

# *St. Michael's Flags & Angel Meadow*



Then and Now





# Welcome



Friends of Angel Meadow and Partners

**The Friend's Of Angel Meadow were set up in January 2004 to campaign for the regeneration of the open space known as St. Michael's Flags and Angel Meadow. The area is situated close to Manchester City Centre, and in regenerating the site, the Friends Group and the Irk Valley Project have created an "Urban Lung" in a busy city centre.**

Cover images: Arrival of the Duchess of Sutherland at Charter St. Ragged School, 1900  
© James Stanhope-Brown

However, the Friends Group were conscious that the history of the site was not forgotten after physical improvements had finished. The group decided that historical interpretative boards on site would help to keep the history alive. The Friends Group also wanted additional resources such as a booklet and CD-ROM about the local history. Funding from the Local Heritage Initiative (LHI) has helped to make this ambition a reality.

The Local Heritage Initiative is a partnership between the Countryside Agency, the Heritage Lottery Fund and the Nationwide Building Society. The LHI awarded a grant to fund 5 historical information boards and 200 copies of a historical booklet and CD-ROM about St. Michael's Flags and Angel Meadow. Included in the grant was provision for the performance of a drama production, which was filmed and is included in the CD-ROM. In carrying out the project, residents past and present have been brought together to compile and write the content for these resources.

With the help of Groundwork Manchester, Salford and Trafford and the Irk Valley Project, this history project has been a great success. The local people have been instrumental in getting the project started and in completing it. We now hope that the items produced will become an important resource for the future in educating about local history.





# Social History

**St. Michael's and Angel Meadow had a notoriously bad reputation until recent times, for example:**

Angus Reach wrote in *The Morning Chronicle* (1849):

*“The lowest, most filthy, most unhealthy and most wicked locality in Manchester is called Angel Meadow. It lies off the Oldham Road, is full of cellars and is inhabited by...bullies, thieves, cadgers, vagrants, tramps and in the very worst states of filth and darkness”*

The area was also described rather unpleasantly in an untitled article by 'The Scout', published in *The Spy* (1893):

*“The dreary wastes of Angel Meadow... When night falls I had rather enter an enemy's camp during the time of war than venture near such dens of infamy and wretchedness. But the poor live here and die here”*

A more thoughtful description was offered by the Reverend Mercer in his book, *Conditions of Life in Angel Meadow* (1897):

*“Do the slums make the dwellers in them, or do the dwellers in them make the slums? The truth, as usual, would seem to lie halfway between these extreme views ... a vast amount of preventable misery and degradation, and its conditions are due, not to the characters and habits of the [area] alone, but obvious defects in social machinery”*

Alleyways off Corporation Street adjoining Angel Meadow, 1908

## Population

- The 1881 census showed 1,091 inhabited dwellings – 1,023 of them having less than five rooms that were all “unsanitary and infested with vermin”.
- The death rate of Angel Meadow, based upon calculations for the years 1888 to 1890, was 50.9 per thousand per annum. The average for all England during the same period was less than 19.

Written by a Charter Street pupil.....

I once was an arab and lived on the street  
without either stockings or shoes on my feet:

And at night cold and hungry in dirt and in rags  
I have cast myself down and slept on the flags.

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## Railways

Soaring brick viaducts were slung across the Irk Valley during the mid-1800s, adding gloominess and more pollution to the trapped atmosphere below. On top of the railways were the noxious smells from the rivers Irk and Irwell, as well as the Gould Street gas works:

*“The mixture was ladled further by aromas from the tannery, the dyeworks, the iron foundry, the brewery, the tripe works and rotting vegetation from the Smithfield market, all added together with the neighborhood’s fried fish and bad sanitation smells, one would agree that the cauldron of Angel Meadow was indeed a potent brew”*

*(source: Angels from the Meadow by James Stanhope-Brown. 1991)*

## Housing

Angel Meadow was once the lodging house quarter of the city, comprising mainly back-to-back houses with no yard, toilet and no “receptacle of refuse”. Many were not in the best state of repair, as noted by the Reverend Mercer: “My experience is that the very worst houses of this kind are in Deansgate and Angel Meadow...six inches only often separated the beds instead of twelve...the sheets had not been washed for weeks...the beds are full of vermin”  
(source: Conditions of Life in Angel Meadow, 1897)



