

What became of the bodies buried beneath City Park?



Riaz Ahmed and Mark Nicholson at the old chapel gateway, now in a Rawdon garden

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BRADFORD'S City Park is well used on a daily basis by people meeting up, to head for a drink or a meal or take a breather by the mirror pool. What they're probably not aware of is that this bustling city centre site was once a large graveyard.

What happened to the bodies buried beneath City Park? A new film by Bradford Through the Lens - a YouTube channel exploring the hidden history of places in the district - traces the story of a chapel that once stood on the site, and its connection with beautiful stained glass windows which survived a gas explosion, and an ornate stone gateway now standing in a private garden.

The video, has been made by The Bradford Through the Lens team, led by Riaz Ahmed, with researchers Andrew Bolt and Mark Nicholson.

"City Park is an area of Bradford that has changed many times over the years. I often wonder whether the people walking through City Park know that once upon a time there were graves down there," says Mark Nicholson in the film. "And do they know that there was once some stunning architecture here?"

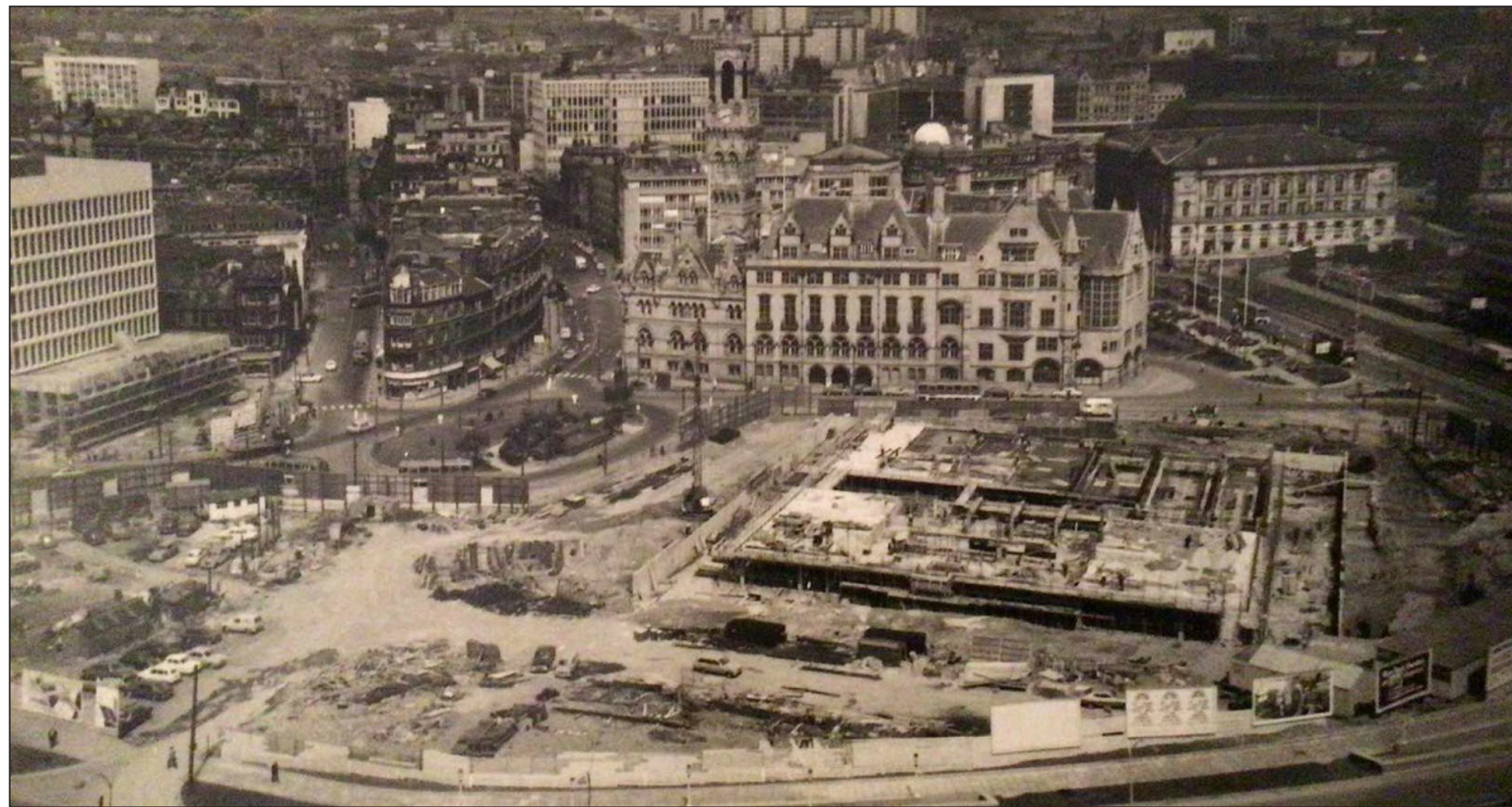
Mark takes us back to how the site looked in the 1800s: "The cityscape was very different. A lane stretched from what is now Bridge Street at an angle. The lane was called Toad Lane - there was speculation that it was known as 'Toad Lane'. It later became Chapel Lane.

