

Known as the Peace Gardens, the front lawns of Sheffield City Hall had a terrible reputation in the 1990s as a haven for drunkards. In 1998, the lawns were renovated as part of the first stage of the Sheffield Council's Heart of the City project. The garden is now a popular venue for families during the summer. The steel ball fountains are symbolic of the city's steel-manufacturing past.



Sheffield Steel

**A city and a writer
find the strength
to reinvent
themselves**

By Shreya Sen-Handley

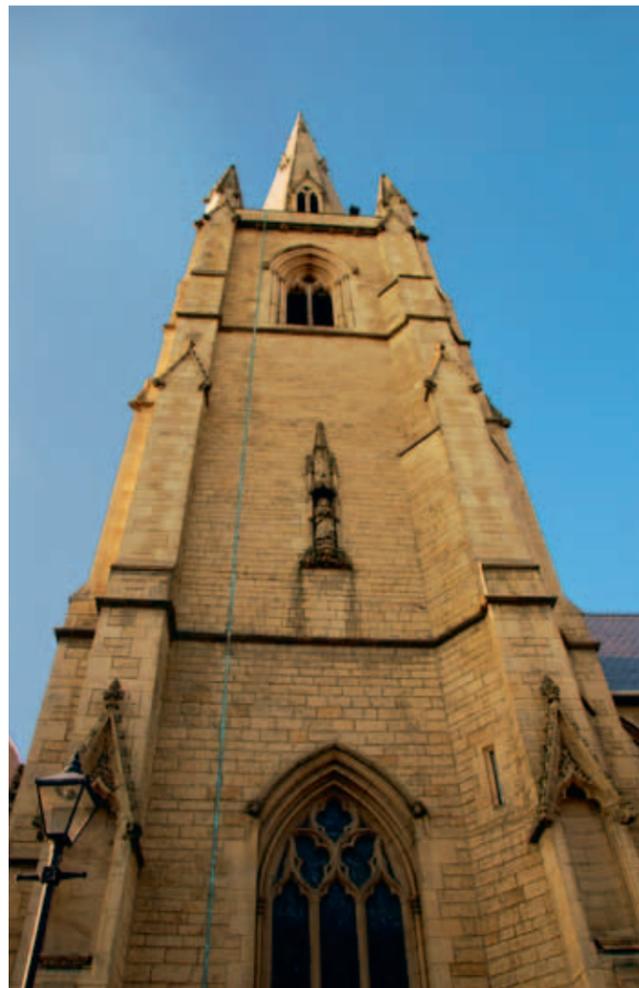
I arrived as an accidental settler in Sheffield in the new millennium. Swept up in a typically impetuous romance with an Englishman on holiday, I ended up leaving everything behind to marry him. It was to be a shiny new adventure in a brand new place—new continent, country, and new city. But Sheffield in 2000 was moribund with that moss-damp smell and underfoot-squelch of a cemetery after the rains. With the same graveyard stillness. I awoke to a town trapped in a time warp, mourning its destruction in World War II and the demise of its busy steel industry; every bit the city of *The Full Monty* but with a thick black vein of deep despair I was unprepared for.

And my exciting adventure? It died young. Our romance lasted as long as we toured England, with the Jaguar S Type purring through banks of hedgerow, down narrow country lanes, under yew tree and oak, with birds chirruping on every branch. The greenness of the landscape, the creaminess of the clotted cream that crowned our wayside scones, and the glow cast by this little island's long list of literary lights whose legacy was simply everywhere—everything I fell in love with while exploring England died a death in Sheffield.

It was green but forever obscured by grey sheets of rain. The clotted cream was no less creamy but with a bitter aftertaste as my marriage went sour. And violent, as my new husband turned out to have the pugilistic predilection of every disaffected man in the gritty, low-cost Northern English films I'd watched. But while there was no joy to be found in my deteriorating domestic situation, I detected a hint of magic in Sheffield. I would have to bring it to the fore, like others before me...

