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The Road To History In North Halifax

I first travelled along the A629 north out of Halifax towards Keighley in 1996. I was going for an interview. I was successful and for the next 17 years I travelled up and down this road. It is not just about personal history but the buildings and features alongside the road reflect contemporary experiences and the history of the town. The road starts at a large roundabout at the edge of the town centre where the Ovenden Road meets Burdock Way. At the roundabout the road is 150m asl and it rises to 300m asl at the junction with Field Head Lane and Pavement Lane at the boundary of the built up area. Travelling along the road I feel you not only rise in elevation but go back and forth in time.

Overlooking the roundabout are some residential tower blocks, built in the 1960s, currently bedecked with scaffolding. It could be that dangerous cladding similar to that which contributed to the fire and fatalities in the Grenfell Tower on June 14th 2017 in North Kensington is being removed. Across the road and below the roundabout is Halifax Ambulance Station. One of the many public services currently engaged in industrial action fighting for an improved wage offer in the current 'cost of living' crisis.

Moving along the Ovenden Road away from the town to the east lies Dean Clough. This massive complex of sixteen grade 2 listed nineteenth century buildings once housed the largest carpet factory in the world. I first entered Dean Clough, as part of my interview was held there, in 1996. At the eastern end of the complex is the (much) larger than life statue of a ram. Created originally by Frank Darnley for the Bradford Festival in 1994-95 it was bought by Ernest Hall, who was responsible for the re-generation of Dean Clough, and placed overlooking part of the mill complex. The symbolism of the ram as the original source of the wealth of the mills is stark. Although it is 8m high and made of distinctive aluminium strips it struggles to have a presence sited in a car park amidst the clutter of urban utilities it is barely visible from the road. This is not the case for the Corona Chimney which marks the western end of the complex. This rises majestically to 90.5m. Dated to 1857 it was part of the continuous mechanisation that transformed the mills from a small spinning and dyeing works in 1802 to a vast mill complex by the end of the nineteenth century. The mill finally closed in 1982 but thanks largely to the sustained efforts of Ernest Hall and his son Jeremy and their team, it is now home to 150 businesses including restaurants, offices, shops, galleries, a hotel, a brewery, local radio and the Viaduct Theatre.

Further along the Ovenden and Keighley Roads there is more evidence of growth, decline and renewal. Small businesses providing goods and services to local people are struggling and some are shuttered up or closed altogether. On the Keighley Road further out of town is the Morrisons store which was opened in 1968. It has celebrated its fiftieth anniversary and is still flying the flag for out-of-town supermarkets. The first such superstore was at West Bridgford in Nottinghamshire in 1964. The headline in the Times was, 'THE WINDOWLESS STORE MAKES ITS DEBUT'. Built by an American company it reflected the post-war rise in car ownership and changing consumer habits hence wall space trumping window displays. The number of these stores increased tenfold in the thirty years after 1964.

Ovenden Hall on Ovenden Road was completed in 1662. It was built for a wealthy agent engaged in buying and selling cloth in London. A service wing added in the 18th century has been converted to self-contained flats but the main house has remained empty for many years and is in a very poor condition. A grade 2 listed building since 1954, Historic England are working with the owners to cost repairs and explore opportunities for use. Let's hope someone with the vision and commitment of Ernest Hall can save this building.

The Railway Hotel at the junction of Nursery Lane and the Keighley Road seems a misnomer given that the nearest railway line is over 3kms away. However, in 1864 a Parliamentary Bill was proposed to build a railway line from Halifax station to Holmfield Mills north of Ovenden. The line was 4kms long and needed two tunnels and two viaducts. It cost £90,000 and was completed in 1879. It was in use for passengers and goods until 1955 when Ovenden station was closed in response to the decline in the textile trade.

There are significant residential estates at the northern end of Keighley Road. Some new estates are being built on sites where previous homes have been demolished. The Calderdale Together Housing Partnership has built 83 homes on the former Abbey Park estate costing £11.6 million. I retired in 2013 and only occasionally drive along this route now but when I do the places I pass trigger lots of memories.