

MARK STEEL'S

IN

**One
Man's
Tour of
Modern
Britain**

TOWN



Mark Steel's

In Town

FOURTH ESTATE • *London*

COPYRIGHT

First published in Great Britain in 2011 by Fourth Estate
An imprint of HarperCollins*Publishers*
1 London Bridge Street
London SE1 9GF
www.4thestate.co.uk

The right of Mark Steel to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted by him in accordance with the Copyright, Design and Patents Act 1988

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

IN TOWN. Copyright © Mark Steel 2011.

All rights reserved under International and Pan-American Copyright Conventions. By payment of the required fees, you have been granted the nonexclusive, nontransferable right to access and read the text of this e-book on-screen. No part of this text may be reproduced, transmitted, downloaded, decompiled, reverse-engineered, or stored in or introduced into any information storage and retrieval system, in any form or by any means, whether electronic or mechanical, now known or hereinafter invented, without the express written permission of HarperCollins e-books.

HarperCollins*Publishers* has made every reasonable effort to ensure that any picture content and written content in this ebook has been included or removed in accordance with the contractual and technological constraints in operation at the time of publication.

Source ISBN: 9780007412426
Ebook Edition © SEPTEMBER 2011 ISBN: 9780007412433
Version: 2015-01-21

DEDICATION

*This book is dedicated to all the people
who've lived in history, in towns or other places,
without whom it would not have been possible.*

Contents

[Cover](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Introduction](#)

[Penzance](#)

[New Towns: Basingstoke, Crawley, Milton Keynes](#)

[Birmingham](#)

[Didcot, Oxford](#)

[Wilmslow](#)

[Wigan](#)

[Horwich](#)

[London](#)

[Outer London](#)

[Hereford](#)

[Norwich](#)

[Boston](#)

[Surrey](#)

[Merthyr Tydfil](#)

[Edinburgh](#)

[Orkney](#)

[Dumfries](#)

[Andersonstown](#)

[Colchester](#)

[Exeter](#)

[Portland](#)

[Motorways](#)

[Yorkshire](#)

[Nottingham](#)

[Coventry](#)

[Walsall](#)

[Lewes](#)

[Gateshead](#)

[Kent](#)

[Bristol](#)

[Conclusion](#)

[Bibliography](#)

[Acknowledgements](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Also by the Author](#)

[About the Publisher](#)

INTRODUCTION

What's the point in going anywhere if the place you go to is the same as the one you left? Who'd bother going on a holiday that was advertised as: 'Visit the magic of the Seychelles, it's IDENTICAL to your own house.'

Imagine if in Tunisia, instead of the background of the call to prayers, the mosques played Magic FM. Or if Paris didn't have that slightly exotic drainy smell, because EU regulations had compelled the place to be cleaned with Jif.

Once, in the New York subway, a huge woman barged into me and yelled, 'Hey, out my way asshole!' And it was marvellous, because that's what's *supposed* to happen in New York. It was as exciting as when I was nineteen and went to Amsterdam and bought a lump of dope off a man in a woolly hat but it turned out to be mud.

After taking the trouble to go to the Lake District you want it to smell of cow pats, and at Blackpool you want everything to look as if it should be in a Carry On film.

Having toured Britain plenty of times, usually to talk to an audience for the evening, I find these local quirks compelling. For example, on the way to Skipton, in North Yorkshire, I noticed a road sign to a town called Keighley. Later, during the show, I asked the audience, 'Is Keighley your rival town?' And the room went chillingly quiet, until one woman called out with understated menace, 'Keighley – is a sink of evil.'

There was something delightful about this, because it was an expression of specifically Skipton malevolence.

Similarly, I went to Merthyr Tydfil, a blighted town at the top of the Rhondda Valley that's been shut down bit by bit. After the show the manager of the theatre told me, 'People often come in and ask what time a performance is starting, so I'll tell them, "It starts at seven-thirty," and they'll say, "Oh, that's a pity. I won't be able to come to that, as I'll be drunk by then."'

And somehow there was a warmth to hearing that, because it was a story of distinctly *Merthyr* despair.

Before appearing in Stockton-on-Tees, in the North-East, I was sent a message on Twitter by a local resident that said: 'This town is where Joseph Walker invented the safety match in 1834. Before that, when we wanted to set fire to upturned stolen cars we had to rub two sticks together.'

And before my visit to Cambridge, someone sent me a message about the town saying, 'This place is Hogwarts for wankers.' It was a cosy thought, because it could only apply to Cambridge, and ought to be the slogan on the masthead of the local paper.

The elements of a town that make it unique are what make it worth visiting. But also, any expression of local interest or eccentricity is becoming a yell of defiance.

