Manchester Black and Blue

ANDREW CROMPTON

Abstract
In living memory, Manchester was black from air pollution caused by burning coal. Today only fragments of that blackness remain, although its former presence can be inferred from precautions taken at the time to protect buildings from soot. At Canal Street in Miles Platting the colouring caused by consuming coal was blue, the result of contamination with a by-product of the purification of coal-gas. It is argued that because the blue street can be seen as beautiful then so can the black walls, which should be treated as an authentic part of the city. The most significant remains are 22 Lever Street and the inner courtyards of the Town Hall, which ought to be preserved in their dirty state.

Keywords: Manchester Town Hall; pollution; coal-gas; Prussian blue; Roger Hiorns; Hardman and Holden

Introduction

A future archaeologist digging in Manchester will uncover a layer of soot fading out after 1956 when the Clean Air Act restricted the burning of coal. Unlike Troy, where a layer of carbon records its sacking, in Manchester the blackness is a record of its period of industrial greatness. Only when that ended were large areas of the city razed. As the surviving buildings have been cleaned, there is now hardly anything left to show that, within living memory, not only had the city been black but it had been famous for it.

The cleaning of the black cities of Britain took upwards of forty years and met with no opposition of which I am aware. It involved, in effect, stripping every surface built before the 1960s. What was removed was real enough for us to be able to ask, 'Where is it now?' The sooty coat, mixed with powdered masonry, was washed down the drains, and in Manchester's case deposited in Mersey estuary silt, having completed its journey from the coalfields in less than two centuries. For a city to change its colour is surely remarkable, and because cleaned buildings were often acclaimed as being like new — indeed, in a sense they really were new — the few corners of darkness that remain can be considered genuine remnants of the old city. An estimate of what remains follows. There is surprisingly little of it, and for that reason alone, laying aside questions of beauty, it is precious and ought to be protected.

Manchester Black

During the nineteenth century, as if the conditions inside a coal mine were reproducing themselves on the surface, new buildings could go black in as little as three

years and soot obscured the faces of illuminated city clocks.[1] The darkest part of town was around Victoria Station where the blackness was like velvet. While pavements and roads were worn clean by traffic, walls became encrusted with soot which became thick enough to grow small crystals that sparkled like mica. The period of maximum blackness occurred from about 1945 to 1960, when macadam roads and black walls coexisted. This was the furthest reach of the forces of darkness. After that, Manchester's switch from black to colour, like the roughly contemporary change from black-and-white to colour television, was seen as inevitable and something in which the whole community could share.

The fact that better suburbs were always upwind is persuasive that no one ever really wanted someone else's smoke if it could be avoided. Why was it tolerated for so long? The history of smoke pollution has been the subject of several studies, notably those of Mosley[2] and Thorsheim,[3] who in describing how a fossil fuel produced effects, seen and unseen, that took many years to be understood and controlled, deal with issues that have an obvious relevance today. They show that the modern view of soot as matter out of place has been the culmination of decades of campaigning work by scientists and pressure groups, a process depicted by Thorsheim as inventing pollution. The debate was not one-sided. There seemed to be no alternative to using coal, and the daily smoke cycle with tall chimneys creating an updraft that pulled in fresh air from the countryside resembled a natural phenomenon. For most people, smoking chimneys were a price that had to be paid for the prosperity they brought, and petty restrictions on black factory smoke intended to promote efficient combustion were as far as the authorities were willing to go to stop it.[4] The fact that the most damaging pollution came from cheery domestic fires providing ventilation and comfort was overlooked; only the poor burnt smokeless fuel like coke.[5] Nor was it so obvious that it was unhealthy in an era when it was normal to smoke tobacco, although some of the arguments in its favour, for example that it was an antiseptic remedy for disease-carrying miasma, carry little weight today.

