

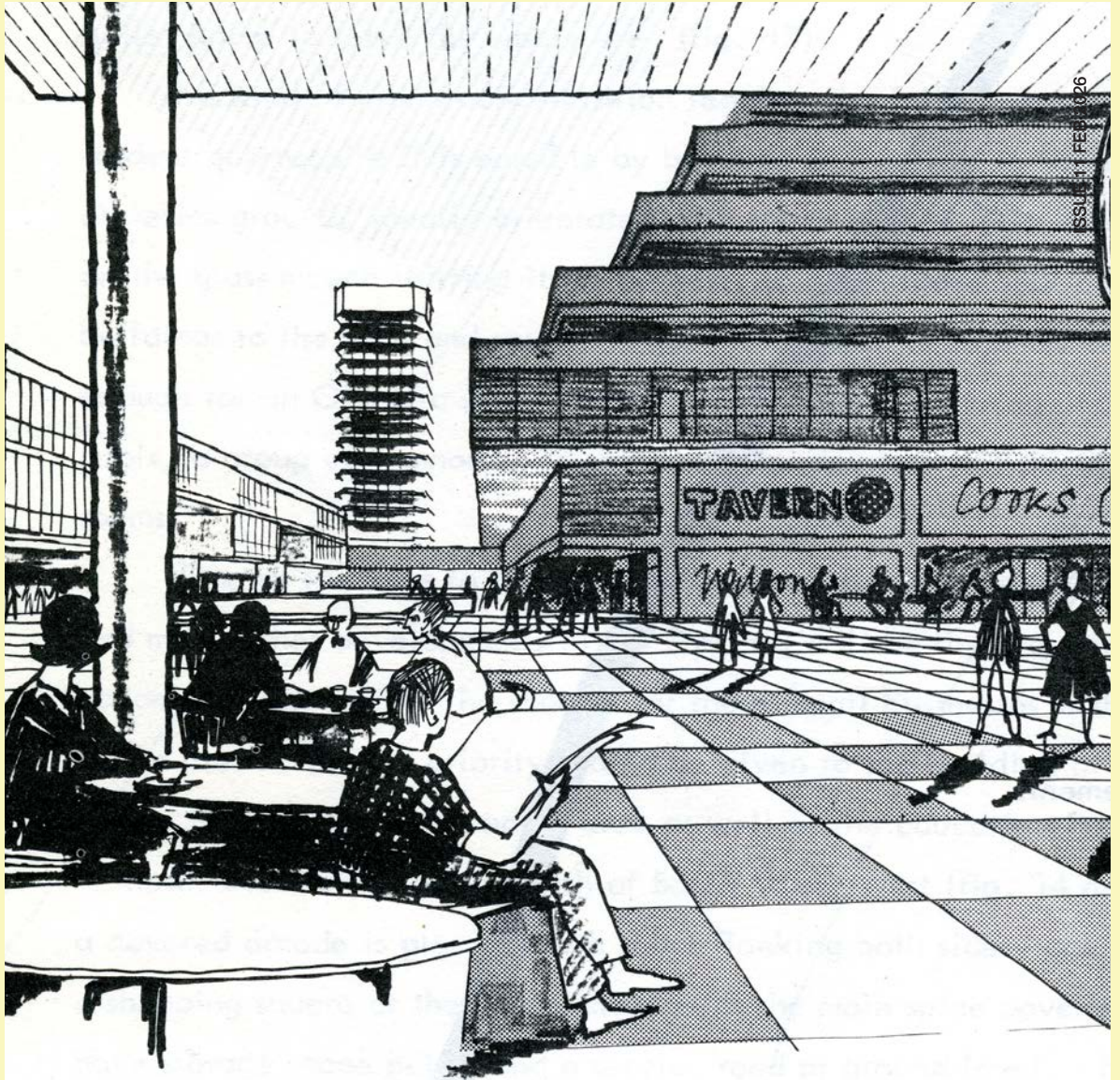
Oxford Road Corridor

MARTIN DODGE TELLS THE STORY OF
OXFORD ROAD'S STREETS IN THE SKY

JOHN ROBB ON FIFTEEN YEARS OF
LOUDER THAN WAR

CELEBRATING 25 YEARS OF BIG HANDS

Spring Edition



Welcome

The Pink House

It was the first time most of us had been away from our parents for longer than a week. Now here we were on the other side of the world, in a place where most people didn't look like us, didn't sound like us. When I arrived here, all I wanted to do was turn back around and go home. I chanted my promise to my parents like a mantra. I would at least try here. It was all that kept me moving. And then I arrived at the garish pink house at the end of the road, with the limp *International Student Society* banner tied loosely above its once grand door.

Worries don't stick around too long in the Pink House. The wall's crumbling? Oh well. Let's go to the party in the basement that the Nigerian students are throwing. Tough day? Let's sit on the grass and finish off the leftovers from the cultural food swap last night.

The Pink House allows us to find one another. It gives us a place where we can just be us. It tells us we belong here just as much as the next person.

Guruleen Kahlo

This work by Guruleen Kahlo was produced for Elizabeth Gaskell's House in collaboration with The Writing Squad and Manchester City of Literature. It is an extract from the new book *I've Never Read Elizabeth Gaskell*, inspired by the House and its rich history. The project was funded by National Lottery players, via The National Lottery Heritage Fund.

