

WORDS ON THE

Elaine Mitchell

Many writers have left us words that conjure up images of the West Midlands in all its variety at different points in time. This selection runs from the sixteenth century to the twentieth, from Coventry to Tong, Shrewsbury to Birmingham.

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Warwick Castle.

John Leland (c 1503 - 1552), poet and antiquary

Although the dates are not precise, Leland spent about six years travelling around England in the middle of the sixteenth century.

'The magnificent and stronge castle of Warwike lying at the west-southe-west end of the towne, hard by the right ripe of Avon, is sett upon an high rokke of stone, and hath 3. goodly towers in the este fronte of it... The doungeon now in ruine stondithe in the west-north-west parte of the castle. There is also a towre west-northe-weste, and through it a posterne-gate of yron.'

Lucy Toulmin Smith (ed), *The Itinerary of John Leland in or about the Years 1535-1543, Parts IV and V* (George Bell and Sons, 1908).

Celia Fiennes (1662-1741), traveller

Riding through England in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, Fiennes provides these rare, first-hand observations from a woman.

'All Derbyshire is full of steep hills, and nothing but the peakes of hills as thick one by another is seen in most of the County ... but tho' the surface of the earth looks barren yet those hills are impregnated with rich Marbles Stones Metals Iron and Copper and Coale mines in their bowells, from whence we may see the wisdom and benignitye of our greate Creator to make up the defficiency of a place by an equivalent as also the diversity of the Creation which encreaseth its Beauty.'

Christopher Morris (ed), *The Illustrated Journeys of Celia Fiennes c1682-c1712* (Webb & Bower, 1982).



The Derbyshire Peak District.

Mary Delany (1700-1788), artist and letter writer

An accomplished woman of letters, Mary Delany travelled through Birmingham in 1754.

'... we did not get to Birmingham until half an hour after eight, and had not time nor daylight to view the riches and beauty of the place. After sleeping very well in very good beds, we met at nine for breakfast ... Sally and I went to the new church, which is so light and glaring 'tis intolerable ... in the evening we walked to their Vauxhall, the gentlemen followed, overtook, and came back to meet us; we walked in the gardens which are really pretty; sate down in one of the boxes, drank tea and coffee (very good), and came home to our inn before nine.'

Lady Llanover (ed), *The Autobiography and Correspondence of Mary Granville, Mrs Delany, Volume III* (Elibron Classics 2007).



Vauxhall Gardens, Saltley, 1850 by J. Pedley.

WEST MIDLANDS



The English Bridge, Shrewsbury.

A.E. Housman (1859-1936), civil servant, classical scholar and poet

Born in Worcestershire, Housman is more closely associated with the neighbouring county of Shropshire.

The Welsh Marches

*High the vanes of Shrewsbury gleam
Islanded in Severn stream;
The bridges from the steeped crest
Cross the water east and west.*

*The flag of morn in conqueror's state
Enters at the English gate;
The vanquished eve, as night prevails,
Bleeds upon the road to Wales.*

A.E. Housman, *A Shropshire Lad* (Silent Books, 1995).

Charles Dickens (1812-1870), journalist and novelist

A scene from *The Old Curiosity Shop* is believed to be based on Tong in Shropshire, where Little Nell is eventually laid to rest in the local churchyard.

'The old church tower, clad in a ghostly garb of pure cold white, again rose up before them, and a few moments brought them close beside it. A venerable building – gray, even in the midst of the hoary landscape. An ancient sun-dial on the belfry wall was nearly hidden by the snow-drift, and scarcely to be known for what it was. Time itself seemed to have grown dull and old, as if no day were ever to displace the melancholy night.'

Charles Dickens, *The Old Curiosity Shop* (Penguin Classics, 2001).

Arnold Bennett (1867-1931), writer

Born in Burslem, Bennett draws on the Potteries in his works, featuring five of Stoke-on-Trent's six towns...Tunstall, Burslem, Hanley, Stoke and Longton are represented as Turnhill, Bursley, Hanbridge, Knype and Longshaw respectively.

