

‘Hodkinson has a light touch and a modest, self-effacing style. He is a fine writer.’ – *The Daily Telegraph*

‘His writing is free of cliché and acutely on the money.’

– Q

‘His prose is never less than first-rate.’ –

The Independent on Sunday

‘He writes with economy and elegance, self-deprecating but never self-pitying.’ – *The Times*

‘Hodkinson can weave poetry out of the mundane.’ –

Daily Mail

‘If, like me, you have a habit of lending your new favourite book on the pretext of getting it back, you may think twice about letting Hodkinson’s beauty out of your sight.’ – *The Quietus*

‘A deft writer, poignant and funny at different times.’ –

The Guardian

‘He has an evocative turn of phrase with an impressive economy of language and the writing flows effortlessly.’ – *The Observer*

‘Hodkinson writes quite beautifully, which means that those of us with lesser gifts are given a glimpse into his soul. It is a richly rewarding place to be.’ – *The Times*

MARK HODKINSON

THE OVERCOAT MEN

A dramatic, high-contrast photograph of two men standing with their backs to the camera in a heavy rain. The man on the left wears a dark, sleek overcoat, while the man on the right wears a textured, herringbone-patterned overcoat. They are positioned in the foreground, looking out over a blurred stadium scene. In the background, a tall, skeletal metal tower with several spotlights at the top stands against a dark, stormy sky. The rain is depicted as numerous white streaks falling diagonally across the entire frame, creating a sense of movement and atmosphere. The overall color palette is muted, dominated by greys, blacks, and browns, with some highlights from the stadium lights and the rain itself.

How Two Unsung Heroes
Staved Off the Bulldozers and Saved
Their Football Club from Oblivion

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Dramatis personæ

(in order of appearance)

Cyril Smith...obese, later-disgraced paedophile MP. Baiter of Graham Morris ('They're coming to get you.') and ex-employee of Fred Ratcliffe.

Bob Stokoe...ex-fA Cup-winning manager. flinty but hyper-sensitive. Dog lover. Issuer of on-the-spot fines. Trilby hat growing ever tighter.

Fred Ratcliffe...Spring King industrialist. Mr Rochdale. Tough nut. Nearly four decades a director, chairman and life-president of Rochdale AFC.

Mark Hilditch...young, earnest striker. fancy a game, son? Toilet-cleaner. Victim of crude retribution from dim-witted first-teamers. Don't throw snowballs!

Trebor Butterworth...sports shop owner. first outsider to see the malaise that was Rochdale AFC. Catalyst for change. Owner of pilot licence.

David Wrigley...man-about-town solicitor. Charming, handsome, tall. Meetings at the bank beginning to follow a familiar pattern.

John Faulks...estate agent entrepreneur. Gadder about town, searching for Spotland allies. Ever smiling, ever hopeful.

Judith Hilton...daughter of the Spring King. Still a Spotland regular.

Andrew Hindle...importer of Lada cars. Frequent flyer in private planes. 'Fairy Godfather' denier. Probably should have stuck with rugby.

Les Barlow...gnarled, chain-smoking (back then), Scotland-embedded sports reporter. Unwilling to sugar-drop the truth: 'They were crap!'

Rod Brierley...last of the old-timers. Wallpaper and paint mogul. Taciturn. One of few Rochdaliens waking up each morning to a view over a Cumbrian lake.

Eric Snookes...tempestuous, door-attacking, cortisone-dosed full-back. Happy enough in his Rochdale terraced house to shun the palm trees of the English Riviera and cash-waving overtures of Torquay United.

Peter Madden...Big Pete. Gentleman Pete. Re-builder of the club - free transfer by free transfer - until the thwarted signing of a York City striker sends him as loco as a Stokoe.

Chris Jones...veteran profanity-issuing striker. An accomplice (of Jimmy Seal) in a plot to dislodge a bobble hat.