Visitors who bring a copy of this zine to Elizabeth Gaskell's House can claim a free copy of *I've Never Read Elizabeth Gaskell*, while stocks last.



A new year brings a fresh set of stories from across the Oxford Road Corridor. Inside this issue, Manchester Museum's new Africa Hub explores what it means to begin with what is not yet known, opening collections to dialogue and collaboration.

Venture Café Manchester introduces its role in connecting innovators across the city and beyond, while at the Whitworth, family volunteering shows how cultural spaces are shaped by the people who use them.

Elsewhere, we look back at the ambitious 1960s vision for 'Streets in the Sky' along Oxford Road, celebrate 25 years of Big Hands as a cornerstone of Manchester's grassroots music scene, and mark 15 years of *Louder Than War* with a live festival at Manchester Academy.

Alongside these features, you'll find our spring listings highlighting exhibitions, performances and gigs taking place across the Corridor over the coming months. Whether you're discovering something new or returning to familiar places, this issue offers a snapshot of Manchester's Knowledge Quarter.

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Front cover: Artist's impression of 'Streets in the Sky' campus on Oxford Road drawn by Peter Wright. See pages 12-17. Designed & edited by Ben Williams. With thanks to our partners Manchester Metropolitan University, University of Manchester, Manchester City Council, Manchester University NHS Foundation Trust, Bruntwood and Royal Northern College of Music

FIFTEEN YEARS *of* NOISE

Louder Than War turns 15 with a live festival at the Manchester Academy. Founder John Robb reflects on the site's DIY roots and the culture that keeps it loud.

Louder Than War and the Oxford Road Corridor are entwined. That's why our Louder Than War Live festival, which celebrates our 15th year as one of the UK's leading music and culture websites, is at Manchester Academy and at the heart of music and Manchester. It feels perfect that a great bill of bands we love like Sea Power, Pale Blue Eyes, Benefits, Evil Blizzard, Immersion, and many others will play across Academy stages on Saturday 14th March.

It will be a day of joy, great music, and a party to celebrate our existence and the people that have been sharing our trip. And, yes, of course it will be just off that long and winding road with its million stories from Marx to Madchester, from splitting the atom to forging Oasis, from the world's first computer to the latest new band that have all made it the main artery for Manchester culture. This is a road where the ebb and flow of music that changed the world has been at the heart and soul of the sound and vision for decades.

On many nights it's the Mancunian Sunset Strip without the warmth and plastic surgery glamour, but with its own unique soundtrack. Oxford Road is the main strip of Manchester music and culture. From Johnny Roadhouse to Manchester Academy and to all the venues like Deaf Institute or Gorilla, or the Ritz, that lie just off. It's always been moving away from the pulsebeat, and it's here on a road that I'm on every day that the *Louder Than War* music and culture website was conceived 15 years ago.

be documented wherever you were, and as the technology zipped further forward, you could virtually run an international music website on your phone sat in HOME or in a cafe on Oxford Road.

You didn't have to be in London.

You didn't have to be anywhere.

You just had to be plugged into the culture and the now, and all that culture was on the doorstep locally and internationally as everyone came here to Manchester and the Corridor. Music was everywhere all at once, and you could tap in anywhere in the digital age without anyone's permission, and this freedom was the basic premise of *Louder Than War* when it started, and this only increased rapidly over the years.

In many ways the website is a digital fanzine. I grew up in the punk days with Xerox zines, and they were wonderful captures of energy and art and wild graphics but were limited by the primitive distribution of how many gigs you could take a plastic bag full of zines around to sell. It was a curious part of those times wandering up and down the bar at various venues selling zines and their crazed missives about music and culture but they were perfect snapshots of their time and the democratisation of media and art away from the few and back to the many and *Louder Than War* still likes to reflect that.

We are a fan site written by and for the fans. We want the words to smell of venues and leap out high decibels at you. We want the holy words to be written by the people involved in the culture and we want the writers to do more than just document. Writers are now also connectors. They join the dots from bands to venues to managers and get new bands on their way and celebrate old bands who still burn.

We also celebrate the photographic image, and I would say that we have the best team of photographers on any music website. I'm often astonished about how good the photos look and that's down to Melanie Smith, a photographer who

is also our photos editor. She has a brilliant eye for a shot and is out most nights documenting the images that capture the magic of performance, and she applies this TV eye to her team of photographers. This is cool because we believe the image and the words are equally important. Music is a quicksilver culture and not always easy to capture but often the image can say everything, and the words can unpack the moment and that is one of the key fundamentals to the site.

We may exist within the DIY ethics of punk, but we have a huge readership. We are not part of any corporate machine or huge media juggernaut.

And we prove that you can have a loud game-changing voice by being passionate and immersed in the culture.

Everything *Louder Than War* has achieved has been off our own backs, and by the good people that work in whatever way towards the common good of the site. Like another editor, Nigel Carr who has got the site's SEO so on point that we often beat media giants like *The Guardian* and the *NME* in Google searches and get as many readers for our pieces...