Five contiguous towns – Turnhill, Bursley, Hanbridge, Knype, and Longshaw – united by a single winding thoroughfare some eight miles in length, have inundated the valley like a succession of great lakes. Of these five Bursley is the mother, but Hanbridge is the largest. They are mean and forbidding of aspect – sombre, hard-featured, uncouth; and the vaporous poison of their ovens and chimneys has soiled and shrivelled the surrounding county till there is no village lane within a league but what offers gaunt and ludicrous travesty of rural charms.'

Arnold Bennett, *Anna of the Five Towns* (Penguin Modern Classics, 2001).

Daniel Defoe (c 1660 - 1731), writer and businessman

Defoe's tour provides a lively insight into early eighteenth-century Britain.

'Leominster has nothing remarkable in it, but that it is a well built, well inhabited town: The church which is very large, has been in a manner rebuilt, and is now, especially in the inside, a very beautiful church. This town, besides the fine wool, is noted for the best wheat, and consequently the finest bread; whence Lemster Bread, and Weobly Ale, is become a proverbial saying.'

Daniel Defoe, *A Tour through the Whole Island of Great Britain* (Penguin Books, 1971).

J.B. Priestley (1894-1984), writer

Priestley's *English Journey*, undertaken in the 1930s, conjures up some powerful images.

'As I left the glorious pastures of the Cotswolds and turned my face towards the Black Country, the sky should have darkened. As it was, I had a brilliant morning for my little cross-country journey; and the nearer I drew to Coventry the better it became. When I actually arrived there, late in the morning, there was not a single shred of cloud in the sky, an exquisite luminous azure. Everything was crystal-clear. Not an outline anywhere had the faintest blur. The



Coventry Cathedral.

brick walls, full in the sun, might have been newly painted by Vermeer. Distant factories, rigidly defined in three dimensions, had a Canaletto quality. Things near at hand, a passing bus, a big yellow poster, dazzled and hurt the eyes. Coventry itself, ancient steeples and motor-car factories and all, was stated so emphatically against the green hollow and the silken sky that to see it gave one a sharp jolt of pleasure. There was the famous old city of the three steeples, and the equally famous new city of bicycles and motor cars and wireless sets, and all so clear that it might have been transported into Italy. This was all wrong.'

J.B. Priestley, *English Journey. Being a rambling but truthful account of what one man saw and heard and felt and thought during a journey through England during the autumn of the year 1933* (William Heinemann, 1934).

Elaine Mitchell is Picture Editor of *History West Midlands* and is pursuing a PhD in garden history at the University of Birmingham.

Further Reading

Literary Heritage West Midlands at www3.shropshire-cc.gov.uk
A vision of Britain through Time at www.visionofbritain.org.uk

WORDS ON THE WEST MIDLANDS

Compiled by Elaine Mitchell

Words record our history but also paint pictures of the past. Many writers have left us words that conjure up images of the West Midlands in all its variety at different points in time. This selection runs from the sixteenth century to the twentieth, from Stratford to West Bromwich, Ludlow to Chesterfield.

AUTHORS AND PLACES

John Leland
(c1503-1552)

- Stratford
- Warwick
- Birmingham

Daniel Defoe
(c1660-1731)

- Worcester
- Leominster

Celia Fiennes
(1662-1741)

- Chesterfield
- Chatsworth
- Coventry
- Kidderminster and Droitwich

Anna Seward
(1742-1809)

- Colebrookdale

Charles Dickens
(1812-1870)

- Birmingham
- Tong

George Eliot
(1819-1880)

- Chilvers Coton
- Nuneaton
- Arbury Hall

A.E. Housman
(1859-1936)

- Clun
- Ludlow
- Shrewsbury
- Wenlock Edge

Arnold Bennett
(1867-1931)

- The Potteries

J B Priestley
(1894-1984)

- Coventry
- The Black Country
- West Bromwich



Warwick Castle.

John Leland (c 1503-1552), poet and antiquary

Although the dates are not precise, Leland spent about six years travelling around England in the middle of the sixteenth century.

