West Bromwich

The Danger List by Mike Fenton

As our world progresses our local communities are often mirror images of the same process; such events are often welcomed, and others deplored. The criteria for these judgements are manifold; there is simple indifference, ignorance and perhaps factors affected purely by the motive of economic profit. Alternatively, we can witness our fellow citizens vociferously opposing ongoing change because it upsets their daily routine, alters their local landscape or appears to take away long cherished memories hard to retrieve once removed. In any circumstance the cities and towns in which we all live and work are either in or will be subject to at some future point in time the onward march of social, political and economic transformation. The majority of us naturally would put aside the more sentimental aspects of nostalgia when it comes to our communities being advantaged by those changes which improve our respective environments, health, education and working conditions. None of us would seriously contemplate a return to slum housing, grinding poverty and chronic unemployment but when the character of our society is subject to our social history being unnecessarily eroded I feel it is our duty to respond vigourously and decidedly so.

Like any other Black Country town, West Bromwich has been subject to its historic panorama of buildings and edifices being metamorphosed into faceless office blocks, soulless housing developments or the ubiquitous car parking lot. On occasions they are obliterated forever, their importance and architectural wonder and design that has been built up over centuries stolen away in a trice by the bulldozer and demolition crew. There remain today very many buildings and structures in West Bromwich which could face potential demise if we drop our collective guard; this is a short history of their life and importance to us all.

***Farley Clock Tower, Carters Green*** is situated at the termination of one end of the town’s High Street, which is thought to be England’s longest. The Farley Clock Tower is perhaps the most famous and iconic of the town’s structures due to it being easily recognisable from all the compass points that surround it. The tower was constructed in 1897 in honour of ***Reuben Farley*** who had been made the town’s first freeman the previous year. An inscription on the monument reads, **"*This tower*** ***was erected in recognition of the public services of Alderman Reuben Farley JP".*** Such buildings immediately relay to us that bricks and mortar are not simply innocuous constructions that are either loved or loathed but have a very real story to relate to its wider community and help secure its rich tapestry of history. Reuben Farley’s rise to public office wasn’t necessarily pre-ordained as his origins were more concerned with local industry, particularly the business of hewing coal from the ground. His first enterprise involved the Dunkirk Colliery, his mining portfolio later swollen by his directorship of the Sandwell Park Colliery Companyand Chairmanship of the Hamstead Colliery***.*** When the potential of involvement in public office loomed, it appeared that Reuben Farley’s tentative steps into this new environment were to stall there and then as he surprisingly declined the offer to become the town’s first Member of Parliament in 1885. His reasoning was that he could best invest his energies into improving the lot of his fellow community. He said that he was, “……*obliged to make the lives of the people brighter and happier*.” It does have to be said however in the interests of balance that his attitude to those in his employment was somewhat harsher. He deplored the 8-hour day saying it was ‘interference with the liberty of the subject’; he also had disdain for the development of trade unions. Nonetheless he continued to involve himself in local affairs, becoming Mayor of West Bromwich 5 times and serving on endless committees and local societies ranging from the Rifle Volunteers to choral groups and West Bromwich Albion Football Club.

He had been 1 of 10 children at his birth in 1826 and it appears that a desire, whether conscious or not, to preserve the Farley gene was to be further facilitated by his 3 marriages, the final union of which to Harriet Fellows gave forth 5 children. Reuben died in 1899 and like some of the town’s other past dignitaries is buried at Heath Lane Cemetery. So next time you find yourself in Carters Green you will know that this structure is not a simple timing device but something that is able to strip away the decades and recount stories from a previous century which in turn channels itself back to where you may be standing, looking skyward to the clock face on Farley’s Tower.