Because the aim of society now seems to be to make every city centre so depressingly identical that if our town planners were put in charge of Athens, they'd

knock down the Parthenon and replace it with a shopping mall called 'The Acropolis Centre', with an announcement that there was much excitement, as the new centre would have a River Island and a Nando's.

You could be dropped blindfolded into a city centre you'd never been to before, and guess correctly that there'd be a Clinton Cards just there, then a Vodafone, Carphone Warehouse, Boots, Specsavers and Next just there, with the anti-vivisection stall there, and on a Saturday you'd hear a 'pheep' and know the Peruvians were about to start on the pan pipes just there, and within the hour they'd have pheeped their way through 'Mull of Kintyre' and 'I Just Called to Say I Love You' and 'Ob-la-di Ob-la-fucking-da', as I believe it's now officially called.

With equal confidence you could predict that just out of town there'd be a concrete expanse containing a giant Tesco, PC World, Majestic Wine Warehouse, Comet, Dreams, and an unfathomable junction with traffic lights facing in all directions that makes no difference anyway, as every turning forces you into the car park at Iceland and there seems to be no way of escaping except by reversing through the checkout at Carpet Right.

Somewhere in this world there must be someone who is immensely proud of having invented the multi-storey car park, which is often the introduction to a new town, as you sink into the trance that allows you to endure the shuffle through traffic towards this disturbing dungeon, where you descend and descend through a chilling gloom that would make Richard Dawkins say, 'Bollocks to that, I'm sure there are ghosts down here,' to level 5, where you think you spot a space but it turns out to be an illusion created by a snugly placed Fiat Uno, past levels 5a and 5b, so you've now forgotten what natural sunlight could ever be, like future generations forced to live in a bunker following a nuclear war, until you find a gap by a leaking pipe that leads to a line of green slime. At which point you're unlikely to take a deep breath, like a nineteenth-century traveller, and exclaim, 'Aha, and this is Taunton.'

Later you'll have to queue at the one paypoint that hasn't got a sheet of paper with a wonky 'Out of order' sign Sellotaped to it, which will be two floors away and up some steps that are so grimy that if you meet someone coming the other way it seems impolite not to murder them.

It's not the ugliness of modern towns, in a Prince Charles sense, that makes them so dispiriting; it's the soullessness. You know they've been plonked there as a result of some regional coordinating business advisory committee that's copied the model of what's been built in 3,000 other towns.

It's as if they're part of a new world, of call centres and chain pubs and clubs, in which the faceless corporation dictates how a town looks and lives and even, with its scripts for the staff of restaurants and call centres, speaks.

So the shops, the customs, the traditions and accents, the hip-hop lyrics, the football chants, the absurd rivalries that apply to one area are preserved almost as an act of rebellion, in place because the people who live with them have kept them going, and not because they've been placed there following a board meeting in Basingstoke.

This book is about some of those glorious human differences that comprise the heart of each town. It follows a series I made for BBC radio. Sometimes I'm asked how I select the towns to write about, but I'm not sure of the answer. I did feel a twinge of power when a butcher told me he'd gone to Skipton with his wife for a

weekend after hearing one of the shows – for a moment I knew how Nigella Lawson must feel when she mentions that she sometimes has a gherkin with cheese on toast, and by ten o'clock the next morning some idiot's bought the world's supply of gherkins.

But as far as I'm aware I choose them fairly randomly, because the main point is that you can look at anywhere at all, and within a day discover enough history, grubbiness, madness and inspiration to realise that it is a distinct and unique cauldron of humanity.

For example, one drizzly dark February afternoon as I came out of the station at Scunthorpe, I got in a minicab, and the driver didn't even look at me, but kept staring straight ahead as he said, 'I don't know what you've come here for, it's a fucking shithole.'

And that's made me remember Scunthorpe ever since.

Penzance

In a spirit of rebellion, I'll start at the end.

If you go to Penzance by train, you will get fooled, even if you've done it before. Less than three hours after leaving you get to Plymouth, and think, 'Oh, we're nearly there. I thought it took six hours to Penzance as that's what it said at the station and it's what the announcer said but it can't take that long because we've gone 230 miles and there's less than sixty left, so I'll start collecting my things together.'

Then the train squeaks across the River Tamar into Cornwall and puffs to Liskeard at the speed of a family of refugees trudging through Somalia, stops at Bodmin and St Austell and places with no discernible buildings so the only reason to get off would be to study the station platform or the nearby flora and fauna, then the buffet bar shuts and the squeaks of the wheels get louder and you expect the next announcement to inform you that at Truro the train will be replaced by a mule and a man in a poncho chewing tobacco who mutters, 'Head two days along the pass to Redruth and follow the track known as Devil's Dump to Certain Death Passage, then take the right fork past Camborne.'