Manchester's microclimate was so remarkable that early on it became the subject of scientific study. In the late 1840s the pioneer environmental chemist Robert Angus Smith established that burning coal made rain acidic — at that time fog tasted of sulphuric acid and made your eyes stream. Black snow fell in Manchester. In fact, because the flakes absorbed pollutants, snow could be used to estimate

[1] Catherine Bowler and Peter Brimblecombe, 'Environmental Pressures on Building Design and Manchester's John Rylands Library', *Journal of Design History*, 13:3 (2000), 181.
[2] Stephen Mosley, *The Chimney of the World: A History of Smoke Pollution in Victorian and Edwardian Manchester* (Cambridge: White Horse Press, 2001).
[3] Peter Thorsheim, *Inventing Pollution: Coal, Smoke, and Culture in Britain since 1800* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2006).
[4] Mosley, *The Chimney of the World*, 50–4.
[5] Stephen Mosley, 'Fresh Air and Foul: The Role of the Open Fireplace in Ventilating the British Home, 1837–1910', *Planning Perspectives*, 18:1 (2003), 3.

the amount of soot in the atmosphere, and in 1902 it was calculated that thirty tons a day were falling on the city.[6] One reads in amazement that when the first urban parks were built in the 1840s all the trees in them died, and that in the early nineteenth century the city was tree free.[7] Even in Edwardian times, tubs of plants used to brighten the city in summer had to be rehabilitated in a municipal nursery in Cheshire for the rest of the year.[8] Three-quarters of sunlight never reached the ground, and the only animals that could survive were those, like rats and pigeons, that lived off man. They became darker in the city than in the surrounding countryside, giving rise to Manchester's own creation myth: the famous peppered moth which changed its colour to improve its camouflage.[9] Doubtless this industrial melanism was the model for Tolkien, who portrayed Mirkwood as a place where everything, including trees, squirrels and moths, was black.

The blackness gave the city the sort of unity that comes from building with a single material. In other circumstances this might have been considered architecturally interesting, but at the time it was treated as disgraceful. Coal can glisten, but coke is matt black. In *Hard Times* Dickens turns Manchester into Coketown, 'a town of unnatural red and black like the painted face of a savage. . . . It had a black canal in it, and a river that ran purple with ill-smelling dye.'[10] In its industrial pomp, Manchester was sometimes seen as sublime, as, for example, when it was compared to the mouth of hell or an active volcano, but it was never considered beautiful.[11] Even so, the painterly qualities of a smoky atmosphere were recognized in Manchester by Valette and in London by Monet, and to go out in fog was an adventure in a city transformed.[12] No one, however, seems to have thought it worth preserving.

The Remains of Black Manchester

Does anything remain of the infernal city? The permanent effects of the smoke are surprisingly slight. One lasting influence may be on men's fashion. Black clothes have often been regarded as symbols of both wealth and self-effacing invisibility.[13] By the mid-nineteenth century, men of industry all wore black, sometimes with tall hats like the chimneys that gave the city its colour. Men, more so than women, dress to match their environment, and in the city repeat dark colours and

[6] Mosley, *The Chimney of the World*, 30–5.
[7] John Roberton, to the Committee on the Health of Towns, 1840, referred to Manchester as having no public park. Quoted in Arthur Pollard, '"Sooty Manchester" and the Social-Reform Novel 1845–1855', *British Journal of Industrial Medicine*, 18:2 (1961), 88.
[8] Mosley, *The Chimney of the World*, 39.
[9] Jerry A. Coyne, 'Not Black and White', review of Michael E.N. Majerus, *Melanism: Evolution in Action* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), in *Nature*, 5 November 1998, 35.
[10] Charles Dickens, *Hard Times* (1854), start of Chapter 5 ('The Key-Note').
[11] Mosley, *The Chimney of the World*, 21.
[12] Thorsheim, *Inventing Pollution*, 14, 29.
[13] John Harvey, *Men in Black* (London: Reaktion Books, 1995), 35, 52, 64.

Plate 1 Manchester Town Hall, 1957, in its true colour. Edwin Smith / RIBA Library Photographs Collection.

rectangular shapes, perhaps brightened with a dash of colour like a pillar-box red tie.[14] Clothes became more colourful as the city lightened, and the hat vanished along with the chimney. Outwardly, we clothe ourselves in more varied ways than

[14] Alison Lurie, *The Language of Clothes* (London: Bloomsbury, 1981), 101–4.

fifty years ago, leaving a social as well as an urban unity behind us, along with the image of Manchester as a tough, masculine city.[15] Even so, black is still the dominant colour, giving a visual link to our dark past.

