

Transcript of Podcast 092 : Salford

{INTRO:

V: So tell me all about your ways, and all about them Salford days. Is it true you're just an ordinary ... enby?!

}

{intro music - jaunty, bouncy}

{Intro standard announcement:

Hello. Thank you for tuning in. You're listening to Travel Tales From Beyond The Brochure, a podcast looking at unfamiliar places across the world, and aspects of travelling you may never have thought of. I'm your host, The Barefoot Backpacker, a middle-aged Enby with a passion for offbeat travel, history, culture, and the 'why's behind travel itself. So join me as we venture ... beyond the brochure.}

{Music fades. Podcast begins}

Hello :)

I've been a month in the Calder Valley now, so it seems weird to be doing a podcast about Salford. But that's often the way content creation is sometimes. I couldn't have done this any sooner because I wouldn't have explored everything. Even as it is, I didn't get to explore everything I'd planned on doing, but I need to keep remembering, we as content creators need to keep remembering, that nothing has to be 100% perfect and cover 100% of the options.

I mean, not that it matters too much because it's not as if Salford is a place that's on many people's bucket lists. Although as you'll hear later, it is definitely interesting to people with specific interests.

But before I talk about Salford, as always on my pods I start with a touch of housekeeping. And by housekeeping I mean 'things I've been up to recently'. Which is, let's face it, never actually that much. Especially now I have moved out of Salford and into the Calder Valley, which makes things more awkward to get to. And, in a week's time, the rail line between Rochdale and Manchester is closing for two weeks to refurbish or replace a bridge over the motorway, making the journey in even more awkward.

What I have restarted is my running. Now I'm in a place that's a bit more pleasurable to run in, and where I don't have to start by going down 12 flights of steps or a dodgy lift, I have a bit more of an incentive. The hills maybe don't give me quite as much incentive as if it were flat, of course, but I'm sure it's good for me in the long run. And anyway, ultra-marathoners do this sort of landscape and they walk up the hills, so that's my excuse when I feel a bit weary. There's a nice loop of just over Parkrun length along the country lanes I've now done once in each direction - one of the directions has a much longer uphill stretch, but the other direction's uphill stretch is much steeper, so it's very much, I mean I would say 'swings and roundabouts' but I'm sure there's a more accurate alternative cliché. For the record, I've not yet done it barefoot, but it looks like there's only a couple of short sections where I'd be irked by it so it's definitely a possibility, though I'm sure seeing a barefoot purple-haired skort-wearing enby go careering down a sidewalk-less country lane will cause confusion amongst the passing dog-walkers. My only concern, regardless of footwear, will be in the Winter when it'll be a tad icy. I'm wary of downhill slopes at the best of times. And some of the hills around here are, I mean forget 1-in-10, some of them have sections of 1-in-5. And that's ... a bit excessive. But we'll see what happens when we get there.

I also need to remember to buy some kind of hi-viz jacket thing. Because some of those country lanes do not have streetlights, and this far north it's dark at lesser extreme parts of the day. Now, of course, you might query the sensibility of going running along country lanes in the dark, alongside steep hills, especially with less-than-thick footwear. I am not a role model. {pause} Still haven't made a will.

I've not done much else. I was going to, but I didn't. I do have tentative plans to disappear for a couple of weeks to South America in October, sadly not Bolivia, but rather Paraguay, because of course everyone has Paraguay on their bucket list. But it does depend on some external factors which I'm not going to talk about yet as they might not end up being relevant anyway.

Well, I am headed to London in the middle of the month, but just for one day and night. It's a meetup and panel session celebrating the 50th anniversary of Bradt Guides, the independent travel guidebook publisher who concentrate on places slightly off the usual tourist trail, including much of the UK. They're also the organisation I was published by, in an anthology with a short story about Laos, a few years back.

But aside from that, I don't have much housekeeping, so on with the pod. Now, I'll do a pod later in the year on the belief that 'everywhere is interesting', but my VA set me a task. If that is true, and that everywhere has something about it that makes it worthy of a visit, then could I do an entire podcast on somewhere as ... somewhere that's not going to make it onto many people's bucket lists as Salford. Let's face it, it has a reputation. People have written about it, but they're never love-letters. The Sabre roads website, dedicated to every single numbered road in the UK (and some that are not), described Salford as 'possibly the only place that destroyed itself in order to build a road to the neighbouring city'. It's not a place easily loved.

And yet. 278,000 people can't be wrong. Well, they can, clearly, but. There has to be reasons why Salford is, in UK terms, a sizeable place, there has to be reasons why people live here, work here, and of course for a city of its size and age, there has to be a decent amount of history and cultural heritage. So let's delve into Salford and find out what makes the place I lived in for the last year tick.

{section separation jingle}

Salford is a city in Northwest England, standing on one side of the River Irwell – indeed its name comes from an old English word meaning 'Ford by the Willow Trees'. The ford in question no longer exists (and honestly I wouldn't dream of trying to ford the Irwell now – for reasons we'll come to in a minute).

