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1. Chinese pagoda in centre of Holloway Circus

Thomas Gardens, within Holloway Circus is the location of the Chinese Pagoda. Placed centrally, it lines up both south and north on the A38; and east and west with Holloway Head and Smallbrook Ringway. It is as a beacon or gateway feature for all those journeying in their cars and on buses or in taxis at this crossover. It was installed at times when relations between UK and China were improving in 1998.

It is unique and to me it is a landmark. When either eating in one of the many Chinese outlets or a takeaway at home in their flats, people may tend to remember the food than the current politics. It is a symbol of another place. It is also significant for the thousands of students from South Asia, who come to study and possibly to live here, of their homeland, as it may be to the many local people who have holidayed in China and the surrounding countries.

2. Background to the road Improvements in the latter half of the 20th century

Seldom do planners get praise for their work when they planned their revolution to bring the City into the brave post war world, that was sweeping Europe. Their vision for the City was the new Inner Ring Road, whilst seemingly brilliant on paper was known as one of their blunders, when the 'City' was enclosed in its 'concrete collar'. Yet many metropolises have carved up their streets and open spaces for the sake of cars, where they have tried to keep cars and pedestrians apart.

The Inner Ring Road got its blessing when the 'Queensway' was opened by late Queen Elizabeth II, in 1971, when she managed to claim all the roads that made up the Inner Ring road, as the Queensway not just the part with the tunnels. The system was planned in 1943 but the work did not start until 1957 and was mostly finished in 1960.

From the mid-90s the City had started to reduce the hold that cars held over the people by removing some of the underpasses, taking pedestrians over rather than under the traffic and either putting new bridges over sections of open to the sky road culverts with bridges and in the case of Centenary Square, decked over an area to take the people directly from one area to another.

Unfortunately, elsewhere these improvements haven't happened, as I was to discover, when trying to photograph the Chinese Pagoda I was forced under the roundabout at Holloway Circus. I didn't want to stay just inside the Circus but to move around to get my views from as many angles as I could. It was confusing, to know which routes would get me to the other side of the ring road or to other roads.

Part of the 'vision' to revolutionise the city was building high rise apartments and office blocks some up to 31 storeys 90 m high and people like Phyllis Nicklin whose photographs we were using to give our 21st century slant in Grid17, I believe, excitedly recorded with her camera at the time, along with the sweeping roads and taking down of derelict bomb-damaged buildings. As part of that legacy, we have the twin towers at Holloway Head, right by the Holloway Circus. Originally called the Clydesdale and Cleveland Towers they are now the Sentinel Towers. Also at this time, 60s, Smallbrook Ringway, with its dual carriageway was built in a generous curve, from the Rotunda, past New Street Station, finishing opposite Holloway Head. The Odeon was housed in the large block on the corner by the roundabout.

The proximity to the burgeoning Chinese Quarter, was a perfect for the Chinese Pagoda centrally within Holloway Circus.

To paraphrase from the plaque on the Pagoda:

"The pagoda was installed in 1998 in Holloway Circus, weighing in at 86 tons and hand-crafted in marble quarries in Fujian Province China, it was donated by Wing Yip and Brothers (Holdings) Ltd to mark the establishment of improving Sino-Anglo relations in Birmingham. Woo Wing Yip arrived in England in 1959 with a few pounds in his pocket and after working in Clacton Chinese restaurant, he went on to build a substantial wholesale business supplying Chinese grocery products throughout the U.K. The structure was erected in what was then called 'Thomas Gardens' to create a gateway feature into Bull Ring area of the city, an infrastructure project that was supported by Birmingham City Council and the European Regional Development Fund. Unsurprisingly this location is now known as "Pagoda Island".

3. Recent developments

More recently, Birmingham City Council encouraged large-scale developments of a range of buildings, some of them in 'the Tall Buildings' category over 100 m high. From the Thomas Gardens you can see recent buildings already in occupation, or in construction, taking in a sweep from the south-east through an arc counter-clockwise to the north west. There is a new tower in construction, somewhere possibly around Bromsgrove and Gooch Streets. Next round is 10 Holloway Circus, also called Beetham Tower, and home to a Radisson Blu

Hotel. This building had some health and safety issues, with falling scaffolding and a large sheet of glazing falling off, requiring changes to the fixing being required. Further round is Orion Building 90 m high in Navigation Street finished in 2007, which is not without its critics. Further round, more recent builds come into view.

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