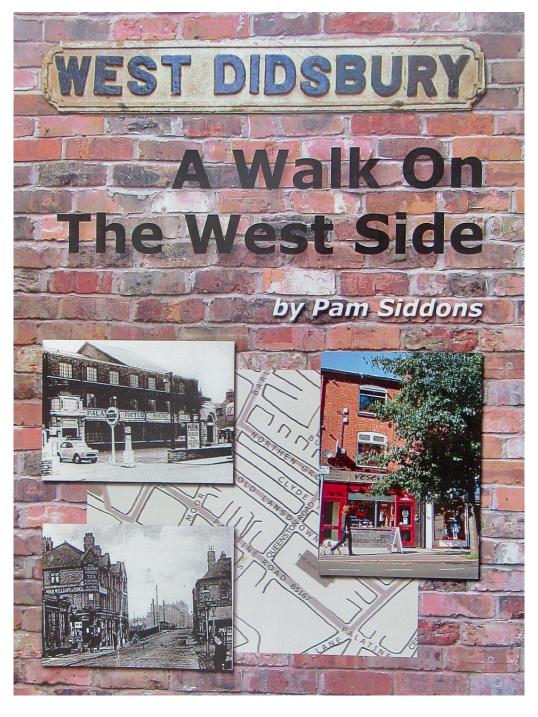
# A WALK ON THE WEST SIDE



Enjoy a walk around West Didsbury and learn some fascinating facts about a truly remarkable area



This is dedicated to Doreen Smithson (1923–2008) who, in her eighty years in Old Lansdowne Road, missed nothing.

#### **Preface**

I created this guide as a little booklet in 2010 and have promised to update it ever since. Enforced isolation has finally left me with no excuse.

It was inspired by tales which my neighbour Doreen Smithson used to tell and a desire to know more about the place where I had chosen to live. I was also Chair of the West Didsbury Residents' Association for twenty years so was interested in the buildings and the different stages in the locality's development. It's a great place, West Didsbury and there are stories down every street.

The walk is designed to take the inquisitive person around the area, point out things of interest and provide snippets of information. It is not an academic work and some items are anecdotal or based on hearsay.

As the acknowledgements page will demonstrate, lots of people have contributed to and cooperated in this. I really appreciate the help I've had from so many members of a great local community.

Unfortunately, at present, the Albert Club is closed because of the pandemic so cannot be used as a stopping off point. With no cafes and pubs available either, you may wish to do the walk in several sections. It's all good exercise!

Please email me with any comments or questions at pam.siddons@thealbertclub.co.uk

Pam Siddons April 2020

# The two walks

# The Albert Club to the Terminus, pages 6-14 Albert Park to the River, pages 15-22



# **West Didsbury**

West Didsbury didn't exist before about 1860. There wasn't much here at all, just a few cottages and the odd farmhouse. The main village settlements were in Didsbury, Withington and Northenden but, when 'Cotton Became King' in Manchester, everything changed.

Merchants and businessmen were making fabulous amounts of money and they wanted to build residences to reflect their wealth and importance. They started around the new Palatine Road area, opened up by the turnpike road to Northenden. Many of them were Jewish shipping merchants from Europe and the Middle East who established themselves in this part of Manchester.



**Left:** A typical mansion built in the Palatine Road area after 1860, This one was on Barlow Moor Road and served as The Manchester Teachers' Centre in the 70s and 80s.

With the richest of all businessmen building their mansions in what was the southern part of Withington, the solid Victorian middle classes were not far behind. Between 1862 and 1870 they built Albert Park consisting of large semi-detached houses in Old Lansdowne Road, Clyde Road, Northen Grove and Cresswell Grove. The land around this area was sandy and not so good for agriculture but, with excellent drainage, it was ideal for building.

Immediately after that, on the other side of what was now Burton Road, Drayton Lodge was sold and Tintern, Bottesford and Arley Avenue were built, providing housing for artisans, shopkeepers and domestic servants. A Mr Vicker bought the Drayton orchard, building Orchard Street and Vicker Grove.

After the railway came in 1881, bringing even more people, a decision had to be made about this rather vague part of Withington known as Albert Park. It was given the name of West Didsbury, even though South Withington had seemed the more obvious answer.

During late Victorian and Edwardian times, West Didsbury was in its heyday. After the First World War however, with its far-reaching social changes, things were never quite the same. After the second war more and more houses were rented out and those who rented the bigger houses took in paying lodgers to make ends meet.

