Less than 10 miles east of Manchester city centre lies Werneth Low, a 915 foot hill that borders Stockport and Tameside. At its highest points, you can see Derbyshire, the Cheshire Plains, the South Pennines, and the Welsh Mountains (so I’m told), and stealing centre stage is Manchester. At its peak, there is a stone compass to direct walkers to landmarks they can spot in the landscape, a welcome aid to the weather that often tries its best to ruin the view. Yet even at its bleakest, the sky provides a grey contrast to allow nature’s greens, browns, oranges, purples to pop out. The landmark on the Low is the Cenotaph commemorating the lives lost in the Great War; there are usually battles around the monument as golfers bemoan dogs disturbing their teeing off on the course, which runs parallel.

For the past two decades, I’ve been dragging my arse up here. It originally began as a challenge to banish a hangover. At the height of my drinking days, I would often make these pacts with myself when faced with the fear which followed a heavy session. Over the years, I’d convinced myself that if I took on an arduous act, at its completion, it would cure my ills. These would range from painting rooms, fixing broken objects or cleaning the house, to hitting the gym and long walks along the canal. They were a penance for pints consumed; if I was going to drink into oblivion, I would have
to punish myself the following day. Writing this now, I wonder if this is some deep-seated influence from my heavily Catholic Irish grandmother who dragged me to church as a kid. They were also ways to distract me from the paranoia while my body and time worked their magic to restore the damage done. It would only be years later I would understand the best way to stop a hangover was not to drink; a book in itself, yet within these pages lie some clues to why alcohol became such a crutch for my peers and me.

One particularly woeful Sunday morning when there wasn’t a wall in need of a lick of paint or a device that needed repairing, I took on Werneth Low for the first time. No matter which way you go up the Low, it is a bastard of an incline. Throw into the mix that I was unfit, had had two hours’ sleep, and carried the contents of a booze cabinet in my gut, 915 feet may as well have been Everest. If anyone had offered me oxygen as I ascended that morning, I’d have been on it, sweating, coughing, aching, yet persevering through the demons in my head and the pains in my body to the top. A path leads you from the entrance to the peak, and halfway between them is a bench (a lifeline that particular morning). As I sat catching a breath, swearing at myself, trying my best not to look like a corpse to the jovial walkers in bright coloured coats saying hello as they passed, I noticed her for the first time, in total panorama: Mamucium. Manchester. Home. The place I’d lived in for decades yet only ever seen from within it. The hangover was ruinous, the weather conforming to type, so it wasn’t an enlightening moment, but it did make me think of how things look differently the further we are away from them.

While my drinking has subsided to special occasions, this walk has become a therapeutic ritual. From here, I can see how both I and Manchester have changed over the years. The bench that first gave me salvation has also been the best seat to watch the
slowest game of monopoly unfold. In the years I’ve come up here, I’ve watched a skyline that once only boasted the Arndale Tower become a playground for cranes. The Beetham Tower then became the most prominent building, followed by Deansgate South, and by the time this book is published, another skyscraper will take dominance. A cynical friend once quipped to me ‘Big Property, Small Pecker’, but it’s not just the size of the buildings but the sheer number of them that now dominate: new apartment blocks, student accommodations, business buildings. In the town centre, they are noticeable by their inconvenience; you walk in their shadows, your pathway diverted to take other routes as they are assembled, but you cannot take in their collective magnitude when you’re stood underneath them.

During the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, Werneth Low, more than ever, was an escape for my family and me. Every single day we were up on the Low. We never saw another person. It felt like we were suspended in a void, dependent on nothing external but each other, detached from everything and everyone else. Stripped of real life’s complexities and the influences an outside world brings, unplugged from the news channels, it was one of the most blissful periods of my life. Mother Nature showed her devious side and offered up a blistering summer when we were supposed to be inside for twenty-three hours a day. Every evening we would go back to the Low to watch the most glorious sunsets; within an hour, the sky became a Monet over Manchester; it bled from blue to orange, deep red before fading to the night. One evening I took a photograph of my eldest daughter running wild with the sun setting behind her. When we returned home, I opened my photos to look at the image I’d caught of her innocent and free when I noticed I’d also captured a silhouette of Manchester in the same shot. Reality kicked in. The reminder that none of this was real – it’s just a pause button.
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At some point, life would have to resume. But how would that future look? I stared at the image and said to myself, ‘That place will never be the same after all this.’

The following day I was interviewed by the Inspiral Carpets’ Clint Boon for his *Humans of XS Manchester* podcast. The premise is for recognised Mancunians to describe their experiences of growing up in the city; what they thought of it then and now. I have known Clint a while; I was franker than usual, more chatting to a mate than being under interrogation. I’ve always forced myself not to be nostalgic as a mechanism to push me forward in my career and life, to concentrate on what is coming ahead rather than staring in the rearview. Looking backward always felt like a waste of time. I reeled off anecdotes of my loves and loathes, and it dawned on me how little I’d taken account of my past. Outside of the name and body, the person I talked about no longer existed; he was somebody I used to be.

