

Country diary
Bradford

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Country diary: Racing peregrines among the rusting mills

Manningham, Bradford: Twenty-six years after this great industrial hub closed down, it still has resonances with the community via its thrilling wildlife



‘The peregrines are an appropriate mascot for these mills.’ Photograph: Helen Davies/Alamy

A peregrine comes bombing down from the ornamented parapet of the 76-metre mill chimney Lister’s Pride, and a hundred pigeons scatter. I’m on Patent Street, Bradford, by the west wall of what was once the biggest silk mill in Europe, called **Lister’s Mill**, or sometimes Manningham Mills. It was thrown up in the 1870s by **Samuel Cunliffe Lister**, and for more than a century was one of the great industrial palaces of the north. Since shutting in 1999, about half has been restored as offices and high-end flats; the other half is derelict. Forests of buddleia cover the concrete floors, and fox trails wind through the weeds.

Peer through steel grilles into the basements, and see hart’s-tongue ferns as thick and green as cabbages in a vegetable patch. Rust is everywhere (what John Ruskin called “living” iron: “It is not a fault in the iron, but a virtue, to be so fond of getting rusted”). On the stretch of grass across the street, gulls gather in great numbers. Today they’re mostly black-headed, with one hulking lesser black-back comically conspicuous in the middle of the throng. At the back I spot two first-year common gulls, paddling their feet in a hopeful worm dance.



Lister’s Mill, also known as Manningham Mills, in Bradford. Photograph: Christopher Thomond/The Guardian

Pigeons assemble here too, of course. There are maybe three dozen purring and burping on the adjacent concrete. Local people like to come and feed them. That’s one side of the pigeons’ trade-off with the mill; the other side, the converse, is up on the top of Lister’s Pride – that’s where the peregrines nest.

They reared two chicks in the spring, thanks in part to the remarkable work of local volunteers, who funded the installation of a nesting tray on the chimney (the same team devised the **Bradford Peregrine Trail**, where you can follow post-industrial peregrines haunting mill and civic architecture from the city centre out into Saltaire, Bingley and Keighley).



A film still of a peregrine taking flight off Lister’s Mill, Bradford. Photograph: Paul Wheatley/Bradford Peregrine Trail

The peregrines are an appropriate mascot for these mills. An Asian form of the peregrine, the shaheen, is an important bird in Pakistani art and culture – so there’s something fitting in seeing these peregrines hunting and shrieking over Manningham, the heart of Bradford’s British-Pakistani community, and the mills that for decades were sustained by migrant Pakistani labour.

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