Graham Morris...the Morris Man. Accountant. Safe hands. My-word-is-my-bond. Inbeterate worrier. An Obercoat Man incarnate.

David Kilpatrick...ex-boarder at top public school. Importer of granite, exporter of straight talking and common sense. Handy with concrete. Another Obercoat Man incarnate.

Chapter One

Welcome to Rochdale

The junction at the end of the A627(M), the spit of road leading from the M62 to Rochdale, is substantial enough to accommodate a small village. Set yourself down on a grass verge, press a tissue to your face (to keep out the fumes) and start counting. There are 13, 14, 15 lanes of converging traffic. Maybe more. Or less. Does the slip road by the BMW garage count as a lane? Or the sneaky one to the left leading from McDonald's, the Odeon cinema and Homebase? Either way, it's a lot of concrete. And cars and lorries and vans.

'The Rotary Clubs of Rochdale Welcome You' is the first sign that isn't directing you to the town centre, another destination (Blackburn or Bury, say) or advising that the two lanes, one of which you're in, are about to become one with traffic merging from the right. More of this later. Within a second or two there is another reminder of where you have arrived: 'Rochdale – Birthplace of Co-Operation'. This is written in huge letters across a railway bridge. For many years, 'Co-Operation' was written, 'Cooperation'. That missing hyphen bothered me greatly. I pondered a moonlit walk across the bridge, paint pot in hand. I decided that it would be out of reach, even with a good pal holding on to my

ankles. The sign relates to the Rochdale Pioneers, a group of 28 men who, as we were taught at school, banded together in 1844 to open a shop selling food they could not have afforded if it had been bought individually. They inspired the birth of a movement which, 50 years later, saw 1,439 co-operatives covering virtually every area of the UK. The principles were later adopted throughout the world. Go Rochdale!

The Dunlop Mill Tower is gone now, demolished in 2014, but most locals still instinctively look out for it, maybe in the hope of seeing it return as a tall ghost standing guard at the entrance to the town. It was clad in corrugated metal, painted soft blue, so that even on dark, rainy days (of which there are many – 140 per year on average), a piece of the summer sky remained unfurled and fastened down. Each year, at the beginning of December, a Christmas tree, complete with fairy lights, would appear on top of the tower. It was a scratty artificial tree, the kind rescued from a skip, but was made beautiful and proud again by its sash of twinkling bulbs and position high above the streets and houses. The tower was much like the bow of a huge container ship because fastened behind it was a seven-storey mill made from 14 million Accrington bricks. Dunlop Mill was believed to be one of the largest mills in the world, employing 3,200 at its busiest, making the cord used in tyres. As a kid, I'd travel from Rochdale to Manchester on the railway line which ran parallel to the mill, and marvel; it seemed to go on forever, brick after brick – it was half a mile long.

At the junction, by the huge Tesco store, is a direction sign shared by 'Spotland Stadium' and 'Gracie Fields Theatre'. 'Rochdale AFC' would have been more apropos because stadium is rather grand. In fact, the place is now officially called the Crown Oil Arena. No one outside of the media has ever referred to it as such, favouring its original

title of Spotland – where the ‘a’ is pronounced as a soft ‘u’ or ‘e’ – otherwise it has the ring of a very peculiar theme park. It is significant that Gracie Fields is referenced seconds after arriving in town. Anyone from Rochdale knows this phenomenon. Utter the word ‘Rochdale’ and the Post-it Note falls immediately from the wall of memory – ‘That’s where Gracie Fields is from’. As if we didn’t know. She made her last film 75 years ago but, like it or lump it (which sounds like one of her catchphrases), she clearly remains the pride of our alley and, if you dig out a 78rpm record, she can still tell you all you need to know about a thing-ummy bob. The theatre named in her honour, which opened in 1978, a year before she died, is seldom used for public performances, most likely because of its out-of-town location. The most recent programme contained a mere couple of shows – two performances of *Beauty and the Beast* described as an ‘Easter panto spectacular’ starring Kerry Katona as the Atomic Fairy, and Basil Brush as the ‘beast’s sidekick’. At Christmas there is a ten-date run of *Aladdin* (‘star casting to be announced’).

