

# **Exploring Greater Manchester**

a fieldwork guide



Edited by Cathy Delaney

# Discovering history and conservation in Didsbury: East Didsbury, Didsbury St. James Conservation Area

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**Aims:** This walk uses the evidence of the built environment and urban greenspaces to illuminate cultural, demographic, economic and social changes over time. Didsbury village has long been regarded as a highly desirable residential suburb, but its last 150 years have been dominated by the influence of two major institutions, the former educational training college and the Shirley Institute, whose sites have been redeveloped since 1990. Today Didsbury has an exuberant, dynamic openness which surpasses that found in many of the other affluent suburbs in the deep south of Greater Manchester. The walk examines the key features of the Conservation area, particularly its listed buildings, and recent changes to it. It reveals the vestiges of the original hamlet; the late Victorian splendour of the homes of key entrepreneurs and civic leaders; the influence of the coming of railways; the important key open spaces that provide varied wildlife habitats and recreational opportunities; and the early twenty-first transformation of the village centre and the sites of former institutions.

**Starting point:** Didsbury Village Metrolink Station. (This is also the starting point for the walk covering West Didsbury and Albert Park which is also in the Exploring Greater Manchester series).

**Estimated Time:** 2 hours

**Further information:** This walk is based on the pre-COVID-19 situation. Access to some greenspaces, buildings and commercial premises may be restricted or not permitted under the conditions existing at the time of writing (August 2020).

**Maps:** Geographers' Greater Manchester A-Z Street Atlas; Ordnance Survey Explorer (1:25,000) no 277 Manchester and Salford; Google Maps.

## Introduction to Didsbury and the Didsbury St. James Conservation Area

The Didsbury St. James Conservation Area (Fig. 1), designated in November 1970, contains the largest concentration of listed building in Manchester outside the city centre. Most of the buildings are residential buildings, originally the homes of notable Manchester entrepreneurs and civic leaders. Many of the residences have subsequently undergone changes of use and redevelopment. In the Conservation Area, which is generally well-endowed with mature trees, the architectural styles vary from the perpendicular of St. James' Church, to the classical and gothic of public build-

ings and the more grandiose homes. Some more modest houses of a more vernacular character also survive.

Even the oldest building, the parish church of St. James in Didsbury has undergone modification and rebuilding several times. In 1235, Nicholas de Longford, Lord of the Manor of Withington granted land for the founding of a chapel, or oratory. The early 17<sup>th</sup> century rebuilding of the original chapel was influenced by Sir Nicholas Mosley, the builder of Hough End Hall in Chorlton. The present church has many memorials to the Mosley family. Situated in a prominent position overlooking the Mersey floodplain, the church was close to a crossing point where the river could be forded.

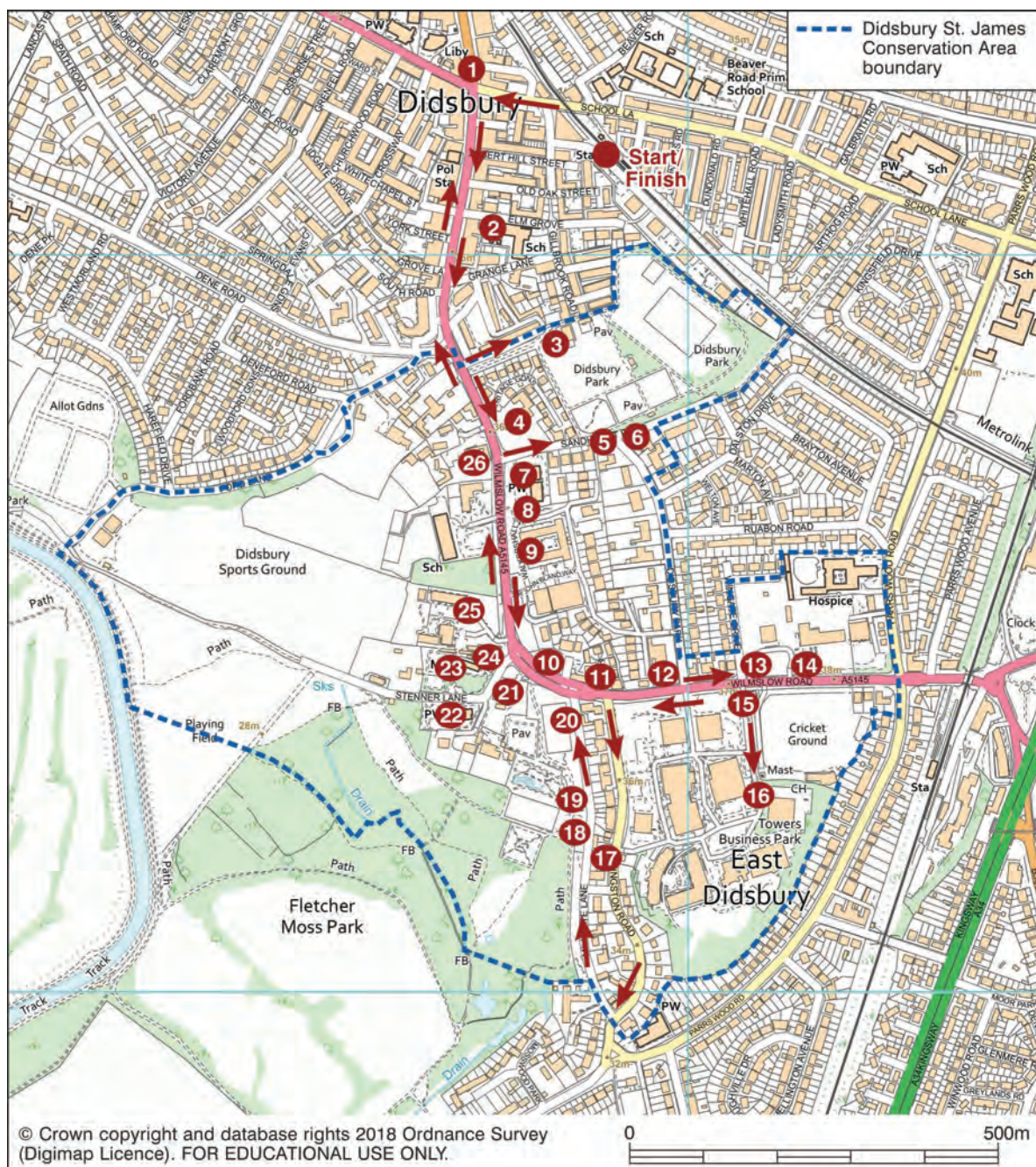


Figure 1: The area covered by the by this walk and the stopping points along the route.