**'The New Burying Ground', which later became known as 'The Flags', was consecrated in 1787. It was the largest cemetery in Manchester and was used for burying poor people who could not afford a proper funeral. The poor were given little respect compared to the wealthier Mancunians who were buried in the church graveyard. As such, the poor had no ceremonies or headstones to mark their graves.**

Friedrich Engels, famously wrote about a nearby pauper burial ground in his account of the Condition of the Working Classes in England (1844):



# Burial Ground

*“The resting place of the outcast and the superfluous...the partially decayed bodies...were heaped up just as it happened, the piles were driven into newly made graves, so that the water oozed out of the swampy ground, pregnant with putrefying matter, and filled the neighbourhood with the most revolting and injurious gases”*

Engels is explaining the horrifying treatment of the poor even in death. Those buried in Angel Meadow were also shown the same disregard. It is estimated there were over 40,000 bodies in the burying ground. The mass grave comprised a large hole, which became full with coffins that were disrespectfully piled beside and upon one another. When not in use, the pit had to be covered up with planks and locked down at night. This was to deter vermin and other curious passers-by from digging around.



By 1816 the burial ground was full and had to close down. It became an open space that was soon notorious for cock-fighting, bare-knuckle bouts, gambling and other unseemly pursuits. Conditions for the poor became

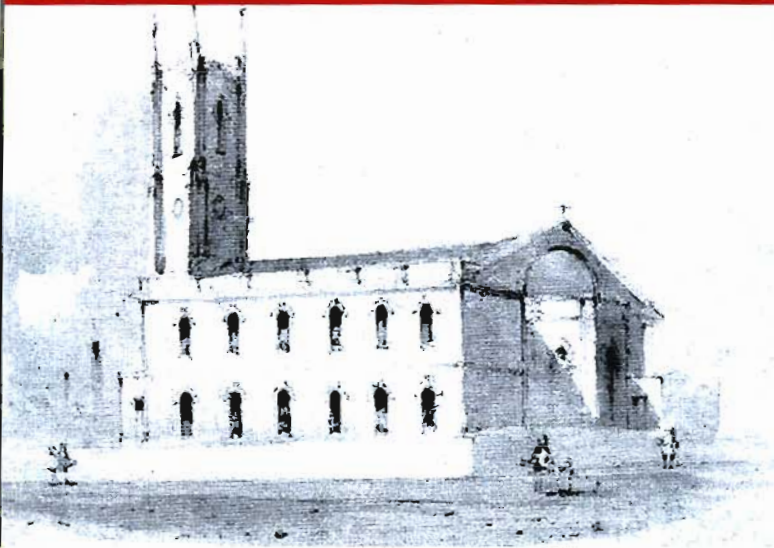


so bad in the 1820s to 1830s that some had to resort to digging up Angel Meadow and selling its soil as fertilizer to nearby farmers. The situation became so bad that in 1855 an act of Parliament was passed which closed similar graveyards and so the burial ground was flagged over, thus preventing any further digging.

Later (circa 1880), a pressure group – the Manchester Open Space Committee – took part in improving the flags by installing children's play equipment, including the famous swings, as painted by LS Lowry







© Manchester Central Library

**St Michael's and All Angels Church was built in 1788 and demolished in 1935. During this time the areas around the church became the most overcrowded and downtrodden parts of Manchester.**

It was originally built as a carriage church for wealthy Mancunians to drive to from the town, or for those who had taken up residence in the more fashionable houses of the area. Two years prior to its construction, however, the Overseers of the Poor of Manchester

had purchased land adjoining the churchyard for use as a Parochial Burial Ground – designed to cater for the high rates of mortality that resulted from overcrowding.