At the start of Roch Valley Way is a turquoise Mini with a Union Jack painted on its roof, perched on a flowerbed. The doors are open and the bonnet missing. The car has been filled with soil from which flowers bloom. According to Martin Taylor, head of environmental management at Rochdale Council, it is part of a campaign to ‘make the borough cleaner and brighter by clearing litter from streets and planting colourful floral displays in a number of prominent areas.’ The cost of buying the Mini, preparing it for the site and installing it on a concrete base was precisely £7,140. Cars as vases is clearly a theme in Rochdale because there is another in St Mary’s Gate, the busy roadway that skirts the town centre. Here, a vintage Morris Minor

van branded in the blue and white livery of the Co-Op has been installed at the behest of former council leader, Richard Farnell. 'Everyone is rightly proud of our links to the worldwide co-operative movement and although it's a historical connection it's one that still resonates around Rochdale today,' he said, probably while banging a bass drum.

Hidden behind a line of strategically positioned trees is a place known to everyone as the sewage works, but its Sunday Best name is Rochdale Wastewater Treatment Works. The landmarks thereafter become rather bleak and deathly: the Cemetery Hotel, Rochdale Cemetery, Rochdale Crematorium, Denehurst Cemetery. On a theme, the streets on the nearby estate are named after battle sites of the First World War: Verdun Crescent, Mons Avenue, Jutland Avenue, Marne Crescent. People are smoking at bus stops. A discarded tyre has been left on the pavement. A wall has been partially knocked down and police tape fastened across the gap. On the right, finally, is the home – whatever its name – of Rochdale AFC. It is the close season, so very few people are about. As I pass, I notice one or two familiar faces, fellow fans, walking from their cars to the office, perhaps renewing their season tickets. Still hoping, still believing.

I turn left into Edenfield Road. Half a mile up the road, The Star has shut down, another pub gone. I enter the car park at Rochdale Golf Club. Bentleys, Porsches and BMWs everywhere and, on the far side, a gleaming Jaguar F-Pace which will cost, as I soon discover, about the same as a terraced house on the other side of town. Back on the main road, the Horse and Farrier and Turf Tavern are still open but the Blue Ball is now N Bar and Grill – the 'N' standing for Norden, the district I am in. The businesses and shops reflect an upmarket clientele – accountants, gift shops (Pookys

Emporium), Norden and Bamford Financial Services, a shoe shop especially for children (Tip Toes), a tutoring centre, a florist (Garden of Eden, no less) and a skin clinic (The Aesthetic Rooms).

At the Bridge Chippy, a suitably elegant cafe boasting 'premium quality food', I turn round. I take a right up Bagslate Moor Road to the tree-lined residential area of Bamford. Many of the houses are individually built. They are large and all manner of shapes and designs. Some have verandas, others are wood panelled. Drives are long and wide. Lawns are carefully tended. Laburnum, lilac and cherry trees have been planted to provide variety and colour. Intercom systems are set into walls next to electronic gates. There is no litter. Benches are positioned beneath wide picture windows. There are no mills or workshops, nor backstreet garages. This is a seldom seen snapshot of a northern English town. I don't recognise it and as I drive through it reminds me of the setting of a suburban sitcom from the 1970s. Any minute now, I might see Sid James and Diana Coupland shouting to Sally Geeson that she can't go out dressed in *that* mini-skirt. Or I could be in another country; affluent America, perhaps, where the leafy peace will soon be disturbed when a Dodge Ram drives by and a wholesome, shiny-toothed kid jumps out, back from baseball practice.

