

THE REMARKABLE LEGACY OF L.S. LOWRY

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The 1st of November 1987 marks the centenary of the birth of Laurence Stephen Lowry, a solitary man who, after decades of apparent failure, was to become Britain's best-known and most-loved twentieth-century artist. His paintings with scurrying matchstick figures set against imposing backgrounds of mills, chimneys, terraced houses and churches have become familiar images. The North West has become 'Lowryland', its proud but decaying areas "just like a Lowry painting". Yet Lowry's paintings are, by and large, composite 'dreamscapes' based not on a particular view but on long-term study of the people and buildings of Pendlebury, Salford and Manchester. For nearly 50 years, from 1909, he made numerous sketches and drawings in the twin cities of Manchester and Salford. It was these drawings which formed the basis of his paintings and which represent a remarkable legacy to the history of the region. Most of these are less well known than the paintings but they comprise an untapped source for the local historian. It is the purpose of this article to direct attention to the neglected topographical value of Lowry's work.

The Early Years

Lowry's upbringing was to give little hint of his later ability. He was the only child of staunchly middle-class Victorian parents and grew up in the leafy suburb of Longsight in south Manchester. His childhood held little distinction; from it he seems to have acquired only the conventions and ethics of the times together with the discipline which was to stay with him throughout his life. Leaving school, he joined a small company in Manchester's commercial heartland. The job allowed him to take some private art classes and, around 1905, he enrolled as a part-time student at Manchester School of Art where he was to spend many evenings over a span of ten years mastering the life class.

As Edward VII's reign neared its end, two events combined to produce in Lowry the vision and the means of realising it. First, in 1909, the Lowry family were forced by a financial crisis to move from the relative opulence of Victoria Park to the industrial area of Pendlebury. Second, a year later, Lowry joined the Pall Mall Property Company where he spent over forty years collecting rents from many of the inner city districts.

It would be impossible to under estimate the importance of Lowry's move to Pendlebury. For within a few minutes walk from his home he could find himself deep in crowded industrial streets dominated by cotton mills and coal mines or in open countryside on the farmland around Swinton and Clifton. It was this unusual mix of industry and landscape brought together so clearly in Pendlebury which was to dominate his work.



Lowry sketching.

The Moss Farms

Lowry was a keen Rambler and it would seem that he very quickly began to explore his new surroundings. He painted *Arden's Farm* at Wardley (110)¹ probably in his first year at Pendlebury. The farm is no more but its location is recalled in street names. In 1910, he painted two scenes entitled *Clifton Junction — Morning* (111) and *Clifton Junction — Evening* (112), using the same view from the Irwell Valley looking up the ridge towards St. Anne's Church, Clifton. Apart from the obvious intrusion of the M62 motorway it is a scene which is still recognisable nearly eighty years later. None of these works were intended to be topographical, they are reactions to the landscape painted in a traditional manner.

Throughout his life, landscape would provide relaxation and the countryside to the north and west of Pendlebury was to become "a place of memories"² when either alone or with occasional companions he could escape his cares. He recorded many of the mossland farms — *On the Moss* 1923 (200) shows the track to Morton Moss Farm, Wardley; *House on Botany, Clifton*, 1926 (235) was the home of the manager of Botany Bay Colliery. The mosses have endured longer than most of the places recorded by Lowry and it is still possible to walk the area and sense the splendid isolation so beloved by the artist. Encroachment is, however, constant and it is surely only a matter of time before the resting place of the Jacobite armies in 1745 falls prey to urban development.