The Didsbury hamlet became more important once the Manchester to Wilmslow turnpike was established and a bridge built over the river in 1755. The Cock Inn, near the church, dates from the 16th century and Broome House, further north, at Stop 4, from about the time the turnpike was opened. The original centre of the village is at the pronounced bend in Wilmslow Road near the church (Fig.2). Here there was once a village green, but now there is only hard paving. The modern centre of Didsbury is a kilometre to the north.

One of the key 19<sup>th</sup> century developments was the establishment of the Wesleyan Theological Institution for the Improvement of the Junior Preachers in Didsbury in the 1840s (Fig. 2). The arrival, in 1880, of the Midland Railway, along whose track bed the Metrolink now runs, prompted a spurt in growth of the settlement, with further impetus after the construction the “Styal Line” between Longsight and Wilmslow which opened in 1909 and led to the expansion of housing in Burnage and East Didsbury between 1909 and 1930 (Freeman 1962). Didsbury grew around the railway stations, shifting the centre of the settlement away from the Church towards the Midland railway station. As in other cities the character of suburban housing developments for the well-to-do changed. The late 19<sup>th</sup> century developments in Didsbury led to the many fine houses to be seen on this walk.

Two important institutions developed in the village during the 20<sup>th</sup> century; the Wesleyan Theological Institution became an expanding Methodist Training College and the Shirley Institute. In 1945, as the Methodist theological college was no longer required by the church, it was leased it to the Manchester Education Authority who used it as a

teacher training college. It was renamed Didsbury College of Education in 1963 and became part of Manchester Polytechnic in 1977 when it became the Didsbury School of Education. It grew again after 1992 when the Polytechnic became Manchester Metropolitan University (MMU), but in 2008, after some opposition to further expansion plans from local objectors who feared increased traffic and parking problems and an overwhelming number of students, MMU decided to close the Didsbury campus, along with some facilities at other sites away from the main campus on Oxford Road near the city centre, and relocate them all to its new Birley Field campus in Hulme, within easy walking distance of Oxford Road.

The British Cotton Industry Research Association purchased The Towers, probably the finest of the late Victorian house in Didsbury, in 1920 to establish the Shirley Institute as a research centre dedicated to cotton production technologies. In the nineteen-fifties, the decline of the UK cotton industry was such that the funding of the Institute decreased and its research contracted. The Institute vacated the building in 1987, since when The Tower has housed small and growing businesses.

These two sites were undergoing further change in 2020. The business park is occupied by large modern office buildings with The Towers still home to smaller enterprises. On the former education campus, the major St. James Park residential development is proceeding.

Many assert that Didsbury is the best suburb in the City of Manchester (Halfpenny *et al.*, 2004). The area originally grew as a railway suburb, with a mixture of workers’ terraces, middle-class villas and merchant-gentlemen’s mansions. Today, it still has a core of large detached and



Figure 2: Ordnance Survey six-inch map of Didsbury in 1848 clearly showing St. James’ Church and the Wesleyan Theological Institution (later the Methodist Training College). Source: <https://maps.nls.uk/view/102344114>.

semi-detached Victorian and Edwardian houses that attract high and (in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century) rapidly increasing prices (Fig.3), especially if they are close to the shops in the “village” centre. Didsbury, with its urban and mixed-use character, is attractive to residents, having good access to the city centre, the motorway network, the airport, and open green spaces. Traditionally higher income groups within Greater Manchester have either settled in Didsbury, relatively close to the city centre, or have moved outside the M60 in search of what is usually perceived to be a higher quality family offer (Cole, 2016). Average house prices in Didsbury have moved well above those in most of the remainder of the City of Manchester (Fig.3). The gap has increased since 2004, Rightmove claiming that the average house price in Didsbury in mid-2020 was £346,000 while in Beswick and Gorton it was £145,000.

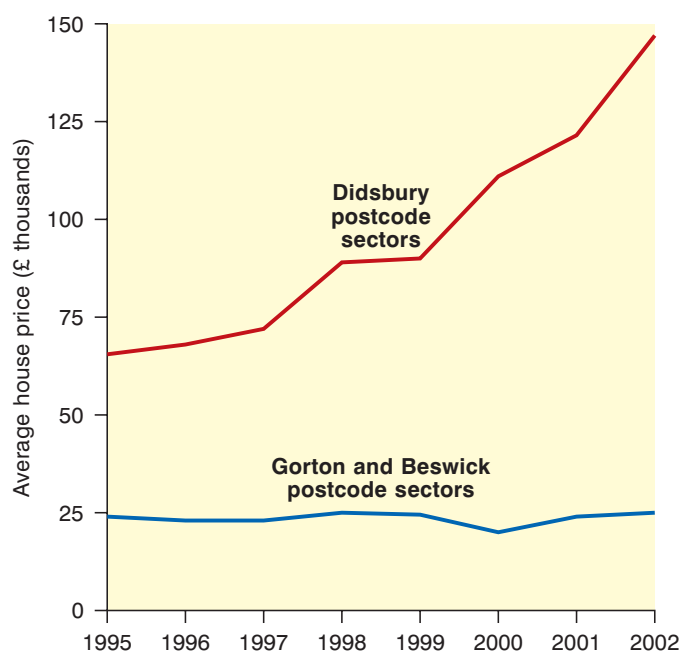


Figure 3: Contrast in the changes in average house prices (in £ on the vertical axis) in Didsbury and in Beswick and Gorton, 1995-2000 (Ferrari and Roberts, 2004).

In 1980, Dame Kathleen Ollerenshaw wrote that few successful people then lived in the City of Manchester and paid taxes to the City Council. For her, only the non-commercial middle class lived in Didsbury (cited in Devine *et al.*, 2008). Sociological studies since 2000 confirm the popularity of Didsbury. High quality conversions of old Victorian properties into self-contained apartments with due attention

to design and security have been in high demand, leading to high rents. The renters were described by one developer as well-paid “young execs” looking for quality places to live and wanting the “type of cosmopolitan atmosphere” to be found in the suburb (Devine *et al.*, 2008).

This social transformation has concerned activists in civic societies, conservation groups, local politicians and other “influentials” who worry that the suburb has been declining, with the character of the area – its fine substantial houses, leafy roads and parks and village centre with local shops – all being lost as a result of wider social trends. The proliferation of cafes, restaurants and pubs making Didsbury an “evening and night-time centre” has also worried local “influentials” greatly. The wider social changes have seen young professional people spending less time cooking at home and more time eating out. The growth of the leisure industries in the suburb, however, has been associated with rising crime (Devine *et al.*, 2008). This all seems to have created something of a generational conflict between older and younger members of the middle classes resident in Didsbury. The older residents, invariably the most active members of the civic and conservation organizations, have sought to retain the exclusivity of the suburb including its low population density, fine substantial houses, leafy roads and parks, and quiet and tranquil village centre with local shops whose use generated a sense of community. This exclusivity has been increasingly threatened by the economic and social change of which the older residents are well aware. These struggles are part of the wider impacts of Manchester’s regeneration and renaissance which has been accompanied by the polarization of social inequalities (Mellor 1997, 2000).

