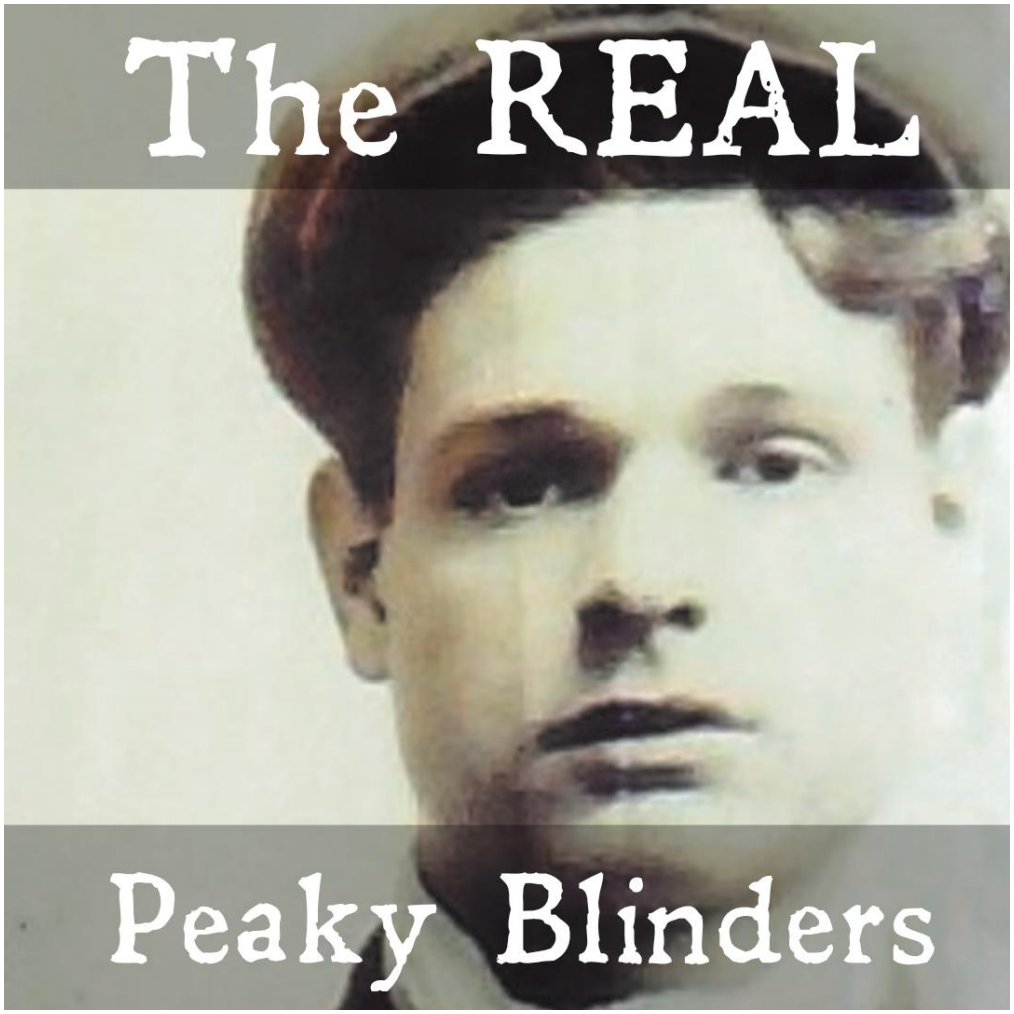
The Real Peaky Blinders & Digbeth and Deritend History Tour

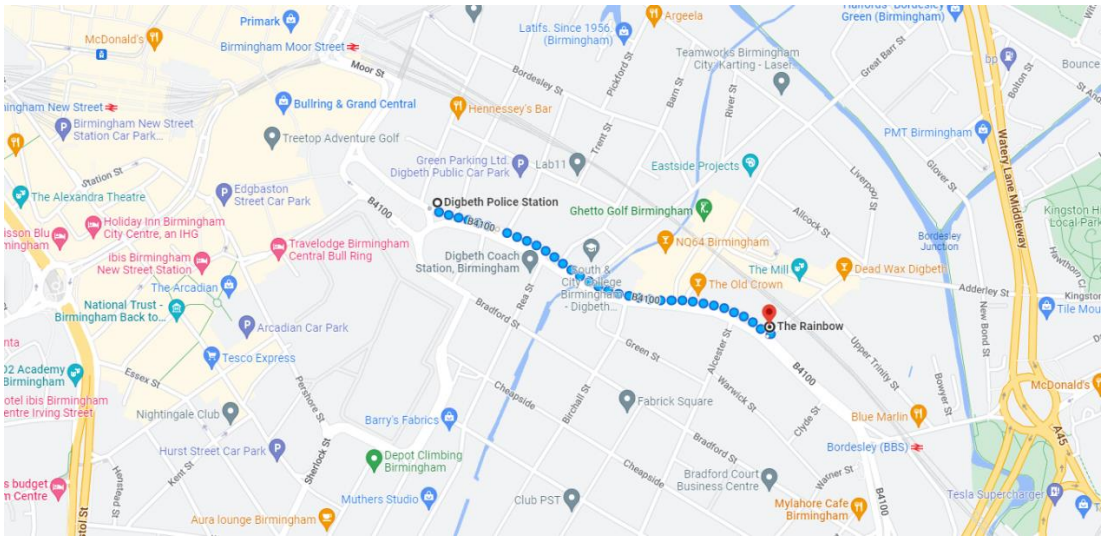


The Tour Route

The tour is a linear one starting from the Rainbow on the corner of Adderley Street and High Street Bordesley and going up to Digbeth Police Station, via High Street Deritend and Digbeth. It then returns the same way back to the Rainbow.