In the fifties things were grim for Albert Park as nobody wanted to live in big, old fashioned houses any more. New was good, old was bad. The larger houses on Palatine Road and Spath Road survived by becoming schools, foreign consulates and old people's homes. The smaller houses around Burton Road were still viable for families.

Luckily, in the 60s, students arrived. Grasping landlords turned the Albert Park houses into hundreds of bedsits. Each room would contain a bed or two, a meter and a Baby Belling and everyone would share the bathroom, all for two pounds ten shillings a week. I know, I was that student.

By the mid-seventies, the council was liberally doling out grants for every developer to become a millionaire by turning these unwanted houses into cheap and insanitary flats, preferably ripping out all remnants of history and design which had hung on through the bedsit era. The more 'housing units' you could make out of each house, the more money you got so extensions and cellars were utilized to create as many flats as possible. The results of this policy can still be seen in some buildings in Old Lansdowne Road.

The good side to these developments, from bedsits to cheap flats and the HMOs (houses of multi-occupation) was that they resulted in a vibrant, artistic, bohemian and often transient population of the sort of people who needed cheap accommodation. Many of the influential players in the success of 80s Manchester music lived in and around here.

As the 80s progressed people really wanted modern, new build flats so the massive old mansions set in large grounds offered a bonanza, particularly if they became derelict or accidentally burned down. By the 90s, new Health and Safety laws rendered those houses surviving as nursing homes and institutions useless as it was impossible to install lifts or the right number of bathrooms. More were demolished until Manchester City Council introduced a planning policy whereby historic houses had to be retained and converted but modern flats could be built in the grounds.

Now the terraces in Burton Road are highly desirable family houses and more and more Albert Park houses are becoming family homes again or being converted into well-designed flats. West Didsbury's fortunes are on the up again but it's always good to remember its chequered past.



**Left:** The Midland Hotel 1970

# A Walk on the West Side PART 1

# The Albert Club to the Terminus

Our starting point is the Albert Bowling and Tennis Club, 39-41 Old Lansdowne Rd, M20 2PA



Established as a gentlemen's club in 1873 by a group of businessmen who lived in and around Albert Park, the Albert's original sporting activity was billiards. When the tennis courts were built, at the turn of the century, the tennis players were considered to be so lowly that they were not allowed in the clubhouse and had to obtain refreshments through a hatch.



Left: Joseph Broome, Cotton Merchant, was the founder and first President of the Albert from 1875 to 1885. He lived at Wood Lawn on Mersey Rd and was famous for his charitable and public works. He was also an expert gardener.

The generous members contributed to the First World War effort by creating a fund to keep the patients in Withington Hospital well supplied with cigarettes and tobacco.

At times the Albert Club has teetered through some hazardous financial periods but, when many other sports clubs collapsed, its members stuck with it devotedly. It's now a popular local sporting and social venue with strong tennis, bowling and snooker teams. It hosts an annual Beer Festival and seasonal, cultural and music events.

To start this 'Walk on the West Side', leave the Albert Club and turn right into Old Lansdowne Rd. Keep an eye out for Cleopatra and Tutenkhamen along the right hand side of no. 24. Sadly faded by the weather now, these fiberglass models once shone bright blue and gold as a part of a Torville and Dean Egyptian themed ice extravaganza.

The late and redoubtable Doreen Smithson lived in Old Lansdowne Rd all her life and would tell stories of characters who lived there during her childhood. Number 11 was a 'house of ill-repute' run by an Egyptian woman called Marie. The young Doreen was fascinated by Marie's varicose veins which had been removed and were kept in a jar on the mantelpiece. Marie also kept chickens which ran in and out of the house as they pleased, often perching on the back of the couch. When Marie wanted to fatten one up for eating, she would tie its legs together and keep it in a box in the cellar.

**Right:** The statue of Cleopatra, alongside Tutankhamen stands at the side of Number 24.

In a reflection of Marie's mantelpiece jar, the late occupant of Number 24 (who installed the statues) kept his cat's testicles in a jar for many years. It was kept in his 'Cabinet of Curiosities'.



At Number 12 lived Captain Webb whose premises were dual purpose. He ran a bookie's from the front room and practiced alternative medicine in the back. Number 5 was home to Emmanuel Levy, (1900-1986) a well-known artist, three of whom's portraits are exhibited in the National Portrait Gallery.