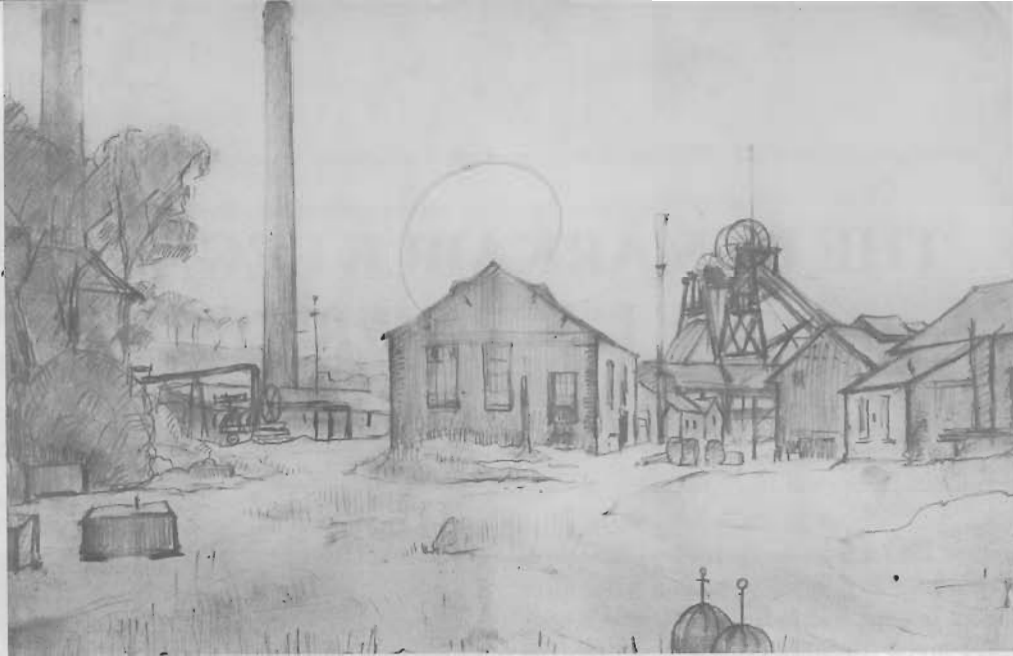


fig.1 Wet Earth Colliery, 1925.

Yet, there are parts of Swinton which are now pleasantly rural which were once heavily industrialised. This is particularly true of the Clifton area where the Croal-Irwell Valley now offers a retreat from the city. Until 1928 much of the area was occupied by the Wet Earth Colliery at Dixon Fold (fig.1). Lowry made several drawings of the colliery in 1925, his work being the only substantial visual record of the site.

Pendlebury and Swinton

It is difficult to judge when Lowry began to record the streets and buildings of Pendlebury. He was to later recount several versions of his awakening as an industrial artist. What does seem clear, however, is that around 1912, he took the decision to draw and paint the urban landscape and its inhabitants. He was to undertake this by amassing dozens of sketches and drawings of each of the components of the industrial scene — the mills, the houses, etc. — which would then be brought together in a composite vision which was characteristic not real, overstated not exact. One of the earliest surviving sketches is *St. Mary's Church, Swinton 1913* (121). The church stood on Temple Drive and was demolished in 1964. In the sketch the church is recorded at the end of a pathway between Swinton Hall Road and Temple Drive. Detail is obscured and secondary, it is the form and situation of the church which interested the artist. Lowry returned again and again to this view, or at least to this sketch. It became *Winter in Pendlebury* (437, Swinton Art Gallery) in 1946 and he painted it yet again in 1960 (327).



fig.2 Pendlebury Scene, 1931.

Swinton had several cotton mills and Lowry drew most of them. His drawings emphasise not only the appearance of the mills but also the dominant position they held in the industrial landscape. Acme Mill, on Swinton Hall Road, was a favourite subject but the mill is never seen in isolation. Always there are the adjacent streets of millworker's cottages and the rough, open area called 'Stump Park'. *Pendlebury Scene* (fig.2) which Lowry dated 1931 is typical. The rather ambiguous conjunction of work and leisure hinted at in this drawing is more clearly seen in *Newtown Mill and Bowling Green* c.1928 (fig.3) where the tranquility of the green contrasts starkly with the mass of the mill. Acme Mill was demolished in 1986, Newtown Mill survives.

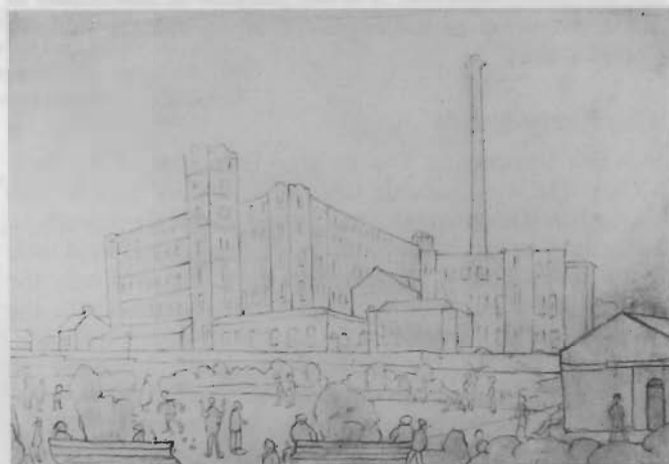


fig.3 Newtown Mill, c.1928.