If classical architecture is suited to clear light, and Gothic to pale light, it might be possible to imagine, by extension, an architecture of gloom and smoke. Sadly, no such style developed, except perhaps where the forms were bold and strong, around the Castlefield viaducts, for example. Here, there are places where a sense of power and sublimity has been lost because of cleaning. Until the end of the last century, the bridges at the bottom of Liverpool Road, seen from the River Irwell, had a Piranesian grandeur that was amplified by shafts of light penetrating drooling filth, but it has all been swept away now.

The lasting effects of the blackening environment are mostly negative. Observe, for example, how little external polychromy there is in Manchester, a city for which Ruskin's ideal patches of colour with soft outlines derived from nature seem comically inappropriate. The Town Hall exterior, for example, was uniform stone in prudent expectation of the inevitable (**Plate 1**), while the effort expended on two-tone patterning on the slate roof was wasted when it became invisible.[16] The Town Hall's colour is all indoors, in terracotta and tiles that can be scrubbed clean. Parts of its mosaic floor are, rather daringly, white.

Strategies to mitigate the effects of smoke can still be seen. The cosmetic approach of painting brickwork black seems never to have been tried in Manchester as it was in London. Architects resisted the corrosive air with impervious materials like the expensive polished granite at the base of the Midland Hotel, or with smooth-faced engineering bricks such as the ubiquitous Accrington Nori.[17] The most common resistant surface was terracotta. From buildings with a few window sills and band courses to those with a full suit, like the old YMCA building on Peter Street, this moulded material was well suited to sculpted details, as can be seen most superbly at the disused fire station on London Road where it was taken over domes. Its colour palette was limited to browns and reds; for something more vibrant a glazed finish was needed. At Victoria Station the magnificent railway map was painted onto glazed bricks.[18] The green tiled walls of the Peveril of the Peak public house on Great Bridgewater Street still have a lurid charm (**Plate 2**). How striking they must have appeared when set against a black background.

Adapting to the darkness involved the inventive maximization of daylight in narrow spaces. Interior light-wells were commonly lined with white glazed bricks, giving service areas the character of a kitchen. Demolition occasionally exposes these previously hidden walls as a flash of white in the city. Some framed buildings

[15] Mosley, *The Chimney of the World*, 87.
[16] Clare Hartwell, *Manchester*, Pevsner Architectural Guides (London: Penguin Books, 2001), 24, 74.
[17] Nori is iron backwards.
[18] Hartwell, *Manchester*, 3.

Plate 2 The Peveril of the Peak public house, Great Bridgewater Street, 2008. Photograph by the author.

became heavily glazed; Canada House is a surviving example.[19] On its Chepstow Street side it has a kind of early curtain walling in which its ceilings step up near the wall, creating a bench under the window on the floor above. This maximizes the height of the glass above the working plane, a detail that was often used in warehouses where goods needed to be inspected under natural light.

The most vigorous scientific defence against the atmosphere was mounted by Basil Champneys at the John Rylands Library on Deansgate, which opened to the public in 1900. Mrs Rylands paid a substantial premium to build in the city centre, where even indoors books became soiled. The Library's walls, in stone chosen for its resistance, step back as they rise to make space for natural light. The building was fitted with an early filtered ventilation system, and its windows, glazed with thick lenses, were kept shut. It was one of the first buildings in Manchester to have electric lighting, powered by on-site gas-engine generators, which showed off the exquisite interior without gaslight fumes. Bookcases had glass doors with velvet seals. Even so, blackness appeared at the top of the vaulting of the Reading Room as early as 1907. In London at the same date, the brick vaults in John Bentley's Westminster Cathedral were painted black to pre-empt the same problem. That

[19] Canada House is seen behind the Peveril of the Peak public house in **Plate 2**. The Chepstow Street elevation is on the other side.

precautions like these were insufficient to hold the soot back is proof enough of the trouble that pollution caused, and by then there was wide recognition that the problem would eventually require smoke abatement.[20]

It was not until the twentieth century that architects used black as a colour of choice. In the 1930s black appeared in fashionable interiors such as Tilly Losch's bathroom by Paul Nash.[21] Lutyens, who often used black and white in contrast, had his own study walls painted matt black.[22] In Manchester the glamorous Daily Express Building by Owen Williams (1939), like its companions in London and Glasgow, had curtain walling in glossy vitreous black, which both matched and resisted the soot. Hugh Casson chose ribbed black granite panels for the District Bank on King Street (1966–69). Both these buildings now stand out from their surroundings. The colour of the Daily Express Building is ironic, but Casson, who praised the city's velvet blackness in a lecture at the time, must surely have expected his building to distinguish itself eventually.[23] If so, he created a delayed-action piece of architecture.