The two mirror-image detached houses at the top right were designed on reserved plots for the two daughters of the builder who built much of the Albert Park estate. Built later than the other houses, which began at Number 1, they had to be designated 1A and 1B.

Turn right into Lapwing Lane. On your right is the impressive Withington Town Hall, built in 1881 for what was then a lavish £2,000. Here, Withington Local Board administered sewage, transport and water and, in 1888, added fire control with the purchase of a handcart, ladder and pump. Communist meetings were held in the upstairs room immediately after World War Two and regular dances and concerts were held there until the 1970s. It is a Grade Two listed building and is now in private hands.

A large area of land behind the Town Hall was used for the council stables, yard and the depot for parks and gardens. This is now Raleigh Close, a private housing development.

At the crossroads are planters, street trees and five benches installed by the West Didsbury Residents' Association with the aid of a council grant. This was the terminus for the oldstyle trams and, before then, a watering station for horses pulling carriages to and from central Manchester. This inspired the name 'Four in Hand' when the house that was Summerhill became a pub in 1997. It's now 'The Greenfinch'. Previously Summerhill had been a home for men with learning difficulties and, prior to that a doctor's surgery.



Palatine Rd Terminus 1912

The tram terminus was also the site of a weekly Friday night soapbox session from the British Union of Fascists in 1938-9 – a particularly obnoxious activity in such a Jewish area. Fortunately, the outbreak of war brought this activity to an end.

The crossroads is the meeting place for three different conservation areas; Albert Park on the pub side, Blackburn Park on the tennis club side and Ballbrook behind the bank. Each of these three deserves exploring in its own right. Incidentally, some years ago, when the black and white building was also a bank, both banks were robbed simultaneously.

The building housing Pizza Express was once the main West Didsbury Post Office and, when it was closed in the eighties, a massive local campaign resulted in the opening of a smaller version in the shopping parade.

**Right:** Detail from the ironwork on the Lapwing Lane Arcade.

The two lapwing sculptures by each end are by local artist Andy Burgess



The ornamental arcade over the shopfronts was becoming run down and dangerous by the Millennium. Various local Civic societies and individuals tried to come up with a restoration plan but were beaten by the cost and the complexities of ownership. Finally a local group, FOLLA (Friends of Lapwing Lane) was formed which eventually raised the money to restore the arcade in 2014. More information and some detailed history of the shopping parade can be found at <a href="https://folla.org.uk/">https://folla.org.uk/</a>.

Opposite the shops is the prestigious Northern Lawn Tennis Club. The club, including the entire clubhouse, was moved to this site in 1909 from Old Trafford where it had been established in 1879. Not long afterwards the clubhouse burnt down and had to be rebuilt, It has hosted international tennis tournaments and many world class players such as Ken Rosewall, Maureen 'Little Mo' Connelly, Jimmy Connors, Pete Sampras, Billie Jean King and John Macinroe.

#### **Palatine Rd**

Palatine Road was opened as a turnpike road in 1862 and its name came from the fact that it was the main road between two County Palatines, Lancashire and Cheshire. The border between these two was then the River Mersey.

Turn right down Palatine Rd to number 147. At the age of 7 and after his father died, Elias Canetti, Jewish writer, philosopher, one-time lover of Iris Murdoch and Nobel Prizewinner, moved here with his mother and governess from the family house in Burton Road. Here lived his uncle, businessman Solomon Arditti and Canetti describes the house and his childhood in West Didsbury in his autobiography 'The Tongue Set Free.'



'unlike all the reddish houses I saw in the neighbourhood it was white and shimmery bright and also, perhaps, because of the name of the road, it seemed like a palace to me.'

Elias Canetti

At the same time the Austrian philosopher and engineer Ludwig Wittgenstein lived at number 154, a house that no longer exists. From here he is known to have applied for a patent for 'propellors for aeroplanes, helicopters, dirigible balloons or other forms of aerial machines while studying at the Victoria University of Manchester.

The flats on the corner of Queenston Rd are an excellent example of Art Deco architecture. These were built on the spot where St Mary's Church was demolished in 1929. St Mary's had been built when the parishioners of St Luke's on Burton Rd became very resentful at having to attend services there. The road was badly lit, the pavements dirty and hardly anyone lived nearby. In 1888 they held a meeting and agreed to build a temporary church on Palatine Rd. St Mary's was a wooden structure of pitched pine with a corrugated iron roof and was always known as 'The Iron Church'. The organist and choirmaster Samuel Langford was the music critic of the Manchester Guardian.