Lowry made possibly a hundred specific drawings of the Swinton area. Subjects range from the mundane *Rear of Property on Bolton Road* to the dramatic *Swinton Industrial Schools*. One drawing, however, stands out: *Bodley's St. Augustine's Church* (fig.4) remains as a principal feature of the town's architecture. Lowry's drawing, taken from the steps of the war memorial, portrays the building as only the artist can. The dark brick of the frontage looms large, making the figures small and insignificant. But the darkness is broken by a small white cross, at the base of the church, which is a monument to the colliers who lost their lives in the Clifton Hall Colliery Disaster of 1885. The pathway, now lined with mature trees, leads to the church but only by way of the memorial.

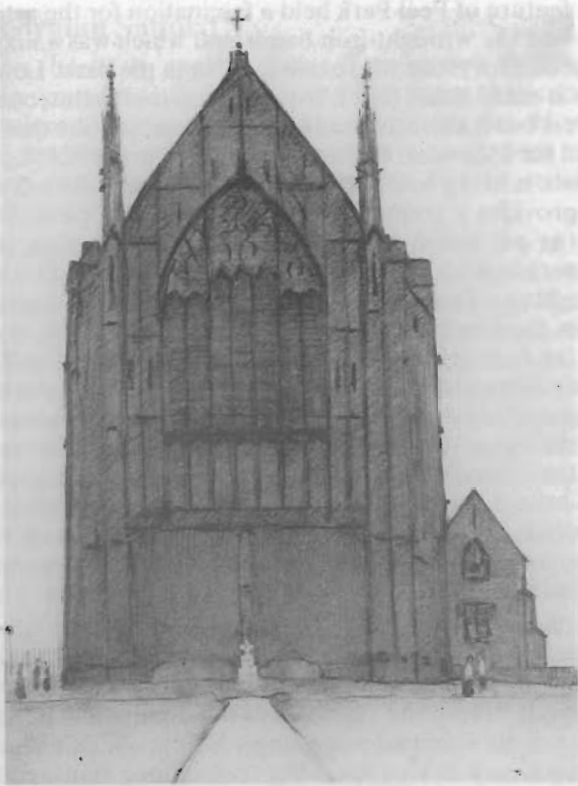


fig.4 St. Augustine's Church.

Beyond the Life Class

When the Lowry family moved to Pendlebury, Lowry began part-time art classes at Salford School of Art. Here he studied life drawing in a room at the top of the Peel Building, now part of Salford University. During the classes the room was blacked-out with heavy drapes. When these were drawn back they revealed panoramas in all directions. From this vantage point Lowry drew three vistas which provide a powerful impression of Salford.

View from a Window, 1924 (fig.5) is one of his finest drawings. It is a rather narrow impression dominated by the rear of the building and the chimney. From this the scene opens out, looking down Whalley Street towards Ordsall. This is Robert Roberts' land, a mass of crowded terraced streets with an almost permanent pall of smoke and soot. Little of the scene captured by Lowry remains.

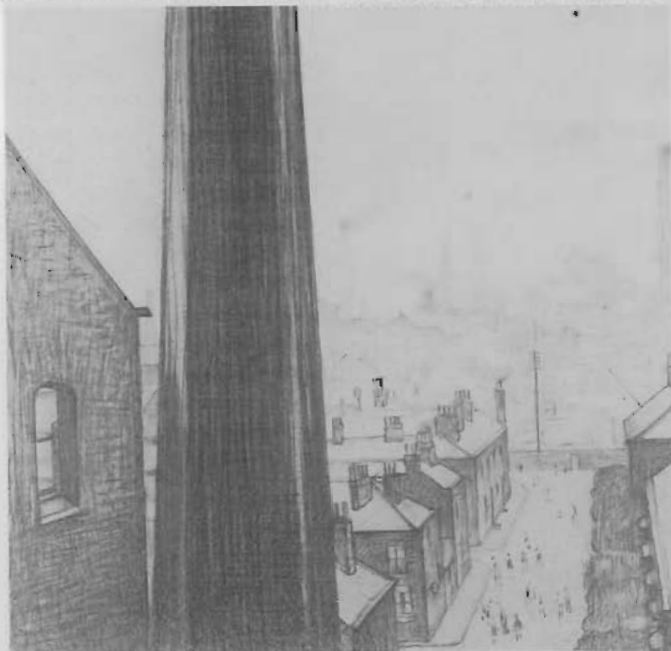


fig.5 View from a window, 1924.

