

Birmingham – Of Canals, Balti and Jewellery

England's 'Second City', often referred to as 'Brum' – Birmingham in the U.K., is the most populous British city outside London with an abundance of things to see and do – historic attractions, green spaces, music venues, theatres, art galleries, restaurants and a buzzing nightlife.



Green Birmingham

It evolved from a market town as early as 1166 when Peter de Birmingham rightfully earned the charter to establish a market from King Henry II. There are quite a few interesting and quirky facts about Birmingham that very few are aware of or care to learn about.

Despite being a vibrant, constantly changing city, Birmingham is one of the greenest cities in the United Kingdom and has plenty of parks and open spaces to enjoy and to discover. Interestingly, it has more trees than Paris and more parks than any other European city.

The Birmingham Botanical Gardens and Glasshouses, a 15-acre oasis of delight, is the home of the National Bonsai Collection and an ideal place to soak up the tranquillity of a perfectly English garden. Likewise, the Cannon Hill Park is one of Birmingham's premier parks and has been awarded Green Flag status. With wonderful flowerbeds, lakes, pools and a unique tree collection, it is easy to understand why.

What makes Birmingham even more beautiful are its canals which incidentally surpass those in Venice by about 22 miles. This is not surprising because while Venice does have a very dense network of canals, it is a tiny place compared to Birmingham. Birmingham's Gas Street Basin lies at the hub of England's national waterways network. Located alongside the canal network in Brindleyplace, a waterfront expansion built in the 1990's, is the National Sea Life Centre, home to the world's first 360 degree transparent tubular underwater walk-through tunnel providing an opportunity to come close to marine species.

Birmingham's canals played a very important role in the Industrial Revolution of England when the 'city of thousand trades' was also known as 'the workshop of the world'. Added to this was the excellent railway network which supported the trade. The Curzon Street Station Building by Phillip Hardwick, as counterpart to the notorious Euston Arch in London is one of the important pieces of railway architecture

globally.

Of special mention is the jewellery industry dating back to the early 18th century. The historic Jewellery Quarter, the oldest working area of its kind in Europe has the largest concentration of dedicated jewellers and was described by English Heritage as a 'national treasure'. Almost half of all the jewellery made in the U.K. comes from this 250 year district, home to around 400 specialist retailers selling handcrafted jewellery, clocks and watches.



St. Paul's Square, the only remaining Georgian architecture in Birmingham is located here along with the Pen Room Museum and the Royal Birmingham Society of Artists. Birmingham also has the largest Assay Office in the world which tests and hallmarks precious metal items as required by the Hallmarking Act.

Home of Inventors

Birmingham was home to the Lunar Society, an informal learned society in the Midlands Enlightenment, including industrialists, philosophers and intellectuals who met from 1765–1813 during the full moon, as the extra light made the journey home easier in absence of street lighting. Among the city's notable scientists and inventors are Matthew Boulton, proprietor of the Soho engineering works, Sir Francis Galton, originator of eugenics and important techniques in statistics, Joseph Priestley, who discovered oxygen and James Watt, inventor of the steam engine. F.W Lanchester built the first four-wheeled petrol driven car in Birmingham. Other notable inventions include: gas lighting (William Murdoch), Brylcreem (by the County Chemical Company in Bradford Street in 1928), coinage (Mathew Boulton), the magnetron and Lewis Paul and John Wyatt's first cotton Roller Spinning machine.

The whistle used by Kate Winslet in James Cameron's film Titanic was based on the original whistle used to save people's lives when the ship sunk. It was made by Birmingham based J. Hudson & Company who are still trading today and are the world's largest manufacturer of whistles. On the medical front, U.K.'s first ever hole-in-the-heart operation was done at Birmingham Children's Hospital and the use of X-rays (radiography) was pioneered by John Hall-Edwards from Birmingham.