Penzance station is the end. It's not like other terminals, where there's a branch line to somewhere: the train rolls exhausted into a huge shed and stops in front of a wall. And the town feels as if it's at the end, with a slight disregard even for the rest of Cornwall for making such a half-hearted effort at being west, an attitude of 'Plymouth? That's practically Japan.' I can only imagine the contempt they have for Polperro, in eastern Cornwall, which boasts on its tourist website: 'Polperro is easily accessible from everywhere in the world.' There isn't even a proper road into Polperro, so you need a couple of flights, a hovercraft and three days in a canoe to get there from the next village. So it seems unfair that a Bedouin tribesman in the middle of the desert might see this website and think, 'At last, a holiday destination we can get to.'

There's a sense that Penzance likes its isolation. Because it doesn't feel as if it's dependent on tourism, it's a proper seaside town. There's no pedalo hire and crazy golf, it carries on with its fishing and its High Street with charity shops and pubs that seem dark even in August, but then you look up and there are palm trees and a sunset over the Atlantic.

There's even an endearing disdain for tourists, as expressed in the pamphlet *How to be Proper Cornish*, that tells us for example, 'Though fish do form a large part of a Cornish man's diet, not all fish is fit to be put on the table. Some, such as scad and ling, is only fit for the cat. Or for tourists.'

I caught a similar attitude when I hired a pushbike to cycle to the very very end, Land's End itself, and the man in the shop answered my request with a grunt, but one that was in a Cornish accent, which was impressive and rude at the same time, as if he'd picked up a handful of balls and juggled with them so they spelt 'Fuck off'. Eventually he fetched the rustiest, clankiest bike in the shop, almost threw it at me and said, 'There you are – you know how to use it, do you?' The bike and I clattered across

the hills the ten miles to Land's End, and it was thrilling, this sense of getting right to the far end of the country, especially as it was windy and thick with a deep sweet aroma of compost, and then everything is called the Last of its kind, so there's a Last Inn and a Last Post Office and probably a Last Nail Salon and a Last Branch of Social Services, and as I descended through the village of Sennen and even past that I anticipated the absolute end, where there'd be nothing but a blustery cliff and I'd stand on a rock for a poignant moment, but instead I turned a corner into the Land's End Experience, where there's a tiny shopping mall with a sweet shop, a clothes shop, a cinema and a permanent *Doctor Who* exhibition.

Why? Who thought this would attract people to Land's End? There's only one reason for going to Land's End, which is that it's at the end of the land. That's its unique selling point, whereas if you try to get people there for any other reason, the fact that it's so far tends to work against it. For example if you lived in Leicester and fancied looking at a replica Cyberman before buying a shirt and some butterscotch, you still wouldn't go to this shopping mall, because it's at Land's Fucking End.

I felt cheated, as Captain Scott would have if he'd arrived at the South Pole to find a branch of Caffè Nero.

But right at the end was the famous signpost, saying John o'Groats 874 miles, New York 3,147 miles, so I decided I'd take a picture of that. Except that I had a cup of tea, went out to the signpost, and it had gone. There were some moments of panic, the sort you'd have if you were at the Taj Mahal, bent down to tie up your laces then looked up and it had disappeared. Then I noticed a sign saying it's £10 to have your picture taken there, and at half past five the people who take the money lock away the signpost and leave. It's literally locked away, in a metal trunk, and secured in a hut. And that, I contend, makes it the most magnificently mean-spirited tourist attraction in the country.

It's even worse when you consider that at the other end of this expanse of sea is the Statue of Liberty, resplendently marking its territory, and not, as far as I know, above a plaque saying 'Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses – from 9.00 a.m. to 5.30 p.m. sharp when we close.'

In Penzance, however, there's a grudging acceptance that tourists have to be catered for, even if they're frustratingly demanding for locals who just want to get on with their normal lives. So you feel like a six-year-old at half term, pestering your dad for attention while he's trying to work. But the real disdain is reserved for those who rent a cottage in the summer and convince themselves it's so magical and far away from urban din and the sunset's so divine that they move down. Then a few months later they're screaming, 'I can't believe there's nowhere to get stuffed olives after nine at night. And the estate agents never mentioned it would get dark this early in January. Take me home!'

For many people, living in the area has a rugged romance, but it flows from a shared sense of struggle, of sticking it out despite the lowest incomes in Britain, the remoteness, the feeling that no one in the big cities is bothered about their problems, such as the dramatic collapse of the fishing industry. One expression of this disgruntlement is how some of the ways of the rest of the country haven't quite made it down there. I was shown round one of the big pubs by a proud landlord, who explained to me the origins of the ship's wheel propped against one wall, and his

paintings of Nelson, and then in one bar he said, ‘Women weren’t allowed in this room until about twenty-five year ago – before all this PC shit.’