Casting an eye from the front window of the Life Room, Lowry would have seen the bulk of central and northern Salford. Two drawings of the scene survive. *View from a Window looking towards Manchester*, 1925 (fig.6) scans the rear of Salford Museum and Library. The terrace above Peel Park is clearly recognisable, as are 'The Meadow' in the large bend of the River Irwell and the factories lining the waterfront along the Adelphi. In the distance, the spires of St. Philip's and Salford Cathedral can be seen. *View from a Window looking towards Broughton*, 1925 (fig.7) has all the elements of a Lowry painting. The eye is taken along the western edge of Peel Park, across the industrial complex of Frederick Road to Lower Broughton and beyond. It is a view which is scarcely evident today.



fig.6 Looking towards Manchester, 1925.

Peel Park

If Pendlebury developed Lowry's vision of the industrial city then Peel Park was to prove equally influential. It was, by the 1920s, a well-established piece of Victorian municipal benevolence which had become Salford's holiday resort. The terrace overlooking the park was a veritable promenade lined with statues and exquisitely-carved marbles. It was a place to get dressed-up to visit, a place for Bank Holiday and Sunday afternoon amusement. Lowry's rendition of *The Terrace*, 1927 (fig.7) shows part of this walk from the Peel Building alongside the library with Lower Broughton in the distance.

Lowry sketched regularly in the park from around 1919 to 1928, the year he finally left art school. The early sketches (145, 146, 151-3) reflect the manner in which he catalogued the park and its views. One shows the view from the park towards St. Philip's Church and the Cathedral. Another is a gateway at the Broughton end of the park, a sketch which, thirty years later, was made into a painting entitled *Factory in Winter* (Private Collection). The portico of Lark Hill mansion is seen in fig.8. The mansion housed the museum and was demolished in the 1930s. Another sketch looks from the park to the Crescent, with the main gates and Lark Hill Mansion prominent. Many of these small sketches were later used in Lowry's paintings or developed as finished drawings. He made several studies before completing *The Steps*, 1930 (257), the view looking again from the park to the mansion, the Georgian building which housed the museum and library.



fig.7 *The Terrace, 1927.*



fig.8 *Lark Hill Mansion.*

One feature of Peel Park held a fascination for the artist. This was the wrought-iron bandstand which was a major attraction for those who came to relax in the park. Lowry drew it many times (201). Not only was it of architectural interest but it also attracted people, a combination that he found hard to resist. In *Bandstand, Peel Park, 1925* (fig.9) a dance is being held. The view is taken from the terrace and provides a comprehensive picture of the park. It is seen as an 'oasis' in a desert of industrialisation, the greenery in stark contrast to the grey depression of Lower Broughton. The park is the countryside held captive within the town. Life in the Salford which Lowry drew was far from pleasant. But even in the despair of *The Classic Slum* and Greenwood's Hanky Park there was the escapist joy of the park. Three years later, Lowry painted the bandstand (248). It appears set against the terrace with the School of Art on the extreme right, with the spire of Christ Church close by. The library building is obscured by a tree but Lark Hill Mansion and the Victorian Gate can be picked out before the panorama concludes with a few of the houses on the Crescent.

Peel Park was to occur time and again in Lowry's work, not always acknowledged but there in spirit. Standing on the terrace with the author Maurice Collis in 1951, Lowry observed: "From the start I have been fond of this view and have put it in many paintings. You know that I have never painted in this spot, but look a long time, make drawings and think. Many early drawings were made from (here)".³