Birmingham City Council is the biggest local authority in Europe employing twice as many people as the European Commission. The frieze above the Council House main door depicts Britannia rewarding the citizens of Birmingham for their hard work. Birmingham's Central Library is Europe's largest public library lending 8 million books annually. Centenary Square, adjacent to the library is made from over half a

million bricks, hand laid and designed to resemble a Turkish rug. Interestingly, the Great Western Arcade, a mecca for shoppers, was built with an all glass dome which was destroyed in World War II. Romantically located on the canals, the Mailbox and the Bull Ring are home to several designer stores, spas and salons.

Festive and Literary City

Birmingham always boasted of a strong literary heritage. Samuel Johnson stayed here briefly, Arthur Conan Doyle worked in Aston and W. H. Auden grew up in Harborne. J. R. R. Tolkien was brought up here and many locations here as the Moseley bog, Sarehole Mill and Perrott's Folly (one of Birmingham's oldest buildings from 1758 said to be the original inspiration for The Two Towers) inspired him. American writer Washington Irving spent many years here producing several famous works as Bracebridge Hall, The Humorists and A Medley based on the Aston Hall.

Birmingham also has a hugely compelling and eclectic cultural spectrum which hosts a selection of festivals with music, dance and good old-fashioned family entertainment. The annual St. Patrick's Day is the third biggest festival outside Dublin and New York dating back to 1952 with the Irish coming to work here from the 1820's.

Birmingham also hosts the largest Vaisakhi celebration outside Asia to the beats of the Bhangra which is home to 90 per cent of Bhangra music originating in the U.K. Incidentally, Birmingham is the centre for Asian music industry in the U.K.

The world's oldest vocational dance school – Elmhurst School for Dance is in Birmingham. The city is also home to many famous rock bands – Duran Duran, UB40, Black Sabbath, etc., and often described as the birthplace of heavy metal. Odeon Cinema's a British chain of cinema's and the largest in Europe had it first theatre opened here in 1930. As regards sports, the first game of lawn tennis was played in Edgbaston in 1865.

As the most multi-cultural city outside London, gastronomic Birmingham too does not lag behind with its platter of varied global cuisine offered in its many cafés, bars, bistro's, stylish restaurants and wayside eateries. The Balti (bucket in Urdu), a type of curry invented here in the 1970's by the Pakistani immigrants, has rapidly become a favourite, both within and outside the community. The acclaimed 'Balti Triangle' with its 50 odd restaurants and takeaways is renowned for giant naans (leavened, oven-baked flatbread) served with a delicious combination of meat and vegetables in sizzling spices.



Birmingham is also chocoholic heaven. Cadbury World provides insight into the world famous chocolate and the world's biggest Cadbury Shop. The packaging plant here wraps approximately 800 chocolate bars each minute. In this context, George Cadbury's Bourneville Estate (1894) deserves special mention for being one of the earliest planned communities focusing on the social welfare of its workforce. Other famous brands from Birmingham are the HP Sauce with its plant in Aston, the Typhoo tea – the first brand to be sold pre-packaged over the counter and Bird's custard powder formulated and cooked by Alfred Bird in 1837.

Although Birmingham's industrial importance has declined, it has developed into a national commercial centre, being named in 2010 as the third-best place in U.K. for business. Birmingham is a national hub for conferences, retail and events along with an established high-tech, R&D sector, supported by three universities. It is also the second-largest city for economy in the U.K. Birmingham is ranked as a gamma world city by the Globalization and World Cities Research Network. It is the fourth-most visited city by foreigners in the U.K., and is definitely one to feel at home – truly cosmopolitan and full of surprises.

{%C5,6%}

By Ilika Chakravarty

27, Hazeltree Croft, Acocks Green, B27 7XS, U.K.

Academy of Business Management, Tourism and Research, Hosur Road

Bangalore, India

ilika_c@yahoo.com

Date: 2011-04-25

Article link:

<https://www.tourism-review.com/travel-tourism-magazine-birmingham-visitors-explore-the-city-of-jewellery-inventions-and-books-article1505>