***Beeches Road School*** (now the KingGeorge 5th)is an important inclusion in this list as in an age of ‘new builds’ and urban regeneration (a 21st century euphemism for raising bland, functionless and insipid constructs) it is worth recalling a time of workmanship when buildings were designed to make their inhabitants aware of their surroundings and purpose. A school is not just an educational institution as a house is not simply a home to cook, sleep or entertain in. Thoughtfully designed and executed, utilising the best craftsmen from its local community, buildings are treasure houses to appreciate and preserve and the school’s architect Alfred Long would have been very conscious of this fact. Beeches Road Schoolin the street of the same name opened its doors in 1893 for boys, girls and infants. With West Bromwich having the Black Country’s best attendance record of the time it had much to live up to. The school today still boasts a very attractive tower and clock, on the apex of which neatly sits a weathervane. Could anyone today seriously contemplate modern developers taking such consideration with such finer points of architectural design? I think not. The school façade includes some fine mouldings with windows panelled in simple but elegant geometric design; atop these windows are finely decorated arch shaped lines which further enhance its aesthetic appeal. I am not naïve enough of course to believe that those children who first ran along its corridors and put ink to paper were in warm and inviting environments. Late Victorian establishments such as these were subject to huge class sizes and the ravages of a cold winter day. The point however is that there is an absolute necessity to defend our artistic heritage and thus keep our local history intact. One of the school’s pupils was a Harry Bell who later found fame as a full back with West Bromwich Albion, turning professional in 1887. When buildings such as these disappear from our view, stories such as these, albeit very insignificant in the context of history’s grand scale, also fade until they are lost forever. We cannot allow that to happen.

***The Church of St. Michael & the Holy Angels*** finds itself neatly at the junction of St. Michael Street and the town’s High Street. Churches in the vast majority of towns and cities across the land have until comparatively recently long been a central part of the community and West Bromwich can certainly claim to have had a rich religious history often swathed in controversy and even social unrest. ***St. Michael’s*** owes its allegiance to the Vatican and Catholicism has long been subject to a roller coaster history and its turbulent development has not gone unnoticed here in the Black Country. The number of Catholics being very few in West Bromwich at the turn of the 20th century, the faithful found themselves trekking across to Bloxwich and at a later stage to Walsall to worship amongst the churches that could accommodate them. Circumstances began to change when Francis Martyn, a priest who supervised the Bloxwich Mission, turned his attention to West Bromwich and the need to serve the Catholic community here too. He soon became a victim of his own success as even non-Catholics were eager to attend the classes he was providing for one particular family in West Bromwich each week. In due course and after renting a non-Conformist chapel, the congregation bought a site for a new church in 1830 the foundation stone for which was laid the following year. Opening in 1832, it was dedicated to St. Michael & the Holy Angels. The architect was Joseph Ireland and designed in the Early English style. A substantial degree of the cost came from George Spencer who became the first ‘in house’ priest in 1832; he was to become the Great great great Uncle of the late Lady Diana. The numbers of worshippers for which Spencer was responsible soon ballooned. Just 2 years after opening its doors, 120 followers were officially recorded; by 1851 a Sunday Mass was witnessed by over 500. Its increased activity by the middle of the century allowed a convent of nuns to live nearby and later operate the school church. In 1875, the church was re-built but remained in the same position. By 1877 its catchment area covered Handsworth to Dudley Port and from Spon Lane to the periphery of Perry Barr. The priest from 1872-1880, Father Joseph Daly, had at one point counted 900 local adherents to the faith but was evidently concerned by the congregation’s irregular attendance. This had been exacerbated by the illiteracy and poverty that was entrenched in the community as a whole. Father Daly also pointed the finger at the high instances of drunkenness which he believed had fractured the cohesion of his flock, saying that 'the character of the place and the social tone of the whole district' were 'antagonistic to the Church'.

The reconstruction that took place in 1877 utilised Birmingham brick and Bath stone. The south-west tower and spire, of Ruabon brick (from Wales) and Hollington stone (from a Staffordshire quarry), were added in 1911. The church remains one of the town’s true landmarks and its architectural splendour can be enjoyed by believer and non-believer alike. All around it are the young shoots of new developments, loathe them or like them, but despite Father Daly’s anxiety over his congregation’s ‘moral fibre’ it still stands firmly and long may it continue.