It's one of the more overlooked cities in the country I think, partly because it's right next to, and dominated by, Manchester, and partly because probably few people realise it is a city in the first place, given other Manchester satellite towns like Rochdale and Stockport aren't. It was granted city status in 1926, in the days when city status actually meant something more than just something for local councillors to fornicate over. Note that the whole thing shows the transient and nebulous nature of borders.

The relationship and rivalry between Salford and Manchester has been around pretty much since the towns were first founded. Manchester appears to have come first – although there's evidence of people up the length of the Irwell Valley from all the way back to the just-post-ice-age (Wikipedia tells us their trinkets and weapons were of poor quality!), the first confirmed town, or at least fortification, was on the Manchester side of the river, close to the current cathedral, in the immediate pre-Roman period. Brigantes territory, for the ancient tribe fans. When the Romans came, they built their own fort, again just on the Manchester side (Mamucium, a name which may or may not refer to either mothers or breasts), remnants of which still exist today in the Castlefield area, but it seems this is about when people started building on the western side of the river too. Interestingly, in the post-Roman era, the Salford developments tended to fare better than the Manchester ones, to the extent that once the Kingdom of England had been established, the large area in the SE of Lancashire was designated the 'Salford Hundred' (later known as Salfordshire) rather than the 'Manchester Hundred'. It covered around 350 square miles (906 km²) and had an estimated population of 35,000. Which still makes it bigger than Kirkby-in-Ashfield. It became a royal manor around 1115 and was granted a market charter around 1230. Manchester's market came much later, well, around 1280, but still, later.

The two cities tended to take opposing sides in civil and regional conflict too – Salford supported Charles I and the later Catholic Stuart Pretenders; Manchester was very much Parliamentary and, later, Georgian.

Most people associate Salford though with the Industrial Revolution. Specifically, it concentrated on two things: spinning & weaving (of cotton and silk), and imports – the docks that served Manchester were built on the Salford side of the Irwell, which itself was canalised – widened, dredged, and straightened, from the centre of Salford all the way to where it joins the Mersey, which itself had the same process pretty much as far as Runcorn. Building a large trading port complex when you're not by the sea is quite a laborious process. And large it was – in pre-World War 1 days the port was handling around 5% of the UK's entire import and export trade. It wasn't just canals either though – Salford was the second-to-last stop on the Liverpool & Manchester Railway – the first entirely engine-driven passenger and freight railway in the world. The town also saw a development of engineering, printing, dyeing, and bleaching factories and industrial companies, many of them quite small-scale. For reasons unclear though, the majority of companies tended to build their offices on the opposite side of the river, and as such Manchester then began to develop faster than Salford economically, which more-or-less became 'where the workers lived'. This led to the town gaining a reputation for being, well,

unpleasant. Which it still has. Friedrich Engels (whose statue stands a short walk across the river) described Salford as “really one large working-class quarter ... [a] very unhealthy, dirty and dilapidated district” in 1844. Fast-forward to the future, and nothing much has changed holistically – Channel 4 conducted a nationwide survey in 2005 and Salford came out as the 9th worst place to live in the whole of the UK. This wasn’t limited to housing and employment but also included thoughts on crime, education, and lifestyle. In addition, an article in the Guardian newspaper as recently as March 2024 cites evidence the Irwell is the most polluted river in England, at least for sewage dumping and storm discharge.

The industrial decline in the 20th century hit Salford quite hard, and what were once slum terraces of workers became slum terraces of the unemployed. In the inter-war period, official surveys suggested they were amongst the worst, if not the worst, in the entire country, many having leaking roofs, broken floors, rotting timber frames, and being rat-infested. These were the houses made famous by local painter L S Lowry, one of the few artists about whom a song was written following his death. Although much closer to his death than Vincent Van Gogh. They were also the direct inspiration for an early TV drama series, but more of that later. Many of the terraces were pulled down and replaced with high-rise tower blocks, of the kind so beloved by 1960s architects. Many of these have themselves since been pulled down, because, I don’t know if you’ve ever spent much time in and around a 1960s tower block, but the best place to be is neither in nor around one. Grenfell Tower, in North Kensington, London, was a great example of one. It still is, in a way.

The area directly along the river, from opposite Manchester Cathedral all the way to the old Salford Dock complex, has been, or is being, redeveloped in recent years, and new office and residential buildings have taken the place of many of the old tower blocks. Some of them are flashy and vibrant, and occupied by organisations like the BBC, and civil service functions like HMRC and the Home Office. Some of them ... are not, including a 13-floor concrete carbuncle that looks like someone took all the energy and retro vibe of a 1960s tower block and built a 2005 cover version. Complete with 1960s-style cladding and a 1960s-style elevator/lift. One. This may be a subtweet. And away from the river, the old slightly worn terraces and concrete towers still persist; Salford Shopping Centre (confusingly in Pendleton, but I’ll talk about Salford’s ‘centre’ very shortly), which was built on the site of around 6,000 slum terrace houses, opened in 1972 and looks like it. You don’t come to Salford for the aesthetic. Sadly. This may be the same subtweet.