This first part will the focus on the story of the real peaky blinders, taking in locations associated with them. It begins at the place where, in March 1890, the first attack took place by men named as peaky blinders in the press; it ends at Digbeth Police Station because of the importance of policing in ending the reign of ruffianism of the peaky blinders.

The return will go back down Digbeth and High Street Deritend to the Rainbow in Adderley Street. This route is distinguished by many historic buildings that enable a telling of the wider history of Birmingham.



Starting Point

The Rainbow
160 High St, Bordesley, Birmingham B12 0LD
(GPS location
Latitude, Longitude 52.4742801, 1.8816229) 0.4 miles

The Rainbow to Digbeth Police Station 0.4 miles (approximately).
Digbeth Police Station to the Rainbow 0.45 miles (approximately).

Transport

Birmingham Moor Street to the Rainbow = 0.7 miles and about 15 minutes' walk.
Birmingham New Street to the Rainbow = 0.8 miles and about 18 minutes' walk.
Digbeth Coach Station – 0.3 miles and about 6 minutes' walk.

On-street parking in Adderley Street – payment needed.
A large car park in Heath Mill Lane, close to the meeting point at Trinity Street Car Park, 49 Heath Mill Lane, Birmingham, B9 4AL.

Part 1

The Real Peaky Blinders

1. The Rainbow, corner of High Street Bordesley & Adderley Street

On Saturday night March 22, 1890, three gang members with “an evil reputation” picked on a man called George Eastwood for drinking a ginger beer in this pub, the Rainbow on the corner of Adderley Street and High Street Bordesley. There was an argument and George Eastwood was threatened but eventually the three bullies left shortly before 11 pm.

A 1950s view of the Rainbow, built in about 1875, on the corner of Adderley Street (right) and High Street Bordesley. All photos are from the BirminghamLives Archive unless stated otherwise.

The Rainbow is just out of view on the right in this photo from 1935, but this is how High Street Bordesley leading into High Street Deritend would have looked in 1890 when the term peaky blinders came into popular use.

2. Railway Bridges Adderley Street (behind the Rainbow)

After about a quarter of an hour, George Eastwood then left the Rainbow to go home. He had to turn left through a lonely part of Adderley Street and beneath two railway bridges; he never made it back to his house. Within seconds, the three men who'd picked on him ran out of the darkness and viciously assaulted him. George Eastwood was knocked down, kicked, and struck by blows from buckled belts. Suffering severe wounds to his head and with contusions all over his body and legs, he was in hospital for three weeks.

Only one of his attackers was arrested and convicted – Thomas Mucklow, who lived in Adderley Street. In the Birmingham newspapers, the attackers were called peaky blinders. This was the first recorded use of the term for Birmingham's hooligans, although the older name of sloggers, who belonged to slogging gangs, remained common.

Standing beneath one of the bridges where George Eastwood was brutally assaulted by peaky blinders and with the Rainbow in the background is Professor Carl Chinn MBE, author of the Sunday Times Number One Bestseller, *Peaky Blinders. The Real Story* (John Blake 2019).

3. The Rainbow

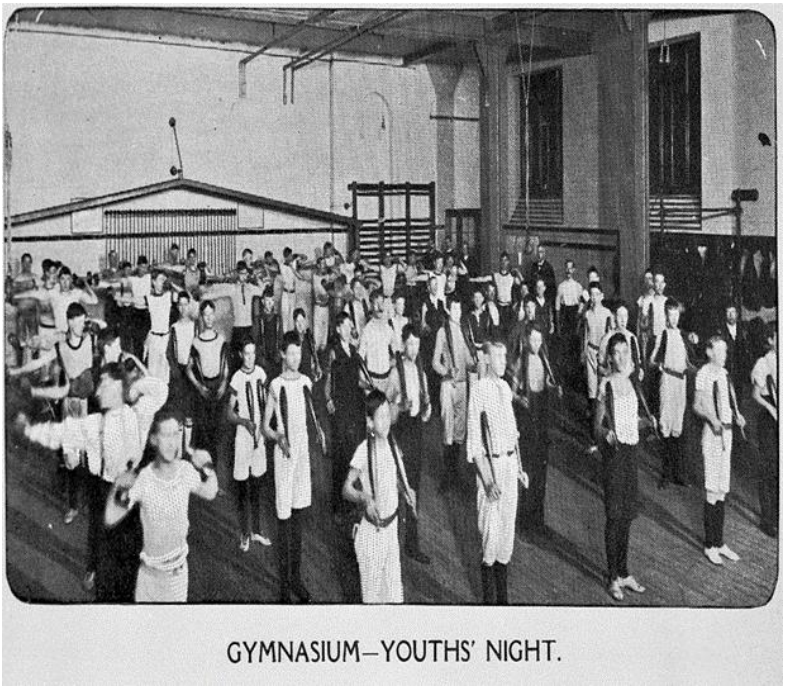
Contrary to popular stories, the peaky blinders didn't stitch disposable razor blades into the peaks of their flat caps, which they slashed across the foreheads of their enemies causing blood to blind their eyes and make them defenceless. Disposable razor blades were too expensive and didn't become widely available on Britain until just before the First World War when the peaky blinders were disappearing. Their main weapons were their buckled belts slashed across the heads of their enemies, their hobnailed boots, stones, broken bricks, knives, and metal coshes.