Similarly, the Manchester these stories took place in, outside of name and geography, didn’t exist. It was somewhere I used to know; this eased the fear from the previous night that Manchester wouldn’t be the same following the pandemic. It has never been stationary. Places and people are constantly in flux, yet our memories are crystallised. ‘It’s not how it used to be’ is something I often hear from long-lived Mancunians. The past romanticised as idyllic. Manchester is not the same as it was, but neither is Liverpool, Sheffield, or Newcastle. It’s just that those cities don’t have such flagpoles of concrete to mark their change. But how much of Manchester’s past do we remember? Do we remember things for how they once were? Are we not all guilty of dressing the past like my daughters do their dolls? There is a touch of colour here to make it stand out; a bit of make-up to cover the blemishes; add a few accessories to embellish the ensemble. We’re happy to promote our successes, but how often do we bare our scars?
Like many of the inmates’ coronavirus made of us, I took in a lot of podcasts, books, radio, and TV shows about Manchester to pass what felt like limitless time. I found no new stories. Oasis, Haçienda, Factory Records, Madchester, Man United Treble Winning Season. The same talking heads, telling the same stories, about the same period. All significant cultural events and people, all things that I revel in and celebrate as a Mancunian, yet they didn’t fully represent the city. It wasn’t where I grew up. The Manchester portrayed by those musicians, footballers, and actors wasn’t my home. There needs to be a skewed narrative to suit a documentary’s purpose. But to look at my city through this lens distorts how it is received to those that lived outside of the city. I asked a few friends and put a call out on Twitter for reflections on what Manchester meant for people who didn’t grow up here.

As a kid growing up in the Midlands, Manchester was this mythical distant land – and everything we knew about it came from Oasis and the Gallagher brothers. We assumed everyone strutted about in parkas and City shirts, telling everyone how ‘mad fer it’ they were. It felt like a city where real people could become superstars, and the party went on until morning. When I finally visited the city in the late nineties, I wasn’t ready and found it too big – unlike Nottingham where I was living at the time which I knew like the back of my hand. Even walking from Piccadilly to Whitworth Street seemed to take an age, never mind trying to get my head round the different quarters and the surrounding boroughs, never mind working out how to get a tram or a night bus. I just assumed Manchester was like what I saw on TV – namely Oasis and Shameless – until I moved here.

– Bill Rice, sports editor, BBC Radio Manchester

I was in Year 8/9 at school in very boring and quiet Oxfordshire … I remember going to London for the day and seeing the video for ‘Live Forever’ on a big screen and I was totally spellbound with them
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[Oasis] and then Manchester. The idea of this big, exciting, but totally unapologetic place.

– Linda Walker, journalist, BBC Radio 4

The Oasis thing felt like a weird boorish boozy cult, football culture crashing head first into music culture and inevitably presenting as less than both. Luckily Manchester is diverse and so there has always been a strong counter-culture.

– @thefibreman, Twitter response

Manchester always felt dangerous, seedy and yet cool as fook. I got mugged in Manchester and took down an alleyway, the police asked me if I wanted to do a line up, I wouldn’t have recognised them anyway as I was too drunk. I was still back in Manchester the next weekend. Because that was the pull of the place, the shopping centres, the mysterious labyrinth of Affleck’s Palace with a million pin badges to wade through, back alley pubs that were once toilets and others that were still toilets, jukeboxes, pool tables and a collective spirit of the people, whether you were indie, emo, goth, towny. It didn’t matter, everyone was equally accepted as they were ridiculed in that fair city.

– @mrseed2022, Twitter response

It felt prior to Oasis, that nothing happened up here – and by ‘up here’ I meant the North – and although Newcastle is a few hours’ drive from Manchester, it felt that things were pulled closer for the very first time. It was the first time you could hear songs and things that you could relate to. I’m not going to over-egg it and say that me and my friends were walking around pretending that we were Mancs – it wasn’t like that – but it showed us that there was a possibility there. That everything didn’t have to come out of London.

