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## A Walk Along Ickniel Street

Atop a gently sloping hill above the Selly Oak landscape, I am standing within the protected earthworks of a 2000 year-old fortified Roman settlement, Metchley Camp. Not that you'd know it looking at it today. Modern infrastructure dominates the view, there's a hospital, medical school, a train station and a busy road dividing the site. The Roman earthworks were excavated on several occasions in the 20th century to document the remains of a once sizable settlement. Later it was gently re-landscaped to preserve it for the future. A two-tone tarmac path bisects the site at ninety degrees, marking out the approximate location of Metchley's main street. Today it's a popular spot for staff and students dining al-fresco on long sunny days, intermingling perhaps with the sounds of Roman revelry echoing down through the years.

I am continuing my walk along Ickniel Street, the old Roman Road that is, in many ways, a journey through my family history and memory. As I walk, I frequently lose myself in thought, as time and memory seem to blur and blend with older histories, striking resonant chords within me. These ghosts are never far from me as I walk roughly northwards, following the estimated trajectory of this oft-lost road. Any evidence of its route beyond Metchley Fort has disappeared, pilfered long ago as roads, railways and industry ate up the land. I work nearby on the campus of the University, the chimes of Old Joe in the distance remind me to get a move on. My footsteps take me along Vincent Drive and Pritchatts Road as I leave the ever-busy Campus behind.

I cross to Richmond Hill Road and a hush descends as the traffic falls away. The road here is wide, with houses, drives and impeccable lawns that speak overtly of leafy affluence. Million-pound mansions abound, surrounded by stolid walls, security trees and steely gates. To my humble eyes it says, stay away, keep out, you are not welcome. I get the drift so I continue my own, drifting down toward the far reaches of Harborne. As the road curves downhill the architecture suddenly changes, mid-20th century flats and maisonettes, '*Highpoint: private estate, residents parking only*'. 'Highpoint' was designed by local architect John Madin after he was commissioned by the Calthorpe Estate to create a housing vision for the future, rejuvenating a bomb-damaged landscape after the Second World War. Today it's often held up as an exemplar of how to do affordable social housing properly and remains well maintained to this day. Highpoint's balconies gleam in the softening sunshine, the air redolent with air fried tofu and quinoa. This is Harborne after all....

Walking through these parts of Birmingham it's hard to imagine what a Roman road would have looked like here. Instead, it's perhaps easier to picture a more contemporary landscape, created by Lancelot 'Capability' Brown nearly 250 years ago. Wealthy landowner Sir Henry Gough commissioned Brown to create a vast deer park at nearby Edgbaston Hall. Looking across the Vale towards Edgbaston Hall my eye catches tantalising glimpses of Brown's rolling landscape in the green playing fields and the latter day golf course.

I continue walking up from Harborne, along Priory Road and then across Hagley Road to Monument Road, when the weather suddenly changes. Avast! Atmospheric ahoy, a bank of fog is drawn across the city like a sky curtain. The light is soft and bright and I'm suddenly able to cast off those Richmond Hill Street blues. The heads of Edgbaston's two towers, Perrott's Folly and Waterworks Tower, become hazy in the near distance as if lost in reverie. It's not hard to imagine how such places influenced the mind of Master Tolkien when he lived around these parts.

Although my aim is straight along the Roman route, I can't resist a dash down to the 'Rezza', a short diversion. If you understand atmospheric, you'll know that fog frequently forms above or sinks down on to, large bodies of water like Edgbaston Reservoir. Blithely I head past the fenced off ruins of the Tower Ballroom, diggers and dump trucks tossing their ravenous heads in the mist, terrible beasts from some unearthly plain. Down by the water the fog obscures the landscape like forgetfulness, as if I'm stood at the edge of the Lethe itself, in the land of the Dead. Eldritch voices float out from an unseen shore, offering dark whispers of Mordor, perhaps. I stand there for a time, lost in my own reverie, my face wet with amnesia.

I find as I get older my memories flow into one another like water, a gathering riptide that makes me an unreliable witness to my own life. Walking this route, I find myself half remembering stories of my Dad's childhood, but I'm no longer sure if these things are true. Since he passed away, I've been told other stories of his younger days that often run counter to his own narrative. They're not unkind stories, they're alternate perspectives from different authors of Dad's story. I'm left feeling like I never really knew him at all. Many times it's buildings that bring him to mind, usually blocks of flats. His work had him hanging way up high in the decorating cradles, endlessly painting corporation property. Many of those buildings have disappeared across the city, but the route of Icknield Street takes me through the fringes of Harborne and Edgbaston to Ladywood, where many of those buildings still survive.

Ladywood is where my Dad was born and brought up, living in a back-to-back house off the Icknield Port Road, and my walk brings me close to the footprints of where those houses used to be. He never seemed sentimental for those days, you know how a lot of people can be? I think he was glad he escaped to the relative calm of 60s Selly Park. Abruptly the Middleway

intrudes on my thoughts, its four lane hard-top thrums with traffic at a volume that feels like an assault against my previous somnolence. Tower blocks loom in the fog like the calving icebergs, ready to fall into an unseen sea. I wonder if Dad's up there, somewhere. I spy an abandoned sports pitch, buddleia and bramble its only athletes, cavorting in the mist. It still surprises me how quickly these pioneers of Nature reclaim such places.

The Middleway, the A4540, was built during the 1960s as Birmingham strove to become the Motor City, driving ever striving towards a fast-moving future. It's an uncompromising feat of transport infrastructure that encircles the city like a tarmac leash and somewhere beneath this stretch, linger memories of the old Roman road, perhaps. Like the waters of the Lethe, Icknield Street has slipped beneath into forgetfulness, supplanted by the twin tyrannies of time and progress.

Perhaps it would be easier and more straightforward to walk this route with a more matter of fact way of thinking. I could do that, documenting the journey with an empirical eye. But, here and now, I find myself increasingly distracted by things less obvious, the unseen, the emotional, the forgotten and the imaginary. Ghosts and demons, grace and favour, lost and found, I am walking the Roman road with an open mind, not just seeing it but experiencing it, letting it tell me stories. I've walked for miles in this self-induced trance, I find myself laughing at a factory sign that simply says '*Birmingham Stopper*'. It conjures images of a monstrous machine munching on a melange of astonishing cakes, on display at nearby H & V Bakers Ltd. All this walking and talking does lend one an appetite.

This stretch of Icknield Street is nearing an end, I am forced from my reverie by thoughts of cake and the need to safely cross this vast expanse of road. The fog still lingers hereabouts as the road sweeps its way up to the cast concrete carcass of Hockley Viaduct. Before finishing at the Viaduct, I double-back along a stretch of Icknield Street that still bears its name, a neutered spur that runs parallel to the Middleway. It's a bit sad in all honesty, a cheerless place to finish my journey. Factory units, broken buildings and oddly, the Jamaican Consulate, all huddling together for comfort amidst piles of fly tipped leavings. I don't dwell for long, the shrieks from inside the decaying buildings are enough to raise the Dead. There are Orcs in them there hills for sure....