{section separation jingle}

Before I talk about contemporary Salford, and what's there that people might find interesting, I want to just deviate a wee bit and go on two small rants, neither of which are terribly important, though one is at least significant on a day-to-day basis.

Regarding the latter. I just spoke about how Salford and Manchester are separated by the River Irwell. I can't impress on you enough how weird and arbitrary this border is. Obviously everywhere has a border, everywhere has a limit of authority beyond which everything becomes Somebody Else's Problem, and geo-politics shows that often these borders are at rivers. However, the River Irwell is not very wide. I mean you can't jump across it, but, honestly, you could probably pole-vault across it. If you were athletic enough and not dyspraxic - I wouldn't do it. It's definitely one of those rivers that, while you know you're on a bridge when you cross it, wouldn't be considered in any way major or defining - one of the bridges that crosses the river between the two is 38m, and that includes part of the span over land.

What makes the border weird is its location. Nikolaus Pevsner, a 20th Century historian who concentrated on hyper-local concepts, made the following observation in 1969: "That [neighbouring] Stretford and Salford are not administratively one with Manchester is one of the most curious anomalies of England." And, ngl, he’s got a bloody point. I’ve always had those vibes.

Salford is closer to one end of the grounds of Manchester Cathedral than that end is to the opposite side of Manchester Cathedral. Manchester Victoria railway station, the second most important railway station in the city, sits at the end of a viaduct over the river, meaning at one end of the train you are closer to Salford than the footbridge to the station exit. Indeed the former Manchester Exchange station that lay next to Victoria was itself *in* Salford. The residential parts of so-called central Salford (a concept I’ll come onto imminently) are closer to Manchester’s main shopping centre (the Arndale Centre) than Manchester’s main railway and coach stations are.

In essence, Salford (and, indeed, the centre of Salford) is literally closer to Manchester city centre than maybe two thirds of Manchester city centre is. And Manchester city centre is roughly a rhombus with sides of a mile

long. (As an aside, me and Laura calculated that, based on the area defined as 'Central London', for an urban area with the population it has, Manchester's city centre is about half the size it should be). And it's significant if and only if you pay taxes to your local council area, serve under laws officiated by your local council area, pay your taxes to your local council area ... if I were on the other side of my tower block, I'd be able to see Manchester Crown Court. It'd be literally, you know, 'just there'. I walk past it every day. Yet I'm in Salford so any admin I'd need to do would have to be done several miles to the west.

But this leads to my other rant, 'Salford' is both a town and a borough, and the centre of Salford isn't anywhere near Central Salford. Or rather, the difference between the City of Salford and the Borough of Salford is surprisingly disparate, in a similar way.

The Borough of Salford is a weird shape. Well, no, it's not a weird shape. It is, vaguely, triangular (or, rather, arrowhead-shaped), and two of the vertices extend out to well into the rural mossy wilderness that exists between Manchester and Liverpool. The problem is, the third vertex, the easternmost one, is where the traditional centre of Salford is. Similar to a megaphone, most of the intensity of Salford is at one corner.

For a year, I lived in a dubious tower block very close to Salford Central railway station. Close enough that if I wasn't a dyspraxic loon with as much arm strength as a flowerpot of soggy basil, I could probably have thrown something from my apartment's balcony and have it land on the station platform. The station itself has only been known as Salford Central since 1989; it was previously called simply 'Salford' and renamed to avoid confusion with the new station at Salford Crescent, which serves Salford University, and replaced stations at Pendleton that were closed partly for reasons of vandalism. It's the second time the station was renamed; for a period in the mid 1850s it was called 'Salford New Bailey' after the road it stands on. Which, to be honest, is a much more logical name. Indeed, with hindsight, those names are the opposite way round.

See, in the old days, the centre of Salford was indeed by where Salford Central station now stands, It's very close to what used to be Salford Town Hall, Salford Cathedral, and the main population centre of the borough. It very much **was** Salford.

Thing is, these days Salford is much more decentralised and plural-centric. Salford council now sits in a building three or so miles west, in Swinton. Salford's central shopping area is, as noted earlier, in the area known as Pendleton, which is, I guess, vaguely near Salford Crescent station but also near enough to Salford Quays and halfway to Eccles. These are much further distances than anything defined within Manchester City Centre; in effect Salford (like Metropolitan Boroughs like Sandwell, Sefton, and Kirklees) doesn't **have** a (town/city) centre, and exists more to fill a map than to define a specific town or city. Therefore if I were to say 'you should go to Salford', it would actually be tricky to define what Salford **is**, outwith the generic borough boundary. And if that seems pedantic, note that Emily Bronte wrote the novel "Wuthering Heights" and it's believed her inspiration was a farmhouse at what is now known as Top Withens. It's a ruin that even today stands in remote rural countryside two miles from the nearest significant village (Haworth). And yet it's counted as being inside the UK's fifth largest city (Bradford), a fact that vaguely amused my flatmate when she visited in mid-June.

There's very little countryside in Salford borough, and what there is, is mossy farmland. Again, you're not going to come here for the aesthetic.

TL;DR: Salford Central isn't.