***Farley Drinking Fountain & Canopy, Dartmouth Square*** may be a somewhat minor construction in view of those already reviewed but no less important to the heritage and history of West Bromwich and its people. It does of course take us back to that early public official Reuben Farley and his successes and further mention of him would not necessarily be unwanted repetition. Reuben was evidently close to his mother Elizabeth with whom he shared a house in the Greets Green area of the town, as when she died Reuben commissioned a drinking fountain to be erected in her memory which was built in 1885. The fountain and the canopy under which it sits has had something of an itinerant past, being originally positioned in Dartmouth Square at the junction of Old Paradise Street and the High Street. When public toilets were built there in 1911 the fountain was removed to Dartmouth Park where it stood near to the main entrance. In 1969 this now quasi-nomadic structure was on the move once more, this time being taken further into the park as land was being commandeered to make way for the construction of the new Expressway. When the local authority tendered for the final stage of the town centre development conditions were undertaken and agreed that during the disposal of the site the fountain would be saved and re-sited close to its original position. In 1981 this West Bromwich landmark found its way back to the High street from whence it first began its travels. It seems somewhat curious now that it should have been moved at all to make way for of all things a public lavatory. It appears the powers of the time saw functionality as more important than artistic endeavour.

The canopy is worthy of particular mention. Manufactured in cast iron by a Glasgow foundry (as if there weren’t a myriad of local foundries to choose from!) it is decorated in red, black and gold and stands nearly 16 feet high and is a little short of 10 feet in width. On one of the scroll like plaques an inscription reads, ***‘In Loving Memory of Elizabeth Farley. This Fountain was erected by her son Alderman Farley J.P. 1885’.*** The canopy has 8 slim pillars that support an ornate domed roof. These pillars rise up to form arches each of which has a circular roundel containing a gilded scroll at its top. On further inspection one can see that these features depict a swan and a heron. Looking down on the viewer above the arches are Oriental dragons. On the dome can be observed a circle of songbirds in flight, the structure continuing the avian theme with a large gold eagle surmounting the canopy. Some may comment that constructions such as these are too reminiscent of an overtly sentimental Victorian era; however, whether this is the case or not is largely irrelevant as it showcases both a town’s history and calls out for it to be defended and preserved for perpetuity.

***The Central Public Library, High Street*** is perhaps one of the more familiar landmarks that are knownto the town’s citizens if not simply for the reason it has a primary functional purpose. Upon entering however, there are comforting surprises in store. This is no bland 1960s, ‘Leggo –like readymade’ where design and workmanship have been consigned to the furthest regions of the universe, this is a solid, purposeful and truly wonderful building tucked away towards one end of the High Street amidst a plethora of small businesses and run down, unkempt premises.

George Osborne, a minister at the Old Meeting House, (later known as the Ebenezer Chapel) between 1785-92, had been associated with the foundation of the modern library service in the town; the books for these were situated at the Swan Inn Public House. Further developments in the town’s bookish involvement was exemplified by the industriousness of the New Street book seller and printer William Salter who was active in the 1820s and by the 1870s government legislation had established the Free Libraries Act, a result of which led to the eventual erection of a library which constituted part of a group of other public buildings in the High Street. This was opened in stages between 1874-75. In 1907, the library moved to its current home on the site of the old market hall and the Heath iron warehouse adjoining the old library. The interior of the building is certainly not what you would expect in a contemporary institution of this kind and all the better for it. Walking up the steps, flanked on either side by ionic columns, you enter a world of stained glass, murals ***and coloured tiles***, the latter of which exalt the art nouveau style popular at the time and even now showing a tangible resurgence. One of the arched stained glass windows fittingly depicts ***William Shakespeare*** as if officially appointed an overseer of the building and guardian of the tomes enshrined within. The ***library staircase*** is tiled in a subtle and cool green the tactile nature of which screams out to the library visitor. A ***crest of arms*** adorns the gallery on the first landing and is overlooked by a large ***canvas in oils***. An air of contemplation pervades the atmosphere, calmly enhanced by its artistic environment and at times you could be mistaken that you are in fact in a century old urban library in a Midlands industrial town and not some more renowned building of historical interest. With due concern and diligence it can continue to be experienced as such.