'The toune of Strateford is apou Avon river in ripa ulter, as men cum from London to it, and stonndith juste vii. [myles] above Eovesham, and then 2. Mile to Warwick apou Avon.'

The bridge ther of late tyme was very smaulle and ille, and at high waters very harde to passé by. Wherapon in tyme of mynde one Cloptun, a great rich marchant, and Mayr of London, as I remember, borne about Strateford, having never wife nor childern converted a great peace of his substance in good works in Stratford, first making a sumptuous new bridge and large of stone wher in the middle be a vi. Great arches for the maine streame of Avon, and at eche ende certen smaull arches to bere the causey, and so to pass commodiously at such tymes as the river risith.'

'The magnificent and strong castle of Wanwike lying at the west-southe-west end of the towne, hard by the right ripe of Avon, is sett apou an highe rokke of stone, and hath 3. goodly towers in the este fronte of it. There is a fair towre on the northe syde of it. And in this parte of the castle K. Rich. 3. Pullyd down a pece of the waulle, and began and halfe finished a mighty tower, or strengthe, for to shoute out guns. This peace as he left it so it remayneth onfinishid. The

dounegeon now in ruine stonndithe in the west-north-west parte of the castle. There is also a towre west-northe-weste, and through it a postern-gate of yron.'

'I cam thoroughe a praty street or ever I enteryd into Bremischam toune. This street, as I remember, is caullyd Dyrtey, in it dwelle smithes and cuttelers, and there is a brooke that devydithe this street from Bremisham. Dyrtey is but an hamlet or member longynge to ... paroche therby and is clene separated from Bremischam paroche.'

'The bewty of Bremischam, a good market towne in the extreme partes that way of Warwike-shire, is in one street goynge up alonge almoste from the lefte ripe of the broke up a mene hille by the lengthe of a quarter of a mile. I saw but one paroche churche in the towne. There be many smithes in the towne that use to make knives and all maner of cuttynge tools, and many lorimars that make byts, and a great many naylor. So that a great parte of the towne is mayntayned by smithes.'

Lucy Toulmin Smith (ed), *The Itinerary of John Leland in or about the Years 1535-1543*, Parts IV and V (George Bell and Sons, 1908).

Daniel Defoe (c1660-1731), writer and businessman

Defoe's tour provides a lively insight into early eighteenth-century Great Britain.

'Worcester is a large, populous, old, tho' not a very well built city: I say not well built because the town is close and old, the houses standing too thick. The north part of the town is more extended and also better built. There is a good old stone bridge over the Severn, which stands exceeding high from the surface of the water. But as the stream of the Severn is contracted here by the buildings on either side, there is evident occasion sometimes for the height of the bridge, the waters rising to an incredible height in the winter-time.'

'I went to see the town-house, which afforded nothing worth taking notice of, unless it be how much it wants to be mended with a new one; which the city, they say, is not so much enclin'd, as they are able and rich to perform.'



Severn bridge at Worcester.

'The cathedral of this city is an antient, and indeed, a decay'd building; the body of the church is very mean in its aspect, nor did I see the least ornament about it, I mean in the outside. The tower is low, without any spire, only four very small pinnacles on the corners; and yet the tower has some little beauty in it more than the church itself, too' and the upper part has some images in it, but decay'd by time.'

'This city is very full of people, and the people generally esteem'd very rich, being full of business, occasion'd chiefly by the cloathing trade, of which the city and the country round carries on a great share, as well for the Turkey trade as for the home trade.'

'The salt springs in this county which were formerly esteemed as next to miraculous, have since the discovery of the mines of rock salt in Lancashire, Cheshire, etc. lost all of wonder that belonged to them, and much of the use also; the salt made there being found to be much less valuable than what is now made of the other. So I need say little to them.'

'Leominster has nothing remarkable in it, but that it is a well built, well inhabited town: The church which is very large, has been in a manner rebuilt, and is now, especially in the inside, a very beautiful church. This town, besides the fine wool, is noted for the best wheat, and consequently the finest bread; whence Lemster Bread, and Weobly Ale, is become a proverbial saying.'