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In saying all that, the purpose of this podcast is to explain why I believe 'everywhere is interesting'. So, what's interesting about Salford and why should you go there? Or at least, why should you be aware of it for more than just 'it's near Manchester'?

Let's start with the most obvious - industrial heritage. A place with the long-standing and industrial background of the kind Salford has must lead to some interesting legacy, right?

Salford Docks, also known as Manchester Docks, despite the fact only one of them was in Manchester, because borders are weird, are no more. They closed for good in 1982. Some of them have been infilled and either built on or left to rot. Four of them though, in the south-west of Salford, were redeveloped into an area known as Salford Quays.

The best way of describing Salford Quays is in comparison. They are, quite literally, a northern version of Canary Wharf. Obviously everything's on a much smaller scale, but it's effectively the same thing - a series of modern buildings and towers, many of which gleam, *gleam*, which are used for commercial and residential purposes, based around a series of renovated docks that have been cleaned and made 'pretty'. There's a local rowing group that uses them as a base. And, just like Canary Wharf, the area is served by a light rail system that links it seamlessly with the centre of the nearby city. In this case, Manchester (not Salford, because as we noted, Salford doesn't have a centre). In addition, there's a series of art installations and ground plaques commemorating the people who worked here, with a specific ongoing mention of the Merchant Navy, which I've spoken about in depth before,

Businesses in the area include the BBC, whose sport department moved here in 2011. I remember it happening; the reason I first registered with a Twitter account was because the BBC Sports Website offers sassy text commentary on sporting events as they happen, and back in 2010 the best way of contacting them was through Twitter, However they were based somewhere in London; when they moved to Salford almost the entire staff quit and they had to recruit entirely new text commentators. They did still keep the sass though, so all was not lost.

The BBC were not the only media company to relocate here - amongst others, ITV have a large building also on the waterfront. Indeed so many media companies were encouraged to move here, a small part of Salford Quays is officially known as MediaCity UK. It's also close to the relocated Granada Studios complex on the south side of the canal/river (at this point the Irwell and the Manchester Ship Canal are the same thing). This is where you'll find the set of Coronation Street. Or did before Covid; I don't know if they've reopened for tours because it's never been something that interested me. Also on the opposite side of the river, in the borough of Trafford and not Manchester, because borders are arbitrary, is the Old Trafford complex. The football stadium (Manchester United (lest you not be aware) is very prominent from Salford Quays; the cricket stadium is a couple of blocks further south. Also on the opposite bank, in Trafford, is the Northern Imperial War Museum (as in, the northern branch of the Imperial War Museum, the original also being on the opposite side of the river from Canary Wharf, maintaining the copycat nature of this place). I'm not going to do a podcast on the Borough of Trafford, just to set expectations. Everywhere is indeed Interesting, but even I'd be hard-pushed to talk for 45 minutes on Trafford. Good for beer though.

Also in the Salford Quays area are several brewpubs (there's a couple of breweries just to the west, including Pomona and the actual offices of Seven Brothers, who have a couple of brewtaps in Salford and Manchester), a standard array of cafes and pop-ups, and, referencing both the BBC and Nostalgia (the subject of recent podcasts), a mini Blue Peter Garden. Ask your parents.

Salford Quays would be quite a plush and convenient place to live, if it weren't about 2 miles from, well, anywhere.

Now, although canals were very important for Salford's industrial development, they tended to define the edge of the borough rather than be a fundamental part of it. That said, there's two canals that still exist and provide a reason to visit, for different reasons. The Manchester Ship Canal, the huge feature that made the Greater Manchester area the powerhouse it was, and which effectively terminated at Salford Docks, is still used for some freight traffic now, but from a tourism point of view, there are trips and tours that traverse its length. The canal is around 35 miles long and ends on the Mersey between Ellesmere Port and Birkenhead (both of which are also places that tourists ... generally don't need to go), and the scenery you see on the way ... look, the Norfolk Broads over in East Anglia are a really popular place to go boating and sailing - I've done it myself - but you don't go there for the ambiance, you go for the experience, and maybe that's the same here. Eight hours of looking from the deck of a boat going '... I think I can see something in the distance that isn't a field or an expanse of moss' doesn't excite me. Maybe it excites you.

One thing that trip would take you past though is Barton Swing Aqueduct. It's not a huge, towering, Roman-era aqueduct with vast arches, nor is it like some of the aqueducts on the British canal network that were built to span a deep valley and consequently give great views of mountain scenery. This aqueduct is about 100m long, weighs 1,450 tonne, and strangely no-one wants to tell me its height. It carries the Bridgewater Canal, that runs from Manchester to, well, Wigan-ish, where it connects with the Leeds-Liverpool Canal. It replaced a late 18th-Century stone aqueduct that was 12m high so, given the nature of canals, it's likely to be the same height. The original needed to be replaced because traffic on the Ship Canal was becoming too tall for it.