Guerrilla word-fare! We move like ninjas at our own speed. This is the new media world - it's not magazines in shops that hardly exist anymore. Media now hums zips and zaps in the air and is moving fast and furious and invisible across the ether and into phones and laptops. It's fast and of the moment like all best pop culture and once read it then sits there in the background like a permanent record of the times we live in; like a digital Daniel Defoe diarising the spinning out of control 21st century and its ever fascinating sound track just like Oxford

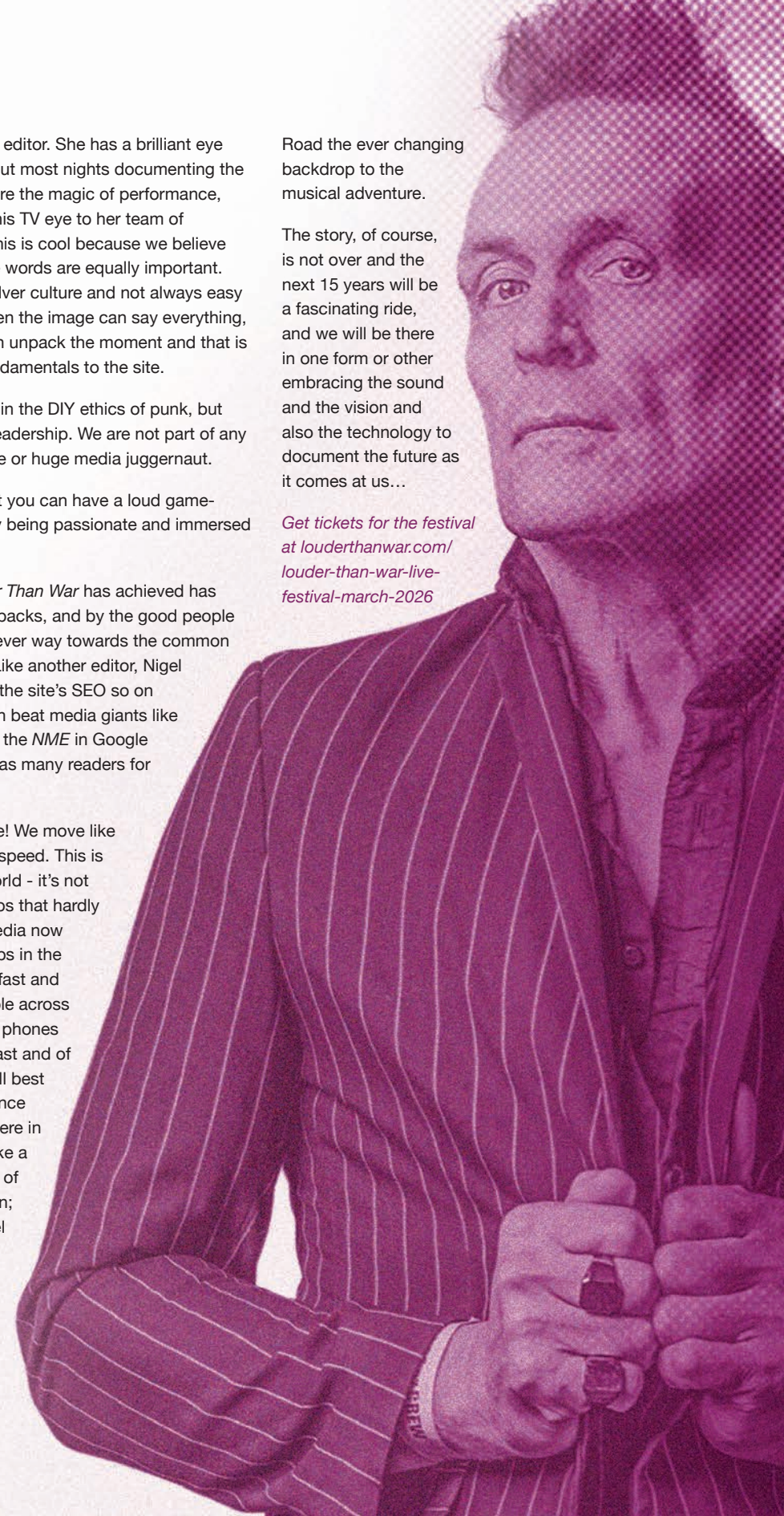
Road the ever changing backdrop to the musical adventure.

The story, of course, is not over and the next 15 years will be a fascinating ride, and we will be there in one form or other embracing the sound and the vision and also the technology to document the future as it comes at us...

Get tickets for the festival at louderthanwar.com/louder-than-war-live-festival-march-2026

In the eighties music was documented mainly by London based inkies. Northern writers were always 'stringers' or 'freelancers', and outsiders covering the 'Manchester scene', and were treated like second-rate writers because they didn't live in London. The journalism, like music, was then looked on as an appendage to the big city, even if frequently Manchester was at the front of the pack.

The Internet boom shifted and changed everything. No longer was music media a cumbersome dinosaur that needed big London offices, huge printers and distribution. Everything could now



Get Involved!

Fiona Cariss, Civic Engagement Manager at the Whitworth, explores how family volunteering is helping more people feel part of civic life.



Across our city there's a group of people, often unnoticed, quietly supporting our most valued charities, community projects and free cultural venues. These brilliant volunteers give their time to help others, supporting events, caring for people, maintaining green spaces, serving food at shelters, and sorting and distributing donations — the list goes on.

At the Whitworth, volunteers of all ages assist in supporting our workshops, welcome visitors, help look after our gardens, care and catalogue our valuable collections and take part in placements and work experience for various projects. I've been working as a Volunteer Manager for over 15 years, and I've spent more than a decade at the Whitworth running our Volunteer and Civic Engagement Programme. Across all our opportunities, family volunteering has become one of the most joyful and impactful strands.