And again contrary to widespread belief, the first peaky blinders did not wear flat caps - they wore billycocks, the working man's bowler hat, like Charles Williams in this photo taken by the Birmingham police in 1893. (West Midlands Police Museum).

The name peaky blinder arose from a fashion, whereby the billycock's brim was 'funnelled' like that of Charles Williams and pulled over one eye to show off a quiff of hair in an otherwise tightly cropped hairstyle. This fashion continued when the flat cap became popular, as made clear by this photo of George 'Cloggy' Williams from 1895 when he was seventeen. Two years later, he was sentenced to penal servitude for life for the manslaughter of PC Snipe, who died after he was felled by a broken brick thrown at him and kicked as he lay unconscious on the ground. Four other men were sent to prison for lesser terms for the attack on PC Snipe and another policeman.

4. Car Park, High Street, Deritend

Concerned clergymen and women played a vital role in the disappearance of the peaky blinders. Some set up Lads' Clubs, often with a football team and sometimes a boxing club. One of them was Father John Lopes. A High Church of England priest who later converted to Catholicism, paid for the building of St Edmund's Hostel for Working Lads and its associated Lads Club. Opened in 1910, just as the peaky blinders disappeared, it boasted a gymnasium on the premises and a sports ground at Yardley. The Grade II listed chapel and bell tower resembling the campanile of San Giorgio Maggiore in Rome are all that survives of the hostel.



A Youth's Night at the Gymnasium of Digbeth Civic Hall, which will be featured on the Digbeth and Deritend Tour. The provision of such facilities for boys in poorer neighbourhhods were significant in ending "the reign of the peaky blinders" and their equivalents in Manchester and Salford - the scuttlers. Importantly, physical exercise also fitted in with the idea of 'Muscular Christianity' and the belief in "healthy minds and healthy bodies".

5. Corner of Heath Mill Lane by the Old Crown

The seeds for the Shelbys of the television series are said to be the Sheldon brothers, three of Birmingham's most notorious gangsters before the First World War, and in 1888, Samuel Sheldon was prominent in a slogging gang attack on two policemen here in Heath Mill Lane. He and his two brothers, John and Joseph, lived nearby and later led their gang of petty criminals in the violent Garrison Lane Vendetta of 1908 to 1912, which pitted them against a local hard man called Billy Beach and his pals. This Vendetta was regarded as "the last of the peaky blinders".

Looking down Heath Mill Lane from High Street Deritend. The man has crossed from the Old Crown which is out of view. On the left is Deritend Library, now called the Old Library and a wedding venue. It was opened in 1866 on the same day as Birmingham's first main library in the town centre. Lending books from branch libraries for free was an important development by the local council in poor districts. The houses in view are back-to-backs, the dominant form of housing for the poor of Birmingham, and were cleared by the late 1960s.

Samuel Sheldon in 1907, wearing the original headgear of the peaky blinders – a billycock. (West Midlands Police Museum).

6. Corner of Floodgate Street by South and City College

Schooling was another factor in the decline of the peaky blinders, through instilling discipline and encouraging education. The impressive Grade II listed Floodgate Street School was opened in 1891 in what was then decried as a hotbed of "peaky blinderism".

Boys at Floodgate Street School in the early 20th century. Notice the contrast between the well-dressed lads with their collars, probably sons of local shopkeepers, and those with mufflers (scarves) round their necks.

Floodgate Street School is on the left of this photo taken in the 1970s. The back-to-back housing that used to be squeezed in between the factories and works have been cleared but the area remained mostly industrial until the turn of the 21st century. In the background is St Martin's in the Bull Ring and the Rotunda, the symbol of 1960s Birmingham, and to the right is the magnificent Bordesley Viaduct. From 1852, it carried the Oxford Line across the valley of the River Rea and now carries the Chiltern Line to Moor Street Station.

7. Corner of Milk Street by the Big Bull's Head

Called sloggers and later peaky blinders, Birmingham's backstreet gangsters were rampant from the 1870s, baiting the police, battling each other, and bullying the hard-working, decent majority of the poor amongst whom they lived. One of the oldest feuds, involving numerous beatings and at least one death, was between the Milk Street Gang and the nearby Park Street/Allison Street Gang. Beginning as an ethnic/religious conflict between the English of Milk Street and the Irish of Park Street/Allison Street, by the late 19th century, with Irish migration having dropped off significantly, it became like other gang feuds – a fight simply over territoriality and claims to be the 'hardest'.

Veterans of the First World War gathering by the Big Bull's Head in the 1930s, perhaps for the silver jubilee of King George V or the coronation of King George VI in 1937. The pub is the first building on the north side of Digbeth, on the banks of an old course of the River Rea. However, but wasn't on a corner until Milk Street was extended in 1880/81. Along with other pubs in prominent locations locally, it was rebuilt and extended during the ensuing decade.

Milk Street is on the left of this photo. The building of H. Goodman and Sons on its far corner is now part of South and City College, but the Big Bull's Head on the near corner remains. On the right is Rea Street, on the nearest corner of which is now Digbeth Coach Station. This photo was taken in 1949, shortly before this stretch of road was widened by demolishing the buildings on the right.

8. Corner of Oxford Street by Smart Kids Nursery

A 1930s view looking up Digbeth from Rea Street on the left (now the site of Digbeth Coach Station) with Oxford Street on the right just past the tram. Close to here in February 1889, five members of the infamous Whitehouse Street Gang from Aston were arrested after assaulting police officers with stones and buckled belts. They took part in riots and numerous gang fights and beatings of policemen and had left their territory two miles away to take revenge on a 'rough' from Digbeth who'd crossed them.