And therein lies a clue to why this aqueduct is so notable. You can't change the height, so what do you do? Clue's in the name. It is a Grade II* Listed Building, and is the first, and only, swing aqueduct in the world. The world. It's only a small thing, but it's completely unique. When large vessels pass underneath, the entire bridge that carries the Bridgewater Canal can swing to the side, a full 90 degrees, like swing road bridges, to allow them to pass. Obviously, logistically, this is much harder for a canal than a road to do, if for no other reason that water is more liquid than tarmac and tends to go places you might not want it to go, if you don't keep it completely under control. To that end there's a series of gates and troughs that keep up to 800 tonnes of water in place.

You can't walk along the Manchester Ship Canal (though you can walk on the roads that run alongside it) as it doesn't have a towpath, because it was built after canalboats needed to be guided by horses so it didn't need one. You can walk along the Bridgewater Canal though, and its Salford section is more aesthetic than its Trafford section - the border is at the Barton Swing Aqueduct, though you can't cross it as they removed the towpath for safety reasons (it was suspended nearly 3m above the canal over the towpath). They're working on a means to replace it, but it just means you have to walk on the pavement next to the road for a wee bit,

Salford, especially the far east close to the Irwell, has several other old bridges, scheduled as Listed Buildings And Structures, but they're all generally less fun than the Barton Swing Aqueduct. Most of them are either Victorian brick railway viaducts, especially the section between Salford Central and Manchester Victoria stations where there are all manner of shops and businesses built into them, or they're bridges over the Irwell linking the two cities by road and foot. Indeed three successive road bridges - Albert, Victoria, and Blackfriars - all date from the first half of the 19th Century, and are all Grade II Listed.

Between Albert and Blackfriars bridges is a very different bridge, almost jarring in its difference. It's one I've walked across a lot, as it provides a short-cut to the northern bit of Deansgate and my nearest Wetherspoons, and on the Salford side it starts in an open, slightly landscaped, pedestrianised square (Clermont-Ferrand Square, because Salford is twinned with it). On the Manchester side it goes along a wide alleyway into the backstreets, but you don't need to myther about that. This is the Trinity Bridge, and is a very modern footbridge, built in the mid 1990s. It's very white, with straight beams connecting the bridge itself to a leaning 40m high column. When viewing it from the Albert Bridge it looks a little like a boat's sail. It's actually the only structure in the UK built by the Spanish architect Santiago Calatrava, who's famous for many structures across the world including Liege-Guillemins railway station, which I've likened to looking like a cross between a spaceship and a butterfly cupcake, Bilbao Airport, which looks like a dove, and the World Trade Center Transportation Hub in New York, which looks like ... I don't know, it looks frankly odd, that's how it looks.

Also in Clermont-Ferrand Square is the Lowry Hotel. I'll be honest; it doesn't look like much from the outside - I can see it from my apartment's balcony and it's actually hard to distinguish from the buildings surrounding it which look very much like they were built in the 1960s Engineering University mould, but it's notable as being the whole of the Greater Manchester area's only 5* Hotel. Yes, I'm perplexed by that as well. It was built in 2001, it's got 8 floors, 7 suites, apparently the world's first 'meditation pod' called the Somadrome, surprisingly only one restaurant (the River Restaurant, because it's right next to the river, which would be a selling point if the river in question wasn't the Irwell), and I've obviously never set foot in it. For a random weeknight in a couple of months, prices range from £168 for the Deluxe King to £620 for one of the suites.

This is just one example of the regeneration and reconstruction of the Salford waterfront area, as mentioned earlier. A couple of blocks away though and the old city re-emerges, at least in patches.

The main road going through Salford is Chapel Street, and runs from the Irwell opposite Manchester Cathedral all the way to past Peel Park and Salford Crescent station. About halfway along is Bexley Square, home to the largest of the real ale pubs in Salford, but also the old town hall and a couple of public art sculptures.

The town hall and courthouse was built in the 1820s in what is described as a Neo-classical style, out of brick and stone, with long rectangular windows and fronted with two large rounded columns. It served as the council offices until 1974 when proceedings moved to the less-aesthetic building in Pendlebury; it remained the courthouse until 2011. It's now been converted into apartments - you can live in it, though I've never come across the opportunity to. It's another Grade II Listed Building, in case you're keeping track.

Also on the square is a bronze sculpture of a horse, a little over 2m tall. Next to it is a bronze sculptured lamppost with a series of little trinkets at the bottom. These combined are called 'Salford Firsts' by the

Northern sculptor Emma Rodgers, and they represent everything Salfordian. The horse is representing the industrial heritage and the canals, and the lamppost because Salford was a very early instigator of street lights; I'll mention that later. The 'trinkets' all represent bits of Salford's history and culture, including politics, music, industrial heritage, science, and transport.

A little further along the main road, away from the centre, is Salford Cathedral. You may be unsurprised to know this is a Catholic cathedral, given Salford's potted liturgical history. It was built in the 1840s in the neo-Gothic style, and seems to have been designed by taking inspiration from several other churches around the country and Belgium. Wikipedia also tells me it was the first Catholic church since the Reformation to be built that was shaped like a cross. That said, I'm guessing not many Catholic churches were built in that period, to be honest.