***The Former Offices of Kenrick and Jefferson, High Street***represents a building which has truly entrenched and historical roots in the town. It was not only home to a significant employer but had far reaching political and social connotations.

In 1875, a weekly *‘Free Press’* newspaperwasfounded espousing Liberal values and policies, the offices mentioned above later providing its home and printing activity. When in 1878 its proprietors, ‘The Free Press Company’ went into liquidation, an already well established Birmingham hardware industrialist John Arthur Kenrick formed a partnership with a local solicitor Frederick Jefferson, the latter of whom had been the secretary of the afore-mentioned Free Press Company. From its rudimentary stages, Jefferson developed the printing side of the concern, expanding the business and focusing on office equipment, business stationery, loose leaf binders, filing systems and office furniture. In 1882 the business moved from Hudson's Passage to the High Street. Between 1886 and 1894 it was apparent Jefferson still wished to promote his progressive view of the world and published *The Labour* *Tribune*, a radical newspaper which described itself as 'the organ of the miners, ironworkers, nut and bolt forgers, &c., of Great Britain' and aimed at a national readership. The *‘Free Press’* itself was to later meet its demise in 1933 but had already earned itself a worthy position in the annals of the social history of West Bromwich and further afield.

In 1900 a limited company was incorporated and the business was to remain equally in the hands of the 2 families from which it originated until at least the 1950s. From the 1910s to the 1930s one of the company’s most prominent characters and Directors was a ‘Mr. Fred’ easily recognisable by his sartorial eccentricity; he was often to be found wearing a monocle and 2-tone shoes. This Bohemian individual must have turned many heads in those early post Victorian days and years! Between 1995-97 the firm sold off all but its envelope business, conducted from a plant elsewhere in West Bromwich. Its premises in the High Street which had been added to from the 1880s to the 1970s stood empty and by the autumn of 2001 had been demolished, the exception being the 1882 building, this being set aside for redevelopment by Kenrick and Jefferson Holdings as an £8.5m shopping and leisure centre. Universally known as ‘*K &* *Js*’ by all those who worked there - my mother *Gwen Seymour* before her marriage began her working life there in 1947 as a printing machine operator – the 1882 premises still present themselves today to the town’s inhabitants as both an echo of a former family concern and a society fundamentally removed from the one we currently experience. Its roots however will forever represent an unbreakable link with its industrial and political past.

The building itself is of red brick and terra cotta. It has a simple yet symmetrical design with 2 storeys and an attic. *Above one of the former entrances the year 1883 proudly announces itself as a reminder of a bygone age*. Various sculptured mouldings and motifs adorn the façade in all directions. Treasures such as these, even if they lie dormant and have no apparent or current function, are nonetheless still treasures.

*The Lewisham Hotel Public House, High Street* has had a varied history and although since 2001 officially titled the *‘Desi* *Junction’*, an establishment selling good Indian food as well as continuing to offer its customers the customary tipple, it is more often than not still referred to by its original designation and even that has been subject to more than one occasional name change.