On the other side of the road is Grosvener St Aidan's United Reformed Church, built in 1890. This is a grade 2 listed building because of the splendid Art Nouveau stained glass windows (right) designed by local artist Walter Pearce. When arsonists set fire to the church in 1992 the roof was completely burned but it was the fact that the fire was drawn so quickly upwards that saved all the windows.

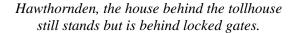
The name 'Grosvener' was added to St Aidan's when the CofE Presbyterian congregation was joined by that of the Grosvener Scottish Congregationalist Church from All Saints. It is also now shared with the Manchester Korean Church.



The last house on the right before Barlow Moor Rd is particularly attractive as its tile and brick patterns and rounded chimneys give it a fairytale, picture book appearance. This house was also built by the local builder for his own use.

The junction with Barlow Moor Rd is where the turnpike was from 1862 to 1881. This imposing toll house which stood on the corner has long been demolished. The metal sign on a pole is all that is left to show that this is the edge of the City of Manchester.







The row of shops with the black and white frontage on Barlow Moor Road at the corner with Palatine Road was known as Tripp's Corner at the turn of the century. (see picture below) The frontages were built on to much older cottages (one known as Suicide Cottage) which can be seen from Palatine Road or Tripp's Mews. Beyond these shops is Oakbank, two Grade 2 listed cottages, numbers 112 and 114 Barlow Moor Road, built in 1851.



#### **South of Barlow Moor Road**

Continue down Palatine Road and turn left into Spath Rd. Along the right hand side is the development in the grounds of Needham Hall. Although obscured by modern town houses, the hall's development into luxury flats has retained its stunning stained glass windows.

After turning right into Holme Road you will approach the entrance to Marie Louise Gardens. This lovely little park was donated to the people of Manchester in 1903 by Josephine Silkenstadt, in memory of her daughter Marie Louise who died at the age of 26. It was the subject of a huge local campaign in 2008 which successfully prevented a developer from building a massive house which would have dwarfed the lodge. Famous for its variety of unusual trees and the tameness of its squirrels the park offers a welcoming breathing space in an area with so many flat conversions.



Left: Marie Louise Gardens Circa 1905

It was a popular walking spot for Admiral Karl Doenitz who was to become Germany's final fuhrer. In 1917 he was a young submarine commander who was captured as a prisoner of war. Being an officer and a gentleman he was allowed parole and he took an apartment in Palatine Rd.

Walk through the park, keeping to your left until you come to the southern gate and turn right out of here into Dene Road then cross Palatine Road at the pelican crossing. Turn right up Palatine Road and, on your left, like Needham Hall, surrounded by modern flats you will come to Greystoke Hall.

**Left:** Greystoke Hall in 1974 when it was a student hall of residence.



Here, Johan and Josephine Silkenstadt lived in Rose Bank, a house they had built in 1872. When their ill-fated daughter Marie-Louise married William Bagshawe, the Silkenstadts built Greystoke Hall as a wedding present. Three years later, at the age of 26, Marie-Louise died of peritonitis and, not long after, her broken hearted husband was mysteriously lost at sea.

In spite of being hemmed in by blocks of flats and sporting plastic doors and windows the two houses still remain, side by side in the centre of the development and close to the park dedicated to Marie-Louise.

Continue up Palatine Road until a left turn takes you into the other part of Spath Road. It is around this road, in Marie Louise Gardens and in the Maurice Feinman Home on your right where much of the action in local photographer and writer Neil Roland's novel 'Taken for a Ride' takes place. Continue along here until you come to a T junction. Although you will be turning right here, it is worth taking a small diversion to the left down Mersey Road to look at what must be one of the worst planning decisions you will ever see.

As you walk down Mersey road you'll come upon a block of 60s/70s style flats on your right which is called Mayfair Court. Hidden behind this block stands Mayfair Mansions, a most beautiful, stylish building. This used to be the Italian Consulate and it does look far more European that all the buildings around it. How the planners could have agreed to its being blotted out like that is a mystery.