Daniel Defoe, *A Tour through the Whole Island of Great Britain* (Penguin Books, 1971).

Celia Fiennes (1662-1741), traveller

Riding through England in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, Fiennes provides these rare, first-hand observations from a woman traveller.

'Here we entred Darbyshire and went to Chesterfield and came by the Coale Mines where they were digging; they make their mines at the Entrance like a well and so till they come to the Coale, then they dig all the ground about where there is Coale and set pillars to support it and so bring it to the well, where by a basket like a hand-barrow by cords they pull it up, so they let down and up the miners with a cord.'

'... the same long steep hill we had to descend which comes to Chatsworth; the Duke's house lyes just at the foote of this steepe hill which is like a precipice just at the last, notwithstanding the Dukes house stands on a little rising ground from the River Derwent which runs all along the front of the house by a little fall made in the water which makes a pretty murmuring noise; before the gate there is a large Parke and severall fine Gardens one without another with gravell walkes and squairs of grass with stone statues in them and in

the middle of each Garden is a large fountaine full of images Sea Gods and Dolphins and Sea Horses which are full of pipes which spout out water in the bason and spouts all about the gardens;...'

'We went thence to Colehill [Coleshill] and pass'd by severall good houses; here I saw the way of making Runnett [Rennet] as they do in Cheshire: they take the Reed bag and the Curd and haveing washed it clean, alt it and breake the Curd small about the bag, so drye them being stretched out with sticks like a glove, and so hang them in a chimney till you need it, then cut a piece off this as big as halfe a crown and boyle it in a little water, which water will turn the milke better than any made runnet and its fresh; this is a pretty market town and stands on a hill.'

'Coventry stands on the side of a pretty high hill and as you approach it from the adjacent hill you have the full prospect; the spire and steeple of one of the Churches is very high and is thought the third highest in England, in the same Church yard stands another large Church which is something unusuall, two such great Churches together, their towers and the rest of the Churches and high buildings make the town appear very fine; the streets are broad and very well pitch'd with small stone, the Cross is noted and the finest building in England for such a thing and in my phancy it very much resembles the picture of the Tower of Babel ...'

'You goe 7 mile to Ambusly [Ombersley] a very sad heavy way all sand, you goe just at Kederminster [Kidderminster] town end, which is a large town much employ'd about the worstead trade spinning and weaving; we also rode by Sir John Packingtons house [Westwood] on the left hand on the hill just by Droitwich, where are the 3 salt springs divided by a fresh spring that runs by it; of this salt water they boyle much salt that turns to good account.'

Christopher Morris (ed), *The Illustrated Journeys of Celia Fiennes c 1682 – c 1712* (Webb & Bower, 1982).

Anna Seward (1742-1809), poet and correspondent

Seward's poem 'Colebrook Dale' laments the effects of industrialisation on nature.

'Scene of superfluous grace, and wasted bloom,
O, violated Colebrooke! ...

*In wreaths fantastic, for the tresses bright
Of amber-hair'd SABRINA. – Now we view
Their fresh, their fragrant, and their silent reign
Usurpt by Cyclops; - hear, in mingled tones,
Shout their throng'd barge, their pond'rous engines clang
Through thy coy dales; while red the countless fires,
With umber'd flames, bicker on all they hills,
Dark'ning the Summer's sun with columns large
Of thick, sulphureous smoke, which spread, like palls,
That screen the dead, upon the sylvan robe
Of thy aspiring rocks; pollute they gales,
And stain they glassy waters. – See, in troops,
The dusk artificers, with brazen throats,
Swarm on thy cliffs, and clamour in thy glens,
Steepy and wild, ill suited to such guests.'*

Anna Seward, *Colebrook Dale*, from Walter Scott (ed), *The Poetical Works of Anna Seward*, Vol.2 (1810).