This imposing Victorian hostelry began its life in 1858 as the *‘Lewis Arms’* but this is without question due to an early typographical error. By 1864 it was the *‘Lewisham Arms Hotel’* with a further change in 1888 and now the *‘Lewisham Arms Inn’.* In1896 the town saw one of its largest public houses re-named once more – the *Lewisham Hotel* proudly claimed its place – *its name blazoned at the building’s apex*. One of its early licensees and owner was Arthur James Price who was to quench the thirst of his customers for 25 years until he hung up his towel in 1906. He had also been a wholesale brewer and traded in wines and spirits to supplement his income. There were to be in excess of a further 8 landlords up to 1992 all with differing periods of tenure, George Abner Milward serving the longest in the 20th century between 1925-46. The pub has not always busied itself with just the beer, wines and spirits industry; it has on several occasions played host to many of the town’s socially historic events. For example in 1885, an inquest was held there into the ‘death by natural causes’ of 5 week old Harry Lunn, the illegitimate son of a Mary Ann Lunn who resided in Overend Street, just a few hundred yards from the Lewisham Arms. Inquests into murder were a common phenomenon in public houses and The Lewisham certainly had its share. On a lighter note a story from 1864 reminds us that insobriety and its consequences are not confined to the 21st century. Reports from the time tell us of an infamous and local individual known as *‘Dicky Dickenson’* who in March of this year made his 36th appearance before the West Bromwich Bench, charged on this occasion with the theft of 18 pence. It transcribed that a scrap iron dealer from Toll End, Henry Brazier, had been imbibing somewhat heavily into the late hours at the Lewisham Arms and admitting to being in ‘a state of fog’ was removed to the safety of a cab for his home at about 2am in the early hours of Saturday morning. Once Brazier had regained his composure and the ill effects of the alcohol had dispersed he said that he could not recall having either given or agreed to giving the accused a florin to pay for a drink. A further witness, a waitress at the inn, Janet Stephenson, had recalled that Brazier had given her a 2 shilling piece in payment for ale. When she returned with the 1s 6d change, the prisoner ‘Dicky Dickenson’ claimed it and put it in his pocket. The accused had denied the charge to a Police Constable Farmer who despite his objections had took him into custody. Later the Bench had exclaimed that he had provided a more than improbable explanation and as a consequence was sent for trial at the ensuing Staffordshire Assizes. It has been frustrating that I have not - to date at least - yet to unearth the final dénouement surrounding this West Bromwich recidivist – that must wait another day.

The Lewisham Hotel still retains its architectural superiority and largesse amongst the ‘lesser’ of its neighbours but if not preserved will lose part if not all of the anecdotes and stories it holds within.

***The Offices of Archibald Kenrick & Sons, Hall Street South*** are tucked away in an unimposing stretch of tarmac and pavement aside a motorway flyover and a nebula of dishevelled businesses; these are however I believe truly remarkable in the context of both the industrial significance of West Bromwich and the unique character of the building itself. The company was established in 1791 and the Hall Street offices date from the 1880s. Kenrick & Sons were prolific in the manufacture of cast iron, the variety and volume of their products placing your head in an almost unstoppable spin. ***Cork presses***, pulleys***, foot lasts,*** keys, mincers, ***door stops (some modelled in the form of Mr. Punch)***, ornately designedletter boxes & ***door knockers***, flat irons & ***‘slug’ irons***, boot scrapers; the list verges on the infinite. Any history of the company, no matter what its size in the context of this particular article, would not give it any justice and I do not therefore propose to present a detailed account of one. The emphasis is on the building and how *this relates* to its economic and industrial roots. Constructed of brick, stone and some terra cotta, it has tiled roofs and is designed in a Gothic style. The ground floor presents an arcade of 14 adjoining arches which leads the eye skyward to the sweeping Victorian magnificence of the other winsome features. Other than elements of tracery, at various points your eyes become accustomed to ***what appear to be gargoyle-esque faces and animals of an almost medieval form***, their more intricate quality having been savaged by the rigours of a Black Country history and environment in which smoke, steam, and coal dust were the masters of all it purveyed. ***A clock face and tower*** sit neatly on the far right-hand side, peaking over the surrounding environment, as if to remind current and future towns folk of its ever fading but all-important history. This building is a treasure trove of heritage and at the time of writing plans are well advanced to transform this fine example of industrial excellence into residential apartments. I find myself recoiling at such circumstances but at least the building - to some as yet unknown extent – will remain and for that I must remain nervously content.

