

Gorton – Place of Dreams and Memories

In 1866 a cattle plague swept through Cheshire which not only killed animals in their tens of thousands but it ruined my great-grandfather. So he did what innumerable people before and after him have done – moved to the nearest big city, Manchester, with the dream of a better life. From country squire to city squatter, he settled in the then booming suburb of the industrial work shop of the world, Gorton.

From being flat featureless farmland Gorton had rapidly become a manufacturer's paradise of cheap, flat open spaces and low rates - ideal for engineering workshops that sprung up by the dozen in the nineteenth century. Here manufacturers could dream of and create world changing machines – like locomotive engines. Gorton's reputation attracted people from far and wide. It certainly attracted Charles Frederick Beyer, a talented mechanical draughtsman from Dresden. In 1851 he entered into partnership with local engineer, Richard Peacock, to create one of the most innovative locomotive workshops in the country – Byer-Peacock. They then exported their dream products across the globe.



*The old engine sheds of Byer & Peacock Locomotive Company,
now industrial units*

Just down the road – or rather, lane – was another, very different place of dreams, Gorton Monastery. The vastly ornate edifice of its church would express the Gothic ideals not only of its famous designer, Edward Pugin, but of a revitalised Roman Catholicism that was then sweeping through the country. In 1850 the Pope had restored the Catholic hierarchy and Cardinal Newman dreamed of a “Second Spring” of the old faith of England as innumerable zealous missionaries, like the Franciscan friars, spread among the urban working class poor with their dream of a better life to come. To enter through the imposing monastery portico was to be transported into an incense laden dream world of fantasy and faith: not just an opiate for the people but “the heart of a heartless world”, as Marx also wrote.



Restoring the Dream – Gorton Monastery rescued from dereliction with a new replacement wing of the cloister now being built for community use.

For those who couldn't wait for dreams of a better world to come there was temporal respite, just across the road, in Belle Vue Zoological Gardens. Opened in 1836, it became the biggest and most popular entertainment park in the country. For 140 years it provided something for everyone – a place of recreation and fantasy, mirth and escape. Somehow, everyone in Gorton has a happy memory of it. For my parents the chance of an evening's ballroom dancing in the grand Elizabethan Suite was the highlight of their week – their dream land.

Further up Hyde Road, an enterprising local manufacturer, Robert Grimshaw, had built himself a country residence in 1796 called Gorton House. His dream was of a great power loom factory, one of the first of its kind, built in the centre of Manchester that would produce cloth in a revolutionary new automated way. Sadly, his factory was burnt down, probably by impoverished and resentful hand loom weavers, and, being bankrupted, his house sold. But around his house a great reservoir system was built – the first of its kind – to supply fresh water to the Manchester people and then, along side it, Debdale Park was created. Like Belle Vue this became a much loved recreational place and treasured open space. I remember my father saying how he would go there on a Sunday afternoon with his father in 1910, while on holiday from India, to listen to the band.

Both my father and grandfather were engineers from Gorton – he once lamented that I had not chosen to become an engineer, a proper job for a man. I have an old photo of my grandfather as Chief Engineer of the Bengal Railways with a young Indian apprentice standing at his side who had come to learn how to run an engineering workshop. His name was Lal Tata and he dreamed of making steel in Indian steelworks. People laughed at his audacity but now the Tata manufacturing dynasty, which he helped to found, has gone one step better and makes cars in Britain, having rescued Jaguar-Land Rover. How times change!

But that's how it is with dreams – you never quite know how they will turn out or where they will lead. Belle Vue closed in 1977, to great local anguish and disappointment, by which time Byer-

Peacock's rail works had also closed, transformed into a nondescript industrial estate – I have my car serviced at a garage there, in the shadow of the imposing locomotive workshed that is testament to the glory of a lost world. Soon the Franciscan monastery would also be abandoned and left to fall into ruin. The dreams of the past seemed to have evaporated to leave an empty, poorer world.

But today the people of Gorton continue to dream, building on the dreams of others before them which are far from forgotten. In 1996 local people formed the Gorton Monastery Trust to rescue the then much vandalised and sadly decaying building. Two decades and millions of pounds later they have succeeded magnificently and beyond all expectation. Not only is it a nationally acclaimed event centre but, incredibly, is now ranked a world heritage site, up there with the Taj Mahal and Temple of Zeus!

The restored Gorton Heritage Trail is a way of keeping memories alive and threading them together like pearls on a necklace. At the moment the Trail – restored in 2016 - just runs along the Gore Book valley but plans are in hand to extend it to a greater Gorton Way which will encompass all the historic sites of Gorton.



Gorton Heritage Trail – still a place to dream!

In 2013 The Friends of Debdale Park set up a registered charity to promote Gorton dreams. One objective was to restore Gorton House, also abandoned and sadly decaying. They dream of a new community hub with a *belle vue* (beautiful view) of the park where there will be something for everyone, a place of recreation and escape. They dream of a place where people of Gorton can go on dreaming, as they probably most certainly will.

As a sign of how much local people think about their community Gorton now has more Queens Award for Voluntary Service (8) than any other area in the country. You too can help to make Gorton a place of dreams and stay up to date with their dreams of others through the Gorton Community Initiative Facebook page.

Paul Kirkham (Secretary to The Gorton Heritage Trail Committee)