The ancient heart of South Yorkshire, Sheffield began as a settlement in a forest clearing beside the River Sheaf in the first millennium A.D. Post-conquest, the Normans built Sheffield Castle to tighten their grip on the North and a small town mushroomed around it. By 1600, its prodigious output of top-notch cutlery had transformed it into a boom town. But the English Civil War saw widespread death and destruction in Sheffield, including the demolition of its castle in 1648. Its fortunes revived temporarily with large-scale steel production in the 18th century, but these factories, when drafted to make World War II weapons, nearly brought about the city's annihilation from German bomb raids. The 16 successive attacks of 1940 flattened the city and killed many. To this day, the trauma of the Sheffield Blitz weighs heavily on its soul, with mournful discussions about it at "greasy spoons" (diners) and pubs alike. But Death, having got its hooks into this city, hasn't left since. The thin, long smokestacks—the remains of its steel-works—resemble the spindly legs of skeletons against its granite sky. The decrepit concrete towers at the heart of the city look shuttered and forbidding. The dingy train station, subterranean pedestrian walks and dank car parks add to the Dickensian air of decay.

I soon realised I was morphing into Sheffield but that wasn't all bad; swaddled shabbily against the marauding cold, frumpy and unadorned, but with a steely resolve to find my way out of my nightmare. And so I went looking for the hidden delights of my new home. I found beautiful churches in winding lanes. I learnt to enjoy Working Man's cider at the haunted Queen's Head, the oldest pub in Sheffield. I salivated my way through a whole street of cosmopolitan grub. On



Located on a cobbled lane between City Hall and Tudor Square, the Cathedral Church of St. Marie, is famous for its tall spire and Gothic Revival architecture. Building the church cost more than £10,500 (about ₹10 lakh), which was a huge sum in 1850. It was closed for extensive renovations in September 2011, re-opening late last year. Side chapels and roofing were restored, in some cases revealing original features previously hidden.

STEPHEN HANDLEY



Surrey Street was shabby and gloomy before the refurbishment, but is now a hub of activity with shops with new facades and several food, art, and crafts fairs (top). During lunch time in summer, this is also where you can enjoy performances by buskers; The revitalisation of the city centre has led to the opening of a number of new cafés, like Café Rouge (bottom), and restaurants in the square in front of City Hall.



STEVEN GILLIS/DINODIA (SURREY STREET), COURTESY STEPHEN HANDLEY (CAFÉ)

“Before I left Sheffield forever, I witnessed the terrifyingly ugly ‘Egg Box’, the marriage registry office in which I’d said ‘yes’ that fateful day, bite the dust. I was not the only one cheering.”

Wednesdays, I spent my last pound on a falafel at the Lebanese deli and on Thursdays I gazed hungrily at the display in the patisserie. I wandered around a spider’s web of cobbled streets behind venerable Sheffield Cathedral and in secret squares I discovered pretty little shops snoozing in the timorous sunshine.

In Orchard Square, a woman who made exquisite jewellery watched as I sketched a funky bangle for her. Did I want a job as her designer she asked, mostly-serious. No, I said regretfully, I work nine to five and when I get home...well, when I get home, stuff happens. Come back, she said, if circumstances change.

The central Tudor Square became my refuge at noon. Flanked by the cultural trinity of Sheffield—the Lyceum and Crucible theatres, and the grand, art deco central library—it’s a sunshine trap but also the core of all that’s cultured in this unsophisticated city. This is where I ate my baguette every day (and sometimes my falafel). It was three-storeyed Waterstones, though, crammed to the rafters with books, which became my best friend.

Then one day I knew I had the confidence and enough start-a-new-life funds to make my escape from my husband—and Sheffield. That afternoon, I found myself outside a stately Victorian house, a solicitor’s office I’d seen in passing while exploring the cobbled lanes. Through the divorce, as my husband raged, I coolly read in the attic room with a chair wedged against the door. My life was about to change.