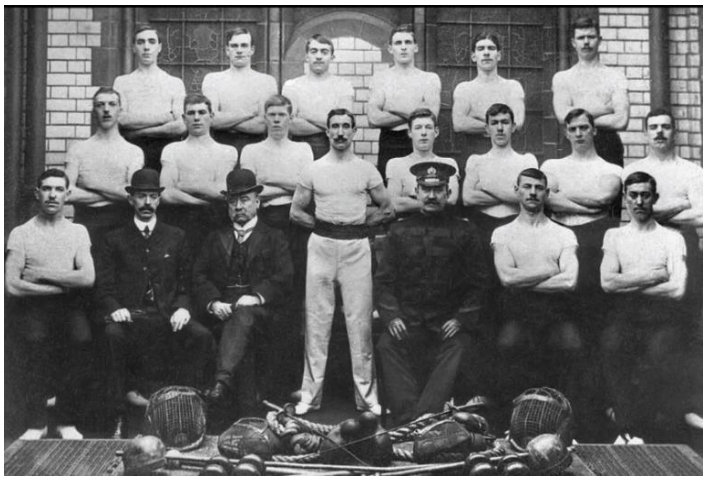
The peaky blinders of drama are depicted as one powerful, organised criminal gang focused on a single family and based in one district, Small Heath, in the 1920s. The reality was very different. There were many back-street gangs in Birmingham from the 1870s, but the peaky blinders disappeared before the First World War, and whilst most engaged in the petty blackmailing of publicans and shopkeepers, they were nothing like organised criminal gangs.

George Hickling in 1905. (West Midlands Police Museum). A member of the Ten Arches Gang from Aston, like many other peaky blinders, Hickling fought for his country in the First World War. Others worked in Birmingham's munitions factories.

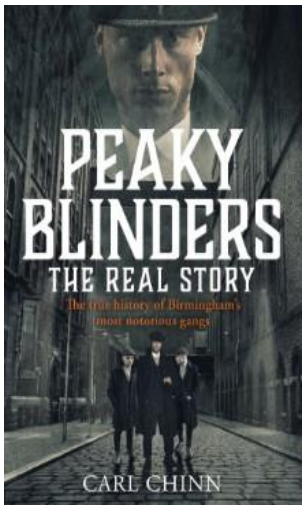
9. Digbeth Police Station, 113 Digbeth & corner of Allison Street

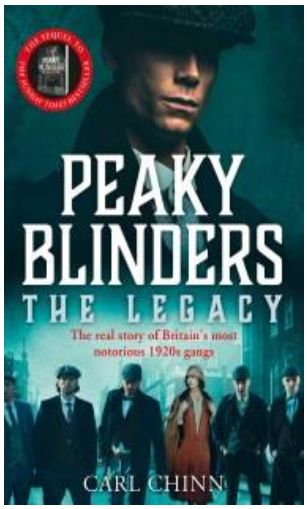
Strong policing overseen by Charles Haughton Rafter, chief constable from 1899, was vital in ending the reign of the peaky blinders before the First World War. This photo of Digbeth Police Station was taken shortly before its opening in 1912 after the old station in Moor Street was demolished for railway works. Three stories high, it had sixteen cells as well as accommodation for 50 single constables. Located on the corner of Allison Street, the domain of the old Park Street/Allison Street Gang and close to the territory of the Milk Street and other gangs, it was in the midst of the districts where the peaky blinders had held sway and was an imposing symbol of police power.

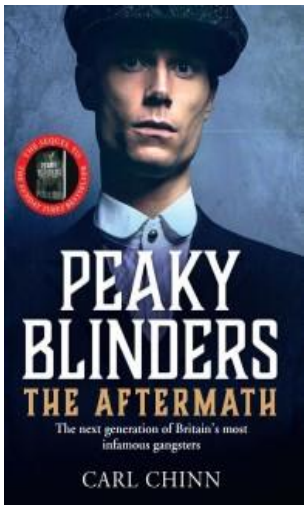
Sir Charles Haughton Rafter oversaw the fight against the peaky blinders by increasing the numbers of the Birmingham police with tall, fit young recruits, by persuading the authorities to impose stiffer penalties for assaults on the police, and by instilling confidence in working-class victims to give evidence against peaky blinders. Sir Charles Haughton Rafter died in office in 1935 and thousands of working-class Brummies turned out in the Bull Ring to pay their respects at his memorial service in St Martin's Church.



Recruits to the Birmingham Police received physical training led by Sergeant Doughty standing in the front row.