Turn back on yourself now and head up Mersey Road to Barlow Moor Road. On the corner is another Grade 2 listed building, once the British Council, now the Woodstock pub and the local for the couples in Cold Feet.



#### **Old Lansdowne Road**

Cross Barlow Moor road at a right diagonal and be ready to turn left into Old Landsowne Rd. Stop for a moment in front of Alberts, once the Barleycorn Pub. In 1984 the pub's regulars planted a tree in memory of their pal and drinking partner comedian Colin Crompton.



Colin was famous on TV in the seventies as chairman of the fictional northern working men's club the 'Wheeltappers and Shunters'. He starred with Bernard Manning as, fag in hand and ringing his bell he would make such announcements as;

'As regards the sign in the Gents that says 'Wet Paint'.... This is not an instruction. Furthermore, with regard to the £300 missing from club funds, we'll have a word with the Treasurer when he gets back from Tenerife!'

Strangely enough, two of the organisers of the tree planting had their own burst of fame as drummers in the sixties. One was Tony Bookbinder from The Dakotas and the other Bernie Dwyer from Freddie and the Dreamers.

The plaque and tree were both removed by the new owners of Albert's but an eagle eyed member of the public found the plaque lying in the rubble and saved it for the WDRA archive.

Until 2011 Old Lansdowne Rd boasted two synagogues. They were both Sephardi congregations who, in later years, merged into one, sharing time at each building but, at the beginning of the 20th century they were very different. The first synagogue, on your right was the Sha'are Sedek (below) but, as there was no longer any need for two, it was demolished in favour of a housing development in 2011.



The Sha'are Sedek Synagogue was built in 1924 for the Jews from the Middle East and Arab countries, many from the city of Aleppo in Northern Syria. Since the 1860s shipping merchants had moved to the area from Syria, Iraq and the Lebanon. Although the majority were Jewish there were also Moslems and Christians and, in those days, these communities shared much in the way of common language and culture. A school existed at the time to teach Arab children of all religions. It was local Syrian Moslems who bought the church which is now the mosque at the bottom of Burton Road in 1968.

Further up Old Lansdowne Road, on the corner of Queenston Road is the synagogue for the Sephardic group, the Withington Congregation of Spanish and Portuguese Jews.



**Left:** The Ark in the Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue

This listed building was originally to have had a Moorish style dome but this plan became too expensive and the roof remained flat. It was built in 1926 when the congregation moved from Mauldeth Road Withington where it had been established in 1904.

You may by now be in need of a rest or want to continue your walk another day. If so, the Albert Club is ahead of you, just after the synagogue.

If you're eager for more – well done! Turn left into Queenston Road and embark upon Part 2.

# A Walk on the West Side PART 2

## **Albert Park to the River**

We start part two, yet again, leaving the Albert Club but, this time turning left and then right into Queenston Road. Here, in the early 70s, in one of the houses on the left, lived Adrian Street, eccentric tag wrestler and showman. Local gossip had it that he had a fur-lined cellar. Yes, you read it correctly – fur-lined cellar. This may have been just a rumour but it was certainly a good one.



**Left:** Ex-miner and glam-rock wrestler Adrian Street (on the right)

Recovering from this mental picture, cross Clyde Road, famed as 60/70s bedsit land and student paradise. The big old houses were perfect to turn into student accommodation and there was very little in the way of student halls then. Usually each student, or usually two shared one big room with beds at one side and a sink and plug-in electric grill and hob at the other. The lucky ones had their 'kitchen area' partitioned off by a couple of pieces of plasterboard that didn't quite meet the ceiling. The whole house shared the bathroom. People used to say, 'Wherever you travel in the world, you'll meet someone who lived on Clyde Road'.

Ahead of you is an alley which will take you into Northen Grove where you turn left. There's no record of what number the Gibb family lived at in Northen Grove but the Bee Gees were here in 1958 and attended Cavendish Road School. Young as they were, they sang in harmony onstage at the Palatine Cinema under the name of 'Wee Johnny Hayes and the Blue Cats' as the audience waited for the Sunday matinees.

**Right:** The Palatine Cinema is long gone now, replaced on Palatine Road by the Job Centre.



At the bottom of Northen Grove, on Barlow Moor Road, you'll see ahead of you Fielden Campus, a part of the Manchester College and this was the spot where another West Didsbury drama played out.

