

A Brummie Break

There's more to Birmingham than meets the eye. Giselle Whiteaker discovers the delights of Britain's second-largest city.



Back in the medieval period, Birmingham was a medium-sized market town. It really came to the fore in the 18th century with the Midlands Enlightenment and subsequent Industrial Revolution. This saw the town at the forefront of worldwide advances in science, technology and economic development. By 1791 it was being hailed as “the first manufacturing town in the world”, with thousands of small workshops practising a variety of specialised trades. While times have changed and Birmingham has blossomed into a major international commercial centre and a vibrant, growing metropolis, a stroll through the city’s Jewellery Quarter takes visitors on a journey back in time.

The Jewellery Quarter is just that – a major manufacturer of jewellery, which has been operating in different configurations for over 200 years and still

produces 40% of the jewellery manufactured in the UK. As I walk through in search of the Museum of the Jewellery Quarter, the history of the area envelops me and I imagine the goldsmiths and silversmiths of old bent over their workshop tables, fashioning intricate works of art for the aristocracy. Nowadays, the area is more focused on retail, but it’s evocative nonetheless.

The Museum itself is somewhat more than a few exhibition rooms. Back in 1899 it began its lease as the factory and offices of family-run jeweller Smith & Pepper. The firm was successful all the way through to 1981, when Eric, Olive and Tom Smith were ready to retire. They had no successors to take over the business, so they closed the doors, leaving everything in situ, and walked away. The workshop was opened as a museum in 1992. The fully-equipped workbenches are used to demonstrate the finer aspects of jewellery



Macdonald Burlington Hotel



The futuristic
Birmingham Library



making, while the old office is the perfect time capsule. It's an interesting glimpse into exactly how far manufacturing has come.

On the pleasant stroll back through the city centre I find myself ambling past St Phillips Cathedral. As I admire the statue of *The Stretcher Bearers*, overflowing with brightly hued flowers, a few men dressed in white stride briskly past. The bells jangling at their ankles and an assortment of decorated headwear give them away as Morris dancers. I follow them around the side of the cathedral where they put on a lively performance of merry jigs, quickly drawing a crowd of admirers. They are a friendly bunch and several of the men engage in conversation, enthusing about the dance's origins and meanings, pointing out who to watch as they shout friendly heckles over to the dancing sets. The accompanying music is infectious and I find myself skipping away in time to the tune when I leave.

I check in to the historic Macdonald Burlington Hotel, smack bang in the city centre. It's a few paces from New Street Station amidst the bustling shopping thoroughfare, yet the plush interior exudes peace and calm. The friendly attendant directs me to my immense character suite, overlooking cobbled New Street and I pause for a few moments to engage in a little people-watching before dinner.

At the appointed hour, my friend Robinson joins me at the hotel's Scottish Steak Club restaurant. The extravagant dining area features high ceilings and tall windows overlooking the street and the gleaming white interior is quite dazzling, yet not overly formal. We're keen to dine on the beef the restaurant is known for, but we can't resist sampling some seafood starters. Robinson selects the classic prawn cocktail, while I opt for the deliciously moist fish cakes, served with a chunky tartar sauce. We choose different cuts for our steaks, but both are cooked to perfection and incredibly tender, leaving us with only just enough room to split a decadent dollop of sticky toffee pudding, laced with a sweet butterscotch sauce offset with vanilla bean ice-cream.

Sated, we set off to work off our excesses on the dance floor. We start with a quick drink at Bacchus Bar, the atmospheric den underneath Macdonald Burlington hotel, before heading to the infamous Broad Street, where crowds of young revellers mosey from pub to club. We choose the more sedate, yet still happening, Arcadian, on the fringe of Chinatown,

popping in to each of the bars in turn to sample the music and break out a few dance moves.

The next morning, after indulging in a pile of free range scrambled eggs and John Ross Jr smoked salmon at Macdonald Burlington Hotel, I take a brisk walk to the Gas Street Basin. With more canal-miles than Venice, a boat journey in Birmingham provides an altogether different perspective of the city. The narrow boats that ply the waterways chug gently along startling waterfowl along their route. The slow, tranquil journey is the perfect way to pass a morning.

From Gas Street Basin it's a short stroll to the city's major landmarks and the shopping mecca known as the Bullring. Victoria Square is in the competition for the most picturesque area of the city, the pedestrianised square housing a statue of Queen Victoria, the

Town Hall and the Council House. Antony Gormley's *Iron: Man* sculpture overlooks proceedings and *The River*, a statue of a voluptuous woman lolls in the centre. She is known locally (and irreverently) as "The floozie in the Jacuzzi".

One of the most fascinating modern constructions is the new, state-of-the-art, £189 million Birmingham Central Library. While reactions to the exterior design by architect Francine Houben are mixed – it resembles an industrial wedding cake – the futuristic interior is no doubt creating a new generation of bibliophiles. With hidden gardens, a stunning book rotunda, a glass elevator to whisk you to the

viewing deck, and the Shakespeare Memorial Room, the library is worthy of inspection, even if you never open a book.

After three days in Birmingham I feel I've barely scratched the surface. While I've resided in comfort at Macdonald Burlington Hotel, cruised the canals and admired the architecture, I haven't been to Cadbury World, the Custard Factory (Birmingham's creative quarter) or the Church of St Martin in the Bullring. I've had no time for shopping, and I've only just begun to sample the city's cuisine. From Marco Pierre White's restaurant bar high up in the Cube, another iconic contemporary architectural gem, I gaze at the city lights, a glass of wine in my hand, and start to plan my next trip. ■

For comfortable accommodation in a conveniently central location, look no further than Macdonald Burlington Hotel. See www.MacdonaldHotels.co.uk/burlington for details.



Jewellery Quarter Museum