In 2020 building densities in Didsbury were being increased by residential developments and inevitably putting pressure on the goals of the Didsbury St. James Conservation Area, which desires to maintain both the high quality of the buildings and the existing well-treed suburban character of the district. The walk provides the opportunity to look at the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century heritage of the suburb with its many listed buildings, and its adaptation to the demands of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It is an opportunity to consider what the urban future of this part of Greater Manchester might be, how we can retain and enhance the blue and green infrastructure, parks, flood plain meadows, the river and the sports grounds that were so important to people in the COVID-19 crisis lockdown.



## The Walk

- > Starting from Didsbury Village Metrolink Stop, walk west along School Lane to Wilmslow Road by the station clock.

### Stop 1: Didsbury Station Clock.

The 1880 Didsbury Midland Railway Station was on the east side of Wilmslow Road, set back some metres from the road, as are the present buildings on the site. The space between the station and the clock was where horse-drawn cabs and private carriages waited for people alighting from the trains in the cutting below the level of the road. Unveiled in 1911, the station clock (Fig. 4) and water fountain is dedicated to the memory of local doctor and civic activist campaigner for the poor, Dr. John Milson Rhodes, who was a GP in Didsbury from 1874 until his death in 1909. Dr. Rhodes played a key role in the transfer of sane epilepsy sufferers from the harsh conditions at Withington Hospital to the David Lewis (Manchester) Epileptic Colony in 1904 (Leitch, 2011b). In 1906, Manchester set up a “colony” for the treatment of patients suffering from epilepsy at Langho in Ribblesdale. Here residents lived in large houses, each accommodating 40 patients.

On the same side of the road as the clock a series of restaurants and bars can be seen. They reflect the 21<sup>st</sup> century changes to Didsbury village, bringing a clientele that enjoys the lively evening and night-time lifestyle that sometimes disturbs older and more traditional residents.



Figure 4: Didsbury Station clock.

- > From the clock proceed south (to your left) along Wilmslow Road, remaining on the same side of the road. Along the road you will see the diversity of shops, cafés, restaurants, banks and entertainment services of modern Didsbury. Turn into the sixth street on the left, Elm Grove, where the Didsbury CE Primary School is on the right-hand side of the street.

### Stop 2: The former Elm Grove Church of England Girls' School (now Didsbury CE Primary school).

This Grade II listed red brick school building (Fig. 5) dates from 1910. Its irregular plan includes a hall with lower entrance section to the right, and another lower section to the left and a tower at the rear right-hand corner of the hall. This Arts and Crafts Movement building was funded by Arthur Godfrey Roby who lived at High Bank on Stenner Lane (Leitch 2011b). There is another classroom block behind the hall. This historic church school provides teaching for about 240 pupils (boys and girls), aged 3 to 11. It is now part of the St James and Emmanuel Academy Trust which was set up in September 2015 and embraces several other local schools.



Figure 5: Didsbury CE Primary School.

- > Return to Wilmslow Road, turn left (south) and take the second left into Didsbury Park.

### Stop 3: Didsbury Park.

Didsbury Park (Fig. 6) was one of the first municipal planned parks in the city. The Withington Local Board of Health (which covered Burnage, Chorlton-cum-Hardy, Didsbury, Withington and part of Moss Side) purchased the land for £2500 in 1893. Fletcher Moss played a key role in the laying out of the Park, originally known as a recreation ground (Million 1969). It was re-designed in the 1920s to include recreational features for local residents including the two

bowling greens which survive today. Now it also has a crèche, football pitch and play area. The park received a Green Flag Award for Excellence in 2008. Once a year, at the Didsbury Festival, pupils from local schools dress up to a theme and meet in the playground of St. Catherine's Primary School, in East Didsbury, from where they parade to Didsbury Park. Urban ecologists value parks such as this as key social assets providing many ecosystem services, such as helping to keep the suburb cool and absorbing carbon dioxide, that help to mitigate the impact of the climate change crisis.



Figure 6: Didsbury Park.

> From the Park, go back to the entrance through which you came and return to Wilmslow Road. Turn left (South) and walk some 50 metres down to the first entrance on the left. You will see Broome House on the right-hand side of the entrance.

#### Stop 4: Broome House.

Broome House is the oldest house in Didsbury, apart from the Old Parsonage (Stop 23), dating back to the early/mid 18<sup>th</sup> century. It is a Grade II listed building that was the home of the Broome family, who, along with the Fielden family, were the major landowners in Didsbury in the eighteenth century. In 1750, William Broome was one of the overseers of the poor in Didsbury. Around 1785 the Broomes built a new house, now known as Sandhurst House (Stop 9) and Broome House changed hands several times in the next 150 years. In 1923 it was bought by Robert Ollerenshaw, the orthopaedic surgeon. On his death in 1949 Manchester Corporation bought it for £5,500, and the house became a residential home for children (France and Woodall 1976).

Around 2000 it passed into private hands again and was returned to residential use. In its grounds a small development of new housing has recently been completed. This new development is typical of the 21<sup>st</sup> century infill process which sees housing developments in what had been the extensive gardens of large houses.

Built of bricks with a pink-washed roughcast render, the house has slate roofs and a symmetrical five-window façade dominated by a central two-storey three-window curved frontage. Three semi-circular steps lead up to a doorway with an open-pedimented Ionic doorcase with decorated capitals.

> Proceed south along Wilmslow road and turn left on to Sandhurst Road, proceed to the junction with Didsbury Park

#### Stop 5: Park End House.

This mid to late 19<sup>th</sup> century house (Fig. 7) is built of red brick in Flemish bond, with sandstone dressings and a slate roof. The two-storey, double-fronted, building has 5 bays, with the central one projecting forwards slightly. It had been used as a student residence and when sold back into private ownership it was reported as being "in a really dreadful state; two dilapidated kitchens, sinks in all the bedrooms, a tree growing out of the back room and a jungle of a garden". Subsequently modernised by new owners after 1996, it was again sold in 2007. In 2020, the house was used as a film set for the "The Stranger" on Netflix.



Figure 7: Park End House.

> Go across Didsbury Park to Pine House.