It’s quite endearing, this unexpected sense of what’s normal. On my first trip to Penzance I heard a couple of people make remarks about the snotty ways of St Ives, a town a few miles to the north. So when I was on stage I asked the audience if there was a general feeling that St Ives was posh, and a woman called out, ‘It’s posh all right – they’ve got a dentist.’ As a definition of posh that is unsurpassable, and leaves you assuming that anyone with an infected tooth in Penzance ties a rope round it, with the other end tethered to the Isles of Scilly ferry so that as it sails off it yanks the bastard out.

It takes a couple of days in Penzance to become aware that almost everything is slightly out of sync with the rest of Britain. There’s a celebrated pub, called the Admiral Benbow, with a statue of a smuggler lying on the roof, in memory of an early-eighteenth-century shoot-out with a customs official. During a meal in this pub, the landlord came up to a group of four of us and said there was live music upstairs, and we’d be fools to miss it as they were astounding musicians. So we went up, and there were twelve people sat in a circle, each taking turns to sing a Cornish song, except for a man in his fifties with spiky blond hair, nose studs and implausibly red cheeks like a sunburned Johnny Rotten who recited a poem about a man who divorced his wife because he didn’t like her pasties.

Then a woman with no teeth at all sang a song about a Cornish woman with twelve sons, all of whom became soldiers, and in each verse another one got killed until there were none left. Then her friend sang a song about a ship setting off with a hundred men on board, and you knew those poor fuckers would be lucky to make it to the chorus. As expected, every one of them was drowned, though I’d been hoping for a twist in which they all came back with sacks full of fish, but were eaten by a runaway leopard. Then they turned to me. ‘What song do you have for us, dear?’ they asked, and I thought, ‘What sort of fishing disaster song do I know? I’m from London.’ Unless I made one up that went, ‘In nineteen hundred and ninety-six old Dave went out in the rain, to buy some cod in parsley sauce but was never seen again.’

‘So the moment has arrived that I’ve been dreading,’ I said, and considered knocking out a version of Eminem’s ‘The Real Slim Shady’ or ‘The Wheels on the Bus go Round and Round’, but instead we all said we were a bit tired and left, so instead they drew a raffle for a packet of biscuits. Funnily enough, a similar thing happened when I went to see the Wu-Tang Clan.

It isn’t just a prejudice, this sense of being somewhere that doesn’t fit in. Cornwall has a tradition of wanting to keep its distance. The most strident expression of that sentiment comes from Mebyon Kernow, the Cornish nationalist party, which has several councillors. It was founded in 1951, and by 1964 it had five separate branches. Ask someone to guess where those branches were, and see how long it is before they get the correct answer: Penzance, Padstow, Redruth, Truro and Nigeria.

For a while there was a militant wing of the Cornish movement, called An Gof. According to the official history of Mebyon Kernow, ‘They claimed responsibility for a blaze at a Penzance hairdresser’s, attacked in mistake for the Bristol and West Building Society.’

You might think that after a mishap like that they’d keep quiet and hope the police

assumed it was revenge for a dodgy perm, but they thought the cause of Cornish nationalism would be advanced if they claimed responsibility, although it's hard to think of any other combination of shops it would be more difficult to mix up when trying to burn one of them down: not a scrap metal yard for a branch of World of Leather, or a vegan café for a place that changes tyres.

But these movements are marginal to the vague but widespread sense that Cornwall isn't entirely Britain. It has its own flag, a little white cross and the rest entirely black, as if it was designed by a fourteen-year-old boy who sits in his room all day listening to My Chemical Romance. It has a patron saint, called St Piran, and an annual holiday on which most towns put on a procession.

This semi-dislocation from the rest of Britain is probably a result of Cornwall remaining Celtic while the rest of England was occupied by the Romans. So at unexpected moments as you turn a corner you'll find an enigmatic stone monument or Celtic cross poking lopsidedly from the edge of a field, whereas anywhere else in England the Romans would have torn it down and replaced it with an aqueduct.

One consequence of this is that there remained a separate Cornish language. Penzance was the last area where it was the first language, up until the sixteenth century.

By the seventeenth century Cornish had mostly died out. But since the 1930s there's been a movement to revive it, and now about two hundred people speak it. I got a book called *Teach Yourself Cornish* from the Penzance library, and the librarian said, 'Would you like book two as well?' which seemed a bit optimistic. Anyway, even a militant Cornishman only needs a few essential phrases, like 'Ogh! Ni re settyas an gempenoryon-gols gans tan dre wall,' which translates as, 'Oh no, we've set the hair-dressers on fire by mistake.'