Designing for pollution continued to be an issue for architects until the early 1970s, recently enough for many modern buildings to have been affected. Pure white forms like those at UMIST became soiled in an uneven way because they did not have sills and projecting courses to throw water off their walls. During the 1960s, architects developed methods of controlling surface drainage to improve the weathering of concrete buildings that did not compromise their modernist appearance. A late example of these techniques is Kantorowich and Hanson's 1970 Architecture and Planning Building at the University of Manchester.[24] On the assumption that it would get dirty, its exposed aggregate concrete panels and open joints were designed to avoid uneven cleaning by rain. It has the distinction of being one of the last buildings in England whose form is a direct response to atmospheric pollution.

Manchester Blue

The coal that did the damage was used in two ways. It was burnt for heat and it was used to make gas that was burnt for light. These two processes marked the city in different ways: burning coal for heat turned Manchester black; burning gas for light, in a single freakish incident, turned a street blue. Gas was made by distilling coal in iron retorts. Its volatile components, gas and tar, were drawn off for

[20] Bowler and Brimblecombe, 'Environmental Pressures on Building Design', 183.

[21] Recreated for an exhibition held at the Hayward Gallery, 25 October 1979–13 January 1980. See Arts Council of Great Britain, *Thirties: British Art and Design before the War* (London: Arts Council of Great Britain, 1979), 185–6.

[22] As seen in the reconstruction in the Hayward Gallery exhibition, 1981.

[23] Personal communication from John H.G. Archer, who attended the lecture.

[24] The building was renamed Humanities Bridgeford Street when the University of Manchester merged with UMIST in 2004.

sale, leaving coke, almost pure carbon that had foamed in the heat like an aerated chocolate bar. In its raw state coal-gas contains hydrogen sulphide, an obnoxious gas whose maximum concentration was controlled by law.[25] This was removed by an elegant chemical process. A small amount of air was added to the gas, which was then blown through room-sized boxes of iron oxide powder that drew out the sulphur in a two-stage reaction:

$$FeO + H_2S = FeS + H_2O$$
$$2FeS + O_2 = 2FeO + 2S$$

Acting like a catalyst, the iron oxide first picks up, then releases, the sulphur, which collected in the boxes. Unfortunately, the iron oxide did not last forever; it was gradually poisoned by cyanides in the gas and converted into blood-red iron thiocyanate. This slowly accumulated as an inert contaminant until the box's power to extract sulphur was exhausted.

This iron thiocyanate had a value. Both Bradford Road and Rochdale Road Gas Works in east Manchester sold what they made to Hardman and Holden Limited in Canal Street. This company's main business was making industrial chemicals from tar liquor, but until about 1920 it also converted iron thiocyanate into Prussian blue.[26] This intensely coloured dye was first synthesized in the early eighteenth century — colloids derived from it are the basis for the blue in blueprints and laundry bluing.[27] Ruskin starts a lesson on how to lay down a watercolour wash by advising his students to 'Get a shilling cake of Prussian blue.'[28] He might have been surprised to learn that parts of his paintbox were made by refining gas works waste. Prussian blue is iron hexacyanoferrate, but despite its dangerous-sounding name is not poisonous.[29] It is, however, profoundly insoluble and lingers wherever it is made. Because of this, Canal Street, alongside the factory entrance, was coloured with blue dye being walked out on the workers' boots. Perhaps hands were involved as well, as I remember even the walls around the factory entrance being tinted, the scene appearing as if through a coloured filter.

A few years ago the factory and its neighbourhood were pulled down as part of the renewal of east Manchester, so severing a poetic link to our industrial past. A few fragments of the factory remain. Parts of its stained walls, where they run alongside the Rochdale Canal, are still standing (**Plate 3**), but what is left of the blue cobbles and flags lies under tarmac. Canal Street, renamed Coleshill Street, is

[25] It was smelly, poisonous and burned to create an acidic vapour that tarnished metal.

[26] The Hardman and Holden factory was connected to both gas works by pipes to receive tar liquor. Vertical rather than horizontal gas retorts were used after 1920, which produced fewer cyanides, bringing the production of Prussian blue to a close.