*Stop 6: Pine House (on the corner of Didsbury Park and Sandhurst Road, opposite Park End House).*

Probably built around 1840, this gothic-style house, with an L-shaped plan, (Fig. 8) has white-painted stucco on brick and a slate roof. Like many of the listed buildings on this walk, this house is threatened by developments proposed on adjacent plots. In 2018 an application for a redevelopment of the adjoining plot at 21 Didsbury Park was refused by the City Council.



Figure 8: Pine House.

> Turn back along Sandhurst Road and proceed towards its junction with Wilmslow Road.

*Stop 7: St. Paul's Methodist Church, on the corner of Wilmslow Road and Sandhurst Road, best viewed from Sandhurst Road.*

Designed by the architect H.H. Vale and built by E.T. Barry and Sons as a church for the nearby Wesleyan Theological Institution, this Grade II listed building (Fig. 9) was opened in 1877. The church was built as a memorial to the local philanthropist and MP, James Heald of Parrs Wood. Built in the Victorian Gothic style, of coursed squared sandstone rubble, with a steeply pitched roof of graduated green slates, Vale's church displays freely interpreted elements of Early English and Geometrical Decorated Gothic architecture. The layout is cruciform with a belfry and steeple on the south-west corner. Architectural elements typical of the style are used throughout, such as lancet windows and foliar decoration, with dormer windows along the nave. The 3-stage tower has diagonal buttresses, and there is a 2-centred arched west doorway.

The building was converted into an office space in 1990 and is currently occupied by Atmos International, an

oil engineering company with offices in China, Costa Rica and the USA as well as Didsbury. The company's primary focus is on detecting pipeline leaks in operational pipelines.

The walls along the north and west sides of the St Paul's churchyard and their gate piers (Fig. 10) and gates date from about 1875 and are also listed buildings. The walls have pitched copings, and upstands at regular intervals (they were piers to former railings).

> Continuing south along Wilmslow Road and adjacent to St. Paul's behind the car-park of Atmos International is the single storey Didsbury Methodist Church.



Figures 9 and 10: St. Paul's Methodist Church and its gate post and wall on Wilmslow Road.



*Stop 8: Didsbury Methodist Church.*

Christian worship continues on the site at the neighbouring Didsbury Methodist Church, a small brick building dating from 1961 (Fig. 11). Methodism in Didsbury traces its roots back to John Wesley's time with the establishment of "Classes" of Methodist members in Burnage with an offshoot in Didsbury commencing in 1790. During the 19th century two congregations developed, one in Albert Hill St. and one at St. Paul's. The two congregations came together in 1991 to form Didsbury Methodist Church in the present refurbished building.



*Figure 11: The present Didsbury Methodist Church.*

> Continue south along Wilmslow Road to the redeveloped education site.

*Stop 9: The former Wesleyan Theological Institution and Chapel, later the Didsbury College of Education and subsequently the Manchester Metropolitan University Didsbury Campus.*

In 1740 the site was purchased by the Broome family (see Stop 4), and a new house was constructed after 1785 by William Broome. The house was built of red brick and had a large deer park at the rear (Million, 1969). It is now the front part of the former university administration building, presently known as Sandhurst House (Fig.12). By 1812 the house was occupied by a Colonel Parker, and in the 1820s and '30s it was a girls' school. The site was purchased by the Wesleyan Methodist Church on 18 March 1841 for £2,000. It served as the Wesleyan Theological Institution: Northern Branch from 1842 until 1940. In 1866 the main house was extended by the addition of two Neo-Grecian style wings and a back to form a quadrangle, and the front was re-clad in a Kerridge sandstone ashlar façade. Commonly known as The Pump House, the house is Grade II\* listed.

To the south of the main house, the Methodists built a red brick chapel (Fig. 13) that could hold 300 worshippers, along with accommodation for staff. This Grade II listed, two-storey building in gothic style, with Flemish bond brickwork on a sandstone plinth, was built in 1842. It has three wings, containing a central hall range, with two domestic wings on each side, initially used as tutor accommodation, forming a symmetrical appearance with the gable end of the upper hall.



*Figures 12 and 13: The Sandhurst House building and the Methodist Chapel.*

The site has been redeveloped by local architects, PJ Livesey, as a residential area of 93 dwellings, with the listed buildings being retained (see: <https://www.pjlivesey-group.co.uk/project/mmu-didsbury-campus/>). The former main building contains 19 apartments, within the original part of the building, and 12 houses in the wings as mews homes; the Old Chapel contains 10 apartments; the Lodge has become a house. A further 42 three-, four-, and five-bedroomed houses and 7 new apartments with an underground car park have been built on the site. The area is now known as St James Park, and a new junior school section of Beaver Road Primary School situated on the other side of Wilmslow Road was opened in 2018.

> Proceed a few steps further South along Wilmslow Road. As you round the corner there is Laurel Cottage, now known as Gardeners Cottage, 801 Wilmslow Road.

*Stop 10: Laurel Cottage on Wilmslow Road.*

This late 18<sup>th</sup> century dwelling (Fig. 14) has been considerably altered. It now has white-painted render on brick, with a slate roof. The windows each have 16 glass panes. It is attached to Nos 803 and 805 Wilmslow Road (Fig. 15) which form part of the group of houses collectively known as “The Grove” (see the next stop).



Figure 14: Laurel Cottage.

> From Laurel Cottage the next stop involves walking round the houses described below, including up the cul-de-sac of The Grove and returning to Wilmslow Road. It is a perambulation rather than a physical stop!



Figure 15: 805 Wilmslow Road.

*Stop 11: The Grove.*

The buildings adjoining Laurel Cottage form part of a set of houses said to have been built around 1870 for an immigrant North German community. Collectively they provide a rare example of domestic architecture reflecting the cosmopolitan nature of 19<sup>th</sup> century Manchester society.

The city’s economic success attracted entrepreneurs from continental Europe who saw that Manchester’s commercial and industrial enterprises provided opportunities for professional development and financial success. The most important among these immigrants were the Germans, who established in Manchester the second largest German diaspora in Britain outside London. This minority soon marked its presence in the city thanks to its small but very dynamic and influential middle-class section. This well-informed, astute business group established itself in cotton broking, banking and manufacturing (Douglas *et al.*, 2002) and quickly became part of Manchester’s economic and cultural elite, participating in and contributing to the city’s mainstream cultural life. These well-educated and commercially successful immigrants were relatively easily acculturated into Manchester’s native bourgeoisie and quickly dispersed in the city’s wealthy suburbs (Kiersnowska, 2016). Didsbury in the 1870s, with its anticipated new railway links to the city centre, had become a highly desirable place in which to live.





Figure 16: Listed buildings in The Grove.