Peaky Blinders Trilogy

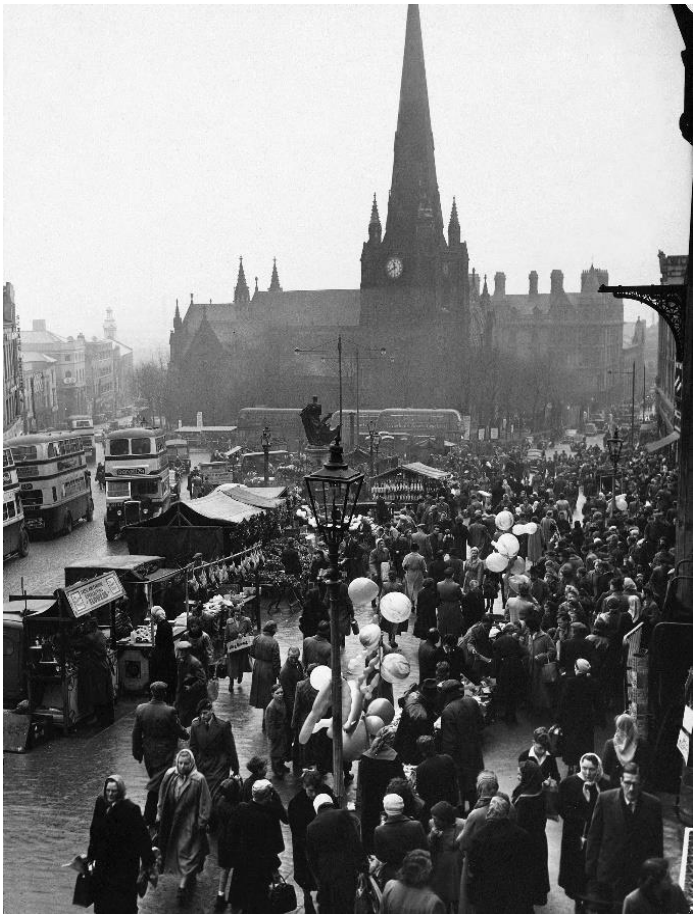
If you want to know more about the real peaky blinders and the organised criminal gangs they spawned, you can read Carl Chinn's Peaky Blinders trilogy.

Part 2

Digbeth and Deritend History Tour

1. Manzils Restaurant next to Digbeth Police Station

Once the site of Morgan's Sausages, Manzils opened as a curry house in 1966, soon after this photo was taken, and is now one of the oldest in Birmingham. Like most Indian restaurants locally, it is run by a family originating from Sylhet in Bangladesh. On the corner at 109, Digbeth is the Castle and Falcon pub which stretched round the corner into Meriden Street. The building dates to the mid-19th century and is now mostly used as a retail shop.



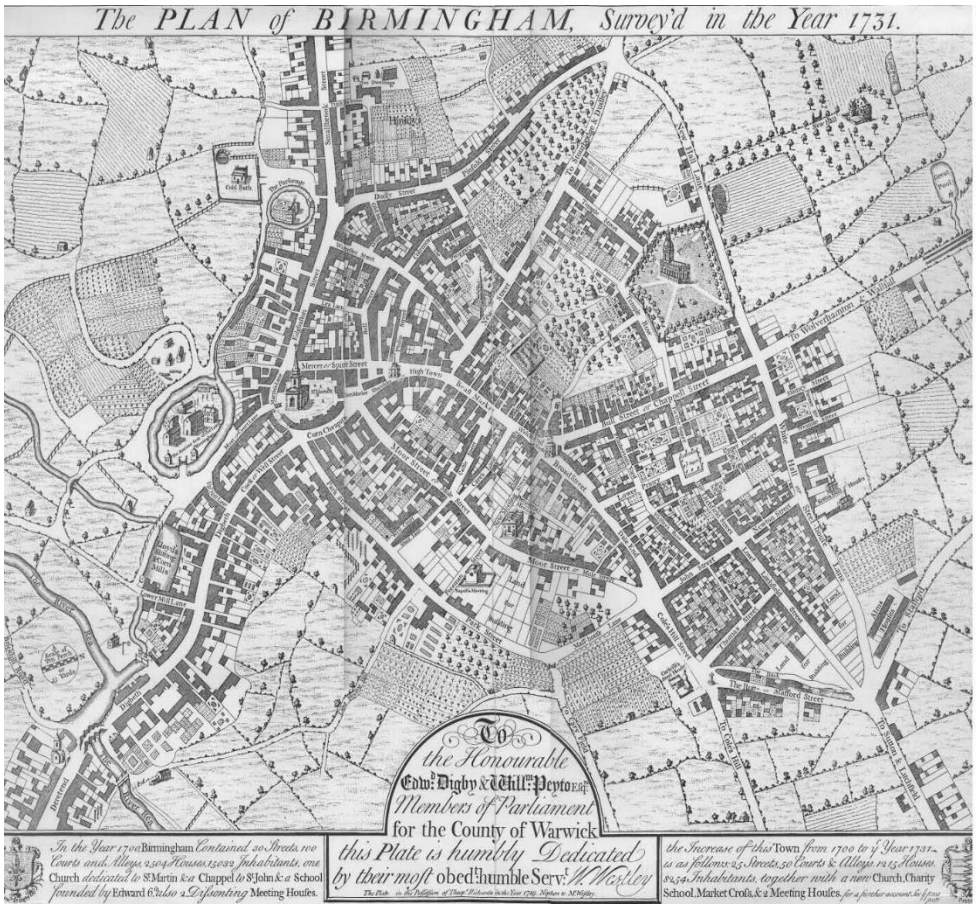
In this view from the 1950s looking down from the outdoor market in the Bull Ring, the tower of Digbeth Police Station can be seen in the background on the left. Soon after this photo was taken, this scene changed drastically as the whole markets area was redeveloped. In turn, this 'new Bull Ring' was replaced with the modern shopping centre in 2003.

The one building that survived is St Martin's Church. Although a Victorian structure, there has been a place of worship here since at least the thirteenth century, standing as a powerful mark of continuity amidst an ever-changing city centre.

As for the markets, they were vital for the rise of Birmingham. An insignificant settlement in the Domesday Book of 1086, Birmingham began its growth from 1166 when its lord gained the rights to hold a market. Quickly a new town appeared, filled with traders and smiths.