Cornish is a Gaelic language, similar to Welsh and Irish and Breton, and now there's an English-Cornish dictionary, a novel's been written in Cornish, and there's a weekly Cornish radio show, which is impressive for two hundred people. I imagine the radio show must have dialogue such as:

'And now our mystery voice competition: "Myttin da."'

'Is it Stan from the Cornish class again?'

'Yes, you've won £4.'

To make it more complicated, a row broke out because some people wanted to speak the old historic Cornish, which I'm sure was lovely but which died out three hundred years ago. Not only would it have no words for Twitter or Crunchy Nut Corn Flakes, it would only have words for things that were around before 1760, so the lessons must go: 'Repeat after me: "Yth esov vy ow merwel dres an pla" – I'm dying of the plague.'

So some people added modern words, and the two factions split apart, then someone tried to solve the problem by merging the two Cornish languages and calling the result 'Unified Cornish'. This was rejected as unspeakable heresy by both the other sides.

Maybe more pertinently, as you leave the railway station there's a large stone sign on which 'Welcome to Penzance' is inscribed in Cornish, and while few people speak the language, they all know there is one, and that it makes them just a bit different. This sense of slight difference seems to have been around for a while. For example,

Cornwall's early trade unions were part socialist and part Cornish nationalist. So according to the book on Mebyon Kernow by Bernard Deacon, in 1847 the quarrymen went on demonstrations carrying the red flag, but with a pasty stuck on the end of each flagpole. (Perhaps their anthem went 'The workers' flag is highly priced, with onions, beef and carrots diced.')

The pasty is a symbol of Cornish pride, to the extent that the Cornish rugby team still begins each game by booting a symbolic inflated pasty through the posts.

But recently the town has become divided over a modern issue. In 2009 the government offered money for a new terminal for the Scilly ferry. Some people said it would destroy the town, especially the harbour, so they set up a group called 'Friends of Penzance Harbour'. In opposition, those in favour of the new terminal set up 'True Friends of Penzance Harbour'. Presumably the first lot were tempted to retaliate with 'Passionate Lovers of the Harbour Who Plan to MARRY the Harbour', to which the other lot would come back with 'Mistresses of the Harbour Who the Harbour Turns to for Comfort and Dirty Filthy Sex Between the Boats Because You Can't Give it What it NEEDS'.

Each group had demonstrations and Facebook pages and protest songs on YouTube, and wrote millions of furious letters, and there were hundreds of websites, and then the local MP proposed a compromise called Option PZ that was hated by both groups. If you think this is all an exaggeration, here's an extract from a letter written to the local paper by a councillor who supported the new terminal: 'The claim that the vast majority have opposed option A reminds me of those extraordinary claims by Soviet and Nazi propagandists. It is a colossal untruth, in the tradition of Dr Joseph Goebbels.'

Exactly. Goebbels always began his speeches: 'Jews and Communists are plotting to prevent the building of terminals so that Aryans are left stranded, unable to dock.' Equally measured from the other side was this: 'John the Baptist, you will remember, foretold the coming of Christ. He spoke fearlessly against the politically powerful of the time and lost his head in the process. Some things in life must be spoken against and resisted. The council's tawdry decision to desecrate the harbour wall is one of them.'

It seems that someone in that council must have been cackling, 'Bring me the head of the designer of the Friends of Penzance Harbour Facebook page.' Council meetings here must be fantastic. In most areas they just go, 'With regard to the proposed bus shelter, a document is to be submitted,' but in Penzance it's, 'I suppose next you'll be invading Poland,' and 'It's people like me who saw Christ was coming.'

As an outsider you have to wonder whether this is the best use of everyone's campaigning resources, and if they put that energy into other issues, they might at least get themselves a dentist.

But maybe it's right that this gloriously overblown internal row should be about an issue that seems minor to anyone outside. This is a town in which the High Street chain stores like Boots and Clinton Cards are punctuated by a shop that sells juggling sticks and playing cards, and in which there's a building, between a pub and a second-hand bookshop, that for no apparent reason is designed like an Egyptian palace, and by the sea is an oval art-deco outdoor swimming pool that had a cannon built into one side to fire at German ships during the war.

So Penzance is the ideal place to do something off-centre, like setting up a pagan snooker club or a nudist butterfly-collecting society. It's as if you can do whatever you fancy, because the authorities will say, 'They can't do *that*. Oh, bloody hell, I'm not going all the way down there, let them do what they bloody well want.'