The buildings generally have brown and white (speckled) brick in header bond, with dressings of sandstone, some red brick, and some applied “half-timbering” in their upper parts and slate roofs. They are quite distinctive and form a harmonious group. Their surrounding mature trees create a garden city feel and bring many benefits to the area. Relatives of the Watts family which owned the Watts warehouse on Portland Street in central Manchester lived at number 1 The Grove until 1921 (Leitch, 2011b).

It is suggested that the best way to appreciate this settlement is to walk round the corner on Wilmslow Road, turn up The Grove to see the whole collection and then come back to Wilmslow Road to look at numbers 807 and 809.

All residential buildings in The Grove and their neighbours on Wilmslow Road are Grade II Listed (Figs. 16-17).

> Continue east along Wilmslow Road, passing the entrance to another section of the redeveloped education site to The Didsbury House Hotel on your left.

#### Stop 12: Didsbury House Hotel.

This two-storey villa (Fig. 18) built in 1848 has a symmetrical three-window facade composed of two projecting gables, with a narrow one-storey link containing an arched doorway with moulded surround and fanlight with Y-tracery. Like many of its contemporaries, it has white-painted stucco on brick and a slate roof. Henry Blacklock, the publisher of “Bradshaw’s Railway Companion” and many timetables, and his family lived at Park House from 1871 for 30 years (Leitch, 2011a).

Park House has now become the Didsbury House Hotel, described on its website as featuring “27 bedrooms with residents’ bar and lounges all reflecting the hotel’s eclectic design and providing a chic urban retreat for both business and leisure guests wishing to enjoy a relaxed stay in Manchester”.

> Continue East along Wilmslow Road to see the next listed building, the entrance to it is just past the second road on the left.



Figure 17: 807-809 Wilmslow Road.



Figure 18: Park House: now the Didsbury House Hotel.

*Stop 13: The Cedars.*

This Villa (Fig. 19), built in 1857 by Edward Walters, has been altered several times and, like many other Didsbury Victorian homes, is at the time of writing (August 2020) being converted in to luxury apartments. Brick built and covered with white stucco and roofed in slate, its entrance front was formerly at the West end, but the orientation was altered by 20<sup>th</sup> century additions which put the entrance on the south side. The interior has an axial entrance hall from the former main doorway at West end which is now covered. However, the hall has a fanlight with radiating glazing bars and keystone and a fine open-string staircase.

The developer's website contains useful information about the redevelopment: "The project [contains] the handsome Grade II listed Victorian Villa, Cedar House, converted to grand apartments. The Coach House that served the villa will become two properties and the Lodge restored to make one unique property. The red brick Parklands will also be retained and converted to provide 39 contemporary apartments, while a second office building, Aspen House, will be demolished to make way for 22 newly built homes. In total the site will provide 85 new homes".



*Figure 19: The Cedars.*

> Proceed East along Wilmslow Road to the entrance gates and lodge.

*Stop 14: Didsbury Lodge and its entrance gate piers and walls.*

These mid-19<sup>th</sup> century gate piers and walls of painted sandstone have been restored as part of another PJ Livesey development (which can be seen up the driveway in Fig. 20).

Another mid-19<sup>th</sup> century structure with white-painted roughcast render on brick and a slate roof, the Lodge (Fig. 21) has a late 20<sup>th</sup> century addition to the rear. It is classical in style, with a central rectangular porch with corner pilasters, entablature, cornice and pediment, and round-headed doorway.



*Figures 20 and 21: The Gates to Didsbury Lodge and the former entrance lodge.*

> At this point cross Wilmslow Road to the south west side of the road and proceed back westwards towards the church. Walk to the striking Lodge on your left.



*Stop 15: The Lodge House of the Towers.*

Formerly the entrance lodge to The Towers (later the Shirley Institute) this redbrick structure (Fig. 22) was designed by Thomas Worthington, and built for J.E. Taylor in 1868-72. Red brick with sandstone dressings and slate roof, it is in French Gothic style with very steeply pitched roofs and tall chimneys. It has a banded gate-pier attached to the north-west corner by a short wall. On the street side of the building is a blue plaque to Daniel Adamson, the initiator of the Manchester Ship Canal (Fig. 23).



*Figure 22: The Lodge House of The Towers.*



*Figure 23: The Adamson Blue Plaque.*

> From the lodge walk up the drive to see the impressive The Towers building.

*Stop 16: The Towers.*

Grade II\* listed 'The Towers' (Fig. 24) was built 1868-1872. The architectural historian Sir Nikolaus Pevsner called it "the grandest of all Manchester mansions". Designed by Thomas Worthington, architect of the Albert Memorial in Albert Square, Manchester, with carvings by Thomas Earp of London, it was popularly known as the 'Calendar House' as it has 12 towers, 52 rooms and 365 windows. It was built for John Edward Taylor, founder of the Manchester Guardian, and was sold in 1874 to the engineer, Daniel Adamson. The decision to build the Manchester Ship Canal was taken in the drawing room of the house by Adamson and a group of associates in 1882.

This red brick mansion in French chateau style has fenestration of cross-window form, with double-chamfered stone surrounds. The dormers have Gothic enrichments including finials, and the oriel to the right has a prominent moulded corbel, enriched with carved grotesques, and smaller grotesques at the angles of the cornice. The grand staircase of the Towers has fine stained-glass windows (Leitch, 2011a).

During WW1 the building was used as a recreation center for war-wounded. In 1920 it became the cotton industry research centre, whose name, the Shirley Institute, derives from the significant contribution to the purchase price of The Towers made by William Greenwood, the MP for Stockport, who asked that the building be named after his daughter, Shirley. In 1961 the cotton research association merged with the British Rayon Research Association to form the Cotton, Silk, and Man-Made Fibers Research Association. In 1989 the Wool Industry Research Association also merged with the Shirley Institute to form the British Textile



*Figure 24: The Towers.*



Technology Group (BTTG) in 1990. In 2004 BTTG moved to custom designed premises in Trafford Park, Manchester.

Between 1986/7 and 2003 most of the remaining 5.9 ha estate has been developed as a business park with some striking modern architecture housing offices for national companies such as John Lewis and British Airways. The Towers building was acquired by Quorum Estates in 1996 and is currently leased to various business tenants.

> Return to Wilmslow Road, turn left and take the first through road on the left, Kingston Road. Proceed down Kingston Road for approximately 200 metres to Number 40 on the right side of the road.

Kingston Road and Kingston Avenue are aligned according to an 1852 project of the British Freehold Land Society that aimed to sell 131 house plots to its members, somewhat along the lines of its development in Albert Park, West Didsbury. The project did not materialise, but its roads remain (Million, 1969).