2. Bonser's Warehouse, 85 Digbeth

This is the Grade II listed tower-like carriage entrance to the former Bonser's Iron Warehouse, which included number 86 next door. Opened in 1850, the entrance led to extensive premises at the back which were demolished in about 1960. This photo shows a busy scene in the later 1950s with Bonser's entrance just behind the car on the right. In the background can be seen the tower of Digbeth Police Station and beyond it, St Martin's Church. The bus in the centre is coming out of Rea Street, where other buses are lined up at an outside garage, now Digbeth Coach Station.



William Westley produced the first Plan of Birmingham in 1731. It shows Birmingham's growth up the hill from St Martin's Church (centre left), the markets close to it, and the lord's manor house just below it - now the site of the Smithfield development. Downhill, Birmingham stretched along Digbeth and High Street, Deritend, officially in the parish of Aston but effectively part of Birmingham.

The town had developed strongly since 1166, but now was on the cusp of a spectacular expansion during the Industrial Revolution

3. The Kerryman at 80 Digbeth & Digbeth Institute

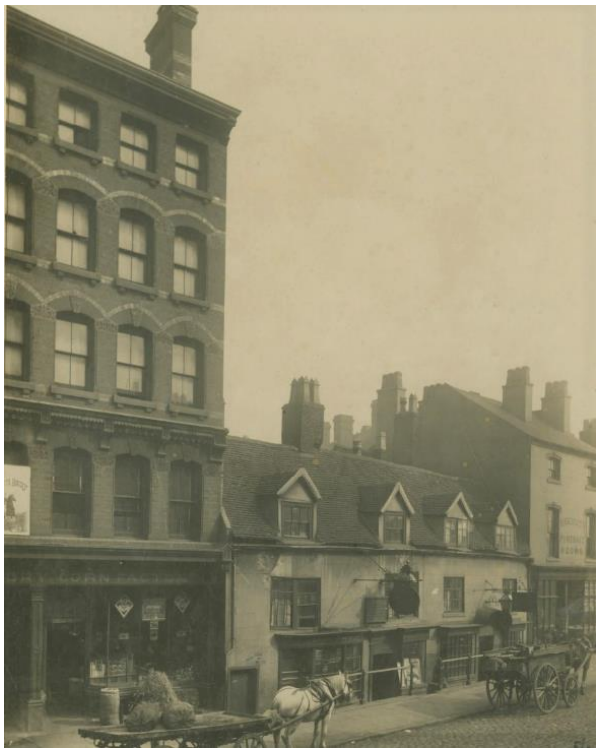
There's been a pub on the site of The Kerryman since the later 1700s. Called the Old Bull's Head, it was refurbished and renamed in the 1990s by its Irish owner, reflecting the importance of Irish publicans in Digbeth since 1945. As for the Digbeth Institute, now part of the O_2 Academy group, founded by Dr J. H. Jowett, pastor of Carrs Lane Chapel, it opened in 1908 to provide local people with a religious centre as well as social amenities and recreational facilities.

Digbeth Institute dominates this photo taken soon after it was opened in 1908. (Library of Birmingham). The girls are walking past the Old Bull's Head, now the Kerryman. From at least the mid-sixteenth century, Digbeth had buildings on narrow plots, like the burgages rented by the townsfolk from the lord in the later Middle Ages. Number 82 Digbeth, to the left of the pub, was a later building on such a plot. Then a tailor's it was next door to the grander Horse and Groom pub. Both buildings were later demolished.

Digbeth Institute was the meeting place for various clubs, including for local mothers as showed here.

4. 225 & 224 High Street Deritend, corner of Milk Street

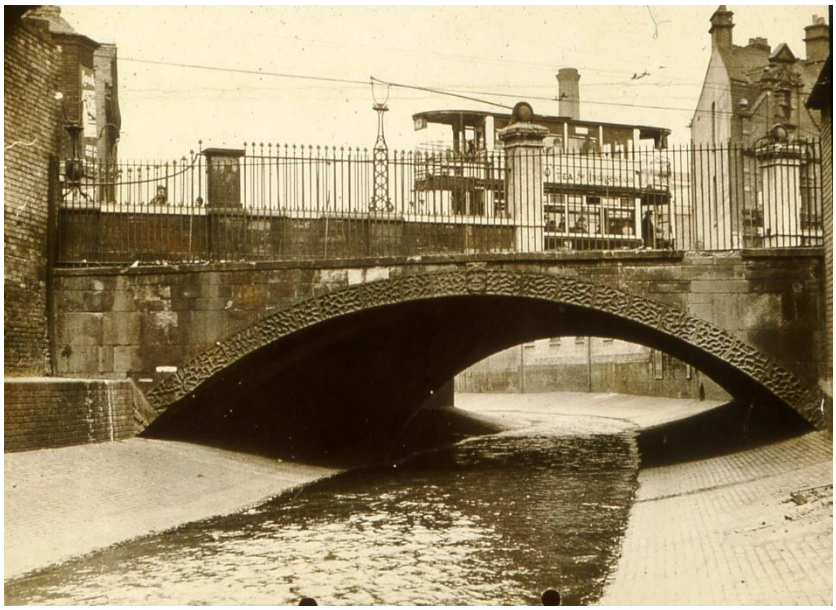
On the opposite corner of Milk Street to the Bull's Head are the Grade II listed 225 and 224 High Street Deritend. Built in 1869 as two shops, warehousing, and a bakehouse for James Fawdry, a wealthy baker and corn, seed, and flour dealer, they were later occupied partly by H. Goodman and Sons engravers. The buildings to the right, shown in this photo from the 1970s, were later knocked down for the construction of South and City College. On the former warehousing in Milk Street is a restored advert for a London firm's Melox Marvels dog biscuits.