George Eliot (1819-1880), novelist

Born in Warwickshire, local references to the area feature in and inform Eliot's early works. Chilvers Coton becomes 'Shepperton', Nuneaton is represented as 'Milby' and Arbury Hall as 'Cheverel Manor'.

'Shepperton Church was a very different-looking building five-and-twenty years ago. To be sure, its substantial stone tower looks at you through its intelligent eye, the clock, with the friendly expression of former days; but in everything else what changes! Now there is a wide span of slated roof flanking the old steeple; the windows are tall and symmetrical; the outer doors are resplendent with oak-graining, the inner doors reverentially noiseless with a garment of red baize; and the walls, you are convinced, no lichen will ever again effect a settlement on – they are smooth and innutrient as the summit of the Rev. Amos Barton's head ...'

'Immense improvement! says the well-regulated mind, which unintermittingly rejoices in the New Police, the Tithe Commutation Act, the penny-post, and all guarantees of human advancement, and has no moments when conservative-reforming intellect takes a nap, while imagination does a little Toryism by the sly, revelling in regret that dear, old, brown, crumbling, picturesque inefficiency is everywhere giving place to spick-and-span new-painted, new-varnished efficiency, which will yield endless diagrams, plans, elevations, and sections, but alas! no picture.'

'At eleven o'clock, Mr Barton walked forth in cape and boa, with the sleet driving in his face to read prayers at the workhouse, euphemistically called the 'College'. The College was a huge square stone building, standing on the best apology for an elevation of ground that could be seen for ten miles round Shepperton. A flat ugly district this; depressing enough to look at, even on the brightest days. The roads are black with coal-dust, the brick houses dingy with smoke; and at that time – the time of handloom weavers – every other cottage had a loom at its window, where you might see a pale, sickly-looking man or woman pressing a narrow chest against a board, and doing a sort of tread-mill work with legs and arms.'

'It is the evening of the 21st June 1788. The day has been bright and sultry, and the sun will still be more than an hour above the horizon, but his rays, broken by the leafy fretwork of the elms that border the park, no longer prevent two ladies from carrying out their cushions and embroidery, and seating themselves to work on the lawn in front of Cheverel Manor. The soft turf gives way even under the fairy tread of the younger lady, whose small stature and slim figure rest on the tiniest of full-grown feet. She trips along before the elder, carrying the cushions, which she places in the favourite spot, just on the slope by a clump of laurels, where they can see the sunbeams sparkling among the water-lilies ...'

'More than a quarter of a century has slipped by since then, and in the interval Milby has advanced at as rapid a pace as other market-towns in her Majesty's dominions. By this time it has a handsome railway station, where the drowsy London traveller may look out by the brilliant gas-light and see perfectly sober papas and husbands alighting with their leather-bags after transacting their day's business at the county town. In short, Milby is now a refined, moral, and enlightened town; no more resembling the Milby of former days than the huge, long-skirted, drab greatcoat that embarrassed the ankles of our grandfathers ...'

George Eliot, *Scenes from Clerical Life* (Penguin Classics, 1998).

Charles Dickens (1812-1870), journalist and novelist



Charles Dickens (1837).

Birmingham Town Hall was the venue for Dickens' reading of *A Christmas Carol* and the town features in *The Pickwick Papers*.

'It was quite dark when Mr Pickwick roused himself sufficiently to look out of the window. The straggling cottages by the road-side, the dingy hue of ever object visible, the murky atmosphere, the paths of cinders and brick-dust, the deep-red glow of furnace fires from high

toppling chimneys, blackening and obscuring everything around; the glare of distant lights, and ponderous waggons which toiled along the road, laden with clashing rods of iron, or piled with heavy goods – all betokened their rapid approach to the great working town of Birmingham.

As they rattled through the narrow thoroughfares leading to the heart of the turmoil, the sights and sounds of earnest occupation struck more forcibly on the senses. The streets were thronged with working-people. The hum of labour resounded from every house, lights gleamed from the long casement windows in the attic stories, and the whirl of wheels and noise of machinery shook the trembling walls. The fires, whose lurid sullen light had been visible for miles, blazed fiercely up, in the great works and factories of the town. The din of hammers, the rushing of steam, and the dead heavy clanking of engines, was the harsh music which arose from every quarter.

