

# DIGBETH HERITAGE TRAIL

## Further Reading

Digbeth, Deritend & Bordesley High Streets  
Conservation Area Character Appraisal  
Birmingham City Council 2009

Digbeth and Deritend, Birmingham,  
West Midlands: Outline Historic Area Assessment  
Olaf Bayer, Peter Herring, Rebecca Lane and Johanna Roeth  
Historic England 2018

Digbeth, Deritend and Bordesley through time  
Ted Rudge & Keith Clenton  
Amberley Publishing 2011

Pevsner Architectural Guide to Birmingham  
and the Black Country  
Andy Foster  
Yale 2022

Birmingham's Victorian and Edwardian Architects  
Phillada Ballard (editor)  
Oblong/Victorian Society 2009

## Credits

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# A brief history of Digbeth



Looking up Digbeth to St Martin's Church by George Warren Blackham

Image courtesy of Birmingham Museums Trust

Digbeth – meaning ‘dyke path’ (because of its riverside location) – is one of the oldest parts of Birmingham.

The area's early growth dates from 1166 when Peter de Bermingham, the Lord of the Manor, secured a royal charter to hold a weekly market. The core of the medieval town was located around the market place, the manor house and St Martin's Church. Although no medieval buildings remain today, parts of the original street layout survive as do a number of historic burgrave plots.

Nowdays the whole area between St Martin in the Bull Ring and Bordesley is referred to as Digbeth. Historically, however, the land beyond the River Rea was the separate settlement of Deritend.

By the 16th century Birmingham had earned a reputation for its expertise in leather-tanning and metal-working. The Digbeth area was a centre for both of these trades thanks to a ready supply of water from the River Rea and several natural springs.



Buck Brothers' 1731 southwest prospect of Birmingham showing St Martin's Church and Digbeth

Digbeth's historic development has also been shaped by different modes of transport. The area sat astride one of the main roads into Birmingham (from Coventry) enabling the easy movement of raw materials and finished goods. During the late 18th and early 19th centuries transport links were enhanced with the arrival of the Warwick & Birmingham (later the Grand Union) Canal and the Digbeth Branch Canal. The Great Western Railway was constructed in 1852 with its terminus at Snow Hill Station.

For much of its history Digbeth was a residential as well a working neighbourhood. During the 1830s and 40s the area was settled by a substantial Irish community, many of whom fled the famines in their native country. However, most working class families lived in crowded, unsanitary courts of back-to-back houses.



Court 2, Allcock Street, Deritend

After the Second World War much of Digbeth's housing stock was cleared and replaced with industrial premises. The area suffered significant economic decline in the 1970s and 80s but over the last 30 years has reinvented itself as a creative quarter for artists, musicians, film-makers and digital media companies, beginning with the development of the Custard Factory in 1993.

Today the history of Digbeth has come full circle with the delivery of two major transport infrastructure projects. The extension of the West Midlands Metro along Digbeth and High Street Deritend will be operational by 2027. The HS2 high speed railway line into Curzon Street Station is expected to be completed after 2030.



The Custard Factory

# Digbeth Trail Map

This fascinating walk explores some of Birmingham's less familiar neighbourhoods and should take between 1 and 2 hours to complete. Please note this map is an approximate guide to the relative sites listed within this publication and is not drawn to scale.



# 1 The Bull Ring



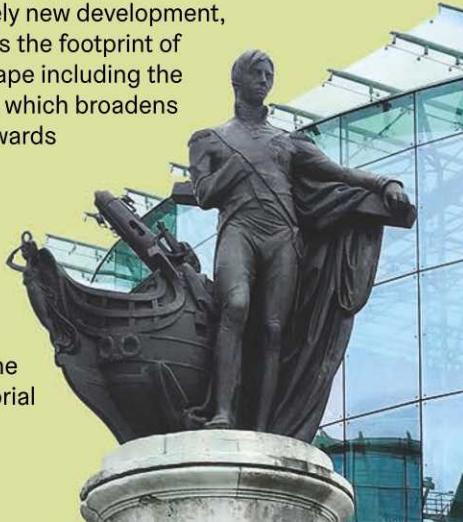
Above: Selfridges  
Left: St Martin in the Bull Ring

Established around 1166, the Bull Ring was the site of the medieval town's weekly market.

St Martin's was Birmingham's original parish church and dates from at least 1263. It was substantially rebuilt by Birmingham architect J.A. Chatwin in 1873-1875, although traces of the medieval structure can be glimpsed inside.

The present Bullring shopping centre opened in 2003. Although a completely new development, the complex respects the footprint of the historic streetscape including the central thoroughfare which broadens as it heads south towards St Martin's Church.

Another important historic survival is Sir Richard Westmacott's fine 1809 statue of Lord Nelson, which was the first figurative memorial to the admiral in the United Kingdom.



# 2 Moat Lane



Top: The Moat and Lloyd's Slitting Mill from Hanson's map, 1781

Above: Moat Lane, c1902

Right: Smithfield Wholesale Market, c1887



Following the manor house's demolition the area became the Smithfield Wholesale Market. In 2018 the market relocated to Witton and the Smithfield site is currently the subject of ambitious regeneration proposals.