In the years after the war there were strict limits on how much anyone could spend on materials when building a house. However, a well known local family, already sustaining a shady reputation for their dealings during the war years, flouted the rules outrageously. In place of 'The Headlands', the old mansion on the site then known as Fielden Park, they spared no expense in building a huge, sleek, white Hollywood-style luxury villa. It had every modern facility for its day and featured some walls, both inside and out, made entirely of glass bricks.

The council decided that this had definitely gone too far and prosecuted the family who immediately fled. The house was abandoned and, over the years, was vandalized, eventually burning down. Older people who still remember the abandoned house that they explored as children say that the cellars were stuffed with more of the illicit building materials used for the house itself.



**Left:** Interior of the Didsbury mosque, converted from a Methodist church.

Opposite Fielden Campus, on the corner of Burton Road is the Manchester Islamic Centre and Didsbury Mosque. This building, once the Albert Park Methodist Chapel, has been in use as a mosque since 1968 and its use has now extended to a centre for Islamic history and culture. It also runs courses in English and Arabic for both men and women, has a marriage and divorce office and holds Sunday Open days for the general public.

Cross the road and pass Fielden on your left. Continue along Barlow Moor Road, past The Beeches and turn left between the massive gateposts of Stanton Avenue. Walk down to the bottom of Stanton Avenue and, ahead, there is a stile which you will cross to reach the River Mersey.

**Right**: The River Mersey at West Didsbury 1910



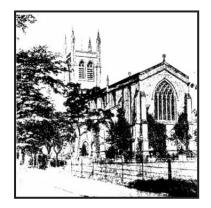
Turn to your right to walk a short way along the riverbank path which forms a part of the Trans Pennine Trail. This is a 215 mile long pathway linking the Irish Sea at Southport with the North Sea at Hornsea, East Yorkshire. Funnily enough, Hornsea is where my father was born.

It was because of the tight loop here in the river that West Didsbury was nearly given the name Mersey Bend. Fortunately the Victorian worthies thought better of it but the distinctive meander of the river here does make the area very easy to find on the map. It also means that the location is susceptible to flooding, thus the steeply built up banks and profusion of golf courses.

Shortly you'll see some steps to your right. Take these steps up to Darley Avenue and proceed in the same direction, admiring the superior riverside residences on your right and the Merseyside Park on your left. This open space was created with a lot of support from local residents and is managed by the Mersey Valley Warden Service. Although small by Mersey Valley standards compared to Sale or Chorlton water parks, it helps to maintain a linear wildlife corridor along the river, linking up with sites all the way to Didsbury.

On your right you pass Rowsley Avenue, full of very imposing houses and in one of these lived David Rifkin, owner of Roland and Rifkin, the Manchester gown shop. He was the first person in England ever to be banned from driving after he drove into a cow in 1923.

This walk turns right when you get to Oaker Avenue but ahead you can see the tower of Christ Church and you may want to have a closer look.



**Left:** Christ Church in the 1880s

Built in 1882 for £13,000 (Withington Town Hall cost £2,000 in 1881) it was the gift of Mr William Roberts. Its tower and pinnacles could be seen from miles around but, unfortunately, the latter were removed early last century for safety reasons. The church stood in open land, well away from the fast growing West Didsbury and was known as 'The Church in the Fields'.

As you walk up Oaker Avenue you will come upon an entirely different and unexpected place of worship, as small and unassuming as Christ Church is magnificent. This is the Welsh Presbyterian Church, faithfully adhering to its Calvinist roots.

At Barlow Moor Road, turn right and, on your left you'll see the entrance to the imposing white Siemens headquarters, built after the Bauhaus style.

Immediately after this there is a fenced off piece of land where the well-used Scout Hut stood until it burned down in the early 90s.

Right: West Didsbury Scout Hut in 1975



The next road on your left is Elizabeth Slinger Road where you will turn left. On this corner stands the Lancasterian School, a much-praised establishment for children between two and sixteen with physical disabilities. The original school from which Lancasterian grew was set up in Ancoats in 1911 and came to Cavendish Road, West Didsbury in 1945,