***All Saints Church*** is without question one of the most important and historically significant buildings in West Bromwich, its name originally believed to have been St. Clements, an unusual and somewhat uncommon dedication, a reminder of this being St. Clements Lane which is to be found at the rear of the current hospital and site of the first functioning workhouse in the town. Although positioned away from the epicentre and hub of the town’s daily social and business exertions, ‘*Old Church’* as it is affectionately known was for many centuries fundamentally important in the cohesion and progression of the town’s future prospects. Although the present church is unquestionably ancient in origin, it is very probable that a much older structure of Saxon heritage once laid claim to the site. It is possible therefore that some sort of religious worship has been performed here for well over 1,000 years.

In encountering the Norman period we can be more assured of the facts. During the 1872 restoration of the church, remains from the Norman era came to light; these consisted of a shaft and two capitals generally thought to be the remnants of a belfry window from the Norman tower. These were later to be preserved as part of the north wall of the present belfry. The date proposed for the construction of the church from this time is between 1080-1090; this however must be regarded as something of conjecture. The 14th century saw a post-Norman reconstruction, giving way to a less austere atmosphere and a more decorative and welcoming style with more light facilitated by larger windows. The Gothic period saw a marked increase in the population of West Bromwich and in response the church witnessed further enlargements, so much so that it can comfortably be assumed that this current structure was more substantial than any of its predecessors. Certain aspects of the Gothic period are still with us, for example the lower parts of the tower comprising the arch and window date from the Middle Ages, these having being encased in more modern stone in 1872.

The 16th and 17th centuries were more concerned with additions than any substantial reconstruction. In 1573, Walter Stanley, Lord of the Manor of West Bromwich, is believed to have been responsible for building a chapel at the East End of the north aisle; this chapel was demolished in 1786. In 1619 the Whorwood Chapel was established in memory of Sir William Whorwood of Sandwell Hall. The 18th century saw neglect and decay. In 1783 it was recorded that it was ‘much dilapidated and in want of repair’. With fund raising underway the repairs to All Saints began in earnest in 1786, virtually all traces of its Gothic past demolished, the exception being the lower tower and the Whorwood Chapel. My fourth, albeit distant cousin, the local historian ***Frederick William Hackwood*** remarked that this single event in the church’s history constituted, ‘the greatest act of vandalism to which any church has ever been subjected ‘.

By 1854 a small sanctuary was built onto the East End, containing the High Altar and illuminated by an ornate Venetian window. About this time the Whorwood Chapel, having been used as a family pew by the Earls of Dartmouth, became a vestry. In 1862 a previously installed and grand pulpit was deemed too large and removed, replaced by a more suitably sized structure. The church we view today originates from the major alterations undertaken in 1872; plans however for a major refurbishment had been in mind for some years before, the Reverends Spry and ***Willett*** being the principal instigators for such change. In 1870, the vicar had complained vociferously, saying ‘The rain pours in at the roof, the walls are mouldy and stained, the windows let in draughts on all sides, the floor is so damp that it is almost dangerous to kneel, the belfry is unsafe, the bells useless for ringing, the whole building is . . . damp, inconvenient, uncomfortable, dirty and slovenly’.

After much wrangling and disagreement about which designs to adopt, 1871 saw the tender of Mr. Burkitt of Wolverhampton to rebuild the church for £6,300, being accepted. The last full day of worship in the old church was Sunday, 25th June 1871 and in April of the following year a memorial stone was laid on the site of the High Altar by the High Sheriff of Staffordshire. Building work continued with gusto and the new church was opened with great ceremony on 29 October 1872. The following year Mr. Willett was thanked ‘officially’ for successfully completing the restoration, everyone agreeing that ‘in place of one dilapidated and inconvenient church . . . there is now a church of great beauty’. That beauty remains today and I trust for millennia to come.