A social commentator said of St. Michael's church in 1816:

*“It is a large brick building with a foundation for a steeple, not erected; nothing remarkable in any point, either on the outside or the inside, except it be for some colossal saints [statues] which outrage nature from the communion recess”*

*(source: A Picture of Manchester by Joseph Aston, 1816)*

A more factual account describes it thus:

*“Erected in 1789, is a plain edifice of brick in the classic style, consisting of a chancel with side chapels, nave with clerestry and a western tower with a pyramidal roof containing a fine bell, cast in 1848”*

*(source: untitled article from Manchester Library, ref: newspaper cuttings – religion – churches – box 498).*

A letter to the Manchester Guardian in 1888 was somewhat more brutal in tone:

*“Why one of the ugliest looking churches in Manchester, situated in one of the most crowded and notorious parts of the city, should have so long enjoyed the pleasant sounding name ‘St Michael’s, Angel Meadow’, is beyond understanding.”*

# St Michael's and All Angels Church



## St. Michael's and All Angels Church Timeline

**1787** – Angel Meadow consecrated by the Bishop of Chester as a cemetery.

**1788** – The church was built by Humphrey Owen, a prominent local citizen and benefactor. It was designed to seat just over a thousand people. Its foundation stone was laid on the 20th May 1788 and consecrated on the 23rd July 1789.

**1854** – The churchyard was closed to further burials.

**1913** – There were a number of *ad hoc* improvements to the church. First, the statues of the 'colossal saints' were thrown out, then the galleries and three-decker pulpit were removed and a new roof provided. Despite this, when the Reverend Jowitt Wilson was appointed rector in 1913, he arrived to find a church heavily in debt, a church door without a handle and cats and kittens in the organ! Nevertheless in his 14 years as rector he did tremendous work –the Parks Committee was persuaded to turn the dismal churchyard into a garden, the tower room was opened for daily prayer and a rectory was built.

In all, Wilson raised £10,000 through shunned bazaars and whist drives. At first he was helped by his friends – when they gradually died, he turned to the Shudehill markets and local restaurants, which he visited every week with a galvanized iron bucket, collecting pennies. He eventually died in 1928 after being an invalid for 9 months. Subsequently, the church was closed in 1935 (source: Manchester Evening News, 18<sup>th</sup> October 1967 article: *Where 'the Ugliest Church in Manchester' Stood*).

**1935** – The church was demolished. One possible reason is that there was no longer any local housing or congregation. Instead, the area was now mainly populated by businesses.



Throughout the years, the area surrounding St. Michael's Flags and Angel Meadow has attracted many famous visitors. Some looked at the area in a positive way, while others were more critical. Their interest however, helps to promote the area we see today as a site of historical importance.



### Friedrich Engels

Friedrich Engels was born in Germany, in 1820, to a successful industrialist. As a young man his father sent him to England to avoid the revolution that was brewing in Germany at that time.

Engels witnessed a shocking amount of poverty in Manchester. This resulted in him writing an account of his experiences in 1844, which was published as the 'Condition of the Working Classes in England'. His account includes a graphic description of Angel Meadow:

*“Angel Meadow was in one of the most notoriously squalid districts; there is a black irony to its name...”*

Engels later collaborated with Karl Marx, which famously resulted in the writing of the Communist Manifesto of 1848.



### Charles Dickens

Dickens briefly worked at the Meadow's Booth's warehouse. He had the sense to leave, but the squalid conditions may have influenced his novel *Hard Times*.



### L S Lowry <sup>1</sup>

Lawrence Stephen Lowry was born on the 1st November 1887 in Stretford. His maternal grandparents lived on Oldham Road, near to St. Michael's Flags. Lowry therefore had links with the area of St. Michael's and Angel Meadow from a young age. After carrying out his artistic studies at the Municipal College of Art in Manchester, Lowry sketched and then painted *St. Michael's and All Angels, Angel Meadow*. There are several more images of Angel Meadow painted by Lowry, including *Britain at Play* and *The Steps, Irk Place*.

### Princess Mary, Duchess of York <sup>2</sup>

Mary, who was born in May 1867, was the great-granddaughter of George III and the second cousin of Queen Victoria. Victoria was keen to see Mary become queen and after the death of Mary's betrothed (the heir to the throne), Victoria convinced her younger son, the next in line, to marry Mary. She then became the Duchess of York. During this time Princess Mary made a visit to the Charter Street Ragged School. Mary later became Queen and was the grandmother of Queen Elizabeth II.