

JAY MASON-BURNS

Drifting Through Time

I am walking the oldest known road in Birmingham, a Roman Salt-way, Icknield Street (or Ryknild Street). From the city's southern margins to its northernmost stretch, I am walking this ancient track in three sections. The first is from Hawkesley in the south, through to the Roman camp at Metchley, the earthworks of which lie within the grounds of the Queen Elizabeth II Hospital in Selly Oak.

I begin on Icknield Street's darkest stretch, on the hills of north Worcestershire near the auspiciously named Grimpits Farm in Wythall. I spent a lot of my teenage years hanging with friends around these parts, drinking, smoking, larking about like many a youth, hazy days. The road here is narrow and sinuous, snaking its way up the rising escarpment like a primordial serpent, wreathed by ancient hedgerows and forgotten histories. It's easy to lose yourself down here.

I'm drifting through the happiest memories, wandering uphill as the sun glimmers through hedgerows and thickets populated by blackthorn, hazel, ash and oak. The outskirts of Hawkesley lie yonder on Primrose Hill. A conversation with a local diverts my attention, he's a metal detectorist and conspiracy theorist it seems, he speaks enthusiastically of the Roman coins he's found here, stamped with the imperious profiles of Marcus Aurelius and Hadrian. His aspect darkens as he details his attempts to get permission to examine local fields along Icknield that he suspects harbour secrets of a lost Anglo-Saxon waystation. He mutters glumly about landowners not wanting people prying on their land, sniffing out their illicit crops. "It's an ill Weed that blows", he grinned toothily as he left me.

Along this darkened road, I'm taking photos that attempt to reflect this erosion of memory and a drifting through my own personal history, because the roots of Icknield Street run deep in my family. Time moves unerringly onward, disregarding the transient and the ephemeral, eroding the seemingly permanent. This journey feels important to me, it's a pilgrimage of sorts, touching the heart of what I've lost. The solidity of my world was shaken asunder recently with the death of my Father, Patrick, who was born and raised on a stretch of Icknield Street in Ladywood, central Birmingham.

I cross the City limits into Hawkesley, where the road forgets itself, becoming Walkers Heath and then Broadmeadow Road as it goes toward Kings Norton. The green edgelands wash up

against the blank cliffs of concrete council flats, the road cutting between like a scar. Like the Anglo-Saxon God of War it's a bit Grim, embattled nature in an unwinnable conflict against the unending tides of humankind. I don't linger, this area's reputation makes me nervous as shadows of latter-day Saxons malingering on corners, poised to raid this lonely legionnaire, perhaps....

Broadmeadow Road becomes Lifford Lane at the back end of Kings Norton, where industrial units bump gums against rows of terraced housing, jostling for space and air. The canal bound for Stratford loops gently beneath whilst an embankment gives the railway a lofty aspect above. It's noisy, dirty and fascinating, gleaming allotment greenhouses glare uneasily across the ever busy road at the noisome rubbish dump. The air is thick with Ravens and Gulls, eager to take their pick of the leavings.

At the brow of Lifford Lane, Icknield Street once flowed through. The road loops back over the canal through to what was Stirchley Street, now the Pershore Road. The traffic is heavy and boorish as more memories flood my senses. It's a bitter sweet nostalgia for dead shops, old friendships and departed family, a lost Stirchley from my childhood. These days Stirchley is shabby chic, popular with urban hipsters in their Chelsea tractors, desperate for their artisanal bread and cheeses. I don't much like it, this trendy new heart has lost much of its soul.

The ghosts of Icknield Street draw me close to Dad's house and his old haunts, the old Co-op where he shopped or the little Café where he breakfasted most days. Like my photos I'm windswept and misty eyed with memory as I turn up Umberslade Road. There was a huge dairy here when I was a kid, it's a car park these days, much like everything else it seems. The road climbs sharply towards the Student Ville of Selly Oak, I'm almost home.

I wonder if patrolling Roman soldiers felt something akin as they neared home, at the top of what is now Umberslade Road, the fires of home burning bright across the valley at Metchley. Ahead, a wide fertile prospect of farms and grazing livestock. Today it's Heeley Road that offers the most likely alignment of the Roman road, down into central Selly Oak. These days it teems with different crops, wheelie bins and terraced HMOs, the local livestock guzzling at the Bristol Pear.

To get to Metchley the route of Icknield Street would likely have cut straight through Selly Oak, beneath what is now the railway and canal embankment. I have to choose slightly longer route, crossing over the railway and the A38 Bristol Road to reach to the similarly aligned canal towpath. This is home turf for me, I live not far away. The Titanic Café, the epitome of the greasy spoon Café, once hung off the edge of Selly Oak Bridge here, in seeming defiance of gravity, feeding hungry factory workers from the neighbouring Birmingham Battery. It's

long since been cleared away and landscaped anew, new factories built afresh for students and shoppers. The canal remains, a quiet and gentle companion along the towpath as the noise of traffic and trade falls away. Memories flow into the waters below, washing away such nostalgia.

This towpath is a favourite haunt, part of my morning commute. Its familiarity is part of its charm, a quiet corridor of nature and calm. The weather deteriorates rapidly as I snap what turns out to be my last photo, looking along the canal. I traipse in mindful contemplation, a penitent sinner on my last trek homeward bound. On the stairs up to University train station, a disembodied voice proclaims “alight here for the Queen Elizabeth II hospital”. I’ve arrived at last, Metchley Camp.

Off Vincent Drive, surrounded by trees and covered in grass, the earthworks of Metchley rest, lost in reverie. Passers-by pay no mind to its forgotten history and I make a decision, there and then, to honour it properly during the next stage of my Pilgrimage. I’ll take my photos on a better day. Besides, it’s absolutely chucking it down and Sue is waiting patiently in the car....

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