

WHEN ANGEL MEADOW WAS TRULY ANGELIC

The above title immediately prompts the question: Did the area now known as Angel Meadow once possess a quality justifying its “Angel” attribute?

An article published by the Manchester Geographical Society, headed *Angel Meadow: A Study of the Geography of the Irish Settlement in Mid-Nineteenth Century Manchester*, stated on page 11:

The name Angel Meadow, which commemorates a former piece of meadow land by the Irk, was in common use by the nineteenth century, though the boundaries of the territory to which it relates were never clearly specified in any consistent manner.

(reference: http://www.mangeogsoc.org.uk/pdfs/manchestergeographer/TMG_14_1_busteed.pdf)

This raises another question: What area did the original Angel Meadow represent?

Its possible answer would require consulting applicable primary sources, in this case: contemporaneous maps and documents. However, most historical research inevitably involves some interpretation, so it seems advisable to start with the assumption that the prefix “Angel” was attached to an actual – meadow-size – area of land, which indicates the need for maps showing the area prior to it being built upon.

A search on this basis revealed two appropriate maps: The first (labeled Map 1) is a section of *Manchester Street Plan, 1801*, compiled by George Cole and J. Roper and appearing in *The British Atlas* of that year. It shows a street named Angel Street containing a row of houses facing an open field or meadow.

The map below Map 1 and labeled Map 2 is a section from *A Plan of Manchester and Salford*, as surveyed by William Green in the years 1787 to 1794.

In both maps, Angel Street and St. Michael's Church – both established in or around 1789 – are clearly shown. Moreover, Map 2 map indicates a proposal for street-building and other developments across the indicated meadow.

Map 1



MAP 2



Usefully, Map 1 shows an unrestricted area of land extending from Angel Street. Its area is delineated by a continuous line of hedges enclosing what could readily be interpreted as meadow-land.

This prompts a further question: What view did the elevated position of Angel Street enable?

An indication of Angel Street's surrounds and what could be viewed is offered in a book with the title: *The Manchester Man*, by Mrs. G. L. Banks, published in 1896.

On page 4, the author states:

...in 1799, from one end of Millgate to the other, the dwellers by the waterside looked across the stream on green and undulating uplands, intersected by luxuriant hedgerows...

Millgate is shown in the left-hand corner of Map 2, and the view from this would be towards the area known as Red Bank.

On page 44, the author describes a summer walk enjoyed by the principle characters in the book. This involved the gathering of wildflowers on their way home:

...summer walks seldom extended beyond Collyhurst Clough and quarries, or Smedley Vale, or through the fields to Cheetham Hill... they came back laden with flowers down Red Bank and over Scotland Bridge, to their respective yards in Long Millgate.

Therefore, those enjoying Angel Street's elevated position would have a view across their open meadow, which extended to Red Bank's fields and a goodly length of the Irk's valley – with its meadows, fields and hedge-rows.

The beauty of the valleys formed by Manchester's rivers is mentioned in James Wheeler's book *Manchester: Its political, Social And Commercial History, Ancient And Modern* – published in 1836.

On Page 257, the author mentions the river-views seen in the year 1804:

...the fertile valleys... formed a landscape which never fails to create an admiration that will reiterate as often as the eye looks over the fascinating picture.



The above illustration appears opposite page 212 of the book *A Description of the Country from Thirty to Forty Miles Round Manchester*, by J. Aikin – published in 1795. The book states:

The annexed view of Manchester is taken from Kersall-moor... The situation affords a pleasing landscape, for the foreground, enlivened by the beautiful windings of the Irwell.

(Kersall-moor would be what is now known as Lower Kersal.)

The illustration indicates the eye-catching scenery immediately around what was then the small town of Manchester. This type of landscape would, it is reasonable to assume, include that containing the River Irk, and would, therefore, be almost on the “doorstep” of Angel Street. And even the presence of what would be water-powered mills on the banks of the Irk in the latter part of the 1700s could enhance that view.

For instance, *A Picture of Manchester*, by Joseph Aston – published in 1816 – claims that the scenery in the immediate vicinity of the town could offer pleasure for a variety of reasons. On page 223, the author remarks:

But it is not always the finest buildings, or the most admired situations, which give the highest pleasure to the mind. There is a species of picturesque which does not altogether depend on nature; and the whimsical and the antique often afford appropriate gratification. [Those who] delight in the former would be paid for their trouble if they were to examine that part of Manchester called Gibraltar, (a labyrinth of cottages situated on the banks of the Irk, near Scotland-bridge,) and the home scenery of that river; particularly near the Corn-mills...

