

BIRCHFIELD ROAD (A34), PERRY BARR TO 6 WAYS (AREA 6)

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Birmingham is synonymous with roads and the motor car – Spaghetti Junction, the Queensway tunnels, and the motor factories of yesterday. It has ‘enjoyed’ a reputation as the UK’s ‘motor city’. Add to this list the A34 which leaves the city centre from the flyover and island at Lancaster Circus, and as the Walsall Road cuts a swathe through the north of the city from Newtown out to Great Barr and Junction 7. The section from Six Ways, Aston to Perry Barr is a 1.5-mile-long section of urban highway, up to 8 lanes wide and elevated at places. It is a path; it could be considered a mega-path.

This path is broad. If your home faces it the people ‘over the road’ are a quarter of a mile away. It is also difficult to traverse. Between Six Ways and Perry Barr there is just one point where traffic and pedestrians can cross at grade – the Heathfield Rd / Trinity Rd junction. At this point traffic on the A34 sails high above ground on a flyover. At other points pedestrians may get to the other side by subways. This relative impenetrability might make it an edge, but to this outsider’s knowledge the communities which it bisects, and separates look and feel similar. Locals may not see it that way of course and it may indeed fulfil the criteria for an edge (Lynch 1960) for many people.

The Highway Improvement Scheme at Perry Barr has introduced changes which impede the free movement of traffic but for the moment at the section south to Six Ways is as it was designed, and it retains the purpose for which it was designed in the early 1960s: car journeys in and out of the city with minimal interruption to the flow of traffic. There is an ‘exit’ which services local districts, but this feels very much like a minor part of the road’s business. Providing through- travellers the quickest way in and out of the city has always been the priority, right back to the days of the Walsall turnpike. This is true also of public transport with limited - stop buses sailing straight through these populous areas to give faster travel times for passengers to / from Great Barr, Sutton, Walsall, etc., local people having to rely on the slower stopping services.

Images

- 1 out-of-town traffic dives beneath what was once Birchfield Island
- 2 the road is divided by the underpass here

- 3 looking back over the underpass to Perry Barr Methodist church on Aston Lane
- 4 out-of-town options on the gantry
- 5 on the other side were three large multi-storey blocks of flats. These have been replaced with new homes, here with minimal window – exposure to the roaring traffic.
- 6 the breadth of the highway can be gauged here
- 7 pedestrians take advantage of the only crossing at grade at the junction with Heathfield Rd and Trinity Rd (this side)
- 8 even where the road is not a flyover it is still separated from the local Birchfield Rd
- 9 traditional streets truncated by the broad highway
- 10 the blue parapets of the road swoops down under the island at Six Ways, Aston on the other side the Lighthouse Young People's Centre in Lozells