New Towns: Basingstoke, Crawley, Milton Keynes

The proof that every town retains a soul, no matter how concrete, corporate, shopping-malled, retail-parked and Tescoed it becomes, is in Basingstoke. Because Basingstoke is a new town, plonked somewhere in the south, though no one seems exactly sure where to say it is, even if they live there. It's renowned as the classic modern commuter town, strangled by regional headquarters for insurance companies and hundreds and hundreds of roundabouts, some of which you can only drive round and then straight on, so you wonder whether the roads were laid by a gang of workmen with an obsessive compulsive disorder, who if they go more than an hour without building a roundabout start rocking backward and forward and making deep groaning noises.

Amongst the organisations who've established their head offices there are the AA, which might be because it's the place they're most often called out to, where their mechanics arrive at the broken-down vehicle and say, 'Ah, I see what's happened. You've got so frustrated with the roundabouts you've abandoned the car and set fire to it.'

The centre of Basingstoke is the Festival Shopping Mall. As you leave the train station, it seems there's nowhere to go except be poured through the Festival Mall's automatic doors, into a city of New Look, H&M and Monsoon units in which you try to keep moving forward in the belief that eventually you must come out into open Basingstoke. After a while it occurs to you that perhaps this *is* open Basingstoke, and that when you finally reach the other side you'll pass one last W.H. Smith and emerge into countryside and past a sign that says 'Thank you for visiting Basingstoke'.

Its image isn't helped by the fact that on Wikipedia, under 'Cultural Impact', it says: 'An episode of *Top Gear* was filmed there in 2008.'

So I was surprised to find a book called *Basingstoke and its Contribution to World Culture*. I thought, 'Maybe there's some stuff I've missed, like Jimi Hendrix started there, singing, "There's got to be some way outta here, but every roundabout takes me to another fucking one".' Or Jackson Pollock's most famous painting was called *If You can Make Your Way Through Basingstoke's One-Way System, Joining these Red Dots Should be a Piece of Piss*.

The book starts off on a positive note, telling us: 'Basingstoke is one of the most derided towns in England. Its reputation is as an over-developed eyesore of numbing dullness. Its very name lends itself to mockery. Basingjoke, Boringstoke and the ironic Amazingstoke are used by its own residents, not always with affection.'

But if you look into the town's past it becomes clear that this isn't just a new town built by numbers to fill up a bit of Hampshire. Because, far from being solely a modern butt of jokes, the place has been loathed for centuries. The founder of Methodism, John Wesley, went there in 1759 and wrote afterwards, 'The inhabitants are like wild beasts, slow of heart and dull of understanding.'

'But surely,' you must be thinking, 'it was more exciting in 1669.' Well, the Grand

Duke of Tuscany went there that year, and his valet wrote an account of the visit: ‘His Highness, arriving betimes at Basingstoke, set out to explore it on foot, but it seemed so wretched it hardly repaid the effort of walking a few paces.’

‘All right,’ you’ll say, ‘but what about 1882?’ Which is a fair point, except that in 1882 an article about Basingstoke in *The Times* said: ‘About midway between London and Salisbury is a benighted little town inhabited chiefly by a race of barbarians.’

This is hugely encouraging for the town, because it means it has a past, a human touch beyond the everlasting Festival Centre and office blocks with eerily silent reception areas. To be insulted with such venom it must have been up to something interesting.

Basingstoke used to be a market town, and its current residents seem aware of this. They refer to a huge and seemingly pointless wall that sits in the centre as ‘the Great Wall of Basingstoke’, and the popular local website ‘It’s Basingstoke not Boringstoke’ describes it as a ‘great mass of concrete poured over the remains of the old market town’.

Also, as *Basingstoke and its Contribution to World Culture* points out, the town was the home of Thomas Burberry, a Victorian draper who established the line of clothes that bear his name, and who apparently invented the raincoat. It could be argued that Charles Mackintosh’s coat, which came earlier, was the first raincoat, but *Basingstoke and its Contribution to World Culture* points out: ‘But these sticky smelly easily punctured garments were a crude concept compared to Burberry’s silky gabardine.’ I’ve no idea who is right here, but it’s joyful to see the town so stropky over the issue, like when a quiet old aunty unexpectedly gets angry about an incident on a bus in 1957.

So there’s clearly a pride in the town’s past. One of Basingstoke’s heroes, who seems to be known by the under-thirties as well as the older residents, is John Arlott the cricket commentator. Arlott was extraordinary, partly because he spoke in a series of six- or seven-word sections followed by a short pause, as if everything he said was a poem, and all in a gentle, lyrical Basingstoke lilt, with an underlying purr, as if while he was speaking he was pushing a slightly broken old lawnmower.