An examination of both the offered maps indicate that the “picturesque” view the author mentions would have been readily seen for the elevated position of Angel Street.

Jacqueline Roberts, consulting various historical references held in the Manchester Central Library Archives Department, authenticates this picturesque perception in her

study entitled *Working Class Housing in the Nineteenth Century*.

In this, her interest centered on the field marked John Carrill Worsley Esq., along with the land immediately beyond (reference Map 2).

On Page 1 of her study, she describes the view along Ashley Lane:

At the spot where Angel Street, Blakeley Street and Ashley Lane met, once stood a magnificent house and grounds from which one of the most beautiful view of vale and river, hill and woodland could be had. Ashley Field would have been part of this beautiful view...

(Note: In the year 1794, the John Carrill Worsley possession – shown in Map 2 alongside Ashley Lane and immediately above the area designated as the New Burying Ground – was known as Ashley Field.)

The landscape Jacqueline Roberts described was the normality for the area and beyond at that time, as the various sources indicate. And within this, the elevated position of Angel Street would offer a view far more extensive and even more compelling as the one obtained from the previously mentioned magnificent house.

However, a more “telling” testimony to the outstanding attraction of the area emerges in the formation of the *Society for the Preservation of Ancient Footpaths* – first inaugurated in Manchester in the year 1826.

In a book published in 1851 (*Historical Sketches and Personal Recollections of Manchester: intended to illustrate the progress of public opinion from 1792 to 1832*) the author, Archibald Prentice, commented on page 289 about the Society's view of Manchester's surrounds, soon after conducting its first survey of the area:

There are so many pleasant footpaths, that a pedestrian might walk completely round the town in a circle, which would seldom exceed a radius of two miles from the Exchange, and in which he would scarcely ever have occasion to encounter the noise, bustle, and dust of a public cart road or paved street: The beautifully undulating country between the valley of the Irk and Cheetham Hill, the fine valley of the Irwell, with its verdant meadows...

The introduction to C. Laurent's *Topographical Plan of Manchester and Salford, 1793*, also makes reference to Manchester's Irk Valley, thus:

...the surrounding country, particularly on the N.E. side, is variegated in the most picturesque manner...

Before then and at the time when the houses in Angel Street were first built – and even up to 1826 – sections of the Irk's clear, fresh water could still support an abundance of fish and eels. And as implied by the mentioned Footpath Preservation Society, the gentle lower slopes on either side of the river would have ancient hawthorn hedges (delineated on both maps) enhancing the meadows and fields covered with a profusion of wildflower. This must have been a view that could easily be described as “heavenly”, and, possibly, evoke an association with the word “angelic”.

It therefore needs little stretch of the imagination to assume that this is what attracted those who first commissioned the houses in Angel Street, whose prefix was derived from the “Angel Meadow” extending before them, along with the view it offered.

This naming supposition is given support on Page 36 of the book *Angels From The Meadow*, by James Stanhope-Brown – published in 1991 – when he states:

The name Angel Meadow is suggestive of fields begirt by hawthorn hedges and woodlands... as probably such was the case...

Again, on page 37, Stanhope-Brown reiterates this perception:

...Angel Meadow, once a wealthy district, with the Georgian houses and Porticos, nestling amidst beautiful scenery and trout streams.

As suggested previously, “meadow” is, it seems, the key-word to determine the area that the historic Angel Meadow represented.

Map 1 indicates its extent. It shows it as an area embraced by Angel Street; the thoroughfare designated on the map as Back Lane; then, on its River Irk side, the curve of Ashley lane; and, finally, the hedgerows starting at Ashley Lane and continuing up to the hedge-lined Back Lane.

Using present-day maps and names, the area is represented by the still existing Angel Street; Rochdale Road (which the map names Back Lane); the thoroughfare known as Aspin Lane (erstwhile Ashley Lane) and (possibly) Ludgate Hill – or (possibly) Gould Street.

Geography, topography, history and common-sense indicates that this area was the original Angel Meadow, whose flower-covered expanse the Georgian houses of Angel Street were originally built to view and enjoy.

However, with the passage of time, loss of contact with the original intention, along with careless, erroneous reportage, designated Angel Meadow to incorporate an area extending to the bizarre.

For instance, during the time of the cholera infliction (particularly that of 1832) the term Angel Meadow included any place in and around its district where cholera occurred.

Even the knowledgeable James Stanhope-Brown's book, *Angels From The Meadow*, shows some confusion. On page 37 the following area is suggested:

Angel Meadow forms a square with Rochdale Road, Miller Street, Cheetham Hill Road and Gould Street.