In 2017, whilst I was on maternity leave, I wanted to support my local community hub at Stretford Public Hall. My major barrier? I had a six-month-old baby! The Hall were amazing and said I could bring her along, so I volunteered with her beside me while I assisted on reception for their *Wellbeing Tuesday* sessions.

This personal experience crystallised something that the volunteer sector's research has consistently shown: time and caregiving responsibilities are among the biggest barriers to volunteering. In national data, 'not wanting to make an ongoing commitment' tops the list at 33%, while 'looking after children' is cited by around 22%, everyday constraints many families feel.

When I returned to the gallery, it made sense to include the opportunity for volunteers to bring children along, especially during our successful Early Years and Family Programme. At first, it was mums bringing their babies while helping during our *Art Baby* workshops; but it quickly grew into something broader, more inclusive, and opened our programme to all ages of volunteers.

In July 2018 we recruited 65 volunteers for our summer *PLAYTIME* programme, including the launch of Family Volunteering, roles that explicitly welcome people to volunteer alongside their families. We saw our first baby-to-teenager volunteers getting involved; learning to welcome other families and engaging their peers in activities through play. Our volunteer roles for families are designed around open-ended play, short shifts, and clear, practical tasks from friendly welcomes to assisting artists, collecting feedback, and photographing sessions.

One of the greatest joys of being a volunteer manager is seeing how individuals' confidence grows, parents or caregivers on maternity leave and teenagers tell us they feel less isolated and more connected. I have seen young people learn teamwork, responsibility and grow alongside each other and then transfer those skills to school and future work.

Volunteering rates have not yet returned to pre-pandemic levels, but by removing the most common barriers (time, childcare, and cost) and wrapping volunteering around the reality of family life, we can invite a new wave of civic participation that is joyful and inclusive.

At the Whitworth we've seen how families volunteering together create art, welcome others, and weave community. Their contributions might look small, but the impact is large. Confidence is gained and friendships are made.

If you want to explore roles that fit your family's rhythm, come and say hello. There are lots of ways to get involved, from one-off *PLAY* days to regular workshops, we'd love to help you find the right fit.

As we gear up to another year of exciting and thought-provoking exhibitions at the Whitworth we'll be looking to recruit more volunteers, especially our Family Volunteers ready for our *PLAYTIME* activities this August inspired by our *Hyundai Translocal Series: Entangled and Woven* exhibition, which you can find out more about via our website.

I'm also excited about a new major solo exhibition by Delaine Le Bas, following her recent nomination for the 2024 *Turner Prize* opening this February. Delaine will be including works, in her *Un-Fair-Ground* show, by our long-term partners Venture Arts and some of their brilliant local artists (who also volunteer with us!), plus neuro-diversity-friendly tours by our excellent Artist in Residence Sally Hirst and lots of other great events throughout the run of the show.

I would also recommend marking in your diaries the opening of exhibition *Beneath the Great Wave: Hokusai, Hiroshige, and ukiyo-e print* in March which will be the gallery's first exhibition dedicated to Japanese prints in over 100 years. It's going to be a great year of exhibitions and events and whether you can volunteer or not we look forward to welcoming you at the Whitworth soon!

To find out more about volunteering, and register your interest here: whitworth.manchester.ac.uk/getinvolved/volunteer

Venture Café Globally, Nationally & in Manchester

ANDREW RUFFLER, DIRECTOR OF VENTURE CAFÉ MANCHESTER, INTRODUCES HOW A GLOBAL MOVEMENT BUILT ON COLLABORATION IS CREATING A NEW OPEN-ACCESS HOME FOR INNOVATION IN MANCHESTER.

Venture Café is a global movement built on a simple but powerful belief: isolation is the enemy of innovation. Launched in 2009 by Tim Rowe as part of the CIC ecosystem in Boston's Kendall Square, it grew out of the premise that great ideas only turn into real-world impact when people with different skills, perspectives and experiences can collide in the same space. Over the past 15 years, that idea has taken root across more than 15 cities around the world, bringing together over 750,000 innovators, entrepreneurs, researchers, creatives, policymakers, and corporate leaders.

What unifies every Venture Café is its flagship programme, the Thursday Gathering - a free, open-access weekly event designed to help people meet collaborators, learn new skills, find inspiration and explore emerging ideas. It's a deliberately informal, highly accessible way of building innovative communities that feel open, inclusive and dynamic. Although each city curates its own locally relevant themes, all are connected through a shared mission and a global network of communities working on the challenges of the future.

In the UK, Venture Café has taken on an even more strategic role. Venture Café London, Manchester and Edinburgh sit within a national framework as one of the Advanced Research and Invention Agency's (ARIA) nine activation partners, funded to support the delivery of ARIA's mission across the country. Together, the UK sites form an "innovation spine" linking three of the country's most ambitious cities, giving founders, researchers and innovators direct access to ARIA's Opportunity Spaces and to the global Venture Café ecosystem. Manchester's place within this network is especially significant, providing a gateway between the UK's northern innovation strengths and international counterparts.

Manchester is one of the most exciting innovation economies in Europe - a city shaped by industrial revolution, advanced materials, health innovation, culture, technology and a long tradition of invention. But like many successful cities, it is also complex and dispersed, with world-leading assets spread across multiple institutions, districts and networks. Venture Café Manchester exists to bring greater coherence, visibility and connectivity to that landscape.