He’d quietly take the piss out of the other commentators. After one of them told listeners that across the ground he could see the sun setting in the west, when Arlott came on he said slowly, ‘You can rest assured that if the sun starts to set in the east I’ll be the first to let you know.’

Arlott was a committed anti-racist, and was instrumental in inviting Basil D’Oliveira, a ‘Cape Coloured’ cricketer who was barred from playing professionally in his native South Africa, to play in England. Arlott called his autobiography *Basingstoke Boy*, and his portrait is on every brochure or website that publicises the town.

There’s one time in Basingstoke’s history when I wish he’d been there, because the town now scorned as a symbol of suburban sleepiness was once known as irredeemably violent. One report described how ‘In Basingstoke election days are occasions for joyous rioting. And even cricket matches are tediously prone to ending in violent disorder.’

You can almost hear Arlott saying, ‘And there goes Fat Jimmy coming round the wicket – with a Stanley knife – while a crowd on the boundary – chant, “Who are yer,

who are yer” – and one wonders if they don’t know who their adversaries are – why it is they’re kicking them with considerable vigour – in an area not distant from the testicles.’

This history, and the way it’s seeped into the culture of the modern town, suggests that the old Basingstoke hasn’t been entirely destroyed by the new, despite the impact of the 1944 Greater London Plan, which aimed to stop London becoming any bigger by building a series of new towns and expanding others, such as Basingstoke.

Houses were built for 40,000 people to move there, which must have seemed disruptive if you were already there, but might have created less tension had hundreds of people not been moved out of their homes to make way for new estates and roundabouts. Dozens of tradesmen were evicted so their workshops could be demolished and replaced by a new shopping centre. One man who felt aggrieved was Alfie Cole, who ran a stables on the Basing Road. In 1966 he drove a pony and trap to Downing Street to hand in a petition to the Prime Minister, Harold Wilson, and as Alfie put it, ‘dumping lorryloads of topsoil at strategic parts of the town during the morning rush hour’ as he went.

Alfie seems almost as revered in the town as John Arlott, and when I mentioned him in a show at the theatre there was almost complete recognition. The majority of people who live in Basingstoke now must have come there as a result of the expansion after the sixties, yet it appears that most of today’s residents identify with the town as a whole, including its figures from before they were there, and approve of the campaigns to prevent the changes that enabled them to come.

Even in a town the citizens themselves refer to as Boringstoke, they want to feel that its traditions and quirks belong to them. It’s *their* boring town. For example, there’s a blue statue in Wote Street of a mother with a child, that everyone calls ‘Wote Street Willy’. Even a travel website describes it by saying: ‘At 7 tonnes it’s the largest phallic statue in Britain.’

Almost the whole of Basingstoke seems aware that the Forum office block in the town is the tallest building on a line between London and New York, which is indeed impressive, although nearly all of that line goes over the Atlantic Ocean, on which there aren’t many skyscrapers to offer much competition.

The wall, the roundabouts and the jokey image are what make the people of Basingstoke half-proud, rather than the joys of how easy it is to commute to London, or the variety of identical chain stores that have been attracted to the Festival Shopping Mall.

Similarly, Crawley in Sussex, about halfway between London and Brighton, was designated a new town in the 1946 New Towns Act, and built to house 50,000 people. Crawley is mostly a suburb of Gatwick Airport, and it has a feel of earthiness, as if while there are the smug people who moved from London to Brighton, and who boast of how the sea air is marvellous for the kids, Crawley is made up of people who thought of doing that, but got halfway and said, ‘Fuck it, I’m knackered, let’s stay here.’

And it keeps growing, the employment opportunities it offers always attracting newcomers. But the areas within the town retain their quaint names that could easily

fool people. There's Pease Pottage and Three Bridges, whose residents must think, 'It's lovely round here, quiet and peaceful. The only noise you ever get is from a major international airport.'

At one point during a show in Crawley I suggested that they must get used to timing conversations to fit in the moments between long-haul flights to Chicago. They all looked utterly bemused, as if to say, 'Is there an airport? Near here? Are you sure? We've never noticed it.' But it turned out I was the one misinformed, because the flightpaths are organised so that no planes fly over the town.

The airport is simply a huge workplace that dominates Crawley, making it like a giant modern pit village. And that makes it cohesive, for example with a Labour Party that's as established as that in any old industrial town, although it's only had fifty years to go through the cycle of being formed with enthusiasm, getting a Member of Parliament elected and then collapsing in a cloud of disillusionment.

The airport should make people across Crawley feel a sense of camaraderie. For example, its presence means that no buildings in the town are allowed to be more than four storeys high. The Hawth Theatre boasts that it's the tallest structure in town, so if al Qaeda choose to attack Crawley, it's the theatre they'll go for.