So was Sheffield’s. The £120 million Heart of the City regeneration programme was going to transform this tatty town into a shiny, vital entity again. I wanted vibrant for myself too, and was ready to leave the setting of the worst years of my life. Sheffield began building, buffing, and polishing just as I upped sticks. But there were loose ends to tie that kept bringing me back and each time there was more revitalisation bustle and more marvels to behold. The Winter Gardens, the largest urban glasshouse in Europe, with more than 2,000 plants from around the world, opened in 2003, becoming the first beautiful thing to blossom in Sheffield in a while. In its wake came the £15 million Millennium Galleries, a glass palace for the city’s finest art. Three years later, a vast, gleaming new train station with a 263-foot art deco water feature had risen from the ashes of the old, to much hoopla. The original had opened in very different circumstances in 1870 on a cold, damp, cheerless Sheffield day. Over time, a combination of wartime bombing and flooding by the River Sheaf, which flows underneath, caused damage so irreparable that £10 million was required to bring it up to spec. The station’s transformation changed Sheffield’s fortunes. The rest of England started streaming through its doors.

The city then set to work on its squat concrete skyline. As part of an ambitious plan to reclaim its beautiful historic buildings, they began gutting and replacing the innards of once-glorious Carmel House while restoring its grand old facade to former glory. The unapologetic demolition of the worst of the concrete monstrosities from the sixties followed. Before I left Sheffield forever, I witnessed the terrifyingly ugly ‘Egg Box’, the marriage registry office in which I’d said ‘yes’ that fateful day, bite the dust. I was not the only one cheering.

My own return to vivacity proceeded apace with Sheffield’s. I bought a home in Nottingham and then, eventually, met and married the love of my life.

Today, I am back in Sheffield, at a trendy bistro in the heart of town. As I wait for my best friend to appear, I think of the marvellous turn

my life’s taken. I reflect on my beautiful toddlers and their amazing father. I think about the many writing assignments streaming in, including this one. I look around me and see the stunner that is Sheffield now and feel no bitterness. It has the air of a fashionable European city. There are well-dressed yuppies hogging the best tables at the chic cafés dotting this central square. There are gleaming new hotels and a colourful Continental food fair on the focal green where Sheffield’s human detritus once slopped about. There is sunshine and laughter and happiness. I breathe in this new city.

This time, it smells good. ■

Shreya Sen-Handley is a former journalist and television producer who now writes and illustrates for the British and Indian media, when she’s not tending to two toddlers, a husband and a home in Sherwood Forest, Nottingham.



The Winter Gardens is the largest urban glasshouse in Europe, with more than 2,000 plants. It is made of glass and larch, a wood that turns silvery with age. It opened in 2003, in place of the ugly old Egg Box building. Every day at lunchtime, it is filled with office-goers and shoppers resting their feet and tucking into a panini.

PAUL HARNES/ALAMY/INDIAPICTURE



The turquoise-coloured Information Commons (top left) is a library and computing building for the University of Sheffield; The Crucible and Lyceum theatres (bottom left) are important landmarks of Sheffield. The Lyceum is the only surviving theatre outside London designed by famous theatre architect W.G.R. Sprague and the last example of an Edwardian auditorium in Sheffield. The statue atop it is of Mercury. Besides theatrical shows, the Crucible Theatre, is home to the most important event in professional snooker, the World Championship.



The double-headed giraffe ‘Spoon Monster’ (officially known as ‘Barking Up the Right Tree’ by Johnny White) is an artwork at the Millennium Gallery (top right) made from Sheffield’s famous cutlery, which was donated by the public; The Genting Club (bottom right) is a new nightclub, restaurant, and casino in the city centre.



GRAHAM LUCAS COMMONS/BRITAIN ON VIEW/GETTY IMAGES (IC BUILDING); EDMUND SUMNER/DINODIA (MILLENNIUM GALLERIES); HUFTON + CROWDINODIA (CRUCIBLE THEATRE); DENNIS GILBERT/DINODIA (CAR PARK)