On my way towards the town centre I pass a wonky sign at the entrance to Mitchell Hey Mill reading, 'Bter Dreams' and wonder what is the nature of its business. I take a quick left into Holmes Street, park up and do a search on my phone. Google proffers, 'Better Dreams – bedding suppliers to the trade.' On my left is wasteland where a shopping trolley has been tossed on its side. It has been there a while; the grass and weeds are holding it tight and snaking into the wire

mesh as if trying to claim it for nature. A huge sycamore has joined in, forming a canopy of leaves that reach down and provide more cover from above.

Further down the street, a burnt-out car is on the other side of a wire fence at the end of a row of terraced houses. It is hard to tell whether it has been dumped or rests on land that was once the site of a mechanic's workshop. The brick-built houses are a hotchpotch. Some have been pebble-dashed, one or two clad in dressed stone. Thin dark trails occur at regular intervals where leaks from gutters have been left unrepaired and water has trickled down. Weeds thrive, little dots of green and yellow where the outside wall meets the pavement. The contrast in neighbourhoods is startling, just a couple of miles from Bamford.

Much of Rochdale is poor and scruffy. It has always been this way, it seems. During the Industrial Revolution life expectancy was 21 while, by comparison, several miles further north, in the more rural Westmorland, it was 38. At 13 years old, Rochdale boys were a full year behind boys from elsewhere in growth terms. In 1915 it was listed as the most polluted town in England. I check the local house prices. One of the two-bedroomed terraces nearby has sold recently for £40,000.

A middle-aged Asian man walks by the car and through the rear-view mirror I see him stop to shake the hand of a neighbour, also Asian. Rochdale has many émigrés; they were invited over originally to staff the mills. They arrived from Eastern Europe after the Second World War, Poles and Ukrainians chiefly, followed by Asians through the 1960s and 1970s. In 1966 about 1,000 people attended a banquet in Rochdale Town Hall organised by Asians as a thank you to the local population for making them welcome. The local MP, Cyril Smith, was the first to grasp the importance of

the Asian vote and canvassed solidly in areas where they had settled – Deeplish, Wardleworth, Heybrook and Hamer, places which are now almost wholly Asian. Relations became strained briefly during the close-down of the textile industry when immigrants were perceived as filling positions ahead of indigenous people. This probably accounted for the 4,000 votes received by Jim Merrick, who stood on behalf of the British Campaign to Stop Immigration party in a by-election of 1972. By 1980, Rochdale, with a population of about 93,000, was home to approximately 10,000 immigrants. Today, nearly 35 per cent of the town's population identifies as being 'non-white British'. There was further tension in 2012 when a paedophile ring, eight men of Pakistani heritage and an Afghan asylum seeker, all living in Rochdale, were convicted of the rape of underage teenage girls, conspiracy to engage in sexual activity with children and trafficking girls for sex.

The road snakes to the right, becomes Primrose Street and passes the former site of Dexine Rubber Company which, from opening in 1941, provided work for hundreds before winding down to full closure in 2008. The area has been fenced off, the buildings left to decay and endure routine bouts of vandalism. Signs are fixed to the surrounding fence – 'Fly tipping is a criminal offence' and 'Dangerous Buildings, Keep Out'. Spray artists have scaled the fence and left their mark: 'KH', 'Cheesedraw' and 'Ned', among others. Again, nature is trying to claim and prettify the mess. Dashes of purple arch from the side of buildings where buddleia has managed to take hold. Rosebay willowherb stand as defiant sentinels among the piles of brick. The site had been a hub of industry from 1863 when Spotland Bridge Mill and Spotland New Mill were built there, initially for wool production, later for cotton. The River Spodden runs

close by, a tributary of the River Roch, from which Rochdale draws its name. Spodden, by the same process, has lent its name to Spotland; the river was known previously as either the Spod or Spot and provided water power for the two mills and many others along its course.