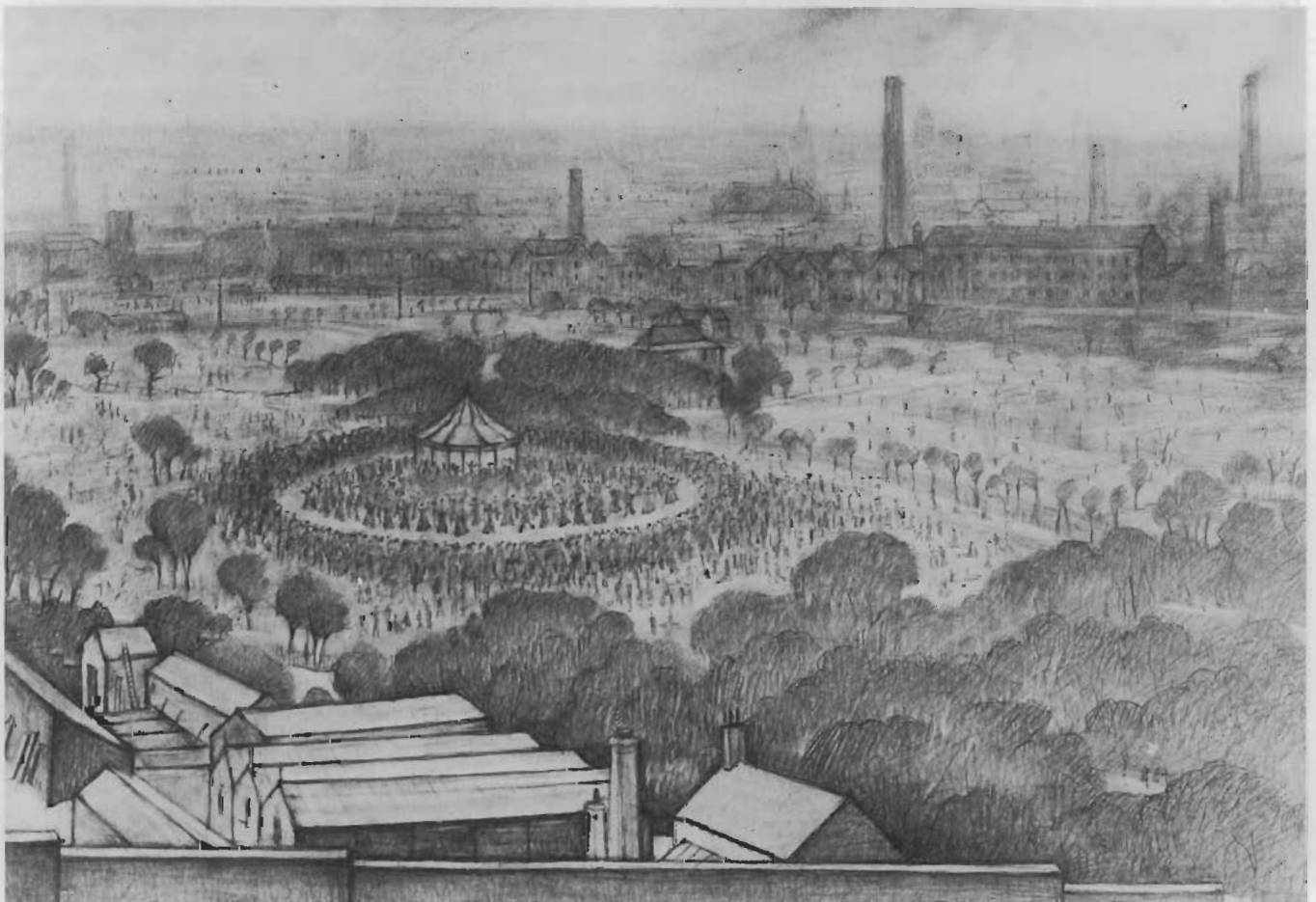


fig.9 *Bandstand, Peel Park, 1925.*

Georgian Salford

It is hard to explain Lowry's attraction to the few Georgian areas in Salford. Perhaps it was the grace and opulence they gave to a rather depressing city. However his interest was aroused it was through drawing rather than painting that he recorded the historic buildings, many of which were later demolished.

On the large plot of land on the corner of Broad Street and Frederick Road stood Leaf Square. The site is now occupied by Salford College of Technology but was formerly bounded by eighteenth-century houses with neat gardens protected by fences and iron railings. Here Lowry made a number of drawings in 1925 and 1926 which form an important pictorial record of the area. The square was dominated by Belle Vue House (fig.10). The economy of line in Lowry's drawing is most appropriate, the splendour of the house being accentuated by the absence of an urban background. It could easily be a Cotswold manor. The Leaf Square drawings give an insight into the way in which the artist worked. One view is taken from a spot perhaps twenty yards from a corner house, complete with a lamp-holder. A second shows that Lowry simply walked around the corner and drew the view looking back to the lamp.

A cautionary note is raised by a drawing Lowry made in 1926 which he called *The Tower* (fig.11). This drawing is essentially based on Leaf Square but the tower is an imaginary addition by the artist. This licence by Lowry needs no defence; he could and did add to, or subtract from, a scene at his whim. In this he is no more subjective than any archive material, but it always does well to check!