[27] Prussian blue (PB) is a chemical without an exact formula. Roughly, it is $Fe_7(CN)_{18}(H_2O)_X$, where x is between 14 and 16.

[28] *The Works of John Ruskin*, Vol. 15: *The Elements of Drawing*, eds E.T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn (London: George Allen, 1904), Exercise VII:24.

[29] In fact, it is an antidote to many poisons including, surprisingly, potassium cyanide.

Plate 3 Blue stains on the ruined walls of the Hardman and Holden works, 2008. Photograph by the author.

forgotten.[30] Today it is easy to have the place to yourself, and walk through piles of rubble that are still flecked with lumps of deep blue.

The process that created the dye has a sort of mythic quality: good iron draws the bad sulphur out of the gas in a continuous cycle, but at the cost of a little of it being sacrificed and turned red before being resurrected by a chemical process that turns it an indestructible blue. Fanciful though this may be, rational industrial processes can often be given an imaginative reading; more or less everyone thinks that petrochemical plants are like cities of the dead, that steam trains are alive and that gas-holders are like circular temples. The blue street has possibilities of this sort. In many ways it resembles *Seizure*, an artwork by Roger Hiorns in Harper Road, London, that attracted large crowds and was nominated for the 2009 Turner Prize. Hiorns specializes in using unusual materials such as bubbles, fire, detergent and perfume. At Harper Road, with Price & Myers engineers, he turned a 1960s council bedsit into a watertight tank using plywood sheets, before filling it with a hot, concentrated copper sulphate solution. After two weeks the liquor was drained, leaving every surface coated with deep blue crystals. It was opened to the public, who were allowed to tour the property wearing wellingtons but were instructed not to touch the walls, which in this case were actually poisonous. The results were

[30] Canal Street was renamed Coleshill Street prior to 1961.

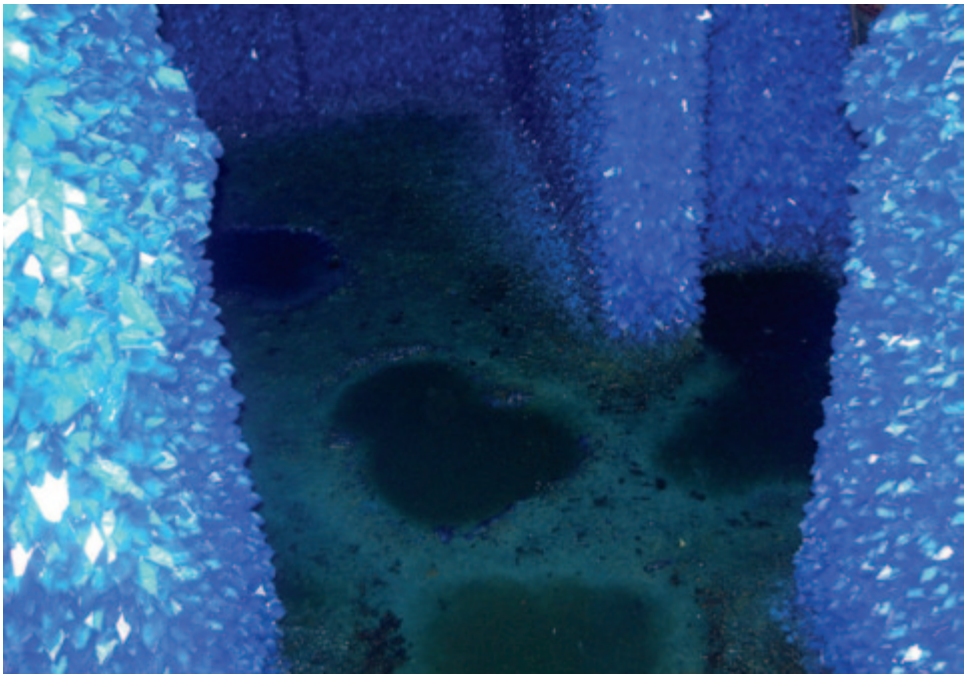

Plate 4 *Seizure* by Roger Hiorns: copper sulphate crystals cover a council bedsit, Harper Road, London, 2008. Photograph by the author.

other-worldly and deeply blue. It had something of the quality of a wreck grown over with coral, or perhaps a cave of wonders (**Plate 4**). There are many ways in which it can be described; as a conversation piece it was a rich seam.