Rochdale once had more than 130 mills, a huge number for a relatively small town. At its height, half a million people worked in Britain's cotton industry. The output per year was equivalent to providing a shirt and a pair of trousers for every man, woman and child on earth. Eighty per cent of the world's cotton products were once exported from Britain and it was said that the industry made enough to meet the UK's requirements within the first hour of the working day. The remainder of the day was for the rest of the world.

Growing up in the 1970s, there seemed to be a mill on almost every street corner, completely out of scale with the rest of the landscape. They usually had peculiar short names, presumably to fit snugly on the side of the tall chimneys: Elk, Pye, Flat, Harp, Mars, etc. I recall waiting with my mum for the 461 bus to Rochdale (via Deeplish) from nearby Castleton and being afraid as it set out along Queensway. This road, almost two miles long, was completely hemmed in by mills and factories and reaching the other end felt as if you'd emerged from a brick tunnel; you could breathe again. Without any discernible landmarks, the only way to mark off the journey was by the names of the mills you passed: Arrow, Linden, Ensor, Blue Pit, Castle and Dicken Green. As a teenager I would see older lads who had gone to work in the mills. The physical change was noticeable. They quickly bulked up from lugging bales and the other heavy work. When you spoke to them they seemed tired and uninterested, blaming the long hours and hot conditions in which they had to work.

WELCOME TO ROCHDALE

The beginning of the end came with a lack of investment and the availability of cheap labour abroad. The last mill to be built in Lancashire was Elk Mill in Royton, near Rochdale, in 1926. Seven years later production was overtaken by Japan and later by the United States, India and China. In 1959 Britain, for the first time, imported more cotton goods than it exported. Mills closed at a rate of one a week in the UK during the 1960s and 1970s. Many were flattened, although this was often done in stages. As kids, we played in spaces where walls were still standing but the roof was missing. We'd find cotton spindles and pretend they were mortar bombs or throw stones at the pigeons roosting in the gaps where windows had once stood. A few working mills remained. They were noisy places with their own distinctive sweet, starchy smell belched out from metal grilles set into the walls.

Rochdale fell into torpor during the 1970s and 1980s, from which it has still not recovered. After the mills closed, unemployment was extremely high. Alcoholism and addiction to tranquillisers soared in the early-1980s and the suicide rate increased. Although conditions in the mills were poor, they still formed communities, taking in all ages, from different ethnic backgrounds and with a high percentage of women; about two-thirds of all cotton workers were female. After the mills closed I remember people, lost souls, suddenly hanging around, stopping to talk to us kids by the canal or when we played football on the bottom field. They had also lost a large part of their social scene. Many mills and firms had their own social clubs and sports teams and these disbanded. Afterwards, those that could find work were taken on as casual workers at the trading estates or retail parks installed on sites where mills had once stood. A company called Fashion Logistics moved into a large

section of Dunlop Mill, for example, and staff loaded and unloaded racks of clothes from and on to lorries. There was little government support for redundant textile workers and, since the breakdown was less swingeing and dramatic than, say, the mining industry – it spanned several decades – there was scant acknowledgement of their plight: no pop concerts or poetry in their name or interest from a media eager to frame its documentaries with poignant pithead imagery.

I continue, heading down Spotland Road towards the ‘seven sisters’, a group of high rise flats, four of which are earmarked for demolition in the next few years. ‘Three sisters’ doesn’t have quite the same poetic ring to it, Chekhov notwithstanding. The nearby districts of Falinge and Freehold have 75 per cent unemployment; in 2013 it was deemed to be the most deprived area in the country. This area, comprising mostly three-storey flats and cheap terraced housing, is where the after-effects of a workaday slow-motion demise of a single-industry (textile) town have hit the hardest. There are no jobs; there is nothing to do. The proliferation of cheap housing, some of it standing empty, means the town meets the criteria for acceptance of refugees. Figures released in 2018 showed that Rochdale has housed more refugees than the whole of the south-east of England, excluding London. Maidenhead, the constituency of the former Prime Minister, Theresa May, has accommodated none; Rochdale has accepted approximately 1,000. While the town has a long tradition of welcoming people from across the globe, the principal reason was the promise of a job. This no longer stands.

