

ALL OF THE FACTORY CHIMNEYS ARE GONE. WHAT'S IN YOUR NEIGHBOURHOOD?

July 29, 2016 Adam Mindykowski Community Archaeology, Historical Archaeology, Landscape Archaeology, UK 19th century, Childhood, Community Planning, memory, place, urban archaeology

The small English town of Kidderminster is internationally renowned as a 19th century powerhouse of carpet manufacture. Sir Roland Hill, a son of the town, published his 1837 work, *Post Office Reform: Its Importance and Practicability*, which ultimately led to the World's first self-adhesive postage stamp, the Penny Black. Other boasts include 17th century Christian rebellion and Led Zeppelin...well, one member specifically.

Kidderminster is now representative of what is commonly described as a 'post-industrial town'. It is a town that has traced a bumpy road of decline since, at least, the 1970s and has yet to recover. Some years ago a 'new' town centre was built on the site of Brinton's carpet factory. The former site of one of the great engines of carpet production is now redbrick, herringbone and chain stores gathered into an awkward 'anytown' and devoid of community focus. The 'old' town centre is now a place of many empty shop buildings punctuated by the odd chain store or thrift shop. Remnants of 1980s modernisation now look worn. The colours of post-70s optimism bled dry and lichen covered. Even graffiti art is absent; so often a symbol of gritty urban spaces devoid of Gentrification. Where is Banksy in this time of need? Could not one of his signature apparitions lift a dark corner of this once cultural hub? Would a local artist paint Vulcan ears and comedy spectacles onto the subject, should it be a figure? Perhaps.

On this Day of Archaeology, 2016, I am working on guidance for Neighbourhood Planning, the current vehicle for empowering local communities with a degree of control over how development will be integrated into their town, village or parish, and protect what is special. In its application, there is a perception of what constitutes archaeology and the historic environment. For many it is about historic buildings or areas designated with a high level of protection. Views, vistas and streetscapes are valued as too the mature trees and hedgerows that frame the skyline or sinuous country lane. However, in conversation with residents, talk will often turn towards the comparatively mundane yet magical places of a long passed childhood: the ancient stone cobbled alleyway used as a short-cut home; the ruinous Victorian shed with its ghosts lurking within the lvy covered walls or the pasture field where a searchlight once swept the night sky in search of Heinkel HE111 bombers. These are the un-Designated and easily lost monuments of experience that define the spirit of place. Planning policy requires quantification, constraint and values defined by methods that will stand up to scrutiny. Nonetheless, value built from experience often thrives at the places in between grand designs and manicured landscapes. Perhaps however, it is an inevitable consequence of change that such places are conserved only in memories and the stories told. The short-cuts and dark corners are erased; the derelict buildings, all swept aside by the 'masterplan'.



Ghost sign, Kidderminster, February 2016 © A. Mindykowski

Back in Kidderminster, in February, under a featureless winter sky, a window briefly opened back to a time when family run shops occupied almost every corner of every street. A modern advertisement hoarding had been removed after years of disuse revealing part of a painted advertisement from the golden age of residential streets as urban markets. With shaking hands, the modern urban explorer *Tweeted* about a 'ghost sign' #UrbanEphemera #CarryOnFlaneur. By contrast, for long-time residents – a now dwindling number in population – eyes became bright with memories of the old corner shop, Penny Chews sold by the genial shopkeeper who always had a smile on winter days. For this neighbourhood, at least, archaeology suddenly became tangible in a few faded letters.