***Sandwell Hall Arch Lodge, M6 Motorway Island*** is a curiosity all of its own with a history perhaps more embedded than any other in the town, its position providing 1000s of motorists each day with a daily reminder of how West Bromwich used to be. The arch was a gatehouse entrance to the former imposing ***Sandwell Hall***, the home and seats of successive Earls of Dartmouth, perhaps the most prominent being that of the 2nd Earl, ***William Legge*** who was active in the mid 18th century and an advocate of Methodism which was rare for an aristocrat of the period. He regularly attended the Wednesbury Methodist meetings where fellow worshippers - many of them colliers and drovers - knew him as "Brother Earl". The hall itself was a major re-construction of the dwelling that preceded it. Both of these found themselves on the ruins of the old Sandwell Priory which dates from the 12th century. This re-designed Sandwell Hall was the creation of William Smith of Tettenhall who in 1703 was commissioned to 'mend the old house'. It appeared that Smith’s original remit was only to ‘improve’ and make alterations, however events were to take a decisive and sharp turn and the remainder of the old building was pulled down, and in July 1705 the foundations of an entirely new building were laid. Work was still in progress in the summer of 1708, by which time Smith had been paid over £1,750 (nearly £150,000 at today’s value). It is thought to have been completed in the very early stages of 1712. A plan of *c*. 1770 suggests that Smith's work may in part have followed the layout of the earlier house, which probably had three ranges surrounding a court; it contained a main hall, chapel, library and dining room. Around 1805 further improvements had taken place, changes which by 1845 had not been well received. When Lord Hatherton visited Sandwell he found it 'a dull house in a very dull situation'; his room, indeed the whole house was 'very dignified and dingy'. The decision of the 4th Earl in 1840 to purchase Patshull Hall on the Staffordshire/ Shropshire border had implications for the hall’s future demise. Lord Dartmouth abandoned the Black Country hall for Patshull in 1853 citing deficiencies at Sandwell; this however was more likely to have been a convenient excuse as at this period West Bromwich and the neighbouring towns had been subject to vociferous and unrelenting industrial development, the scars from which had and were continuing to take its toll on the surrounding natural beauty of the area. The money and investment which the Dartmouths has ploughed into the local economy had bitten the hand that fed it and it was time for these West Bromwich aristocrats to announce their final farewell.

The Hall however was not to be left an unoccupied, draughty relic, unwanted and forgotten. For a short time G. F. Muntz, the metal manufacturer and political reformer took up residence but he soon left and the hall did eventually remain empty, albeit for a short period up to 1857. ***An Anglican educational institution was active*** there until in c.1900-1906, the premises took on the mantle of a lunatic asylum for ‘mental defectives. Its successor was to be a Borstal institution in the 1920s, Smith’s 18th century grandeur giving way to the inevitable in 1928 when demolition took place but not until every interior and exterior fitting was sold off at auction, an event that must have been a marvel at which to wonder. The auction included 14,000 square feet of oak flooring, 200 oak and pine doors, 2 oak and one stone staircase and 63 carved wood, marble and stone mantelpieces. At the completion of the demolition it was estimated that near to 10,000 tons of rubble, bricks and stone had been razed to the ground and with it centuries of history inextricably linked to West Bromwich and its people, the only reminder being the isolated architectural morsel we witness today on a major motorway traffic island, giving an appearance of something metaphysical and maybe even a little surreal.

The gateway is of sandstone and has a rounded arch, Doric columns providing an enhanced elegance to this shred of 18th century local craftsmanship, providing a Classical appearance to an otherwise unnoticed and forgotten icon of the Black Country. A flanking brick wall also survives and stretches out until there is no more, almost as if attempting in vain, to reach out for its former years of glory; survive though it does and despite the threatening traffic, noise and subsequent pollution, every effort needs to be maintained to ensure its future existence and posterity.

The majority of the afore-mentioned structures are not officially ‘at risk’, however, as already stated, the purpose of this short history of the more renowned buildings, sculptures and objects of interest that dot the landscape of West Bromwich is not to revel in a fog of superficial nostalgia, it is more an exercise in being disciplined in our approach to our local history and heritage, safeguarding our towns’ treasures for generations to come, keeping the stories, folklore and legends associated with them alive. The American motor- manufacturer Henry Ford was absolutely and fundamentally wrong – history is ***not*** bunk.