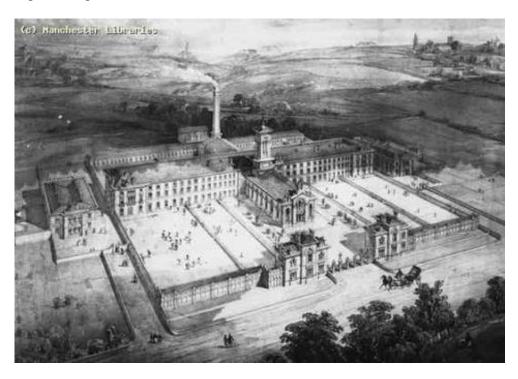
Elizabeth Slinger was, for many years, the well-respected headmistress of Lancasterian but her name is now associated in all criminal minds with the police. The divisional headquarters was opened on the 3rd October 1994 and covers the South Manchester division which consists of Chorlton, Barlow Moor, Northenden, Brooklands, Baguley, Withington, Didsbury, Ladybarn, Wythenshawe and Sharston.

After the police station there is another special school The Birches Specialist Support School for primary age children with severe learning difficulties. This is on the corner of Elizabeth Slinger Road and Nell Lane, one of West Didsbury's oldest roads.



**Left:** the gates and entrance to Withington Hospital, formerly the Chorlton Union Workhouse.

Although you will be proceeding right here, take a little sortie to the left as far as the gates to the old Withington Hospital, previously the Chorlton Workhouse. These gates and surrounding buildings were erected in 1855 and accommodated 1,500 inmates.



**Above:** Chorlton Workhouse circa 1900

In 1864-6 a pavilion plan hospital was erected to the north of the workhouse. Designed by Thomas Worthington, a distinguished Manchester architect, it was recommended by Florence Nightingale as 'a model for the whole country'. Most of the hospital has now been demolished to make way for housing and the historic gates and entrance are part of a luxury flat development. If you were to follow Nell Lane to Princess Parkway you would find, on the corner, a small wood named 'The Paupers' Graveyard', a poignant reminder of the workhouse days.

It's not so long ago that some elderly people in West Didsbury experienced shudders of fear if they had to attend Withington Hospital. The fear of the workhouse had remained with them since they were children.

Turn back along Nell Lane, past the Elizabeth Slinger junction and you will see, on your right, the new community hospital. There are no longer wards and beds but there are a wide variety of purpose built outpatients' clinics and day surgery facilities.

#### **Burton Road**

Turn left into Burton Road by the George Charles bar, named after the greengrocer who had the shop around 1900.

Throughout the 1940s and 50s this was a tobacconist's and sweetshop run by Mr Whiteside, an artist and eccentric who filled the shop with Victorian automata and 'penny in the slot' machines. Clowns would go through their mechanical actions, birds would flap and tweet or horses and carts would circle, all at the chime of a clock or the drop of a penny.



**Right**: *Mr Whiteside's tobacconist* 

Later, it became a traditional corner shop which went by the excellent name of 'The Eagle Food Stores' and was run by Mr Choudhury. He became a founder member of the West Didsbury Residents' Association when he led an unsuccessful campaign, along with residents of Northen Grove, to oppose the building of a Kwiksave supermarket where the Co-op is now. In order to build Kwiksave, the Public Hall had to be demolished.



**Left:** West Didsbury Public Hall The smaller building on the left is still there and houses the Conservative Club. Note the cow being driven up Burton Road.

The Hall had a history of public entertainment, Early last century the Albert Club tennis players would hold their dances there. They were deemed far too young and racy to be allowed to hold them in the stuffy gentleman's club. In the late twenties the Withington Literary and Social Society, established by the synagogue congregation, would produce plays there and, after the war, Theo Papadopoulos used to run a card school. In more modern times the hall was a home for judo classes and break dancing lessons.

Next to what's now the Co-op is St Luke's Church, built in 1881 and now the home of the British Mountaineering Council. This was the church considered to be in such an unsavoury position in 1888 that St Mary's was built in Palatine Rd. The First World War memorial was brought over from St Mary's in 1935.

In 1900 the shops on Burton Road were the most cosmopolitan in Manchester. With so many of their customers from Europe and the Middle East to please they stocked food and artefacts that Mancunians found very exotic. People would come for miles just to look at the things that were sold.

The best original remaining Burton Road shopfront, with its glass pillars at either side of the corner door is that at Steranko, on the corner of Vicker Grove. This used to be Duwe's the bakers, chocolatier's and elegant tea shop. Next door to this, the hairdresser's has good examples of the stained glass which ran along the tops of all the shop windows.