#### *Stop 17: 40 Kingston Road.*

This low, single-storey, detached house (Fig. 25), built in 1962-3, was designed by John Parkinson Whittle as his family home. Whittle was a partner of the local firm Halliday Meecham and was project architect for the buildings at Salford Technical College, now Salford University. The

plot runs west to east and Mrs. Whittle specified that they should have an internal courtyard (Fig. 26) to allow light from the south into the main living space. Constructed of dark grey engineering brick, with custom-made double glazed windows, the house has attracted much attention from architects concerned with the modernist movement (see Grade II-listed modernism: 1960s John Parkinson Whittle-designed property in Didsbury, Greater Manchester at: <https://www.wowhaus.co.uk/2017/03/06/grade-ii-listed-modernism-1960s-john-parkinson-whittle-designed-property-in-didsbury-greater-manchester/>).



*Figure 25: The front of 40 Kingston Road from the street (note; the rear of the house cannot be seen from Millgate Lane).*



*Figure 26: Google Earth image of the flat roof of the 1962 listed house with its interior courtyard.*



Few houses of this style exist in the suburbs of Greater Manchester, but sometime after 2013, a modern-style house was built in the grounds of Lawnhurst (Stop 27).

> From 40 Kingston Road continue south and turn 1st right into Kingston Avenue and right again into Millgate Lane. Some 40 metres on the left is a small car park and the entrance into Fletcher Moss Park (Fig. 28).

#### Stop 18: Fletcher Moss Botanical Gardens and Park.

Fletcher Moss is one of the most important figures in the development of Didsbury around the end of the nineteenth century. Notes about his life and legacy are in the following box.

Follow the maps below (Fig. 27) to visit the Rockery and The Croft (Stop 19) to the right of this gate. You may also like to turn left and descend to the nature park and boardwalk.

Manchester City Council has listed the 5.4 ha Fletcher Moss area of wet woodland with associated areas of open water, marsh and grassland as a Grade B Site of Biological Importance in its biodiversity strategy. Through a joint initiative of the City Council, the RSPB, Southway Housing, and the Fletcher Moss Friends' group, a wildlife garden been set up at Fletcher Moss Park. The start of the garden is near the gate by the small car park on Millgate Lane, to the right along the path towards the boardwalk. A bird feeding area and 'bug hotel' have been established, and wild flowers and wildlife-friendly plants and shrubs have been introduced for birds, insects and small mammals. There is a path though the garden which leads on to a small meadow area and then to a dipping pond. This is an important contribution to bringing nature closer to the people of Manchester. A good example of willow-carr woodland is to be found in the lower part of the gardens, and along Stenner Lane (see note after Stop 22).

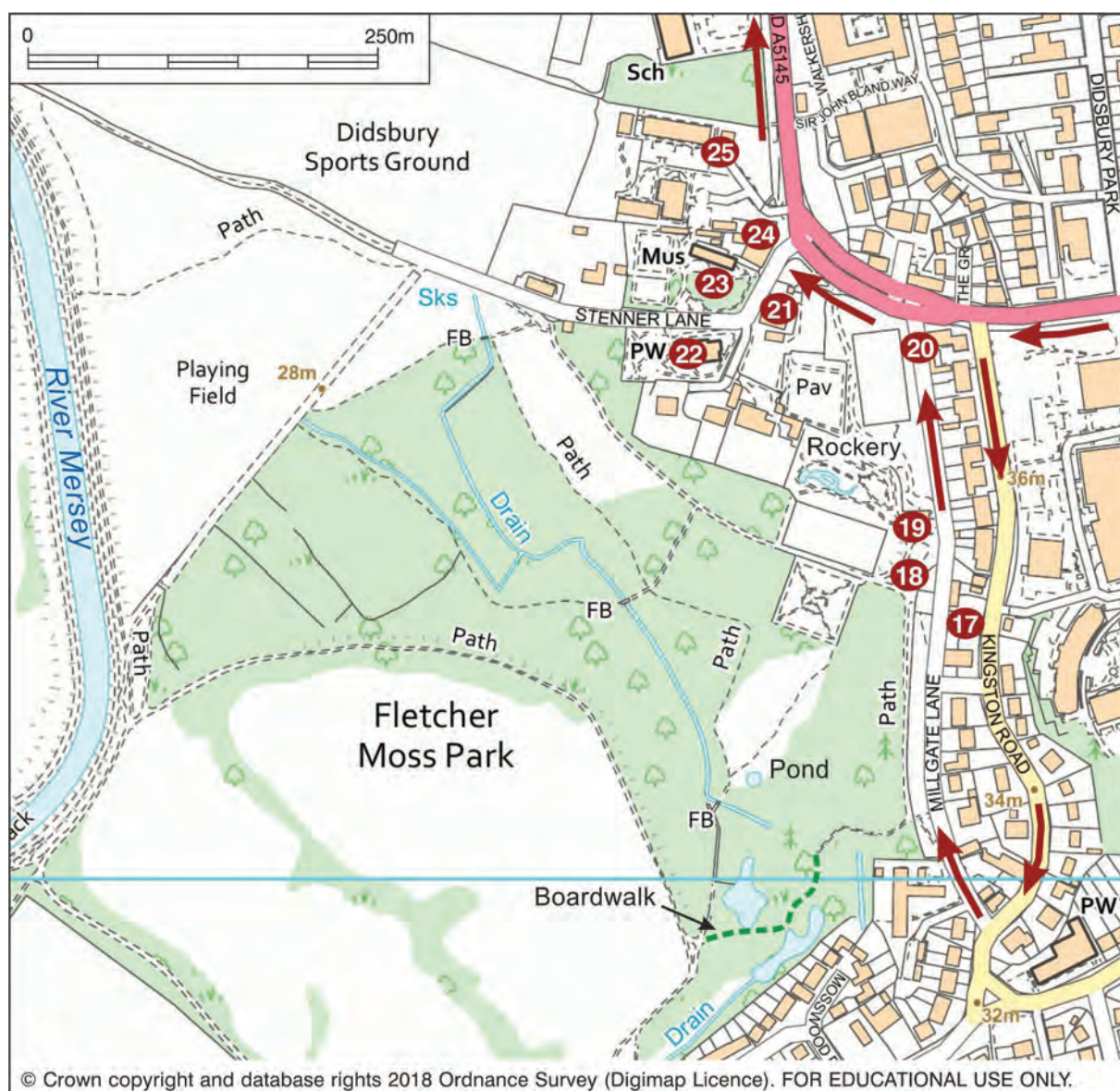


Figure 27: Fletcher Moss Park and adjacent areas.