I pass a corner shop (remember them?) with a sign outside reading ‘Booze ‘N’ Basics’. A shop called Hensch Supplements on Whitworth Road has posters in the window of near-naked young men lifting weights. More

closed-down pubs, chipboard nailed across the windows. The same with former bingo halls, some of them still with rain-scrubbed posters on their walls advertising half-price Wednesdays. Signs, lots of them, for nurseries and day-care centres with twee names, usually citing bees or butterflies. Plenty of care homes too, several set back and swathed in rhododendron bushes, others pressed tight to the busy road and its booming traffic. Betting shops, pizza outlets, kebab houses and car washes that appear to have been set up overnight. Postmen and postwomen pass by, almost running – probably meeting a delivery target; that’s why they wear shorts and trainers. Most gardens along the main roads are overgrown, unkempt. The pavements are full of plastic bins, all at different angles, some tipped over like a drunken line-dancing team. A kid (no helmet) revs his motorbike and does wheelies on wasteland across from Albert Royds Street. His dog chases after him, bark, bark.

Eyes back on the road, I have to be careful because two lanes often and randomly become one without forewarning. This impromptu funnelling calls upon the better nature of drivers, to show consideration to their fellow man (or woman) because only one car can pass from two lanes into one at any given time. After you, Sir (or Madam), please pass this way. No, after you. In Chalfont St Giles, Lower Slaughter or any other similarly genteel environ this road design would function perfectly well. Not in Rochdale. These two-into-one lanes are council-sponsored showdown sites for boy (and girl) racers; queue jumpers; anger management subscribers; stubborn, I’m-not-budging middle-aged lane hoppers and random hotheads looking for a reason to shout at, gesture to, or, worse, set upon fellow drivers. If you survive the particularly challenging bottleneck at the Kingsway–Milnrow Road junction and need a lie down,

head to the Bulls Head pub where bed and breakfast is a mere £20 PPPN, according to its sign.

I avoid driving into town because it's almost impossible to reach without putting aside an afternoon to traverse the one-way system, bus lanes and a tramway which does the hokey cokey across various roads. Congestion and frustration, that's what it's all about. I've been there many times before, of course, and there are several magnificent buildings to recommend. Magnificent and Rochdale in the same sentence, at last. The town hall (due a £16m refit) built in 1866 in the Gothic Revival style; the Georgian post office (now a pub) and Touchstones (art gallery, museum and local studies library) are all splendid ways to spend an overcast Tuesday, even if, to get there, you have to pass a statue of Gracie Fields doing a weird kind of curtsy. Perhaps she's doing the hokey cokey, too. There is also a spanking new sports centre and a 'multi-use' public building (library, coffee shop, council offices) called Number One Riverside which has a wibbly wobbly wavy design, but is a bit too close to the River Roch, which is prone to burst its banks. Sadly, there is no independent book shop or town centre cinema (though one is pending with six screens, apparently, as part of a £250m regeneration scheme). As in many other northern towns, the centre is clogged with charity and pound shops, nail bars, food outlets, mobile phone shops and downmarket clothes stores. And, to reach them, you've got to slalom around a fair number of beggars, druggies and drunks.

Thankfully, Rochdale is skirted by wonderfully rough countryside. A few miles from the town centre and you are engulfed in a grassy sea of moorland. From up there, where the curlews make their throaty, insistent calls and the landscape is hewn from millstone grit and soft peat, Rochdale, down below, can look quite beautiful. At night

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the best vantage point is on the car park of the White House pub on the A58, the top road to Halifax. As darkness falls and streetlights come on across town it appears as if this golden spread has been specially ladled from the Pennines. When you're so far away, you don't see the litter, the graffiti, the mess and the mucked-upness. All you see is light.