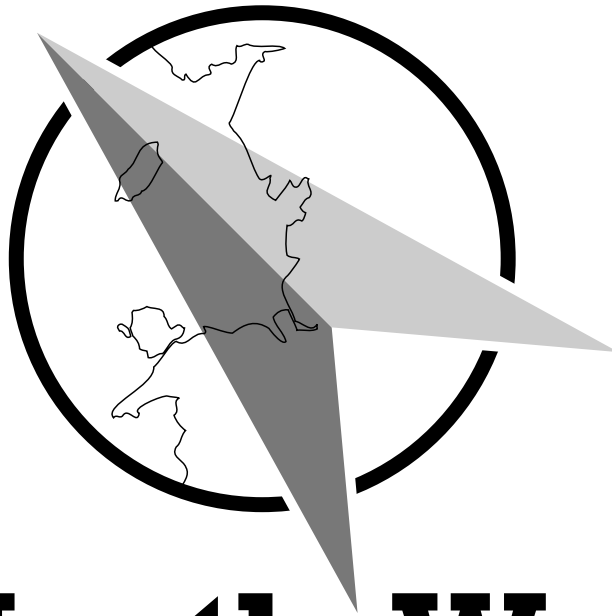


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Reviews

Clare Hartwell

Manchester

Pevsner Architectural Guides, Penguin Books, 2001. 370 pages, £9.99 paperback. ISBN 0-14-071131-7



The monumental 'Buildings of England' series produced by Sir Nikolaus Pevsner in the 1950s and 1960s was a landmark in popularising architectural studies. Manchester's architecture featured in the 'South Lancashire' volume, published in 1969. Clare Hartwell's book, designed as a practical guide to exploring the buildings of central Manchester and its inner suburbs, is a very worthy successor. It makes much use of recent research, and deals fully with the major changes which have transformed Manchester in the past three decades. It is a splendid volume, recommended without hesitation to anyone interested in the city's geography, history and architecture. The book's size means that it will fit into a (rather large) pocket, although its wealth of information and its guidance to the delights and interests of Manchester's buildings means that it should not stay there!

A particularly welcome element of the book is the inclusion of a series of walks, each accompanied by a map. Four of the walks are within the inner city; others are included in a section ('Outer Areas') which deals with Ancoats, Ardwick and Beswick, Cheetham and Strangeways, Chorlton-on-Medlock and Hulme. Descriptions of the buildings along each walk are accompanied by many illustrations. A useful feature is the insertion of brief, but informative boxes dealing, for instance with 'Workshop Dwellings', 'Assize Courts Statuary' and 'The Irwell Navigation'. If one follows the walks with the book in hand, one is likely to see many features which previously have escaped notice. The descriptions encourage the reader/walker to look upwards, as well as to view the buildings at street level: sculptures, friezes and other decorations feature prominently in the narrative. Indeed, reading the book makes one aware of the wealth of detail present in the facades of many of Manchester's buildings. Much research has been undertaken to find information about the architects and craftsmen responsible for them. Clare Hartwell's expertise as an architectural historian is apparent throughout the text, although she herself is generous in her acknowledgement of the assistance provided by many individuals.

The 'Introduction' provides a summary of the historical geography of Manchester and its surroundings. Attractively illustrated, it ends with a section ('From the Late Twentieth Century') which, whilst praising the efforts of conservation groups to increase public awareness and appreciation of the city's historic architecture, concedes that "the scattering of undistinguished 1980s Postmodernist buildings in the centre have done little to enhance its appearance." Clare Hartwell notes that some of the best recent architecture has been commissioned by, or is associated with, the higher education sector.

A new lease of life has been given to many older buildings in the city by the residential conversions which started in the 1980s. In 1991, there were fewer than a thousand residents in the central area. By 1998, there were 4550, and the projection for this year (2002) is more than 10,000. The other major cause of recent changes to the city centre was the bomb exploded by terrorists on 15 June 1996, which "seemed to unleash a tidal wave of development which has sent ripples all over the city." Clare Hartwell ends her survey of the development of Manchester with some uncomfortable questions. Noting the contrast between "the glittering new buildings, exclusive apartment blocks and café bars of the city centre and the decaying inner suburbs, run-down 1960s and 1970s estates and bleak clearance areas", she asks if there is a danger that affluent childless young professionals will dominate the communities of the city centre. She is concerned, too, as to whether the achievement of community architecture in Hulme can be matched in other inner-city suburbs.

Sections dealing with 'Major Buildings' and 'Academic Institutions' together account for about a quarter of this new Pevsner Architectural Guide, whilst that on the 'City Centre' runs to more than 70 pages. All three sections are excellently illustrated, include useful maps and provide the reader with information about both the buildings and the architects responsible for them. The author is robust in her comments – the former police and fire station opposite Piccadilly Station is described as "a magnificent municipal

showpiece, now shamefully neglected, the detail blurred by a thick layer of dirt" – but content to praise – the All Saints Building of the Manchester Metropolitan University "has a relaxed look and it works well in an understated way." The up-to-date nature of the volume is exemplified by the description of the City Art Gallery extension by Michael Hopkins and Partners, under construction when the book was written, but opened in May 2002.

Geographical and historical factors have played a major role in determining much of Manchester's appearance. Sales of large parcels of land towards the end of the eighteenth century, including estates owned by the Byrom, Minshull, Aytoun, Lever and Mosley families (all remembered today in central street names) facilitated the rapid expansion of the city. Clare Hartwell notes that the owners often surveyed and laid out the roads and building plots before selling them to developers, and that the interlocking grids remain discernible in the modern streets. The influence of spatial constraints is evident, too, in some of the city's major buildings: Alfred Waterhouse had to fit the Town Hall into a near-triangular site, and the John Rylands Library, by Basil Champneys, was constructed on a long, narrow parallelogram with a short frontage to Deansgate.

Clare Hartwell's book includes a comprehensive guide to 'Further Reading' and a valuable illustrated glossary. An index of artists, architects, patrons and other persons mentioned in the text is separate from the detailed index of localities, streets and buildings. The latter makes it very easy for the reader to locate information about sites of personal interest.

Some buildings of national importance within reach of Manchester centre are described in the final section of the book ('Excursions'). However, the outer areas will be dealt with in a forthcoming companion volume, 'Manchester and South-East Lancashire'. If it offers only a small portion of the interest of Clare Hartwell's 'Manchester', it will be a very good purchase indeed!

Wilfred H. Theakstone