



BIRMINGHAM



Anne Baird

Just Passing Through

Birmingham's having a celebration - and why not? There's reason enough, writes Mary Cutler

It's Birmingham's hundredth birthday this year. You know Birmingham. You passed through there once. This is the standard response to the revelation of my origins; my standard retort is, 'Thankyou'. We'll keep the place to ourselves. You don't know what you're missing.

Being a Brummie is like being an Australian used to be. You deliver spirited, well-researched and witty lectures on the rich culture and radical heritage of the city and people nod sympathetically, and choke back their sniggers.

So I'll spare you the lecture. I won't tell you about 18-year old Ken Tynan sauntering down New Street, a red ribbon threaded in his black silk umbrella, on his way to play Hamlet. I shan't mention Tolkien brooding on Middle Earth and the Hobbit in the leafy suburbs of Hall Green. I shan't even reveal that the illustrator of *Rupert Bear* was a Brummie; those wonderful sea-shores the natural product of the imagination of a land-locked

child. I'm going to tell you about my great aunts.

My great aunt Sue was a forewoman at ICI before, during, and after the first world war. My twin great aunts, Lil and Beck, worked all their lives in the various skilled small industries so characteristic of the city, produced three children between them and couldn't iron a shirt or make a stew to save their lives. My daughter's home economics teacher was shocked that she didn't possess a single female relative who could teach her how to hem a skirt. But when, at 11, I toyed with the idea of being a barrister, my mother, who had left school at 14, produced the name of the only woman judge in England without pausing for breath. Consequently, when I went off to my posh university to find the embryonic feminist movement proudly discovering role models and working women and contraception and power dressing, I was a bit surprised. We'd had them in Birmingham for years. (You should have seen my great aunt Sue in a cloche hat.)

We had other things, too. The sixth-formers who the little girls at my school crushes on were not captains of the hockey teams, but veterans of the first Aldermaston marches. (I couldn't tell you who was in the hockey teams - people joined under assumed names.) At the boys' school next door the ubiquitous Ken Tynan had won a debate against the motion that 'This house thinks the present generation has lost the ability to entertain itself by praising the joys of masturbation. In 1941. We had to make do with our classics teacher telling us that Sappho was a very passionate woman. Nevertheless I went off to my posh university and discovered that some people had been repressed by their schools ...

We don't know who we are, you see, stuck here on the dividing line of Britain, so we have to keep asking questions to find out. We don't know what will work,

so we experiment. This explains our passion for pulling down the city. When I came home from university every term I used to get lost; they kept moving New Street station. Nostalgia for a Brummie is a building site. My childhood landscapes have been destroyed; there were fields and trees at the bottom of my garden - it's very beautiful in the suburbs of Birmingham (you won't believe me, of course) - and on the brow of the hill there was a factory, Birmetals. Its green lights twinkled for the night shift; my mother used to tell me Father Christmas made toys there. It closed down in the 70s - because of the strike, Margaret Thatcher claimed: rejoice, rejoice, that's what comes of people paying themselves more than they earn - and they tore the roof off it. There ain't no Santa Claus.

They tore the roof off our beautiful Victorian reference library too, and rain fell on the stained glass and embossed gold of the names of the benefactors of that cathedral to learning and self-help. Although it has to be said - and I speak as one who spent the 60s in there doing my homework - that rain used to fall on your head quite regularly even when it had a roof.

Go and see the Rotunda while it's still there - next time you're passing through. It's a round office tower block in the city centre, like an enormous candle, fat and fun; but it's been up for 20 years, which makes it an ancient monument, so its days are numbered. Some Birmingham writers thought we might write a play to celebrate the centenary, set in a sit-in to save the Rotunda; but we got into such a violent debate about whether it was worth saving, we all hurried back to our own study/workshops to write our own plays in true individualistic Brummie fashion.

Three of us can actually trace our families back to the jewellery quarter: grandfather, great-grandfather and, in my case, great

great great-aunt, master and mistress jewellers. Craft and art and industry in harmony, as they are on the Birmingham shield which used to be on the side of the Corporation buses until they turned into West Midlands Passenger Transport: two sturdy figures wielding hammers to knock things down and tools to build them up again with the city motto at their feet. Forward.

Forward. To the new international convention centre. Fortunately it isn't built yet so we are enjoying beautiful vistas while they flatten Broad Street: panoramic views of the Gas Street canal basin; wonderful jumbles of old and new, while Watt and Boulton and Murdoch stand on their plinth and think on - 'if I'd known it was going to come to this I wouldn't have boiled the kettle' - and the cranes tower above, still festooned with fairy lights and Christmas trees. We're very fond and full of trees in Birmingham; we used to be



Watt & Co: Left standing

the Forest of Arden. And there's the Rep and the art gallery clock and Hansom's town hall - trust Birmingham to get its town hall designed by the man who invented the taxi - and Chamberlain's fountain and Simon Rattle's City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra play on.

And there in the mud and the rubble and the clay glimmers that vision of the city that young Joe Chamberlain had as he walked through the slums of Five Ways to his office in tree-lined Colmore Row. When it's finished and the vision's made concrete I expect we shall find we've betrayed it. But we'll pull it down and start again. Forward. Happy birthday, Birmingham. From me and my great aunts. •