Hiorns said that he wanted his blue house to be something transgressive and vulgar that had generated itself, a description that could equally well be applied to Manchester's blue street.[31] Although the work of many feet, the Canal Street stain was unintended. Lacking either a formal or a final cause, it resembles those found objects onto which we can project our unexpressed thoughts.

Manchester Cleaned

Cleaning was a violent act that used acids and abrasive jets to strip the surface off buildings. It did not cost much to set up in business and was thirsty work; the temptation was always there to turn up the pressure. Who would ever notice once the scaffolding was taken down? For an architect to accept too low a price was to invite trouble. Good firms experimented to find the softest abrasive that would work, even down to talcum powder, and by the 1980s it had become, belatedly, a professionally organized business whose techniques are now part of the conservation

[31] James Lingwood, 'The Impregnation of an Object', in *Seizure* [exhibition catalogue] (London: Artangel, 2008), back page.

Plate 5 *Piccadilly Plaza*, by Arthur Shearing ARIBA, 1960. Reproduced courtesy of Manchester City Council.

architect's repertoire.[32] Sadly, damaged stonework was by then everywhere to be seen in the city. The formerly crisp stonework on the Royal Bank of Scotland in St Ann's Square was blunted by cleaning; even the pulpit inside Edgar Wood's Long Street Methodist Church in Middleton lost its sharpness.[33]

With the cleaning came a new image for the city. Except for its medieval core, Manchester grew up with coal and so lacked a prelapsarian state of purity to which it could be restored.[34] **Plate 5** shows how things were meant to go in a post-coal age Manchester. This drawing by Arthur Shearing appeared on the front cover of a multi-lingual brochure depicting Manchester as a destination for international businessmen.[35] Featuring the proposals for Piccadilly Gardens in 1960, it offers a snapshot, as it were, of the city in mid-moult, in which by a trick of perspective the clean modern buildings seem to overwhelm and physically diminish the old black ones.

[32] Nicola Ashurst, *Cleaning Historic Buildings*, Vol. 2: *Cleaning Materials and Processes* (London: Donhead, 1994), 156–7.
[33] John H.G. Archer, personal communication.
[34] Elain Harwood, 'White Light/White Heat: Rebuilding England's Provincial Towns and Cities in the Sixties', in *The Sixties: Life, Style, Architecture*, eds Elain Harwood and Alan Powers, Twentieth Century Architecture 6 (London: Twentieth Century Society, 2002), 63–4.
[35] *Manchester* (Manchester: Municipal Information Bureau, 1960).

Cleaned buildings were often described as being like new, which in many ways they were. The act of cleaning supposed that what was attached to a wall, be it paint, graffito, advertisement or dirt, was not really part of it, although a more social view of architecture might well include them. As it is, these superficial things serve to date buildings in old photographs, and so when a building is cleaned it is taken from the stream of history and spoilt as a document of the past. Of course, the removal of elements added throughout a building's development was just what Morris and Ruskin objected to in restoration, and was what led to the formation of the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings (SPAB) in 1877, which Morris himself referred to as 'Anti-Scrape'. Yet Manchester was not protected. In fact, it was scraped very thoroughly indeed, creating something that was, in the sense that Morris used the word, a forgery. Still, I do not suppose that he would have objected; in his fantasy of the future, *News from Nowhere* (1890), he referred to 'a place called Manchester, which has now disappeared'.[36]

What is the Oldest Building in Manchester?

It follows that what is really old on Manchester's streets must be dirty. This raises a question: 'What is the oldest building in Manchester that you can touch?' Manchester has been resurfaced on the horizontal as well as the vertical plane. Cobbles have been covered by tarmac, and old flags, like old pennies, have vanished along with the paraphernalia of the coal age such as gaslights, coal-holes, cast-iron kerbs, tall chimneys, chimney pots and coal-bunkers. Places you expect to be black turn out, in fact, to have been cleaned when you go and look.