At the time of podding, it was being renovated and restored, and the roof replaced, so I've never had the opportunity to go in it, or even see it in its full glory as it's had scaffolding on it for as long as I've been here. A bit like Manchester Town Hall over the river, which is annoying as that's supposed to be one of the nicest buildings in the whole region. What I can tell you about Salford Cathedral though is its spire is 73m tall and the whole structure is a Grade II* Listed Building. One for the future.

For the record, the nearest Salford gets to an Anglican cathedral is the Chapel of Sacred Trinity, a very village-church looking building close to the eastern end of the city and flanked by a huge railway viaduct. The church came first; the original building being built in 1635, the first parish church in Salford according to their own website. The bell tower of this church still survives, despite the rest of the building being rebuilt just over a hundred years later. Obviously it's a Grade II* Listed Building, I can hear the bells ringing from my apartment, and I've been inside it twice. Because it's my local polling station.

One of the least likely things to find in such an industrial and densely-populated places as Salford is an old manor house. Ordsall Hall, in the district of Ordsall and very close to Salford Quays, feels weirdly located between council estate housing and the regeneration that's occurring on the waterfront. And yet it's one of the oldest buildings in the city and has itself seen the whole area change.

It was originally constructed in the mid-13th Century, although the oldest surviving parts are from about 200 years later, and, to be fair, it does look quite stereotypically Tudor in its panelling and woodwork frame. It stands in its own lawned grounds which, while no longer huge by mediaeval manor house standards, are still noticeable in the surrounds of Salford. Apparently it even used to have a moat.

Over the centuries it's been a family home (though clearly not one that would have been lived in by any of us mere mortals, a working men's club for a local mill, a school for would-be church people, and, during world war 2, a radio station. It's now a museum and it's free to enter and wander around.

It's on a couple of levels - on the ground floor there's a recreation of the kitchen complete with models on the sort of banqueting food that would have been prepared therein, and the Great Hall, which has huge ceilings and a replica pillory. I didn't ask if it was usable. Upstairs are the bedrooms, including the famous star chamber, because of the stars on the ceiling. Which are not made of dubiously-luminous plastic, rather, of dubiously-reflective lead. At the very top of the manor house you can wander amongst the ceiling rafters and beams; a little cramped but you can get a glimpse of the original roof.

There is an unsubstantiated rumour, since Stuart times, that the Hall has a connection with the Gunpowder Plot of 1605. The story goes that Robert Catesby and Guido Fawkes planned some of the details in the Star Chamber. While it feels a bit of a stretch, especially as none of the leading conspirators had any connection with the area (many of them hailed in fact from Yorkshire), recall that Salford seems to have been a traditionally Catholic stronghold throughout the centuries, and the owners of the Hall were familiar with Robert Catesby, so it's not implausible.

Another old building is Kersal Cell, a very clearly Tudor building that was constructed in the mid 1500s on the site of a very small pre-reformation monastery or priory. It's in the north of Salford, down a small residential cul-de-sac close to the Irwell, and it's still used as private housing today, meaning all you can do is wander down the road and peer at it through the trees, hoping the local Neighbourhood Watch don't notice you. It is also a Grade II Listed Building, which presumably makes it awkward to live in as there'd be a whole plethora of regulations and things you can't do to it. Like solar panels. Or, presumably, double-glazing. It also looks quite weird, nestled quaintly (ugh) surrounded by much more modern housing.

One of the problems Salford has had, historically and presently, is that at least at its eastern, central, end, its very nature meant open space is at a premium. A densely populated city confined in a small area in a bend in a river has meant it's not a very green city. One of the few is Peel Park, a little to the east of the centre, on the way to Salford Crescent railway station. It was opened in August 1846, after much planning and agitation by the local MP (Mark Phillips) and the then-Prime Minister (Robert Peel), and is often touted as being the first urban public park in the UK. This may well depend on semantics and definitions, but it's certainly one of the earliest dedicated public spaces of its type – although parks certainly existed in the country previously, they were exclusive rather than inclusive; you had to be 'the right sort of person' to get in.

It's not a huge park, though it is large enough to have a 2-lap Parkrun (as opposed to a 3-lap one); it's bounded on the east by the Irwell which sometimes floods – indeed in 1866 the whole park was covered with 2½ metres of water, an event now commemorated with an obelisk near the Parkrun starting line. Although the dodgy concrete slabs that demarcate a wide path along the river do get overrun from time to time, it's mainly with geese rather than water these days – the embankment built alongside ought to prevent major issues. Which is just as well when you remember how clean that water isn't. I saw a couple of teenagers paddling in it the other day. I hope they were wearing diving boots.

The park contains the campus for the University of Salford, and, as part of the University, also has an art gallery, museum, and public library, which is notable as being possibly the first free public library in the UK. It's also the most aesthetic building on campus given that it's clearly Victorian and much of the rest of it ... is clearly not.

Moving away from history, Salford is also notable for other cultural concepts.