Another lost Digbeth landmark is Sampson Lloyd's 'slitting' mill. Established around 1700 to the east of the manor house, the water powered mill was used to cut sheet iron into rods for nail making. The site of the mill is now occupied by part of South & City College.

The Manor House or 'Moat' was a moated building that was the seat of the Lord of the Manor of Birmingham during the Middle Ages.

The original buildings were demolished and the moat filled-in in 1815-1816, but the remains of medieval stone structures excavated in 1973-1975 survive intact beneath the current street level.

# 3 Digbeth

The north side of Digbeth (which is the name of the street) features a variety of buildings which reflect the historic development of the area.

The impressive former Cold Store was constructed in 1899 to the designs of architect Ernest C. Bewlay. The Grade II listed building is today occupied by the Prince's Trust.



Next door is the ornately decorated Digbeth Police Station, completed in 1911.

Further along the street the gothic tower of the former Bonser & Co ironmongery warehouse (constructed c1860) is one of Digbeth's most familiar buildings.



A couple of doors down is the former Digbeth (now O2) Institute. Built 1906-1908 as a Methodist congregation chapel, the building became a performance venue in 1955 and has featured such famous acts as UB40 and Duran Duran.

Digbeth Institute

# 4 South & City College

The plot bounded by High Street Deritend, Milk Street, Moore's Row and Floodgate Street is home to South & City College's Digbeth campus. Although the main college building was constructed in 2003, the campus incorporates several sensitively restored historic buildings.

On the corner of Milk Street is a handsome Victorian shop and warehouse complex built for the corn and flour merchant Thomas Fawdry in 1869. The warehouse to the rear boasts a splendid (repainted!) 'ghost' sign advertising 'Melox Marvels' dog biscuits!



Located behind the modern college building is the Grade II\* listed Floodgate Street School of 1890-1891 by the famous Birmingham architects Martin & Chamberlain.

Floodgate Street gets its name from the floodgates which were used to control the water levels of the River Rea prior to it being culverted in the 1890s.



Left: Floodgate Street School

# 5

## The Kennedy Memorial and the River Rea



On the corner of Floodgate Street is a memorial mosaic to US President J. F. Kennedy (*above*) which was commissioned in 2013 by Birmingham's Irish Community. The Digbeth memorial is a reworking of a 1968 mosaic which was created by the artist Kenneth Budd for St Chad's Circus. Although the original work was demolished in 2007, parts of it were rescued by Budd's son Oliver and incorporated into the Digbeth mosaic.

Behind the Kennedy Memorial, now barely visible in a brick-lined culvert, the River Rea marks the historic boundary between Digbeth and Deritend. The name Deritend is first mentioned in 1276 and is believed to come from 'Deer End Gate', as Peter de Bermingham's medieval manor house was surrounded by a deer park.



Above: Deritend bridge over the River Rea c1920s  
Left: The River Rea today

# 6

## The Custard Factory



Above: Deritend Library building  
Right: Green Man sculpture by Tawny Gray



One of the most famous names associated with Digbeth is Bird's custard powder. The egg-free recipe was devised by Alfred Bird in 1837 and such was its success that in 1902 his son Alfred Frederick built a handsome new factory, the Devonshire Works.

The Bird's company left Birmingham for Banbury in 1964 and the site was redeveloped as a hub for independent artists in 1993 by local businessman Bennie Gray who named it The Custard Factory. Today the complex is home to numerous artists, media companies and other creative industries.

Next door to the Custard Factory is the former Deritend Library, Birmingham's oldest surviving library building (dating from 1866). Although it closed as a library in 1940, the building was preserved and is now used a conference venue.

# 7 Old Crown Inn

The Grade II\* listed Old Crown Inn is one of the oldest secular buildings in Birmingham. Although often claimed to date from 1368, it was actually constructed around 1490 as the Guildhall and School of the Guild of St John the Baptist of Deritend. It was first recorded as a pub in 1589.

Sadly the south side of Deritend High Street lost all of its surviving historic buildings when the road was widened in the late 1940s. The losses included St John's chapel which stood close to the bridge over the River Rea. Originally established in 1380 it was rebuilt in 1735 but demolished in 1947.

The only historic structure to escape the road widening project was the 16th century Golden Lion Inn - but only because it had been dismantled and moved to Cannon Hill Park in 1911!



Above: The Old Crown Inn

Below: 19th century photograph of the south side of Deritend High Street. The Golden Lion inn is visible on the left and St John's Chapel on the right



# 8 Heath Mill Lane

Heath Mill Lane gets its name from a water mill that was originally located nearby. The mill was in use from at least the 16th century until the 1840s.

Right: Detail of 1820 map showing the millpond  
Below: St Basil's



The lane passes under the huge blue brick arches of the Bordesley railway viaduct, constructed in 1852 to carry the Great Western Railway into Snow Hill Station.

The church of St John & St Basil was built 1910-1911 to the designs of the Birmingham Arts &

Crafts architect Arthur Stansfield Dixon. The church is now home to St Basil's charity which works to support young people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness.

