

Exploring Greater Manchester

a fieldwork guide

Web edition edited by Paul Hindle



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3.1 Little Ireland

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Aims: To discover the dimensions and nature of an area which achieved international fame as the archetypal Irish district in nineteenth century industrial cities.

Starting point: Salisbury Public House, James Leigh Street, bottom of steps to Oxford Road.

Estimated time: 20 minutes.

Further information:

Busteed, M. A. (1996) 'The most horrible spot'? The legend of Manchester's Little Ireland *Irish Studies Review* 13, 12-20.

Clark, S. (1977-8) "Chorlton mills and their neighbours" *Industrial Archaeology Review*. 2, 207-39.

Engels, F. (1845) *The Condition of the Working Class in England*. Translated, with foreword by V. Kiernan. Penguin, London, 1987 pp 97-99, 123-6.

George, A. D. & Clark, S. C. (1979) "A note on "little Ireland", Manchester" *Industrial Archaeology* 14, 36-40.

Kay, J. P. (1832) *The Moral and Physical Condition of the Working Class Employed in the Cotton Manufacture in Manchester*. London, pp 34-6.

Kidd, A. (1993) *Manchester*. Ryburn, Keele, pp 45-50.

Map: Ordnance Survey five-foot plan of Manchester and Salford, Sheet 33 (1849). This sheet has been reprinted by Alan Godfrey; www.alangodfreymaps.co.uk

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Introduction

The 'Little Ireland' district of Manchester was the smallest and most short lived of all the areas of Irish settlement in the city. Most of the residential housing was built in the early 1820s and by the late 1840s most of this had either been closed up or demolished. Moreover, it covered only about four acres and at the 1841 census had a total population of only 1510. Yet, it came to be seen as a typical Irish slum.

Before you go

Read Engels p 97-99, Kidd p 45-50.