– Andy Bell, journalist

At that formative age – sixteen, seventeen, eighteen – in your life, you just don’t think about other cities. I don’t think that I’d ever thought about Manchester until Oasis came on the scene, because I had a
really strong relationship with Oasis in terms of their music, and I remember listening to *Definitely Maybe* for the first time and it wasn’t about Manchester; that album, it was about growing up and wanting to be something you’re not, and I think that was the first album that spoke to me as a person, and I sat up and went ‘someone has written music for me here’. Culturally, I saw no real difference between what was happening in Manchester to what was happening in Camberley, Surrey at the time, which couldn’t have been two more different places in the nineties. Camberley was all commuter belt, bankers and it was a relatively wealthy area and I’ve seen images of Manchester looking back around the time of the IRA bomb; it wasn’t the shiniest, brightest of places. I wasn’t drawn to Oasis because they were from Manchester, or even because of who they were as individuals, because that very much came later. The music came first for me, but the more I became aware of them as individuals – and they were these big personalities, and they had the Manchester thing, that was kind of what they shouted about. That then did become Manchester. So it was the swagger, it was the attitude, it was the bucket hat, it was the little round glasses, it was the parka jackets. That became, for me, exactly what Manchester was at the time. Before I moved here in 2000, it felt like a city with a buzz, a city that was developing and growing. It had this sort of creative exciting culture around it, and it had a bit of edge as well. And I think that’s important when you’re looking at creativity as a drawing point. Because if you’re safe, and you’re happy, and you’re in a bubble without anything challenging you then you’re not going to push against that. And that’s where good creativity comes from, it comes from when you’ve got to overcome an obstacle, battle something or manoeuvre around something. That’s where it comes from. So for a city to have that sort of spark, it needs that sort of edge, it needs that sort of spikiness to it, and Manchester definitely had that. And I don’t mean creativity in terms of just the art, music or culture. Something that flows through the city is the creativity from the grafters who are looking at entrepreneurial ways to make business or opportunities, and I think that’s really cool.

– Jim Salveson, XS Manchester
In the mid- to late nineties I hadn’t travelled far outside my hometown of Southampton. We had no cool bands and no culture to speak of. Thanks to bands like Oasis, the Smiths, the Charlatans and the Stone Roses, and TV programmes like *The Word* with Terry Christian and *TFI Friday* with Chris Evans, we southerners put Manchester on a bit of a pedestal. We liked the humour and the swagger. This resulted in a focus on, and a veneration of, Manc culture and Manc celebrities to the detriment of others. I tended to group bands and celebrities into two categories: ‘From Manchester’ or ‘From somewhere-otherwise-than-Manchester’. Even massive bands like Blur – I vaguely knew they were from London but it wasn’t a point of interest. In fact, I couldn’t tell you where any of my other favourite nineties’ bands were from if it wasn’t Manchester.

– Claire Moruzzi, content editor

Oasis clouds all. These aren’t wrong or right views; they are interpretations made from media representations, celebrity triumphs, or brief city visits. They don’t paint the whole picture. An omnipresent perspective is impossible, but that doesn’t mean we shouldn’t add more dimensions to the narrative. The past, like landscapes, is also best viewed from a distance. Only when we travel in years between events do we begin to look at things differently. It is never within the moment that we know what it means, but only after it has occurred. It is only then stories stand out against the transparency of time. But who chooses which stories are important, which moments, and how we remember them? Oasis had left Manchester by 1996, yet where are the stories of Mancunians that stood in their shadow? What stories did they have to tell? What tales haven’t we told? I looked back once more at my own life and asked myself how had the city shaped me? How had Manchester formed my identity? The more I looked at life events through the lens of the city, the more it became apparent how intrinsic Manchester had been to my growing up. The drink, the drugs, the songs, the sport, the crime, and the culture had moulded me more than I’d imagined. I began
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picking at the threads of these themes and realised so much of this period remains undocumented, overlooked, dismissed. I wondered if I told parts of my life through these themes, could it tell an alternative story of Manchester? But my story alone wouldn’t be enough. It would be one more person telling a single account. It would be a bold task, but could I possibly collect different impressions simultaneously? Would that give a better portrayal, if not a full one? Would it even be possible? I wanted to find out.

There are countless great books on Manchester, but few first-hand accounts of what it was like living here at the turn of the millennium, and none that did what I wanted to attempt: take a story told in broad strokes and rewrite it with a fine paintbrush, held by multiple people. What was it like to be a musician trying to do something different to the mainstream? Did the IRA bomb kickstart the regeneration? How was Manchester’s nightlife after the Haçienda? Why did Manchester seem to be the home of the binge drinkers of the country? What was it like to be involved in gang wars? How did the city’s school system fail its youth? What is a Mancunian, if not the stereotype? These were questions that I wanted to find answers to. In total I interviewed 106 people for this book, a mixture of names you will know and some that you won’t; people that didn’t want their names printing and names that have been changed for legal purposes. There are names that didn’t make the final cut, a decision based on editorial reasoning, but their input still had an influence, their voices just as authentic, and many opened new lines of questioning as the contributors grew. Collating the stories of other Mancunians has opened my eyes beyond what I knew of my city. We shared the city simultaneously; we may have shared similar experiences, but how we receive them is always in isolation.

The vignettes of my life that run throughout are of My Manchester. The kind people that contributed parts of their story
show us their Manchester. Some views may contrast, some may concur, but they are all the points of view of people with a real lived experience of the city at the time. Bound together, I hope these collected impressions of Manchester at the turn of the century give you a portrait of what it was like to be there, then.

Thank you for taking the time to read it.

David Scott