Photos: Baseler and Holmes

The idea is simple: create a regular, accessible focal point for innovation that the entire ecosystem can anchor around. Through our monthly Thursday Gatherings, moving to weekly events in early 2026, anyone working on new ideas - from founders and researchers to corporates, investors and community innovators - can come together to share knowledge, explore emerging technologies, and build meaningful relationships.

Each gathering is thematically curated around topics that matter for Manchester's future, whether that's advanced materials, music, neurotech, gaming, sustainable fashion, internationalisation, longevity or the future of manufacturing. These themes are selected in close alignment with ARIA's Opportunity Spaces, as well as Greater Manchester's strategic priorities and frontier sectors. As a result, attendees can always expect content that is both relevant to the region and connected to global agendas.

The experience itself blends formal and informal formats in a way that makes participation genuinely easy. Keynotes, fireside conversations, workshops, panel discussions and innovation showcases sit alongside more relaxed networking and interactive creative sessions. One evening might involve Japanese fan-painting; another might spotlight new materials startups emerging from the Graphene Engineering Innovation Centre; another might bring in international partners to explore global connections. What remains consistent is the atmosphere: open, welcoming, busy and buzzing with ideas.

Attendees also gain access to a community that cuts across sectors, backgrounds and experience levels. Founders mix with researchers; corporates encounter early-stage talent; policymakers meet artists; students mix with investors. Many of the most valuable connections formed at Venture Café events around the world happen spontaneously - and Manchester is already beginning to show the same early signs of that catalytic effect.

Ultimately, Venture Café integrates with the wider ecosystem by acting as a neutral convener. A space that amplifies others' work, complements existing networks and helps make the entire region feel more connected, visible and globally plugged in.

Venture Café Manchester is based in the Renold Building at Sister, the new innovation district occupying the former UMIST campus. This partnership is foundational. Sister is fast becoming a home for Manchester's next generation of startups, technologists, researchers and creative thinkers, offering workspaces and community programming that align naturally with Venture

Café's mission. As a result, our events are not only hosted in a vibrant, design-led venue but embedded in a growing campus that embodies the city's ambitions for innovation and creativity. Over time, our partnership with Sister will hopefully deepen into shared community initiatives, cross-activation and joint programmes that strengthen the culture of innovation across the site.

Our relationships with Greater Manchester's universities are equally central to our mission. The University of Manchester, Manchester Metropolitan University and the University of Salford bring world-class strengths across advanced materials, health innovation, AI, manufacturing, creative tech and data science. Venture Café provides the space for those academic strengths to interact more fluidly with industry, funders and the broader ecosystem. Whether supporting the visibility of spinouts, enabling researchers to showcase work, or helping students develop entrepreneurial capability, the aim is to build a clearer bridge between research excellence and commercial opportunity.

Beyond academia and Sister, Venture Café is working in partnership with the broader innovation community across Greater Manchester. This includes MIDAS, the GM Business Growth Hub, the Turing Innovation Catalyst, Bruntwood SciTech, GC Angels and others. Each relationship is geared towards collaboration rather than competition, ensuring that Venture Café becomes a shared platform rather than a siloed initiative.

Our role is to help convene, amplify and connect, not to duplicate work that other organisations already do well.

To support this approach, we are establishing a Venture Café Manchester Steering Committee, bringing together ecosystem leaders who will help shape programme priorities, identify emerging opportunities and ensure that our work continues to strengthen - not fragment - the region's innovation landscape.

Venture Café Manchester is designed to be the city's open-access innovation home: globally connected, strategically aligned, locally rooted and built on a mission of helping innovators meet, collaborate and create impact. Through our partnerships with ARIA, Sister, the universities and the wider ecosystem, we are shaping a new focal point for Manchester's innovation story - one that reflects the city's past, embraces its future, and enables more people to take part in the journey.

Find out more about Venture Café Manchester and how to connect with innovators: venturecafemanchester.org

Africa Hub

Manchester Museum's Danny Roberts introduces a gallery built around what is not known.



Spring Edition

Walk into the newly launched Africa Hub at Manchester Museum and you will notice something different straight away. Some objects do not have the answers you expect. Names are missing, origins are unclear and uses are unknown.

Africa Hub is a new gallery that begins with honesty. Rather than presenting collections as complete or settled, it makes space for gaps, silences and questions, and invites visitors to pause, look closely and reflect on what is missing. Unlike many galleries or exhibitions that mark the end of years of research and collaboration, Africa Hub represents a starting point. It builds on the Museum's existing work with diasporic communities and communities across Africa, while creating space to deepen and expand this engagement further.

Manchester Museum holds more than 40,000 objects from across Africa, many collected during the British Empire through trade, anthropology, confiscation and looting. In many cases, the only record is a donor's name or the year an object arrived. The makers, original names, cultural meanings and the communities they belonged to were rarely documented. Africa Hub begins there.

Among the objects on display is a striking figure of a horse with an ibis on its back. Nothing is known about its traditional use, its name or the community it came from. All that is recorded is that it arrived in Manchester in 1976, donated by a private individual. Instead of filling in the blanks, the gallery leaves them visible, allowing the objects themselves to raise questions and to start a process through which the Museum can better understand the African collections it cares for and make collective decisions on how they can best inspire future generations. That process includes working with diaspora communities to develop new ways of sharing and celebrating cultural heritage and, in some cases, considering restitution to communities of origin.

This approach marks a shift in how collections are shared. The gallery becomes a place where questions are valued and where future understanding can be shaped through dialogue, research and community knowledge, rather than being completed behind the scenes.