**Left:** Burton Road at the Lapwing Lane crossing in 1905. Blagg's is on the left with the padlock sign hanging outside

The oldest business, however, is Blagg's Hardware, on the corner of Burton Road and Cavendish Road. The Blagg brothers established this shop in 1871 when it was called 'The Padlock'. In the picture above you can see the padlock sign hanging over the door. Charles Eric, the father of the present owner, Alan Gracie, began to work for Mr Blagg at the age of fourteen and, after twenty years, bought the business himself. Nowadays, Blaggs stands out by way of its seasonal displays on the flat roof; an old bicycle bedecked with plants in the summer and lit-up Father Christmas and accompaniments in December.

## **Lapwing Lane**

On the opposite corner to Blagg's is the massive edifice, the Metropolitan. Built as a magnificent hotel to complement the Midland Railway line which reached West Didsbury in 1880, the Midland Hotel had luxury bedrooms upstairs, an excellent lounge with waiter service, a vault and a bowling green where the car park is now.



The Midland has had a good few ups and downs over the years. It was famous in the 1950s, 60s and into the 70s as a live music venue hosting Jazz, Rock and Rockabilly. Monday nights were packed out for the Alan Hare Big Band whose residency lasted from 1968-76.

**Left:** The Alan Hare Big Band at the Midland

By the 80s things were going downhill at the Midland. It became well-known as a haunt for drug dealers and its clientele were blamed for the high crime rates in the area. On a couple of occasions, parents leaving Cavendish Road School with their children were horrified to find a full police raid in progress with dogs, vans and suspects lined up outside the pub. Eventually, after each new landlord promised to 'clean it up', the 'Mid' closed down in the 90s. On a personal note, I worked as a barmaid there during that time and there was another side to the pub. In spite of its reputation, it was also place full of warmth, a lot of humour and some absolutely unforgettable whacky characters.



The Midland Stable Block c 1990



The Metropolitan Stable Bar 2012

In 1998 things looked up. Two local businessmen took on the mammoth task of, not only rehabilitating the pub but using entirely local artists and designers. They gave it a completely, very upmarket new image and The Metropolitan was born.

The tiny Railway, across the road, actually doubled in size in 1990. Derek Rimmer, the landlord throughout the 70s and 80s vehemently opposed any attempt to enlarge the pub into the empty cobblers next door. However, in the end the inevitable happened. Created from a cottage in the 1890s this little pub is supposed to be haunted by the spirit of an old customer who, from time to time, rolls the barrels about in the cellar at dead of night.



Along Lapwing Lane on your left is Pandora Street. Here, the glorious eccentricity of West Didsbury is kept alive by a man who collects army vehicles and can be seen driving down the road in his tank. As I write, some sort of troop transporter has been parked up on Old Lansdowne Road for over a year.

On either side of the road, the Lime Tree and Greens have both been established for over thirty years – amazing success for independent restaurants. Prior to the Lime Tree's opening the building housed a hairdresser's on the ground floor with a 'dodgy dungeon' in the cellar.

On your left are the Lapwing Court flats, built in 1969. Walk along past these and, before you come to Brankgate Court, the next block of flats you'll see a wide entrance leading to garages at the rear. This was the entrance to Withington and West Didsbury Railway station. The curved wall on the left in the photo below can still be seen today.



**Left:** Withington and West Didsbury Station

The station fell into disuse when the railway closed in 1967 although the old platform could still be seen below all the undergrowth until the tramline was built.

When he read the first edition of this walk, Michael Papadopoulis sent this memory from America.

'At the age of five or six I walked to school and back across the footbridge at the Withington and West Didsbury station. My daily ambition was to be on that footbridge with a train thundering below so as to be engulfed by the smoke from the locomotive chimney. The best trains were the express trains to London – they began to slow down so as to stop at Didsbury Station. The reason for that stop was said to be that a director of the Midland Railway lived in Didsbury and had the London trains stop there as a convenience.'

Our walk began with Doreen Smithson and it will end the same way. It was on either side of this station entrance that Doreen's family had a market garden and kept beehives behind the right hand wall.

Her granddad lived at no. 36 Lapwing Lane and when Doreen was young she worked on the family's fruit and vegetable stall at the station entrance. At the end of each day she'd walk along Lapwing Lane and turn into Old Lansdowne Road on her way to number 34 where the family lived and where Doreen remained all her life.



We are going just past there, to the Albert Club where we began this walk about a hundred and fifty years ago.

# Acknowledgements

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