Though a modern building, South and City College stands upon the historic Deritend Island once formed by the two branches of the River Rea. Low lying at the bottom of the valley, it was the location of tanning pits until the early 1700s. From the early sixteenth century, this Deritend Island was fronted by the Old Leather Bottle and Old Three Crowns. As shown in this Library of Birmingham photograph taken by Thomas Lewis, these two small buildings were entered several feet below the footpath, marking as they did the original falling of the road to the ford over the River Rea before the road was raised to meet the bridge that was built. The pubs were boarded up soon after this photo was taken and knocked down by 1915.

5. Deritend Bridge, South and City College corner of Floodgate Street

Now hidden from view, the River Rea was crucial to the emergence of Birmingham as a market and manufacturing town. The crossing point for several important local routes, including those from Stratford, Alcester, Wolverhampton, and Coleshill, it encouraged the lord of the manor to place his market on the slopes leadings up from the ford. Because the valley was prone to flooding, a causeway was built to allow passage; thus, Digbeth is derived from the dyke path. As for Deritend, it was the deer gate end, the end of Birmingham leading into the lord's deer park recalled by Park Street by Selfridge's. Today the River Rea is deeply culverted and mostly hidden from view.



The old Deritend Bridge before it was demolished in 1935.

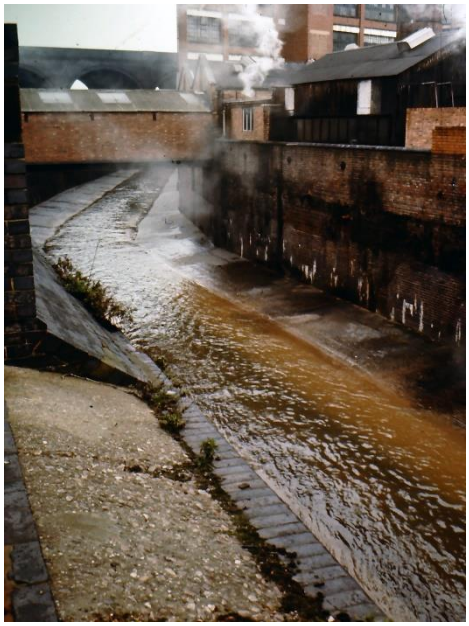
After President John F. Kennedy's assassination in 1963, Birmingham's Irish community paid for a memorial emphasising his attempts to integrate Black and white communities. Unveiled in 1968, its original location was by St Chad's Roman Catholic Cathedral as Because of redevelopment, a of the Memorial was moved to the corner of Floodgate Street as it was close to the former Irish Centre.

6. Turn into Floodgate Street

Floodgate Street was in one of Birmingham's poorest neighbourhoods, where the infant mortality rate was horrendous and where the city's first Infant Welfare Centre was opened in 1907. The local mothers battled daily against ill health and poverty. They were the real backstreet heroes not the peaky blinders. This photo of some of them outside the Infant Welfare Centre was taken just before the First World War. Notice how many of the women are wearing men's' flat caps. They were held in place by hat pins.

The left side of Floodgate Street is dominated by the former works of W. J. Wild, washer makers, a company founded in 1919. It expanded greatly in the later 1930s, when this photo was taken, knocking down back-to back houses and other old premises and replacing them with modern art-deco influenced factories.

7. Cross the River Rea via the bridge on the right of Floodgate Street under the railway bridge and turn right into Gibb Street to High Street Deritend



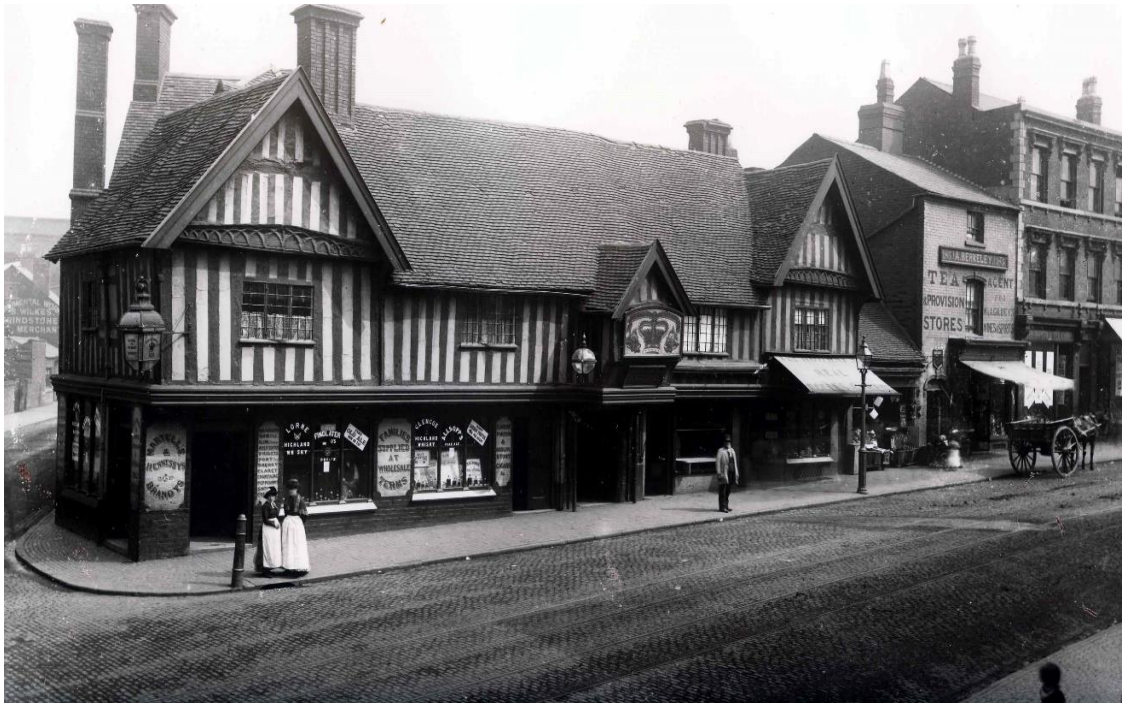
The bridge over the River Rea gives a rare view of it flowing between Digbeth and Deritend. Rising in the Waseley Hills, the Rea joins the River Tame at Nechells, close to Spaghetti Junction.