The cleaning has been so thorough that even dirty brickwork is now hard to find. County Street, facing the Manchester Town Hall Extension, is unclean, as are a few buildings around Blossom Street in the Northern Quarter. Stone received the smoke better than brick. With stone you can pretend that the blackness is a through colour, as if it were carved from solid soot. Black stone is now rare, and this seems to be as much the case in Liverpool and Leeds as it is in Manchester. Bits of uncleaned stone of a certain age can be found in cemeteries.[37] Manchester General Cemetery, at Queen's Park, Harpurhey, has some old patches. Some blackened stone can be found outside city centres on gritstone spires, where the expense of erecting scaffolding has saved the stain even if the rest of the church has been cleaned.[38] In central Manchester there is a small piece of genuine black stone inside the Cathedral on the inner faces of the tower, where the flanges of its high arch were gouged to receive a cement finish in Victorian times. This render was removed in

[36] William Morris, *News from Nowhere*, ed. David Leopold (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 96.

[37] In Liverpool see William Mackenzie's black pyramid in the graveyard of St Andrew's Church, Rodney Street.

[38] The black spire of Trinity St David's, Leeds, makes a wonderful contrast to the nearby white tower of the university. See also St Philip's, Litherland, Sefton, and Christ Church, Heaton Norris, Stockport.

Plate 6 22 Lever Street, Manchester, 2010. Photograph by the author.

about 1870, and what can be seen on those pock-marked surfaces is genuine late Victorian soot laid down after that date.[39]

Doubtless there are hidden cavities where undisturbed soot lingers, and so discoveries can be expected. In 2010 the removal of lettering fixed to a brick wall on Dale Street exposed the sooty shadows where the cleaning never reached. An uncanny message from the past, PUGH DAVIES & Co Ltd (an old textile company), can now be seen written in soot.[40] In Manchester, to the best of my knowledge, 22 Lever Street is now the only remaining, complete, uncleaned building facing a street (**Plate 6**), and it ought to be listed for that reason. Its sharp, black stonework is transportingly old fashioned.

[39] It was so dark inside the Cathedral in Victorian times that its gaslights were never extinguished. See Revd Thomas Perkins, *The Cathedral Church of Manchester* (London: George Bell & Sons, 1901), 24.
[40] At the junction of Dale Street and Little Lever Street.

The Town Hall Yards

It is unlikely that coal will ever again be burnt so carelessly as it was in Britain in the nineteenth century, and it follows that black cities will be made no more. What a pity then that Manchester did not retain a 'Black Quarter'. A block or two of blackened buildings, even rain-washed rather than the original velvet, would have been a thing of beauty and a boon to art and tourism. In the language of fashion, black is ever new; what better colour for a city could there be? Fortunately, there is still one splendid piece of original blackness alongside which the other examples pale.

Plate 7 East yard, Manchester Town Hall, 2010. Photograph by the author.

The most significant remnants of Manchester's dark past are the three inner courtyards at Manchester Town Hall, which, when the exterior was cleaned in 1967, were left untouched in order to save money. One of them can be glimpsed through the Lloyd Street gate, and the others from windows inside the building. As time passes they are being slowly lightened by rain, although their patina is perhaps all the more beautiful for this change. The north and south yards, at the front of the building, are trapezoidal, and on plan look like (blackened) lungs. The north courtyard has been damaged by the insertion of a modern kitchen, an intrusion that has been likened to filling in the hole in a Henry Moore sculpture.[41]

The largest yard, the east yard, is the real masterpiece (**Plate 7**). Dressed with white and light grey tiles, this irregular Gothic hole is a picturesque and sooty world of its own. Best of all, you can stand inside it, high up on quarter-circle stone balconies, because Waterhouse, incredibly, takes you briefly outside if you visit the lavatories. The most expensive building in Manchester had outside WCs. Leaning over the old iron balustrade, you can look down on the original cobbles, and with the old corridors seen dimly through the leaded windows there is a perfect lack of modern fittings to be seen, a few parked cars excepted. Take them away and only a whiff of coal dust is needed to complete the illusion of the past.

Seen in the sinister blue light of Canal Street, the Town Hall yards can be recognized as the oldest and most authentic spaces in Manchester. These are the last remnants of King Coal and should be valued for their macabre blackness. Where else in the world can anything like this be found? How fragile they are, what a temptation they offer to be restored and destroyed. Admire while you can these accidental works of art created by keeping the rates low.

[41] Hartwell, *Manchester*, 76 n.