**Fletcher Moss: a key entrepreneur and local politician who helped to change the face of Didsbury at the start of the twentieth century.**

Fletcher Moss, the son of a corn merchant, was born at Ryecroft in Cheetham Hill, Manchester in 1843. His family were living on Wilmslow Road in Didsbury in 1861. Fletcher also became a corn and provisions merchant. By 1891, he was living at the Old Parsonage.

He was highly active in public life, serving variously as a Churchwarden, a member of the Withington Local Health Board, a Councillor for the Exchange Division of Manchester and later, when Didsbury had been incorporated into Manchester, as a Councillor for Didsbury. He became an Alderman and a Justice of the Peace. He also wrote a history of Didsbury.

He lobbied Carnegie for help to establish the Didsbury public library. He helped design the Didsbury Recreation Ground (now Didsbury Park).

His legacies include the gardens at the Old Parsonage in which he and his mother played a key role. He purchased the Croft in about 1912 when the Williamsons moved out. The gardens at the Croft reflect the dedication and enthusiasm of the Williamsons as Moss did not keep them long, giving them and the Old Parsonage to Manchester City Council in 1915 on the understanding that he would be able to live in the Old Parsonage until his death. He passed away in 1919.



*Figure 28: The entrance gate to Fletcher Moss on Millgate Lane.*



*Figure 29: Fletcher Moss Gardens.*

The lower, wooded part of Fletcher Moss lies on the Mersey floodplain and has been inundated many times. The area is actually part of the Didsbury flood basin into which the river can be deliberately diverted to avoid serious flood damage further downstream. One of the more striking floods here occurred on 6th February, 2011 (Leitch 2011c).

The walled rock garden (Fig. 29) was laid out by the botanist Robert Williamson on a south-facing slope. The south-facing main rock gardens are sheltered from the elements, allowing a great number of non-hardy species to thrive in a micro-climate. Small waterfalls run down the rock gardens into a pond which is surrounded by royal ferns, marsh marigolds, skunk cabbage, Gunnera ("giant rhubarb") and irises. The gardens contain a wide range of ornamental trees and shrubs, including Chusan palms, tulip trees, mulberry, dawn redwood, swamp cypress, Chinese dogwood, Adam's laburnum, common walnut, Oxydendrum arboreum, and various dwarf conifers. Fletcher Moss has held the Green Flag Award, the national standard for parks and green spaces in England, since 2000.

*Stop 19: The Croft in Fletcher Moss Gardens.*

Emily and Robert Williamson bought the Croft in 1882. Robert developed the garden with plants brought in from exotic places around the world. Some of the plants were so rare that they were eventually sent to Kew Gardens (Leitch, 2011c). The house (Fig. 30), was the location of the first meeting of the organization that later became the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB). In 1889, Emily formed a group called the "Plumage League" to protest against the breeding of birds for plumage to be used in women's hats, a highly fashionable practice at the time. The group gained popularity and eventually amalgamated with the "Fur and Feather League" in Croydon to form the RSPB. The building is now used as a café.





Figure 30: The Croft.

> From the Croft, return to the gate through which you entered the park and turn north up Millgate Lane to Stop 20.

Millgate Lane, as its name suggests, led to a corn mill on the River Mersey, close to where there was a ford across the river to Gatley (Million, 1969). By the late 13<sup>th</sup> century, water-powered mills were to be found along the River Mersey at Didsbury, Northenden and Heaton Norris. Cheadle had two mills on the Micker Brook (Redhead and Miller, 2014). These mills probably would have been similar to the Old Mill that still stands at Dunham Massey. Another mill was built just downstream of the old Cheadle bridge on the turnpike road from Didsbury to Wilmslow. The mill race from the river Mersey is clearly indicated on the mid-nineteenth century map of Didsbury parish in France and Woodall (1969). A second mill was built by the river in 1812 and is marked on Greenwood's 1818 map of Cheshire. The last Didsbury Mill was pulled down in 1969 (France and Woodall, 1969).

The 1871 census indicated the continuing importance of the mills in the nineteenth century, with the millers William Jackson and James Wardle living in Corn Mill Yard at the end of the Lane (Giles, 2009). Most of the other inhabitants of dwellings on Millgate Lane, including those of the cottages at stop 20, were farmers, farm servants or domestic servants. Significantly, the Howard family were cotton weavers, contributing perhaps to the tradition of home weaving in early nineteenth century Didsbury.

#### Stop 20: Millgate Lane.

This row of four small, mid-19<sup>th</sup> century cottages at 7-13 Millgate Lane (Fig. 31) included one shop. They are made of brick and have slate roofs. They are similar in size, but with contrasting form and different windows to the unpainted nos. 15 and 17 (Fig. 32) further down the lane. Many of the occupants of these cottages worked on local farms. A century later, one of these houses was owned by the late Rabbi Brian Fox.



Figures 31 and 32: 7-13 and 15-17 Millgate Lane.

> Walk north up Millgate Lane to return to Wilmslow Road where the Didsbury Hotel will be on your left.

*Stop 21: The Didsbury Hotel.*

The mid-19<sup>th</sup> century hotel (Fig. 33) was probably a rebuilding of a former structure. The western part of the building has three storeys, with the remainder having two storeys, although the overall height of the structure is the same. The window heights vary but the round headed appearance tends to give an impression of some uniformity. There is a gable chimney to left and two ridge chimneys to the right.



*Figure 33: The Didsbury Hotel.*

> Walk past the hotel and turn immediately left into Stenner Lane to the church on your left.

*Stop 22: St. James Church, its Sundial, and Stenner Lane.*

St James (Fig.34) is claimed to be the second oldest church in the City of Manchester. It is an ancient Anglican church of medieval origins with significant subsequent 17<sup>th</sup> and mid-19<sup>th</sup> century modifications. The tower was built in 1620, the nave in 1855, the chancel in 1871, and the east half of south aisle in 1895. Like all the medieval churches along the Mersey valley, St. James is situated well above the flood plain on the first terrace of the river, out of reach of riverine flooding, demonstrating how well mediaeval church builders understood the flood risk from the Mersey.

The church is of red sandstone with slate roofs. The 18<sup>th</sup> century galleries were removed during substantial reconstruction in the 1850s and 1890s. The stained glass is all 19<sup>th</sup> century. The church contains impressive funerary monuments, particularly of the Mosley family who were local magistrates. The church was designated a Grade II\* listed building in 1952. The interior of the church underwent significant repair and renovation in 2012 as part of the 775th anniversary celebrations.

A Grade II, possibly 18<sup>th</sup> century, listed sandstone sundial (Fig. 35) is located 2 metres from the south (rear) wall of the church.