At the heart of Africa Hub there is a community collaboration that has helped to shape some of the displays. Many of these collections have been stored away for decades but are now being redisplayed and reinterpreted through partnerships like the one with the Igbo Community Greater

Manchester (ICM). ICM have worked with Lucy Edematie, Curator – African Collections from Colonial Contexts at Manchester Museum, on collaborative research focused on objects that have significance for their community and decided how these should be shown and described.

For the Museum, this kind of collaboration recognises that meaningful interpretation cannot happen without the voices of people connected to the objects. Cultural knowledge, memories and lived experience bring depth that historic records are lacking. Co-curation of this space has influenced not just what is displayed but how it is framed, offering visitors a richer and more human way of engaging with the collections.

For Honourable Mrs Sylvia Mgbearurike of the ICM Women's Wing, the process has been deeply personal. "We are united from Nigeria. We are the Igbos. Anywhere we are, we try to identify ourselves as a community. We have a culture of togetherness, sharing and love." Seeing Igbo heritage represented in Manchester makes her feel at home. "It makes us feel represented. That is what diversity and inclusion are all about."

Africa Hub also confronts difficult histories. "Some of these objects were given, some were stolen, some were taken forcefully out of conquest," Mrs Sylvia Mgbearurike explains. Bringing them together again is a step towards inclusiveness and shared understanding. For Emeka Onyegbuna, also a member of ICM, the gallery is about learning, connection and respect. It shows the role museums can play in preserving social heritage when communities are involved and sacred objects are treated with care.

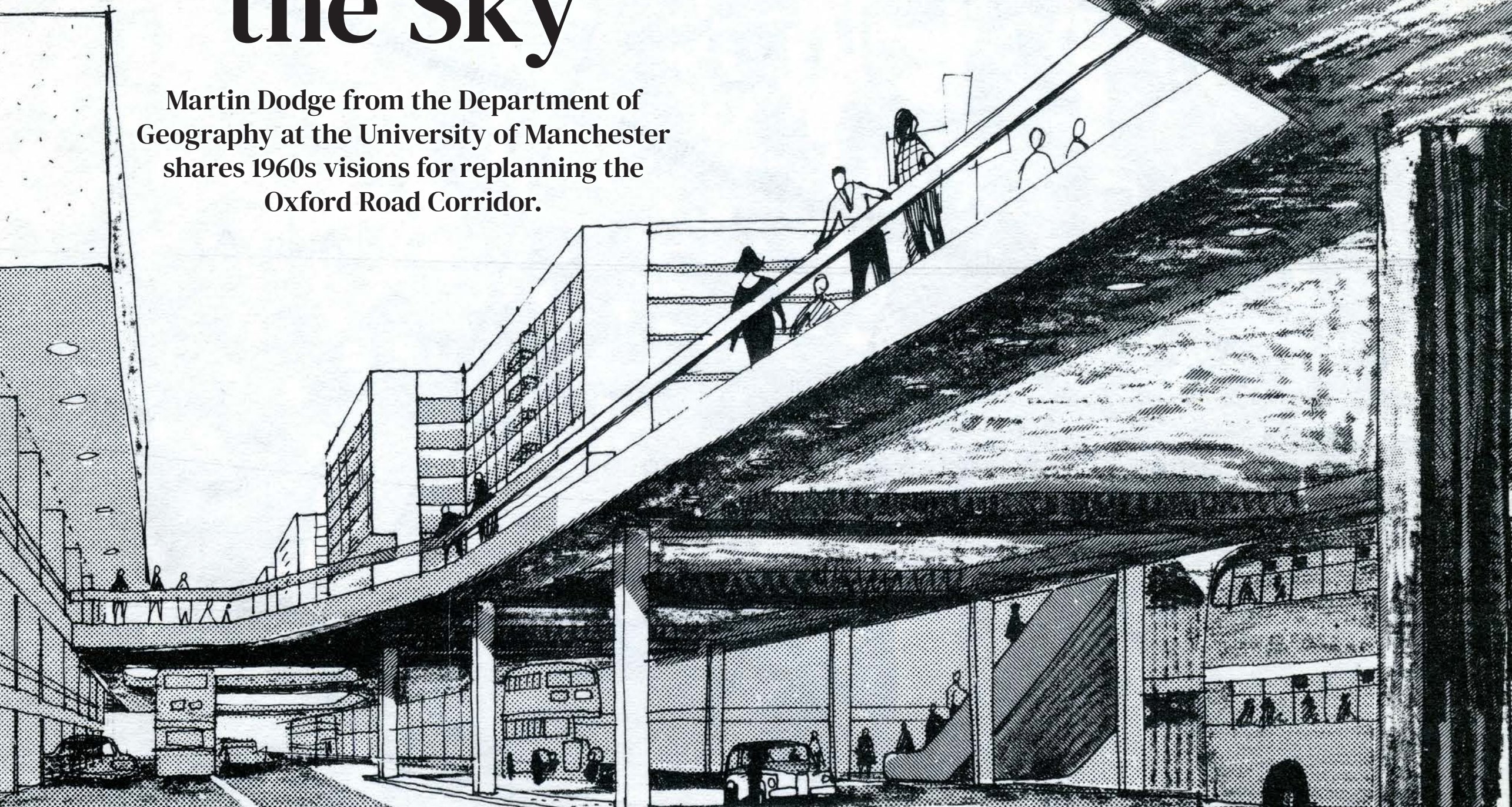
The Museum is laying its lack of knowledge bare and extending an invitation to visitors to come and view the collections, in person and online, and share their own knowledge, experience and perspectives to create a richer narrative around the African collections. Every contribution helps reconnect these collections with the people and communities for whom they matter most.

