

FORT DUNLOP (AREA 1)

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When the Dunlop Rubber Co decided to build a new factory, they chose a site between Erdington and Castle Bromwich, where the River Tame meandered over green fields.

They took good advantage of the space, building not only the central stores and offices, which is what we know as Fort Dunlop, but also 4 other factories, each specialising in its own aspect of tyre production.

The site was developed between 1916 and 1920. Its architects, Stott and Gibbings, had cut their teeth on Lancastrian mills and gave us a huge brick building of up to eight storeys with rows of windows. The name Fort Dunlop was put on the tower and an illuminated Dunlop Tyres sign was added late.

At its height the Fort Dunlop site employed over 10,000 people but like much of British industry it declined in the face of overseas competition and had ceased most production by the 1980s, although specialist tyres (motorsport and motorbikes) continued till 2014 and aviation tyres are still produced on site.

The building lay dormant for about 20 years and was used from time to time for warehousing, an occasional performance space, and was the support structure for the world's biggest poster up to that time, advertising the Ford Mondeo.

Urban Splash acquired the building and the surrounding land in 1999 and converted the central core into what was then the largest open plan office space in the country outside of London. The roof was covered by soil and grass, the largest in the UK.

There are 73 companies registered at the wider Fort Dunlop site, which has been redeveloped and is now a business park / industrial estate. The core building is devoted mainly to office and conference use but there are also on-site leisure and recreational facilities, including a gymnasium and a children's nursery.

Fort Dunlop as a landmark

The core building clearly meets Lynch's criteria for landmarks as it is a large physical entity of unique design which provides a memorable clear and simple form (pics 1,2 and 3). The building contrasts with its background and nearby elements: it is higher than anything else

around it. It is of red brick with a deep blue hotel annex (pics 4 and 5) whereas the neighbouring low-rise buildings are mainly of white or neutral tones.

Fort Dunlop is visible from several directions, giving it spatial prominence. This is most true of the views of the building from the M6, as its tower and long side elevation are clearly seen (pic 5). It can be seen from a fair distance both ways along the Fort Parkway but is not dominant until you get close. Visibility from Tyburn Road to the north is not great.

The core building can also be clearly seen above the houses from a few locations on the Bromford estate (pics 6 and 7) but is separated from it by a fearsomely impenetrable edge – the River Tame and railway topped by the M6 and then by Fort Parkway. It can also be spied from the churchyard of St Mary and St Margaret's, Castle Bromwich, over a large traffic island and the elevated M6 (pic 9).

So, Fort Dunlop is unarguably a landmark, but a landmark for whom? ;As it is Instantly recognisable by travellers along the M6, it is perhaps one of the city's best-known landmarks amongst those for whom Birmingham is just somewhere to pass through. For the traveller the Fort gives only basic information for wayfinding – either you are approaching Birmingham or you're leaving it.

The value of Fort Dunlop as a landmark for local people may be questionable as, given its location halfway along Fort Parkway it will not be a key landmark for wayfinding within the city. This seems to be the case with distant landmarks as referred to in Lynch's study of Boston, in which he observes that 'only people unfamiliar with Boston seemed to use them to any great extent in organizing the city'.

Lynch attaches importance to 'historical associations' and 'other meanings' in raising the value of a landmark and this may well be a factor in how people from Birmingham consider Fort Dunlop. At its height the Fort was one of the city's great factories, in the same bracket perhaps as the likes of the Austin and Lucas, a part of the city's great manufacturing heritage. This could be significant for many people but then again many, particularly younger people, might primarily associate 'The Fort' with the nearby retail park (pic 10).

References

K Lynch (1960): The Image of the City

<https://suite.endole.co.uk/explorer/postcode/b24-9fd>