One of Salford's biggest exports, historically, has been a drink. But not beer, no, this is a fruit-flavoured soft drink called Vimto. It's mainly berries with a scattering of other flavourings ('herbs and spices', rather than whatever the feck is in Irn-Bru). The name is short of Vim Tonic, and it was originally created as a kind of 'health tonic'. Although originally founded the other side of the river in 1908, production was moved to Salford two years later, to a spot near to the Cathedral and on the way to Peel Park. No idea where it's made now, but the HQ of Nichols, who make the stuff, is in Newton Le Willows, halfway between Manchester and Liverpool.

While seen in the UK as a bit quirky and regional, Vimto has a huge overseas following, particularly in the Middle East. It's the most common drink consumed during Ramadan, especially in Saudi Arabia. Upwards of 20 million bottles a year are sold there. I have no idea why. It's also popular in parts of West Africa, notably Senegal and The Gambia.

The site of the old factory in Salford is now a development called Vimto Gardens, and has a branch of co-op supermarket on it. Where, obviously, you can buy bottles of Vimto.

Just on the south side of the other main road west out of Salford's centre, the A57 which makes a beeline for Liverpool, is a redbrick building built in 1903. This is Salford Lad's Club - the name coming from the Victorian and Edwardian vibe of centres serving the needs of the local community, which in this case was to provide youth provision and entertainment for the boys of the area when they weren't at school or work. A youth club, in a sense, but this was 1903 so it was a lot more regimented. For the record, though that's still its name, it has since opened its remit so is now a non-denominational cultural centre that is open to people of all ages and sexes. Presumably including us non-binary peeps, but to be honest, I've never asked.

In itself, it's a fine example of the style, many of which across the country have since been demolished, and it provides a good link to Salford's history and culture. Indeed it's now a Grade II Listed Building. However this particular building is notable for more recent pop-culture. I walked past it a few months ago and made a YouTube Short video, and all I said was something like 'If you recognise this building, how's your back?'. It was a quite popular video.

The building was used as the backdrop for what is now considered an iconic photo of local pop bad The Smiths; specifically it was the inside cover of arguably their best known album 'The Queen Is Dead'. Apparently at the time the people who ran the club weren't too impressed with being associated with such anti-establishment lyrics as 'I say Charles, don't you ever crave to appear on the front of the Daily Mail dressed in your mother's bridal veil?'. They seem to be okay with the fame of it now though. And in any case its vibe, location, and fame, have led to it appearing in a multitude of other media since.

The Smiths aren't the only musicians with a Salford connection; most of the members of band Joy Division came from Ordsall and thus within spitting distance of Salford Lads Club. Joy Division, if you know your pop-history, were one of the less cheerful-sounding groups of the late 70s, their most famous song being 'Love Will Tear Us Apart' (name an opinion that will have knives to your throat as per the Tangled meme - I prefer the Paul Young version), and yet people were surprised when their lead singer killed himself. Anyway they reformed afterwards and changed their name, and you'd have thought a name like Joy Division would have certain 'connotations' that they might want to avoid with a new name, so naturally they renamed themselves 'New Order' which of course doesn't have any baggage whatsoever.

Another notable musician from Salford is Mark E Smith, one of the strangest people to ever have a hit record never mind an entire pop career, which he did under the name of The Fall, a band with so many ex-members, largely because Mark E Smith was one of the strangest people to ever have a pop career, that it became a byword for rapid staff turnover. He once said 'if it's me, and your granny on bongos, it's The Fall', and honestly, it wouldn't surprise me if several people's grannies probably have been.

Obviously there's an overlap between industrial history and music, and there's two examples of this from Salford. John Cooper Clarke is punk poet who started a career in the 1970s and is still going, including hosting the occasional show on BBC 6 Music. By 'punk poet', I mean, I guess a modern-day version would be Kae Tempest, someone who is primarily a poet but who occasionally makes music, and who does tours like musicians would, and whose poetry is very direct, political, and observational. I've been known to write poetry and I do consider John Cooper Clarke to be a direct inspiration. One of his poems/songs is a 6-minute picture of life on an urban residential street - Beasley Street, which he based on a street in Lower Broughton not very far from where my flat was.

Before him however was someone who's world famous as a poet and musician, the singer-songwriter Ewan McColl. He was a socialist, nay, a communist, and this is reflected in much of his writing, but he was also a collector and archiver of traditional folk songs across the UK, including being the conduit by which the County Durham folk song 'Scarborough Fair' became notable (a retired miner performed it for him; he recorded it, did his own version, folk legend Martin Carthy heard it from him, and taught it to Paul Simon).

He's noted for being the writer of "Dirty Old Town", a song originally about Salford specifically but whose more famous cover versions (notably The Pogues) remove those references and make it generic. It's the one that begins "I met my love by the gas works wall / Dreamed a dream by the old canal". Because what gives a place a sense of romance than industrial heritage. Not that I'd know about romance.

He also wrote "The First Time Ever I Saw Your Face", which is ... a somewhat off-brand song compared to the rest of his output.

His children followed him into the music business; Kirsty had her own folk-rock career, while Neill hangs around with David Grey, who comes from the other side of the Irwell. Quite a way the other side actually; Sale in Trafford Borough. He's posh.

But this is not a podcast about the history of music from the Greater Manchester area, which is a shame, as I could probably rattle on about it for a couple of hours.