Charles Dickens, *The Pickwick Papers* (Penguin Books, 1972).

A quieter scene from *The Old Curiosity Shop* is believed to be based on Tong in Shropshire, where Little Nell is eventually laid to rest in the local churchyard.

'The old church tower, clad in a ghostly garb of pure cold white, again rose up before them, and a few moments brought them close beside it. A venerable building – gray, even in the midst of the hoary landscape. An ancient sun-dial on the belfry wall was nearly hidden by the snow-drift, and scarcely to be known for what it was. Time itself seemed to have grown dull and old, as if no day were ever to displace the melancholy night.'

'The village street – if street that could be called which was an irregular cluster of poor cottages of many heights and ages, some with their fronts, some with their backs, and some with gable ends towards the road, with here and there a signpost, or a shed encroaching on the path – was close at hand. There was a faint light in a chamber window not far off, and Kit ran towards that house to ask their way.'

'Along the crowded path they bore her now; pure as the newly-fallen snow that covered it; whose day on earth had been as fleeting. Under the porch, where she had sat when Heaven in its mercy brought her to that peaceful spot, she passed again; and the old church received her in its quiet shade.'

Charles Dickens, *The Old Curiosity Shop* (Penguin Classics, 2001).

Arnold Bennett (1867-1931), writer

Born in Burslem, Bennett draws on the Potteries in his works featuring five of Stoke-on-Trent's six towns...Tunstall, Burslem, Hanley, Stoke and Longton are represented as Turnhill, Bursley, Hanbridge, Knype and Longshaw respectively.

'Moor Road, which climbs over the ridge to the mining village of Moorthorne and passes the new Park on its way, was crowded with people going up to criticise and enjoy the latest outcome of municipal enterprise in Bursley ...

The Park rose in terraces from the railway station to a street of small villas almost on the ridge of the hill. From its gilded gates to its smallest geranium-slips it was brand-new and most of it was red. The keeper's house, the bandstand, the kiosks, the balustrades, the shelters – all these assailed the eye with a uniform redness of brick and tile which nullified the pallid greens of the turn and the frail trees.'

'At length, Mynors having encountered many acquaintances, they got past the bandstand and stood on the highest terrace, which was almost deserted.

Beneath them, in front, stretched a maze of roofs, dominated by the gold angel of the Town Hall spire. Bursley, the ancient home of the potter, has an antiquity of a thousand years. It lies towards the north end of an extensive valley, which must have been one of the fairest spots in Alfred's England, but which is now defaced by the activities of a quarter of a million people. Five contiguous towns – Turnhill, Bursley, Hanbridge, Knype, and Longshaw – united by a single winding thoroughfare some eight miles in length, have inundated the valley like a succession of great lakes. Of these five Bursley is the mother, but Hanbridge is the largest. They are mean and forbidding of aspect – sombre, hard-featured, uncouth; and the vaporous poison of their ovens and chimneys has soiled and shrivelled the surrounding county till there is no village lane within a league but what offers gaunt and ludicrous travesty of rural charms.'

Arnold Bennett, *Anna of the Five Towns* (Penguin Modern Classics, 2001)



The English Bridge, Shrewsbury.

The Recruit

*Leave your home behind lad,
And reach your friends your hand,
And go, and luck go with you
While Ludlow tower shall stand.*

*Oh, come you home of Sunday
When Ludlow streets are still
And Ludlow bells are calling
To farm and lane and mill*

*Or come you home of Monday
When Ludlow market hums
And Ludlow chimes are playing
'The conquering hero comes'*

A.E. Housman, *A Shropshire Lad* (Silent Books, 1995).

Mary Delany (1700-1788), artist and letter writer

An accomplished woman of letters, Mary Delany travelled through Birmingham in 1754.



Vauxhall Gardens, Saltley, 1850 by J. Pedley.

