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Holford: A Study in Surveillance

A recent walk around Witton Cemetery (near to the immense M6 motorway viaduct) took me close to the fringes of Holford and I was intrigued to explore it a little more closely. A bit of researching online told me that the area was mostly self-contained as a modern industrial estate. It is a district within Perry Barr, bordered by the M6 motorway, the A453 Aldridge Road, the culverted River Tame and the Grand Junction Railway. Aside from a couple of very old houses converted from industrial properties, no one that I could see actually lives in the Holford area.

According to William Dargue's *A History of Birmingham Place and Placenames A to Y*¹, the area of Holford or 'Oldford' was named for the shallow river crossing near to where the Holbrook stream joins the River Tame near Perry Barr in north Birmingham. The fluid presence of the Tame and Holbrook has shaped the surrounding meadows into an extensive flood plain, much of which has been extensively industrialised during the last two hundred years. Historically, local industries have centred around livestock farming and watermills. Again, according to Dargue, Holford Mill started life as a Corn Mill in the 14th century. It later became a Fulling mill involved in wool production and then in the 16th century it became one of the first local mills to take up metal working. During the Industrial Revolution it became a hammer mill and later a blade-grinding mill until 1855 when it was converted to boring gun barrels. Remnants of the building were still in use as late as 1956 as a storehouse within the now demolished IMI Factory works.

Modern Holford has been given over to Holford Industrial Park, much of which was built on brownfield sites in the late 1980s. Holford is built up of small and medium-sized factories, plus distribution centres and climate controlled warehousing. Most of the buildings are steel framed two-storey boxes, very-very-very-very long boxes, the façades of which are so bland they are almost hypnotic, stretching like geological epochs into the dim and distant. The surrounding fringes are lined with landscaped borders and tarmacked parking bays which only serve to emphasize the total banality of this place. Holford isn't easy on the eye, and it's not meant to be. Glass windows are frequently reserved for corner end sections where office mezzanines and canteen patios are clustered to maximize the interior space. The roads that divide the plots are mostly straight and pretty much devoid of traffic at the weekends, aside from uniformly spaced trundling queues of learner cars, travelling hypnotically at the speed of snooze.

It's difficult to imagine feeling enthusiastic about working in such an aesthetically banal place, but I guess maybe that's the point. If a place is deliberately bland, you're less likely to be distracted by its local attractions. Holford is utilitarian, functional and that's about it. Even the river Tame seems bored by its progress through the area, culverted and controlled, it ambles through serenely, lobotomised by the prevailing architecture. Signs around the estate proclaim that it's at full capacity, but my walk around highlights the lie, vacant lots are obvious, some of them vast and weed strewn. I visited on a Saturday, hoping it would be relatively quiet, so I could avoid any heavy goods traffic that is common in these places. However, after half an hour I was desperate for something to happen, just something! And when it finally did, it so unnerved me that I immediately decided I hated the place.

Everywhere you go in Holford there are cameras, from the moment you intrude on the estate you are under surveillance. CCTV, thermal imaging, video monitoring, proximity-activated security alarms, retractable bollards, hidden security speakers that bark at you if you stray too close to certain buildings. You can hear the camera housings whirr as they spin to follow you around. Strident disembodied male voices snarl out instructions, "Stand clear of the Building!" "Electronic devices are in operation!" "Your activities are being monitored!" It's deeply unnerving. I'm usually quite fearless when I'm exploring new places, losing myself in what I see. But Holford's overt hostility to the passer-by really put the wind up me and left my hackles in tatters. The ever-present sense of being watched was eerie, amplified by the mordant dead calm that prevailed across the area. The sense of danger, that I might inadvertently trigger some hidden alarm or set off a signal for armed police to come storming down all trigger-happy and armour plated, was deeply unnerving. I've been in decrepit buildings that felt safer than Holford. Obviously, it's deliberate, the robust protectionism on show is overt and in your face. The risk of criminal activity is obvious I suppose. Theft and criminal damage to equipment is rife, Holford's financial reliability is underpinned by this protection and by golly do you know that it is! Holford is like Ira Levin's fictional village of Stepford, robotic, sterile, lifeless.

The only things that weren't bothered by the uber-surveillance were the resident Canada geese. No ducks were given by those guys that's for sure, strolling about the empty forecourts like they own the place. Many of the street corners play host to rather vast and deep potholes, caused no doubt by the constant weekday heavy goods traffic. After a good downpour these rapidly turn into impromptu bathing spots for the gagging Geese, they are that deep! Ultimately, I was glad to leave Holford to the geese, honking hilariously in the gutter.

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1: "HOLFORD / HOLDFORD / OLDFORD" – Dargue, William 'A History of Birmingham Place and Placenames A to Y' – accessed 16th April 2023. <https://billdargue.jimdofree.com/placenames-gazetteer-a-to-y/places-h/holford/>