If you come out of Salford Lad's Club, and turn right, you're on a street that's lined with old-style Victorian terraced housing, and cherry blossom. They're a well-preserved and, let's be honest, quite elegant-looking, row of housing that extends past a small garden square. Despite being one block away from the main dual-carriageway road out of the city, it feels very quiet and serene.

This road is called Coronation Street.

No. Not that one. Well, not quite.

So, for those of you unfamiliar (/me waves at my American audience especially here), Coronation Street is a TV drama, a soap opera of the old school; it's been running since December 1960 and shows no sign of stopping yet - it seems to be both the longest running TV drama series in the world, and the one with the most number of shows (over 11,300 at the time of this podcast). It's set on an urban residential street lined with terraced housing, and tells the lives of the people who live on it.

The thing is, the original creator of the series, Tony Warren, was raised in the Salford borough, in Pendlebury and Eccles. And after an early career in TV and radio as an actor, he had an idea of creating a series set on a Salford street with a pub, a shop, and a load of houses, and literally just telling the story of the people who lived there.

While Coronation Street in Ordsall is almost certainly not the direct inspiration for the TV series, and its name is almost certainly co-incidental, it is canon to state that Wetherfield, the suburb of Manchester the series is set in, is directly based on, and therefore directly represents, Salford.

I would say this is also an example of the kind of urban landscapes made famous by L S Lowry in his paintings, and while he certainly did a lot of work in Salford, I'd like to point out he was born in Stretford, on the other side of the Irwell in what is now the Borough of Trafford. So while he actively arted about Salford, and while there's both a hotel and a bridge named after him in the borough, that's why I've not mentioned him much. He died in Glossop, which isn't even in Greater Manchester (though it probably should be), and is buried in Manchester's Southern Cemetery. I've been to his grave. People leave paintbrushes at it.

{section separation jingle}

Before I sign off, here's a few other notable points about Salford.

Salford was the location of the first passenger bus service in the world, of the kind we know them today. In 1824, a chap called John Greenwood set up the first regular fare-paying 'stop in the street' bus route in the world. It ran from Pendleton, in the area that is now dominated by Salford's Shopping Centre, went through the centre of Salford, and terminated at Market Street in Manchester, close to Piccadilly Gardens. Almost exactly what you'd want from a bus service, even today. And yes, while I don't know the exact route that bus took, there's certainly several bus routes even today that run something very similar.

The bus would have run along Chapel Street - I mentioned this earlier as being the main road out of Salford heading up towards Wigan, the one the cathedral and town hall and Peel Park lie on. It seems this was the first street in the world to be lit by gas lamps, the forerunners of modern electric street lighting, They were installed in 1806. So next time you're walking down a road in the dark, bring to mind that this is where it all started. Similarly, and probably part of the same project, the nearby Salford Engine Twist Company, who operated a mill between Chapel Street and the Irwell, became the first cotton mill, and thus probably one of the first buildings of any kind of its size in the world, to be lit with gas lighting,

Salford was also the location of the invention of the Bush Roller Chain. Now, you might not know what the Bush Roller Chain is, but I can pretty much guarantee you most of you will have, not used exactly, but certainly appreciated, one. It was patented in 1880 by a Swiss-British engineer called Hans Renold who had a factory in Salford. His company still exists; their website proclaims themselves as the oldest established transmission chain company that still exists, although sadly they do not specify the location of said factory where the invention happened. And what is a bush roller transmission chain? It's a small chain that's driven by a toothed wheel. It's used in a myriad of applications for transmitting power from one part of a device to the other, but in everyday use you'll see and know it mostly as a bicycle chain, the small chain that drives the wheels when you pedal.

Although Salford has had a history of Catholicism, the north of the borough, on the borders with Bury, are notable for two other religions. The area of Broughton has one of the largest Jewish communities in the country (the local political ward has a population that's nearly 15% Jewish; the average across England is 0.5%). But it's also home to a notable Greek Orthodox community; they immigrated in the 1820s, for, uhm, Reasons, and eventually settled in the Broughton area. In 1861 they established a permanent church, the Church of the Annunciation, which is now the oldest purpose-built Orthodox church in the UK.

Speaking of The Church, it's perhaps notable, especially given the dual themes of Catholicism and working-class social agitation in Salford, that the second family planning clinic outside London opened here in 1926. It was designed to ensure working-class women (of which there were many, because this is Salford) had access to birth control information for an affordable rate. The Catholic Church were unimpressed, but, frankly, fuck them. So to speak. Indeed, use a condom, for added symbolism.

{end pod jingle}

Well that's about all for this pod. Join me again next time for another adventure **Beyond The Brochure**. Until then, a few final words: "Hot beneath the collar / An inspector calls / Where the perishing stink of squalor / Impregnates the walls / The rats have all got rickets / They spit through broken teeth / The name of the game is not cricket / Caught out on Beasley Street." And if you're feeling off colour, as you would be if you'd been living on the likes of Beasley Street in the 1970s, keep on getting better.

{Outro voiceover:

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Until next time, have safe journeys. Bye for now.}