Sally and I went to the new church, which is so light and glaring 'tis intolerable ... in the evening we propose taking a walk as far as the Vauxhall of this place and drinking tea there ...'

'She and I walked to their Vauxhall, the gentlemen followed, overtook, and came back to meet us; we walked in the gardens which are really pretty; sate down in one of the boxes, drank tea and coffee (very good), and came home to our inn before nine.'

Lady Llanover (ed), *The Autobiography and Correspondence of Mary Granville, Mrs Delany, Volume III* (Elibron Classics 2007).

A.E. Housman (1859-1936), civil servant, classical scholar and poet

Born in Worcestershire, Housman is more closely associated with the neighbouring county of Shropshire.

*Clunton and Clunbury,
Clungunford and Clun,
Are the quietest places
Under the sun.*

The Welsh Marches

*High the vanes of Shrewsbury gleam
Islanded in Severn stream;
The bridges from the steeped crest
Cross the water east and west.*

*The flag of morn in conqueror's state
Enters at the English gate;
The vanquished eve, as night prevails,
Bleeds upon the road to Wales.*

The Lent Lily

*On Wenlock Edge the wood's in trouble;
His forest fleece the Wrekin heaves;
The gale, it plies the saplings double,
And thick on Severn snow the leaves.*



Coventry Cathedral.

J B Priestley (1894-1984), writer

Priestley's *English Journey*, undertaken in the 1930s, conjures up some powerful images.

'As I left the glorious pastures of the Cotswolds and turned my face towards the Black Country, the sky should have darkened. As it was, I had a brilliant morning for my little cross-country journey; and the nearer I drew to Coventry the better it became. When I actually arrived there, late in the morning, there was not a single shred of cloud in the sky, an exquisite luminous azure. Everything was crystal-clear. Not an outline anywhere had the faintest blur. The brick walls, full in the sun, might have been newly painted by Vermeer. Distant factories, rigidly defined in three dimensions, had a Canaletto quality. Things near at hand, a passing bus, a big yellow poster, dazzled and hurt the eyes. Coventry itself, ancient steeples and motor-car factories and all, was stated so emphatically against the green hollow and the silken sky that to see it gave one a sharp jolt of pleasure. There was the famous old city of the three steeples, and the equally famous new city of bicycles and motor cars and wireless sets, and all so clear that it might have been transported into Italy. This was all wrong.'

'From Birmingham I went to have a look at the Black Country, which lies to the north and west of the city. This notorious region was strange to me. Now I have seen it, but of course it is still strange to me. You have to live some time in these places to understand their peculiar qualities.'

'If I declare that Coketown is a horrible hole, I do not merely mean that it cannot be fitted in to some private fairy-tale Merrie England of my own: I mean that it is a damned horrible hole. And I hope you will take my word for it.'

'On the Dudley side, you look down and across at roofs and steeply mounting streets and pointing factory chimneys. It looked as if a great slab of Birmingham had been torn away and then tilted up there at an angle of about forty-five degrees. The view from the other side, roughly, I suppose, to the north-east, was even more impressive. There was the Black Country unrolled before you like a smouldering carpet. You looked into an immense hollow of smoke and blurred buildings and factory chimneys. There seemed to be no end of it.'

'My friend's warehouse was in – shall we say? – "Rusty Lane," West Bromwich. He keeps sheets of steel there, and no doubt any place is good enough to keep sheets of steel in; but I do not think I could let even a sheet of steel stay long in Rusty Lane. I have never seen such a picture of grimy desolation as that street offered me. If you put it, brick for brick, into a novel, people would not accept it, would condemn you as a caricaturist and talk about Dickens. The whole neighbourhood is mean and squalid'

'In the heart of the great empire on which the sun never sets, in the land of hope and glory, Mother of the Free, is Rusty Lane, West Bromwich. What do they know of England who only England know? The answer must be Rusty Lane, West Bromwich.'

J.B. Priestley, *English Journey*. Being a rambling but truthful account of what one man saw and heard and felt and thought during a journey through England during the autumn of the year 1933 (William Heinemann, 1934).