As Onyegbuna says, "We can't rewrite the past, but we can make sure the next generation understands it, that they can look at these collections and say, 'This is part of me.'"

Africa Hub is free to visit, inviting audiences to explore the space and share their perspectives through conversation or written feedback. Many of the objects on display and the stories being gathered can also be explored online, extending this exchange beyond the gallery.

Streets in the Sky

Martin Dodge from the Department of Geography at the University of Manchester shares 1960s visions for replanning the Oxford Road Corridor.



Our recently published book, *Building Towards Bicentenary*, marking the University of Manchester's bicentenary in 2024 provides a lavishly illustrated two-hundred-year history of the University and the changing landscape along Oxford Road. For the first time, the story is told in an accessible and visually engaging way through maps of the growing campuses and the architectural plans and historic photographs of scores of the University's most fascinating buildings.

One of the most important periods in this historical story, recounted in detail in our book, was in the 1960s, a decade of massive growth in buildings for higher education along the Corridor. There was the large-scale expansion of the Victoria University of Manchester to the east side of Oxford Road and the cluster of new science and engineering buildings along Brunswick Street.



Meanwhile, the city council was developing a group of colleges around Grosvenor Square, which would merge into Manchester Polytechnic (formally founded in 1970). Nearby Manchester College of Science and Technology was developing a completely new campus on derelict land just south of the Sackville Street building. This institution adopted the name University of Manchester Institute of Science and Technology (UMIST) in 1966.

To cope with the scale and speed of development, there was a decision to enact a comprehensive masterplanning. This exercise examined in detail the whole of the so-called Manchester Education Precinct (MEP) area under the direction of consultants Hugh Wilson and Lewis Womersley. (They were influential in the 1960s more widely in Manchester being responsible also for the design of the Arndale in the city centre and the infamous Crescents deck-access flats in Hulme.)

For MEP masterplanning, Wilson and Womersley's team delivered a series of recommendations about land allocation, the arrangement of major

new buildings and the provision of more student housing around Oxford Road. But perhaps the most radical aspect of their masterplanning of the University development was the promulgation of the 'Streets in the Sky' agenda. This was articulated clearly in their 1964 MEP Report,

'To adopt the principle of maximum separation of pedestrian from vehicular traffic throughout the site and to achieve this by raising pedestrian movement to a level above the traffic in those areas where new buildings are to be erected in the region of traffic roads.'

The maps from the 1967 MEP Report set out the wide extent of the upper-level pedestrian walkways that would be built by 1984 (shown in yellow).

'Streets in the Sky' were anticipated to run from Oxford Road train station almost down to the Whitworth, linking together most of the planned new buildings and with several link bridges across busy roads.

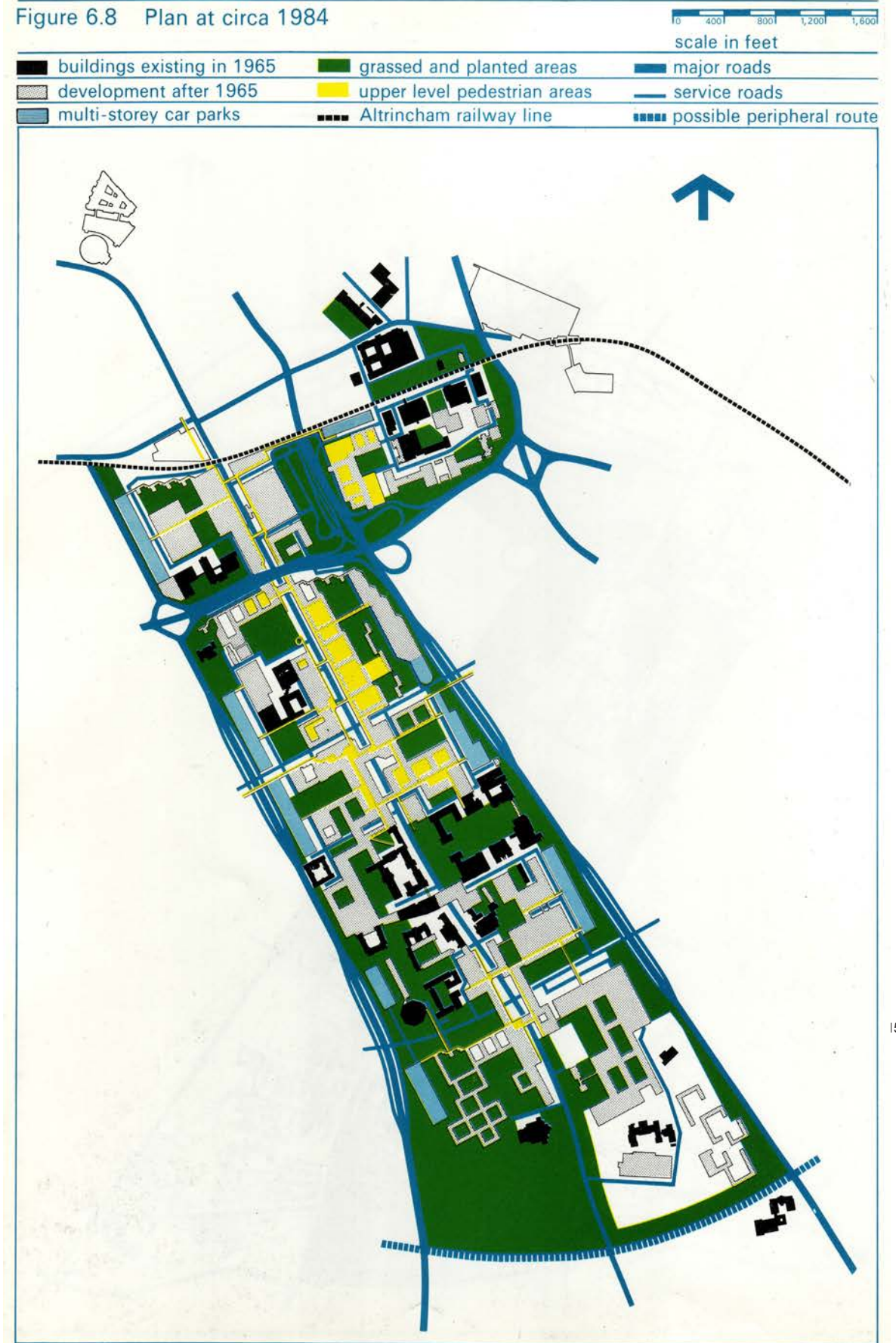
An important initial element to the walkway system was the Mathematics

