

A is for ASHTON

To paraphrase a well-known saying:

*“You can take the girl out of Ashton but you can’t take Ashton out of the girl”.*

So what is it about a depressed former cotton town in Lancashire that holds a special place in my memory?

I was born in Ashton-under-Lyne, went to school there, worked in the Grade II listed public library, fell in love there, several times, but left, aged 21, and never really returned. The cobbled streets, the busy market ground, the distant views of hills and moors and most of all, the people, inhabit a rich store of memories.

*“Manchester is lovely, the weather’s sometimes fine,  
I’ve even known the sun to shine in Ashton-Under-Lyne”* the old song goes.

Perhaps it’s something to do with the climate- the damp air was why cotton mills sprang up there in the first place, and its proximity to rivers and to the sea, via the Manchester Ship Canal. Cotton brought prosperity to the town; some mill-owners, philanthropic men, built solid houses for their workforce, endowed the public library and municipal Baths and created parks.

I lived right in the centre of town in the same house my mother had lived in as a child. My early childhood was populated by grandparents, aunts and uncles, cousins, friends and neighbours- a huge extended family. When I was seven years old, in 1954, we moved from our “two up two down” terraced house in Turner Lane, owned by the railway company, to a post-war council house in Waterloo, a mile or so from Ashton town centre. It seemed, at the time, to be the lap of luxury, with a bathroom and two toilets, one inside, and one outside. There were six of us living in the large three bed-roomed house, with a triangular-shaped garden at the back. The house was a corner plot so there was a large piece of garden at the side too, in which my father grew potatoes. The Downshaw estate in the mid-1950s was full of young families so there was never any shortage of play-mates. The estate was bordered by farms, fields and cloughs, a ready-made playground. From my bedroom window I could see Hartshead Pike, a tower built in 1863 to commemorate a Royal wedding, although the hill had been a beacon site throughout history. I still have my school essay, extolling the virtues of Ashton-Under-Lyne to the would-be tourist. Though, even then, I could not imagine many tourists having Ashton on their itinerary. I wrote enthusiastically about the Pennine foothills, “Tulip Sunday” in Stamford Park, brass band contests, the Easter Fair at Daisy Nook, the Whit Walks and Wakes Weeks.

My roots in Ashton-under-Lyne are deep. My great grandfather came to Ashton from Cumberland in about 1870. He was a leading light of the Wesleyan chapel in Oaken Clough, Waterloo, married a girl from Waterhouses, and ran a greengrocer’s and coal merchant’s shop on Oldham Road. With the death of my father in 2007, over 135 years of Copeland involvement in Methodism in Waterloo came to an end.

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