*Figures 34 and 35: St James' Church and the Sundial.*

If a break from the urban scene is desired at this point, turn westwards from the church into Stenner Lane, which leads towards the Mersey flood plain. It enters a priority habitat for ancient and/or species-rich hedgerows. The Lane has a diversity of woody species along its length and an interesting understorey. As mentioned at Stop 18, Stenner woods contain the "Willow Carr" which is a remnant of a habitat that once would have covered all the Mersey flood plain. Willows thrive in waterlogged soil where other trees drown or suffer from rotten roots. In the drier areas there is an interesting mix of trees, including alder, sycamore, birch,





Figure 36: Wildflowers in Fletcher Moss Park; left to right, marsh woundwort, purple loosestrife, water mint and marsh orchid.

ash, poplars and wych elm. There is interesting ground flora of woodland wildflowers. Some of the marshy areas support a variety of marginal plants – those which grow in shallow water, but whose leaves emerge from the water. This includes marsh orchids, water mint, dotted and purple loosestrife, wild angelica and marsh woundwort (Fig. 36). If you take this detour along the Lane, it is easy to turn back and return to Wilmslow Road and the church.

Otherwise, continue from the church back up Stenner Lane towards Wilmslow Road to the gateway to the Old Parsonage House on your left. At the top of the short slope in Stenner Lane, opposite the church, were handloom weavers' cottages occupied by members of the home-based textile workforce of early nineteenth century Manchester (France and Woodall, 1969).

#### *Stop 23: The Old Parsonage House and Gardens.*

The 1876 sandstone entrance archway (Fig. 37) to grounds of the Old Parsonage is a modest folly composed of fragments taken from demolished buildings in Manchester. The features include a moulded round-headed arch including short shafts with foliated caps, and a melange of carved details such as urns, a bird with raised wings, and raised lettering on the inner side: "FM 1876".

The Grade II listed Old Parsonage building, probably the second oldest one in Didsbury after St James' Church, was originally built, at least in part, around 1650 "for the use of the minister". It is next to one of the two public houses that flanked the nearby village green, Ye Olde Cock Inn. It is believed that at one time the house was connected to the Cock Inn and this is shown on a map dated 1851.

In 1832 a grocer (sometimes also referred to as a curate), Sam Newell and his wife, lived in the house and the name

was changed to Spring Bank. He added the two wings at either end of the house. He let the house to Rev W J Kidd who stayed there for ten years but left because the servants said the house was haunted by the ghost of Mrs. Newell.

The Family of Alderman Fletcher Moss lived at the Old Parsonage from 1865. He and his mother were responsible for much of the present layout of the Old Parsonage gardens which contain many ornamental trees brought in over the 130 years.



Figure 37. The neo-Norman stone arched gateway with its sculpture of an eagle.





Figures 38 and 39: The Old Parsonage and its gardens.

After the acquisition of the house, the City Council used it for many years as an offshoot of the City Art Gallery. In 1982 the paintings were removed and it was used as offices by the Council Housing Department. In 2011 the council appeared to have no further use for the building and it was boarded up. It was rescued from this parlous state by the imagination and hard work of the Didsbury Civic Society, who formed the Didsbury Parsonage Trust and leased the building from the Council for use as a Community Centre. With the help of Heritage Lottery funding and money from other sources, the house has been completely refurbished and is now a thriving resource for the local community.

> Return to Wilmslow Road and turn left to the Ye Olde Cock Inn.

*Stop 24: Ye Olde Cock Inn and The Olive and Vine Restaurant.*

Built on the site of a 16<sup>th</sup> century building known as The Cock, Ye Olde Cock Inn (Fig. 40), so-called because of the cockfighting that used to take place there, is made of grey-

painted roughcast on brick with a green slate roof. It has a long rectangular plan and rear extensions.

Next to the Inn are two cottages, originally numbers 844 and 846 Wilmslow Road, now converted into a restaurant (previously called the Steak and Kebab Restaurant) (is the name change an indicator of the gentrification of Didsbury?). This late 18<sup>th</sup> century building is another with white painted brick and a slate roof (Fig.41). Number 846 has a symmetrical shop front at the ground floor level, with a doorway flanked by large square windows of three round-arched lights. Number 844 has a square four-pane sashed window, a doorway to the left, and a first floor window matching those of number 846. In 1911, number 846 housed a dairyman and his family, while a gardener who worked for Fletcher Moss lived next door. Number 846 began to be used a refreshment rooms in 1933 and has continued as a catering outlet ever since (Leitch 2011c).



Figures 40 and 41: Ye Olde Cock Inn and The Olive and Vine Restaurant.

> Continue North on the left side of Wilmslow Road. The next drive leads to Stop 25.



*Stop 25: Philip Godlee Lodge.*

Built in 1865, on the site of the house that had been Yannis' Farm, then known as Ramsdale Lodge and later the Elms, this was the home of cotton spinner William Callendar. It was subsequently converted to a residential home for the elderly, with the house (Fig. 42) then being renamed after Philip Godlee, a former chair of Manchester City Council. In the early 2000s it was re-configured into privately owned residential apartments (Good and Leitch, 2009). The two-story house has an impressive square double-depth main block facing east with L-shaped wing on south side. It has a symmetrical three-window facade, with emphatic corner pilasters, and a central Ionic porch.



*Figure 42: Philip Godlee Lodge.*

> Continue north along Wilmslow Road, past Beaver Road Primary School and Barlow Medical Centre, to Lawnhurst, the large brick house on your left.

*Stop 26: Lawnhurst.*

This fine old house (Fig. 43) was built in 1894 for Henry Simon, founder of engineering group Henry Simon Ltd., who had emigrated from Breslau (Poland) in 1860. In World War II, it became a military hospital and subsequently Rosecroft preparatory school. In 2012 it was converted into 12 luxury apartments.

As in the grounds of other large Didsbury mansions that are being converted, new buildings are appearing. In 2013, Paul Butler Associates Ltd. secured planning permission for a contemporary family dwelling located in the grounds of the listed Lawnhurst (Figs. 44 and 45). The scheme was justified on the basis that it would be subservient to the listed Lawnhurst, a local heritage asset; would respect the character and appearance of the Didsbury St James Conservation Area; and, would not impact on the amenity of neighbouring residents.



*Figure 43: Lawnhurst.*



*Figure 44: The contemporary house at Lawnhurst.*



Figure 45: Google Earth image of Lawnhurst, on the right, and the contemporary house, on the left, with the overhanging trees.

Unfortunately, this contemporary house is not visible from the road or from the car-park of Lawnhurst. It is not accessible to the public. However, the authors consider it is important to know that modern architecture and innovative style does exist in Didsbury and thus we add these pictures.

> From here continue northwards back up Wilmslow Road to the Didsbury Clock where the walk concludes. At the clock you can turn east along School Lane for the Didsbury Village tram station.



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