This crossing also highlights the magnificence of the Bordesley Viaduct. Built entirely of brickwork, it's 2900 feet in length with a maximum height of 70 feet passing over the Rea and has 60 main arches of an average span of 37 feet.

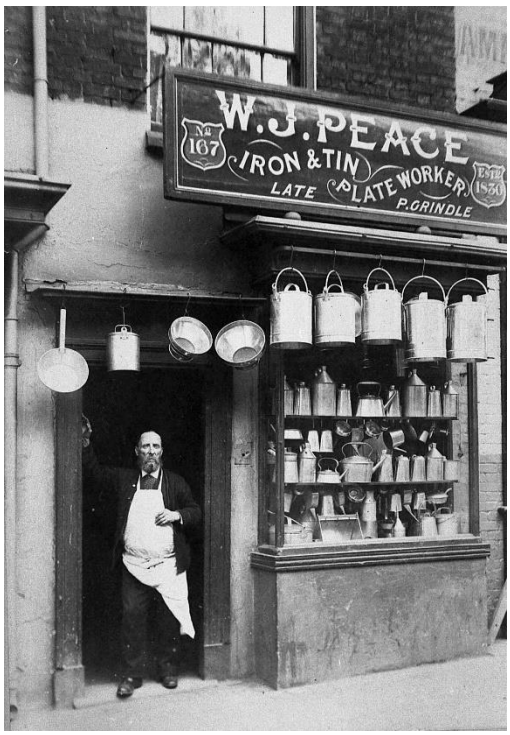
Gibb Street runs to High Street Deritend through the Custard Factory complex. Now a centre for creative businesses, the main building on the right was originally the Devonshire Works of Bird's Custard. Developed from 1887 and with an impressive frontage from 1902, it provided clean and regular work for many young women locally. In this photo from the late 1950s, the Bird's Custard Factory is the large building on the right and on the bend, and in front is the Lloyds Bank opened in 1874. Gibb Street runs between them. By now the opposite side of High Street Deritend had been completely cleared to allow for a final phase of road widening.

8. The Old Crown, corner of Heath Mill Lane

Built in the late 1400s as a guild hall, schoolroom, and priest's house attached to the nearby Church of St John, the Grade II* listed Old Crown has been a pub since the seventeenth century. The oldest building locally, in about 1538 it was noted as a mansion house of timber by John Leland in the first description we have of Birmingham. He described Deritend as a street as pretty that he'd ever entered in which dwelled smiths and cutlers, whilst Birmingham was a good market town with many smiths making all manner of cutting tools, lorimers making bits for horses, and a great many nailors. Its beauty was one street (Digbeth) going up the slope from the river.



A photograph of the 'Old Crown' from about the 1880s. On the left in Heath Mill Lane is the Ornamental Works of Solomon Wilkes, grindstone merchant and stone mason. This site is now part of the Custard Factory complex.



S. J. Peace tinplate and iron worker at 167 High Street Deritend in the early 20th century, further along from the Old Crown. Later renumbered 180, the building still stands in the block of shops between the Old Crown and the car park. His business was founded in 1830 and was typical of the small workshops that abounded in Deritend and Digbeth from the later Middle Ages onwards.

9. Court 34 name plate, 175 High Street Deritend. ,

Birmingham's poor lived in almost 44,000 back-to-backs, small two bedroomed terraced houses with one room downstairs which shared a back wall with a house in a terrace behind. Many were hidden away in numbered courtyards, approached from the street through entries, and in which were communal miskins (dustbins), lavatories, and standpipes.

This is the last known court plate in Birmingham at 175, High Street Deritend. It's the last building in the row after the Old Crown and before the car park and is above the boarded-up entry.

Women in a yard of back-to backs in Digbeth/Deritend, overshadowed by the Bordesley Viaduct. Despite the beliefs of many ignorant middle-class people, women like these strove to keep clean despite the insanitary living conditions, the industrial pollution, and having to share an outside cold water tap in the yard. Notice the lines of clean washing, the broom, and the handmade net on the windows – symbols of the pride of these women.

10.Digbeth Court & Back to the Rainbow

Numbers 164 High Street Deritend and 163 High Street Bordesley, now called Digbeth Court, were built in the 1850s as shops with residential accommodation above that was accessed by a separate doorway off the street. A series of workshops of varying dates of building were attached to the rear. One hundred years later, much of the south sides of High Street Deritend and High Street Bordesley were cleared for road widening as shown in this photo. The ground floor of 163 was then Deritend Post Office and to the right is the Rainbow.