

MALCOLM VEITCH

1. The Marlborough, 170 Anderton Road, B11

To me this is an iconic building that, in my opinion, acts as a Landmark standing tall amongst houses that front onto Anderton Road and industrial units along Montgomery Street. Its Grade II Listing on 3rd December 2009 makes it even more interesting.

It commands attention like a red lighthouse. The clock tower can be seen poking above roofs of buildings from many angles, from along parts of the Grand Union Canal, from various Sparkbrook streets and even across the Small Heath Bypass and the extensive rail tracks that run parallel.

I first 'met' The Marlborough when investigating a path in the Grid project: The Warwick Canal. I made my way to the start at Anderton Road, where the road bridge goes over the canal. As I ascended the long ramp, first the clock tower and then the rest of the building appeared. I was compelled to take some pictures and included it for the Grid project, and although I did a quick scan around there was much to learn this time round.

When we were given the Birmingham Landmarks, it was inevitable that I would choose the Marlborough, as I felt this little-known building stood out for me and I felt I wanted to revisit it and see where else this building could be seen from. I also needed to know more about it, from the websites. I only discovered it had Grade II listing from two fishermen just nearby, so needed to find out what qualities made the building get its Grade II Listing.

Once it must have stood proudly but today, it looks rather forlorn, being locked, windows boarded up and displaying a for sale notice.

Its Grade II listed building status may not protect it, if no one is responsible for maintaining it as a living building. I wonder whether it is still worth doing up? Perhaps there is a potential benefactor out there who hailed from Sparkbrook and now wants to bring the old pub into life again.

It's a beacon in a very different world from the one in which it grew up more than a century ago. Then it must have been something else when its patrons filled its bars with loud voices and bonhomie.

2. Let's look at its history

(Loosely taken from the British Listed Buildings Sparkbrook Ward)

'The Marlborough' was built in 1900 on a prominent corner site to the designs of William Jenkins who was the foremost designer of public houses in Birmingham in the late-C19 and early-C20. The pub was built for Mitchells and Butlers (M&B), who owned and ran a great number of licensed premises.

Formerly built on the site of another building, The Marlborough appears to have had a row of terraced houses attached to it on the west. In fact it is recorded that in the 1990s the terraced housing next to the pub was demolished and replaced with a surface car park. Today you can quite clearly see the outline of the gable of the house that was attached to it.

Located on the industrial edge of Birmingham, with farms like the one run by the Sparke family who are said to have farmed here and may have named the local stream the Sparkbrook. The area would remain agricultural until the end 18th century when the Industrial Revolution came and the population doubled. Then the farms were absorbed into the factories and working-class terraces. Throughout its history until its closure it has remained in its original use and unfortunately there is very little information about it, including when it was closed.

Looking at its exterior, you see from the corner view at the junction of Anderton Road and Montgomery Street, The Marlborough has an almost exaggerated perspective, where the box-like square corner extends up two storeys and then the two-storey square clock tower with its four faces and its dome and the weathervane. The elevation fronting Anderton Road has two substantial semicircular bays, running up to the top of the second storey and above that each has elliptical brick arches which stand between dentilled gable ends.

Pubs in the period were lavish affairs, to make strong statements and a presence in the district, as in fact a Landmark.

Moving around the streets, the building changes its perspective, so higher up Anderton Road, towards the Stratford Road, the gable end with its chimney becomes dominant and you can see the outline of the former demolished terraced houses. Along Montgomery Street the side of the pub is flush to the pavements, whilst high above the view is dominated by the chimneys. This lovable building fitted its period and whilst today the area has changed much since the days when the likes of the Lloyd family (of Lloyds Bank fame) lived in Farm Road, Sparkbrook. Today, rather sadly, you'll find it listed on the lost pubs website, where over 45,000 pubs have gone as fashions and habits change and new cultures emerge.

Back in 1900s, with Victorian Birmingham about to become Edwardian, these were the local palaces that Mitchells and Butler's patrons wanted to drink in.

The reason for being designated at Grade II status is that the pub is a largely intact example of a late Victorian public house with a prominent clock tower feature. It retains its early 20th century character, having the original layout with separate bar, smoke room, off-sales area, dining room and club room still intact. It is also special in having etched and coloured glass and extensive areas of ceramic tiling.

3. Why I chose this more-than-just-a-pub as one of my landmarks

I was walking along the canal in February, when suddenly the Marlborough's clock tower came into view as it peeked over a wooden fence: here was the 'Neufchateau' of Sparkbrook. 'Whatever is this extraordinary building?' I asked myself. I had passed a significant, derelict industrial building on one side of the canal and graffitied walls on the other. They were in stark contrast to this late Victorian styled pub that came into view. I had to photograph it and I did that from the bridge over the canal.

Thinking back to the early part of the 20th century, you wonder about the local men making their weary way home after a long hard day at the furnace who would see the lights on at their local and stop for a jar with their mates before going home to their families.

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