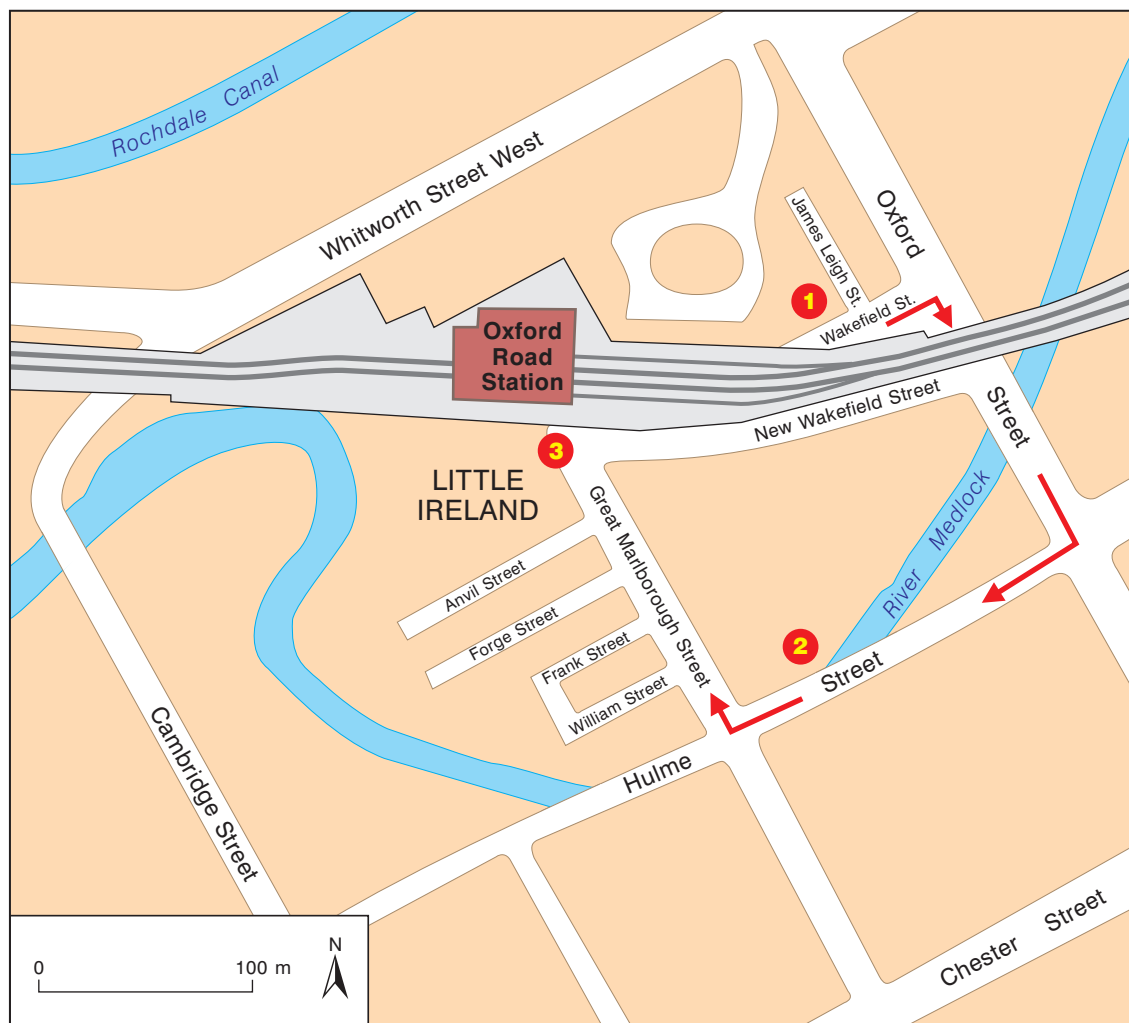
Walking Tour

1. Start at the Salisbury Public House, James Leigh Street, at the bottom of steps to Oxford Road Station. The pub is named after the Marquess of Salisbury. Note the houses with four storeys, one of which is a cellar; this was quite a common form of house in late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. Houses along the front of Oxford Road (originally Street) were first intended as modest middle class residences, but were soon swamped by advancing industrial and commercial development in the early nineteenth century and taken over for multi-occupation by industrial workers. The cellars, which were originally intended for storage of wood, coal, water, bulky household equipment and non-perishable foods, were later rented out for accommodation. Poor ventilation and drainage

and propensity to dampness led to them being regarded as centres of infectious disease and they became the special target of urban sanitary reformers.

The gradient from Oxford Road to the foot of the steps partly dates from the construction of the road in the late eighteenth century, when material for the embankment of the roadway was excavated from the area later occupied by the station. This lowered the level of the entire area. James Leigh Street is the sole survivor of group of seven small streets the others were, demolished in 1845 to make way for the Manchester and Altrincham railway line and Oxford Road Station

2. Return to Oxford Street and walk under the railway bridge; turn right to reach the junction of Hulme and Great Marlborough Streets. Note how the River Medlock flows underneath the street. At the end of the eighteenth and beginning of the nineteenth century this area was at the rapidly advancing frontier of Manchester's industrialisation. The site attracted industry because the Rochdale Canal on the northern edge provided transport plus water for industrial purposes. The Medlock, which marked the southern border, was convenient for both water supply and waste disposal. By the 1820s textile mills, iron foundries, food processing factories, slaughterhouses, coal and timber yards had been laid out.



Residential housing consisted of unplanned, opportunistic, speculative building on the space available around and between the factories and mills. The naturally low-lying nature of the area had been enhanced by the excavations for Oxford Road; the area was underlain by boulder clay; the banks of the Medlock had been reinforced to protect the factories from flooding, but this had raised the level of the river above that of the housing – note the gradient down Great Marlborough Street. The end result was perpetual high humidity and damp in the houses and a notable vulnerability to flooding, which carried all the filth of the river into the houses – as in May 1847 when boats had to be used to rescue people from the upper storeys of their homes. Since by the 1840s, there were 13 factories surrounding the district, it was also prone to smoke pollution from chimneys. However, this was not the only area of poor housing in Manchester, and it was not by any means the worst.

The wall plaque on the left hand side, about 40 metres down Great Marlborough Street, is one of only three plaques to the Irish presence in nineteenth century Manchester (the others are on the wall of the UMIST Registrar's department in Granby Row, and at the railway arch on Hyde Road,

marking the site of the 'Fenian Ambush' of 1867). The Irish settled here because this was one of the districts where cheap accommodation was being built, when they began to arrive in increasing numbers in the early 1820s. The area also had the advantage that a large number of unskilled employment openings were to be found in the surrounding factories and mills.



The 1841 census shows that relatively few Irish were to be found along the front of Oxford Road and Great Marlborough Street – they were concentrated in the small streets and courts off the main thoroughfares – James Leigh, William, Frank, Forge, and Anvil Streets were over 75% Irish in 1841. The original name plate for Frank Street is still in place.

3. Continue down Great Marlborough Street to the junction with New Wakefield Street. Looking back up Great Marlborough Street from the front of the railway viaduct the gradient down from Hulme Street is particularly noticeable. By 1861 'Little Ireland' was almost empty of private residents, except along the front of Oxford Road and in a few houses along New Wakefield Street. They had been squeezed out by a combination of forces – the expansion of industrial and commercial premises anxious to take advantage of a site so close to a major canal, road and railway, and the sealing up of the cellars by the police in the late 1840s to check the spread of disease, especially endemic cholera. In fact, the outbreaks of 1832 and 1849 in Manchester left this area relatively unaffected.

Therefore, 'Little Ireland' as a residential reality lasted barely more than 30 years, other Irish districts in Manchester had much larger populations, lasted much longer, had much worse housing and suffered more severely from the recurrent appearance of cholera, typhus and typhoid. Nevertheless, this small district became world famous, and a 'Little Ireland' was the generic shorthand for a concentration of poor unskilled Irish living in slum housing, in an industrial area, throughout the industrialised world in the nineteenth century.

Ironically the 'gentrification' of this part of inner Manchester has now made parts of the district the site of some of the most luxurious and expensive housing in the region. The contrast with the nineteenth century could not be greater.

After the excursion re-read Engels in conjunction with Kay and Busted to discover why such a small short-lived area should achieve such world-wide notoriety.