At the junction with Fazeley Street is the incomplete Duddeston railway viaduct of 1852 (left). The structure was never used as rival railway companies built a different route into the city centre.



# 9

## Fazeley Street East

Fazeley Street is home to some fascinating historic buildings, several of which have been restored and repurposed as venues for the creative industries.

On the south side of the street is Fazeley Studios (right), a former Unitarian Sunday school (1865-1868) and chapel (1876-1877) which was converted into an office and hospitality venue in 2008 by the Custard Factory developers Bennie and Lucan Gray.



Dating from 1837, The Bond was originally built as a gasworks by the Birmingham Gas Light and Coke Company. Between 1875 and 1888 it operated as an ice factory, after which the canal shipping company Fellows, Morton and Clayton turned it into a 'bonded' warehouse (for goods awaiting payment of customs duties). The building was restored between 2021 and 2023 and now provides a workspace for independent television and creative content companies.



# 10

## Fazeley Street West



Further along the street is the 1935 Fellows, Morton and Clayton warehouse with its distinctive boat-shaped rear elevation. The warehouse was originally built alongside a 19th century canal basin which was filled in around 1978. The site is currently being converted into new film studios by the creator of the *Peaky Blinders* television series, Steven Knight.

Also part of the studio complex, the Grade II listed Junction Works is an early example of a purpose-built canal office. It was first occupied in 1812 by Pickford & Co and then subsequently rented by the Grand Junction Canal Company.

On the other side of the street is the back of the old Typhoo Tea factory and canal basin. The 1929 building is to be restored and extended by the BBC as their new Birmingham headquarters by 2026.



Right: Junction Works (top) and Typhoo Basin

# 11 Warwick Bar



Completed in 1789, the Digbeth Branch Canal was a catalyst for the industrial development of the Digbeth area. The canal runs northwards for a mile where it connects with the Birmingham & Fazeley Canal at Aston Junction. The southern end of the canal terminates at Warwick Bar, where it joins the Warwick & Birmingham Canal (now the Grand Union), which was opened in 1799.

Alongside the Warwick Bar lock is a distinctive red brick warehouse, the eaves of which extend out over the canal to provide a covered loading wharf. Constructed around 1840, the Grade II listed building was for a time used by the fruit company Geest so is often known as the 'Banana Warehouse' (*below*). The building has recently been announced as the new home of the BBC *Masterchef* television programme



# 12 Digbeth Branch Canal

On the opposite bank of the Digbeth Branch Canal is the rear elevation of the Birmingham Gun Barrel Proof House. Established by an Act of Parliament in 1813 to 'prove' (test) barrels and completed guns, the institution still fulfils this role today.



Continuing along the canal a tunnel leads under the Grade II listed railway bridge of 1833–1838 designed by Joseph Locke to take the Grand Junction Railway into Curzon Street Station.

At the far end of the tunnel a pathway leads up to street level and Birmingham City University's city centre campus. The campus was developed from 2011 and includes the historic STEAMhouse building of 1899 which was restored in 2023 as a centre for scientific and technological entrepreneurship.



Right: STEAMhouse

# 13

## Millennium Point and Curzon Street Station



The largest Millennium Commission project in England outside of London, Millennium Point opened in 2001. Designed by Grimshaw Architects, today the building is home to Thinktank (Birmingham's Science Museum) and Birmingham City University's technology and engineering faculties.



Running alongside Millennium Point is Eastside City Park. The park opened in 2013 and was a key element in the regeneration of the wider Eastside area.

On the other side of the park Grade I listed Curzon Street Station (*below*) is the oldest mainline rail terminus in the country. It was built to the designs of Sir Philip Hardwick in 1838 as a counterpart to his Euston Arch (now demolished) on the London & Birmingham Railway.

The building is currently being restored and refurbished as part of the Birmingham terminus of the HS2 high speed rail line from London.



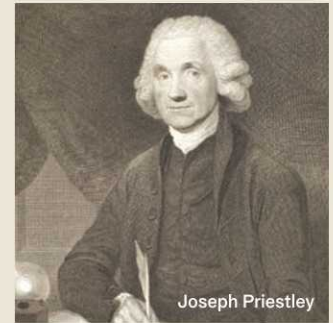
# 14

## Moor Street

St Michael's Catholic Church on Moor Street (*right*) was constructed in 1803 as a Unitarian meeting house to replace an earlier building (ministered by Joseph Priestley) which was burnt down during the 1791 Birmingham riots. The meeting house was purchased and consecrated by the Catholic Church in 1862.



Moor Street Station was opened in 1909 by the Great Western Railway to cope with the growth in suburban rail traffic into Birmingham. The GWR's main station, Snow Hill, was reached via a tunnel which ran under the city centre. However, this was not wide enough to accommodate all of the additional services and so Moor Street was built at the opposite end of the tunnel to resolve the capacity issue.



The station was restored and extended in 2002–2003.



To return to the start of the trail go through the Bullring shopping centre and take the south exit to St Martin's Church.