The area around Bank Place was another Georgian stronghold. Lowry made several drawings in this vicinity which he later developed as paintings. *By St. Philip's Church*, 1926 (fig.12) shows just a small part of the church. The emphasis is placed on the railings surrounding the churchyard, a Georgian house at the end of Encombe Place and a small terrace overlooked by Salford Cathedral. The terrace has since been demolished but enough of the scene survives to acknowledge the

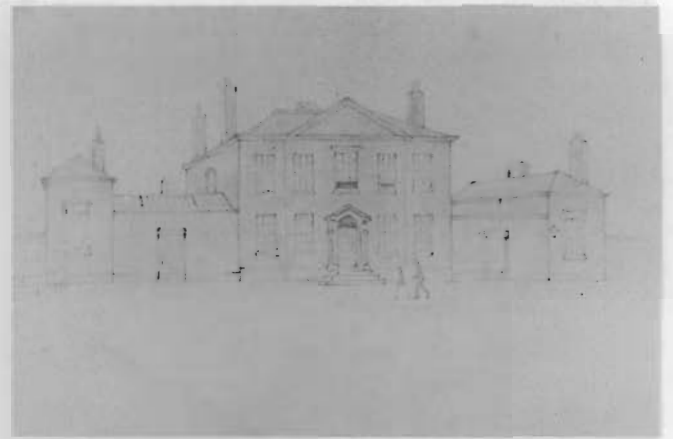


fig.10 Belle Vue House, c. 1925.



fig.11 The Tower, 1926.



fig.12 By St. Philip's Church, 1926.



fig.13 *The County Court.*

accuracy of the drawing. Close to St. Philip's stands the County Court. In itself a fine building, Lowry was more impressed with the view at the rear of the building, dominated by a stone archway and Georgian houses (fig.13). Again a corner lamp fitting appears. The arch and one of the houses survive.

It is apparent that Lowry's love of period architecture is specific rather than general. He ignored the busy, wide sweep of the Crescent, preferring the enclaves of Leaf Square and Bank Place. It is, perhaps, not a coincidence that his later depiction of Georgian houses symbolises isolation and decay, the once-proud buildings standing forlorn and forgotten, overtaken by time and events.

Towards Manchester

So often, when examining Lowry's topographical work it is apparent that he was far more than a simple recorder of the local scene. Very seldom did he draw the obvious. He was ruthlessly selective, choosing subjects which either suited his style or which offered useful references for future use. Almost daily his travels took him past Peel Park along the Crescent and Chapel Street towards his work in Manchester. Yet few of the notable buildings found expression in his work — the Crescent, Salford Royal Hospital, Salford Cathedral and the Town Hall are all ignored or treated with scant respect.

Only one general view of the area was recorded by Lowry and this was *Flat Iron Market* (fig.14) which he drew around 1925. One of his most atmospheric and freely-worked drawings it shows the thriving market which was regularly held on the triangular piece of land surrounding Sacred Trinity Church. Virtually devoid of traffic, the drawing does, nonetheless, convey the vitality of the market. Yet there is far more. It is the proximity of market and church which focussed Lowry's attention. The dark solid mass of the oldest church in Salford rises from the stalls and shoppers. It is a powerful image but this is no picture-postcard scene. It is Salford and the church itself is dominated by the mass which is Threlfall's Brewery (on the left) and the commercial buildings of the Greengate area. It is a Salford which has been recorded by others yet few have matched Lowry's overwhelming sense of place.

There may well be romance associated with Sacred Trinity but there was little or none as far as *Oldfield Road Dwellings* (fig.15) went. The curiously-shaped tenement stood in Upper Hulme Street close to Salford Royal Hospital. Speaking in 1966 to Edwin Mullins, Lowry recalled: "1927 I came here. I'd stand for hours on ... this

spot ... and scores of little kids who hadn't had a wash for weeks would come and stand around me. And there was a niff too".⁴ Former residents of the now demolished dwellings would argue. But Lowry drew it as he saw it — a rather odd building and a community in itself.

The drawing is also the subject of some controversy. A painting of the same scene, entitled *Dwellings*, was purchased by the Tate Gallery in 1939. Both to the Tate and Edwin Mullins, Lowry sited the dwellings in Ordsall Lane, several hundred yards from the actual location. It was a confusion in Lowry which is perhaps understandable, yet the Tate has to this day refused to accept the evidence of geography and history. This is a rather odd and dogmatic stance which does little credit to the cause of truth and which emphasises the need for caution in bringing together art and history.