"Chapel Lane is all but gone now, but there's still a section of it in the courtyard between the original town hall and its extension. The lane ran along the back of the town hall to Manchester Road."

Mark reveals that the site outside the present day magistrates court was previously used for worship in the city.

There had been a chapel for Bradford's Unitarian congregation since 1719. It moved from a meeting house in Wibsey to Chapel Lane, where the chapel premises had a high wall and imposing stone gateway.

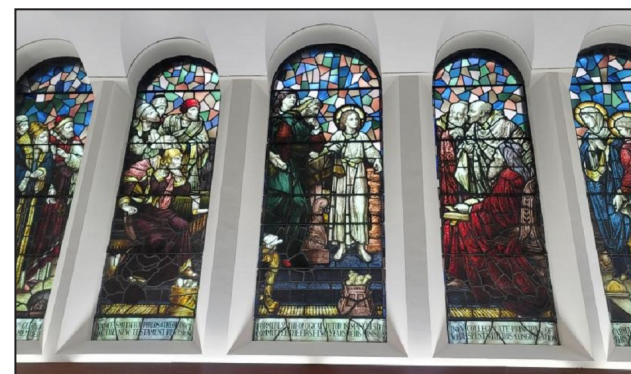
"Some of the interments were beneath the chapel floor," says Mark. "After the Burial Act discontinued the use of chapel grounds for burials, due to sanitary concerns, the final burial at Chapel Lane



The old Unitarian Chapel in Bradford was demolished in 1969 to make way for a new civic precinct. Images: Bradford Through the Lens



The chapel was knocked down for the city re-development



The stained glass windows of the old chapel still survive today

was in May 1853 - a three-year-old girl, Ellen Thresh. On her tombstone was written 'Oh cease to drop the pitying tear, I am gone beyond the reach of fear'.

It was decided that the chapel would be replaced with larger premises and the final service took place on October 6, 1867. The new chapel was built on a former burial ground, says Mark. The first service at the new chapel, which accommodated 500 people, was on June 3, 1869. A Sunday school was built at the back of

the chapel.

"The Unitarian Chapel served its congregation well into the 20th century and its bicentenary was celebrated in 1919," says Mark.

"When Bradford city centre was developed in the 1960s the site was earmarked for a civic precinct, with courts and a police station. The chapel was given a compulsory purchase order and the final services were on June 7 and 8, 1969 - memorable for perhaps the wrong reasons.

sons.

"A gas explosion at the old Odeon cinema the previous night had smashed several windows of the chapel, so the final services were conducted with broken windows and the noise of workmen outside. The service was led by Dr Alan Bullock, the son of a former minister of the chapel, who expressed anger at the damage to the building and the noise disturbance. Exactly 100 years had passed since the first service at the chapel, in

1869."

On August 21, 1969 a wrecking ball smashed into the grand Victorian chapel. A Telegraph & Argus report showed the building being demolished by "a huge crane with a metal ball on a chain".

"Many locals still recall the mass exhumation of bodies during the demolition," says Mark. "The site was screened off but the upper rooms of City Hall offered a ringside view of the grim proceedings below.

"The human remains were said to have been re-interred at Bowling Cemetery, but there is no reference to them in burial records there or any other cemetery. So what happened to the bodies?"

In the 1970s the chapel was relocated to new premises in Russell Street, and stained glass windows from the old chapel were installed there. The windows - manufactured by celebrated glassmakers Heaton, Butler and Bayne, whose stained glass is in churches around the

world - had been gifted to the chapel in 1905. That they survived the gas explosion of 1969 was, says Mark, "a minor miracle".

"They are a forgotten example of work produced by world-renowned glass-makers nearly 120 years ago," he adds.

The film traces another forgotten feature, this time from the original chapel. Following demolition of the first chapel, its stone gateway was

taken to the garden of a house in Rawdon. Visiting the site, Mark and Riaz discover ivy creeping up the ornate stonework. A remnant of Bradford's past, still standing proud.

As Mark says: "Pieces of old Bradford turn up virtually anywhere."

* To watch the video go to www.youtube.com/watch?v=dxGtEbc9x8
For more about the channel go to www.youtube.com/@BradfordThroughTheLens



The chapel was an imposing Victorian structure when it opened in 1869



Scaffolding around the old Unitarian Chapel prior to its demolition



How the T&A reported the old building being brought down by a wrecking ball