And maybe the fact that so many people are connected to one workplace has enabled a local football team to become implanted as part of the culture, in a way that's taken place in few British towns since the 1920s, by which time the bases of most football clubs had become cemented. Crawley Town FC was helped along the way by the wealth of a character of the sort who, to stay legal, newspapers refer to as 'colourful', and who was suspended from football for corruption at his previous club in Boston. To get a sense of life at Crawley Town, here's a report by a visiting fan of their match with Bath City: 'Their manager, a rather large Steve Evans, spent the whole match pacing up and down the touchline, shouting abuse at the Bath players, the referee and everything else that holds existence on the planet. At half time an announcement was made that went, "There's an old man that lives behind the stadium and has made a complaint. He says there's too much noise and we need to quieten down. So let's make the bastard even more annoyed and make some noise."'

Now, the theory that all towns, however corporatised, retain an underlying soul, is stretched to the limit in Milton Keynes. There can be few places that try so hard to live up to their image. The first sign that something's not healthy comes as you drift through the Buckinghamshire countryside towards the town, and pass the first roundabout, which has a grid number. So a sign will tell you this is H4 or V5 roundabout, as if you're a Lilliputian moving through a giant game of Battleships.

What's more disconcerting is that, apart from these grid numbers, the roundabouts all look identical. The view in every direction from each of them is of a highway with trees perfectly spaced on each side, and a giant rectangular warehouse behind the trees, so you've no idea if you've been past this bit already or not.

You're entrapped in this grid with no way of working out what direction you're going; although I haven't tested this, I expect the town planners have fixed it so compasses don't work here, they just spin violently the way they're supposed to do if you're in the Bermuda Triangle.

The most sinister warehouse belongs to River Island. It stretches the whole length of one grid section, a shiny oblong block with no apparent entrances, no bobbles or chimneys or bits sticking out, just a perfect smooth geometrical structure that's far too big for River bloody Island. If all the clothes in all the world's River Island stores were put in a pile, they would barely fill one corner of this complex, and if it emerges one day that it's full of long corridors and solid steel doors that open only after a biometric sensor scans your iris and a sugary automated voice with an American accent says, 'Identity confirmed – you may proceed to the excavation section,' and where an army of ex-Death Row inmates are building a tunnel to China in preparation for an invasion, I shan't be entirely surprised.

With no churches or pubs or graffiti or bridges or landmarks to plot your position you find yourself not only lost, as you can be in any town, but unsure where you are in relation to the rest of the world, as if you were in a rowing boat in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. The grid numbers only make it more confusing, as you pull over and try to calculate that if you've just passed H5, and the one before that was V6, then H7 must be to the right, which, as H9 cancels out V3 over 5 divided by x, the angle of the line H2–V8 must be equal to the sum of V1 squared.

Milton Keynes is a town that must have been designed by a mathematician, one of those philosophical ones like Pythagoras who saw numbers as the only part of the universe that embody perfection. Even the one building you can see as you pass through the town on the train is a huge cube comprising hundreds of identical glass squares on all sides that looks like part of a puzzle for super-intelligent giants.

Outside the station all is chillingly symmetrical, with even the lamp posts having spherical tops so the pattern isn't spoilt. I assume there must be bylaws to ensure that this picture is maintained, so that if you're planning to walk down one side of highway H2, you have to get someone to walk down the other side at the same speed, to stop the place becoming lopsided. As an experiment, somebody should try something like leaving a kettle on the pavement to see whether an official would place one on the other side within minutes, maybe having emerged from a pipe that leads to the control room under River Island.

I took my son around Milton Keynes when he was twelve, and he found it bewildering, which I suppose was a good sign. Two years later I told him I was going back there to do a show and he said, 'Oh no, you'll be on stage and someone in the front row will slyly pass you a note that says "Please help us".'

Defenders of the town point out that it's a pleasant environment, with open spaces and lakes and a low crime rate and efficient schools and all sorts of activities, but the qualities advanced as positive aspects are all top-down, as if arranged by a happiness committee. They've been organised by the people who produce brochures that say: 'And if ballooning is your preferred leisure activity, then it's up, up and away with the Milton Keynes Hot Air Ballooning Association. Yes, whether it's double word scores at the Indoor Scrabble Centre on H3 or artificial shark fishing at the hexagonal lake on the corner of V7 and H5, you'll find all your desires are catered for here in Milton Keynes.'

Living there must feel as if you're part of a social experiment, with cameras following you to monitor the effects of issues such as triangular shapes on the heart rate. It was born when a Labour housing minister, Richard Crossman, announced