It is generally thought that Salford changed little in the early part of the twentieth century, that there was a permanence which was only brought to an end by the widespread clearances of the 1950s and 1960s. But change is a constant theme in any town or city with elderly, run-down or inefficient buildings being replaced. So it was, in 1927, that Lowry's father brought to his son's attention the imminent demolition of St. Simon's Church, which stood on St. Stephen's Street. Robert Lowry recommended it as "a piece of particular isolation in a thickly populated area"⁵ and Lowry duly went to record it. St. Simon's was not an ordinary church — its bulk, the squat spire on a tall tower and the soot-blackened stone all appealed to Lowry. A small, hurried sketch on the back of a torn envelope defined the basic form of the church and its surroundings (fig.16). It is tempting, with knowledge of Lowry's acute visual awareness and his ability to mentally catalogue a scene, to suggest that a completed drawing of the same scene (fig.17) developed from this sketch. However, the drawing was probably made on the spot. A year later, Lowry made a painting of St. Simon's (see cover), the three works being the only visual record known to have survived.



fig.17 *St. Simon's Church, c. 1928.*



fig.14 Flat Iron Market, c. 1925.



fig.15 Oldfield Road Dwellings, 1927.

It was on his travels into Manchester that Lowry discovered a scene which was fundamental to some of his paintings. *River Irwell at the Adelphi*, 1924 (201) is a view of the flooded River Irwell seen from the Crescent looking towards Broughton. The river has become a lake with barren islands barely above the surface. From the 1930s, this lake first seen on the Irwell repeatedly occurs in the industrial composites.

Manchester

Lowry spent much of his working life tramping the streets of Manchester. From the offices of the Pall Mall Property Company, he sallied forth to collect property rents. He seems to have been little impressed by the grand buildings of the metropolis. His work took him to Ancoats, Hulme and the Oldham Road area and it was in these districts that he found inspiration. He was later to tell Edwin Mullins: "If I were to be asked my chief recreations, I ought to say walking about the streets of any poor quarter of any place I may happen to be in".⁶ Mullins was not to know that Lowry's assumed leisure was, in reality, his job.

In Pendlebury and Salford, Lowry made many accurate topographical drawings of buildings and places. This is less true of his work in Manchester. The city appears to have provided less of the fabric of his painting but more of the human content. Lowry was an acute observer of human nature and many of the incidents he immortalised in paint were seen by him in Manchester.

However, it was in the city that he made his most comprehensive record of an area. In 1929, he was asked by friends to undertake a visual survey of Ancoats. A year later, he exhibited twenty-five drawings of the district at the Roundhouse. It was his first one-man exhibition and all the pictures were sold in a matter of days. *Great Ancoats Street*, 1930 (fig.18) attests to the strength and accuracy of Lowry's record. The buildings seen here have since been demolished but two drawings in the collections of Manchester City Art Gallery (71, 73) can be compared to present day views.

Also in 1930, Lowry was asked by the Director of the City Art Gallery in Moseley Street to submit some studies of Piccadilly with a potential commission in mind. Lowry's efforts were rejected and it was suggested that he tried again. He refused. He was never happy with commissions; he had to paint a scene as he saw it. In 1954, he again painted *Piccadilly Gardens* (82). Ironically, but fortunately, the painting was acquired for the city's collections. Some Manchester buildings recur repeatedly in Lowry's work. In particular, *St. John's Church, Deansgate* (154). Other Manchester views include studies made during the artist's time as a fire-watcher during the Manchester Blitz (285).

Worsley Village

The hamlet which grew up around the Bridgewater Canal basin at Worsley was a commercial development housing the men who worked and maintained the canal and the underground coal mines. Today, it is a picturesque piece of rural England which fits rather uneasily into the urban sprawl of Greater Manchester. Lowry's walks must have taken him regularly to the village and, around 1925, he made several drawings of the canal and its environs. One of these is of particular interest (fig.19) for a photograph (fig.20) taken some years before allows direct comparison between the view of the artist and the camera. *Worsley — Canal Scene (View of Packet House)* shows the Victorian building with St. Mark's Church in the distance as viewed

from the towpath from Monton. The accuracy of Lowry's drawing is dramatic. Here is the artist relaxing, portraying buildings in a landscape, needing only the shades offered by a pencil to produce form and colour. The figures cast no shadows but, extremely rare in a Lowry picture, the reflections show the direction of the light. Lowry was one of the first artists to discover the attractions of this small illage.



fig.19 *Worsley Canal Scene, c. 1925.*



fig.20 *An earlier photograph from the same spot.*

Disappearing Salford

Since the Second World War, Salford has changed more drastically than any other city in Britain. Whole streets and districts vanished from the map as two centuries of decay and neglect were ended in a fanatical bout of civic pride and property speculation. In some ways it would be easier to list the survivors than the victims for the latter are too many. The city as most people knew it was disappearing fast. In an effort to retain at least some evidence of the past, Lowry was asked by Ted Frape, Director of Salford Art Gallery, to record some of the doomed buildings and streets, mainly in the Trinity and St. Matthias' areas. The artist had no conditions imposed on him, he could draw what he wished. He returned with several drawings including *St. Stephen's Church*, 1957 (319) and *Francis Terrace*, 1956 (fig.21).