A fair-sized meadow that would be: more like two or three farms. But even more alarmingly, the first two lines of an ode quoted on page 95 states:

*You children of the Meadow
Twixt St Michael's and St Chad's*

This takes Angel Meadow completely outside of Angel Meadow.



IN ANGEL MEADOW AND ST. CHAD'S, CHEETHAM HILL.

Nevertheless, mistakes can arise in even the most careful of works. The magnificently and profusely illustrated book *Manchester Old and New* – by William Arthur Shaw – published in 1894, in three volumes – contains an impressive and carefully detailed drawing of the lower end of Angel Street, composed by Henry E. Tidmarsh (reference: Vol. II, Page 121).

Unfortunately, the drawing was ascribed: IN ANGEL MEADOW AND ST. CHAD'S, CHEETHAM HILL.

The depicted upper part of the church just beyond the houses is that of St. Michael's. St. Chad's tower is that which is just discernible below the wall-mounted street-light. This drawing is reproduced in the previously mentioned James Stanhope-Brown's publication of 1991, but with the title edited to remove the error.

However and as previously noted: mistakes can and do creep in, and are, sometimes, taken as the reality by those not completely familiar with an area – as, it seems, is and was the case regarding the true, historic, area of Angel Meadow.

The threat of other things to come for Angel Meadow were already foretold on Map 2, which shows intended streets to be built across the Meadow. This intention (finally effected

by 1831 – as indicated on Bancks' map of that year) irretrievably destroyed the “angelic” view once valued by the “gentry” occupying the houses in Angel Street. In the face of this threat, the previously contented occupiers did the obvious: they vacated the area.

Thus vacated, Angel Street along with the subsequent hastily built streets imposed across its meadow became filled by a new influx, causing chronic overcrowding and producing the results thereof.

Exacerbating this awful onslaught was the complete lack of any sense of hygiene on the part of the new arrivals (reference: Sir [James Kay-Shuttleworth](#) *The Moral and Physical Condition of the Working Classes of Manchester in 1832*).

This and its inevitable results lasted until 1845, when Manchester Council finally took responsibility for removing refuse and cleaning up exposed sewage, along with supplying clean, piped, water and instituting proper drainage.

However, the now “disease-free” inhabitants were prone to form gangs of rowdies that troubled the neighbourhood up to the 1890s (reference: *The Gangs of Manchester*, by Andrew Davies – published in 2008). Nevertheless, by the end of the 1800s, the condition of Angel Meadow began to show comparative improvement, as the Tidmarsh illustration of c.1894 (shown above) implicitly declares.

For the sake of atmosphere and accuracy, the artist took his easel and sketch-pad and sat in the open to compose his selected views. This he did in Angel Street, and, it appears, received only polite and friendly interest from the people he portrayed.

By contrast, when working in the city area, Tidmarsh found that the owner of a shop resented him sketching in the street immediately outside his premises. He promptly called a policeman and the artist was (briefly) arrested (reference: *A Methodist Artist Rediscovered*, H. E. Tidmarsh 1855-1939).

But be that as it may: Angel Meadow's eventual “up-lift”, happening during the 1890s, has many testimonies. For instance, the book *Sunrise to Sunset*, by Mary Bertenshaw, published in 1991, gives a “happy” account of her childhood in Angel Meadow, beginning in 1909, when, aged five, she and her family moved into a lodging house to be managed by her father.

On page 127 of her book, she offers a tellingly nostalgic conclusion:

Now I'm in my eighty-seventh year and I can look back on my early life with fond affection... Over the years I've witness the demolition and destruction of many of the places that meant so much to me as a child. Angel Meadow is no more and the Lodging House has long since gone...

A similar sentiment is again offered in *Old Pubs Of Rochdale Road And Neighbourhood Manchester* – published in 1985 by Neil Richardson.

In the section headed *Memories of Angel Meadow*, Elizabeth Peers states:

I was born in 1911. My parents were Joseph and Mary McGarr and we lived in a large, beautifully furnished house off Angel Street.

The pristine Angel Meadow of bygone days can never be resurrected; yet the dedicated efforts of FOAM has shaped a section of it to be, if not heavenly, at least delightful. By this, the old essence of the Meadow can – again at least – be suggested. This is, indeed, a truly noble endeavor.

Comments From The Writer

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The above essay is compiled on the basis of primary sources wherever possible – as befits a study involving the historic.



However, careless reportage and the perverse changing of names can distort or destroy historic links and thereby cause difficulties. For instance, Ashley Lane was renamed Aspin Lane. This irresponsibility took place, as far as I can ascertain, some time in the 1960s?

