

NEW TOWN ROW (AREA 6)

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New Town Row is the local name for approximately one mile of the B4114/A34 from Lancaster Circus to just past the Newtown Shopping Centre.

New Town Row, or The Row as I will call it, bursts out from below Lancaster Circus and the A38 flyover in a blaze of colour, overlooked on its Aston side by a bank of giant white and pink hued student accommodation towers standing beside the Birmingham & Fazeley Canal. On the Gun Quarter side of the canal bridge there is considerable redevelopment in progress as evident by the current demolition of the Turner Machine Tools Ltd. building. (photos 1, 2, 3)

The Row squeezes itself into two lanes and a cycle lane over the canal bridge. Then it spreads out into a busy dual carriageway lined with new 'smart' white bus stops, an assortment of businesses, and the cycle lane on the west side (4). The concrete bison sentinels are watching over you as you travel north, the pinky hued student tower blocks form a city skyline backdrop as you travel south to the city.

There are two very old established firms with military links on opposite sides of The Row. At 82-86 New Town Row are Firmin & Sons. From modest beginnings as button makers in 1655, they now design and supply ceremonial and parade dress and modern operational gear to the British military and those of other countries. In 1812, William Westley Richards founded the company that has been credited with some of the greatest designs in both military and sporting firearm history. Today Westley Richards & Co. specialises in making sporting shotguns and country/safari clothing in their factory on the corner of New Town Row and Pritchett Street (5).

The A4540 Birmingham ring road cuts across The Row at a very busy intersection. Looking back towards the city from this intersection on New John St. West you can see the plethora of advertising and digital signage directed at the large volume of passing traffic rather than at people living in the nearby council estates and tower blocks (6).

Thornton House, the first of three tower blocks built in 1967, overlooks this ring road intersection. These tower blocks were constructed using the Bison pre-cast concrete construction technique developed by a company which had been founded in 1919 to build military pill-boxes. A grass verge planted with trees runs between the west side of The Row and the towers in an attempt to soften the visual effect of these modernist monoliths. Their south facing sides do take on a lovely golden glow in late afternoon sunshine (7).

There are no houses anywhere along the Row. Its only when you peer between and behind the tower blocks that you can see the extensive council estates spreading west into Newtown.

On the east side of the Row heading north from the ring road intersection there are some larger business premises including, Safestore Self Storage (8), Birmingham Busworks, the VW Van Centre and the extensive Birmingham Central Delivery Office and Mail Centre.

The central shopping centre at the top end of New Town Row opened in 1973.

“Once home to the likes of Sainsbury’s, Tesco’s and two high street banks, the centre interior is now a hollowed out home for two charity shops, a seafood market, a tiny African teas and food store, a bric-a-brac and hardware emporium and cheap clothes shop. The big name draws outside are Aldi, Farmfoods and Greggs. There’s a bookies, a post office and a drive through chicken eatery” – quote from Birmingham Live, March 2019.

Photo (9) shows outside Aldi overlooked by the unusually wide Inkerman Tower block. Note that there are regeneration plans for the Inkerman tower block dated March 2022 which will upgrade the façades, fire safety strategies and thermal performance of the tower, install new heating and ventilation systems within the flats, and provide greater use of amenity space due to a new enclosed balcony system. These changes will substantially alter the outside appearance of the tower block – that is if there is money for the plans to go ahead?

After the last New Town Row bus top the A34 curves gently to the left and there on the corner of Potters Lane is the magnificent Barton Arms, a Grade II listed Victorian pub. Laurel and Hardy stayed at The Barton Arms in May 1954, while appearing at the adjacent Aston Hippodrome (now demolished and initially replaced by The Drum Arts Centre).

The Drum was an iconic multi-cultural music and arts venue whose name still survives to this day on road signs all the way up The Row. However The Drum permanently closed its doors in 2016 and was reopened in 2019 as the Legacy Centre of Excellence, billed as Europe’s largest independent Black-owned Business and Arts Centre. It is not so much a music venue now, although they do have open mic nights on the first Wednesday of each month featuring music, poetry and dance. Three churches operate upstairs on Sundays – so it is a community venue in a neighbourhood that has sadly lost many community facilities.

There is no street art in The Row until you get to the pavement outside the Legacy Centre where there stands a ‘World Reimagined’ globe, a spherical mural created by the art collective ‘Create Not Destroy’. The imagery is stark and bold, embellished with phrases for the viewer to ponder and consider the ramifications of the Transatlantic Trade in Enslaved Africans and its damning legacy (10).