He produced also, two views of *Christ Church* which stood at the top of Acton Square opposite Peel Park. He had first worked in this area in the 1920s (232) when it would appear that his interest lay not in the church but in the railings around it and the rather splendid iron gateway and lampholder. This type of gateway was featured in several later paintings; the drawing seems part of the cataloguing process. However, in 1956 (fig.22) he returned with a different objective. Now it was the church and its geography which was of paramount importance.



fig.18 Great Ancoats Street, 1930.



fig.21 Francis Terrace, 1956.



fig.22 Christ Church, 1956.



fig.23 Eccles Railway Station, 1963.

Eccles

In the early 1960s, staff at Monks Hall Museum in Eccles prepared a unique tribute to Lowry in the form of a homage by his fellow artists. During the preparations Lowry visited Eccles several times and was, on one occasion, in 1963, asked by Frank Mullineux if he had ever made any drawings of the town. Lowry had not but it did not take much for him to be persuaded. Mullineux provided paper and pencils and Lowry made a number of sketches of two of the town's more unusual buildings — *Eccles Railway Station* (fig.23) and *Eccles Town Hall* (349). History is fortunate that Frank Mullineux is a thorough man for he kept all the preliminary sketches made by Lowry on the spot. These sketches, now in the Salford Lowry Collection, show how little Lowry needed to put on paper to prepare a detailed drawing. The choice of subjects is also interesting — both are quirky, both might have been built with the knowledge that Lowry would later immortalise them. The station burned down in 1971, the town hall survives.

The Later Years

Lowry's close association with Pendlebury ended, after nearly 30 years, in 1948 when he moved to his last home in Mottram-in-Longdendale. He had never been

particularly fond of living in Pendlebury but acknowledged his debt. His industrial scene was changing; the mills were closing and the tightly-knit communities were being dispersed. As he grew older, he saw the need for younger artists to interpret contemporary events and sought to escape the fame and intrusions by frequent sojourns to the North East coast. He was, however, inextricably bound to Salford and Manchester. He could never hide the indelible mark the two cities had left on him. In her comprehensive biography of Lowry, Shelley Rodhe recounts the story told by Sheila Fell. She and Lowry had spent the day sketching in front of Skiddaw. When she asked to look at Lowry's work he had made an industrial landscape. Even in the sublime scenery of the Lake District he could see only Pendlebury!

Conclusion

This survey of L.S. Lowry as a topographical artist can only be selective and somewhat superficial. The artist made hundreds of drawings in the Pendlebury, Salford and Manchester areas. Many of these are in private collections, inaccessible to most people. Therefore, I have concentrated on one public collection, that of Salford Art Gallery which holds the largest and most comprehensive array of the artist's work. Even here, I have omitted studies, drawings and paintings which all relate to the subject.

Around 1912, L.S. Lowry deliberately and obsessively set out to put the industrial scene on the artistic 'map'. That he succeeded is history. In doing so, he granted Salford and Manchester a priceless legacy. He created a remarkable record of two industrial cities. His work is, therefore, a major local history source, an achievement which is only just being appreciated.

Lowry's huge popularity encouraged many younger artists to paint the scenes they knew best. Some were content merely to recreate a nostalgic view, based neither on familiarity or memory. Such works are of little historic value. Other artists including Harold Riley, Tom Brown and Philip A. Westcott have extended Lowry's topographical work into modern times. It is largely due to Lowry's efforts that Salford and Manchester have an unrivalled artistic record of urban life in the twentieth century.

NOTES

1. Numbers in brackets refer to the catalogue of Lowry's work in M. Leber and J. Sandling, *L.S. Lowry* (1987). For reasons of space these illustrations could not be included in this article. Unless stated otherwise all drawings referred to are in the Salford Art Gallery collection.
2. Harold Riley to the author.
3. Maurice Collis, *The Discovery of L.S. Lowry* (1951)
4. Edwin Mullins, 'The Lonely Life of L.S. Lowry', *Sunday Telegraph*, November 1966, reprinted in Leber and Sandling, *L.S. Lowry*.
5. Lowry to Salford Art Gallery staff.
6. Mullins, 'Lonely Life of Lowry'.

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