Unfortunately, this severing of names from their original connection is all too often found. Until the vandalism of name-change, Ashley Lane held its title as far back as 1506, and is mentioned by that name in Richard Hollingworth's *Mancuniensis; or, an history of the towne of Manchester* – written in 1656. I quote the relevant section, exactly as written:

*...with the sayd Bishop's money, purchased of the sayd West (Lord de la War,) his land in Ancoates, and the milnes seated vppon Irke, and free fishing from Ashley-lane to Irwell, with power to sett downe stakes, and fence in the sayd river, or on etther syde...*

A further difficulty in historic research is ensuring the accuracy and impartiality of sources.

For instance, *The Conditions of the Working Class in England, 1845*, by Friedrich Engels, has entered the realm of Holy Writ. Nevertheless, W.O. Henderson and W.H. Chaloner, in their 1958 publication of Engels' work, were impelled to challenge his impartiality. On page 60 of the book *Manchester In The Victorian Age* – published in 1985 – the author, Gary S. Messinger, offers this comment:

*...perhaps the strongest indictment of Engels is that compiled by W.O. Henderson and W.H. Chaloner. They argue, for example, that Engels gave 'garbled and abridged' versions of excerpts from his sources but identified them as direct quotations; that he used documents indiscriminately, giving them no indication of their relative accuracy or authority; that he sometimes embroidered factually accurate accounts with 'events' of his own invention; that his artist's eye and his propagandistic zeal made him seized upon the lurid, representing it falsely as the whole...*

It is, perhaps, understandable that Engels would be inclined to give way to the human failing of selective perception in his desire to give an underpinning to Karl Marx's prophecy of the proletariat's imminent revolution in England – this due to exploitation by the bourgeoisie. After all, he and Marx were very close friends and their aims were identical – one of which was, primarily, social revolution.

Engels, in his *Condition of the Working Class in England, 1845*, declared:

*The proletarians, driven to despair, will seize the torch which Stephens [the Chartist] has preached to them; the vengeance of the people will come down with a wrath of which the rage of 1793 gives no true idea. The war of the poor against the rich will be the bloodiest ever waged.*

Of course, and as previously implied, Engels' disposition would be to look for conditions that would justify and thereby give rise to his expectation.

However, another German visitor to Manchester, Friedrich von Raumer, of equal merit to Engels in terms of education and observational powers, offered a different perspective of the working class situation. He commented in his book of letters, entitled *England in 1835*:

*The English workmen (I do not speak of the children) receive in proportion higher wages, and live better, than those in Germany. In the manufactory of Messrs. Sharp and Roberts, for instance, the average weekly wages is about thirty shillings, and the principal necessities of life, food, clothing, and fuel, are now no dearer here than with us. The breakfast of the workmen consisted, as I saw, of the finest wheat bread, cheese of the best quality, and a considerable portion of ale or porter. (ref: Volume 3, Letter LXIII, page 222.)*

The difficulty is who to believe – or who not to believe?

Regarding the general lot of the working class of that time, as distinct from the “black spots”, history, it seems, is implicitly on the side of Friedrich von Raumer, because the “bloodiest war ever waged” did not occur.

The consensus amongst historians – along with general observations – ascribe the Parliamentary Reform Acts and ever-increasing standards of living as the reason for the failure of Engels' prophecy. The unprecedented prosperity of the 1850, 1860s, and 1870s (the mid-Victorian economic booms) blunted, it seems, any revolutionary ardor that the working class might have possessed.

The Marxist view dismisses this perception. It claims that the working class was too “unaware” (i.e. suffered from “false class-consciousness”) to appreciate their “true” position – which was, or should have been, according to Marx and Engels, revolutionary.

However, such are the perils of research into the historic. It can readily present an intellectual maze in which it is easy to be confused about ways of avoiding false trails and thereby arriving at justifiable conclusions. Nevertheless, I suggest that the investigation into the origin of the name “Angel Meadow” has successfully negotiated its difficulties by using a wealth of sources – or so I believe.

My two books (*Different Times* and *Nancy*) use Angel Meadow and adjacent districts as a setting. Although written primarily to entertain, they are based on historic sources.

As such, they could add another dimension to Angel Meadow's history, and can be consulted by way of this link:

[http://www.amazon.co.uk/William-Kenneth-Jones/e/B0034OD1XW/ref=sr\\_tc\\_2\\_0?qid=1367342727&sr=1-2-ent](http://www.amazon.co.uk/William-Kenneth-Jones/e/B0034OD1XW/ref=sr_tc_2_0?qid=1367342727&sr=1-2-ent)

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