Building, completed in 1968. The iconic 18-storey tower included a large pedestrian ramp from ground level Oxford Road up to the large podium. The walkway would subsequently connect to and run straight through the middle of the computer building (now the Kilburn Building) and onto the new chaplaincy (St Peter's House and Crawford House).

To show how the street in the sky would work as vibrant social spaces, impressionistic sketches were drawn by Peter Wright and presented in 1964 in Manchester Education Precinct: Interim Report of Planning Consultants.

Beyond the chaplaincy the walkway would cross Booth Street East, taking pedestrians high above roaring traffic and double-decker buses, and to connect to a planned major new sport complex fronting Oxford Road. This centre would have included swimming pools, an ice-rink, a rifle range and climbing wall. On the other side of the road the walkway would traverse the front façade of the

Figure 6.8 Plan at circa 1984



new music college and onto Grosvenor Square where it would convey pedestrians gently to the ground in front of the College of Adult Education on an elegantly spiralled ramp. We have photos of an architect's model, but sadly the spiral ramp was never realised as the walkway system stalled crossing the Royal Northern College of Music (RNCM).

At the heart of the walkway network that was built was the Precinct Centre with its upper-level covered shopping square. The design of this mega structure stretching along most of Booth Street and with a large link bridge over Oxford Road was undertaken from 1967 by Hugh Wilson and Lewis Womersley as architects.

With shopping seen as vital to its success, there was provision for 38 retail units – mainly at first floor and arranged around two large, covered squares - along with several large showrooms at ground level. Early occupants included Haigh and Hochland bookshop, a newsagent, greengrocer and a travel agent. Later, a post office, various banks and the Phoenix public house opened though it took well over five years until all units were let. The architects Wilson and Womersley also located their Manchester office at the Precinct Centre. There was also a six-storey block of student flats, named Cornbrook House after a 'lost' river that runs nearby in a shallow culvert.

Through the years, the Precinct Centre struggled to retain retail businesses and eateries. The incomplete upper-level walkway system meant the shops positioned at first floor level were rather marooned with many customers unwilling to venture up to them, even with the provision of large escalators.

However, Lewis Womersley proudly remarked in 1974 in the University's staff magazine: 'On sunny days I find it exhilarating to stroll along the length of the walkway and experience the variety of interest of internal spaces and external views'.

The positive 1960s vision met economic reality into the 1970s and none of the proposed upper walkway system along Oxford Road beyond RNCM was ever realised. Likewise, the massive sports

centre on the other side of Oxford Road, with its upper-level walkway remained on the architects drawing board. (Although decades later swimming pools did materialise with the construction of the Manchester Aquatics Centre for the 2002 Commonwealth Games.)

The end of the existing 'Streets in the Sky' started in earnest with the demolition of Maths Tower in 2005 and its replacement with the University Place (the 'tin can'). This broke the pedestrian bridge to the Kilburn Building, although the supporting concrete plinth was retained and repurposed as a large signpost.

A much more dramatic severing of the walkways came with plans to comprehensively redevelop the Manchester Business School in the 2010s with the Precinct Centre bridge over Oxford Road being pulled down over a summer weekend in 2015.

The link bridge across Booth Street to RNCM was also removed. During major reconfiguration of Alliance Manchester Business School, overseen by the architects Building Design Partnership, between 2016 and 2019, all retail facilities were relocated to the ground floor.

Today there are only fleeting physical traces left of the 1960s 'Streets in the Sky', a vision that was supposed to transform movement along Oxford Road. It was a positive agenda but with misplaced

optimism of changing human behaviour. The piecemeal delivery of elements of the walkways also meant it was never a comprehensive system and added to people's reluctance to waste time going upwards only to have to come down again to reach a different building.

Martin Dodge is a Senior Lecturer in the Geography Department at the University of Manchester. Much of his research is currently focused on critical interpretations of visual representations of the urban landscape. He is also conducting studies of the historical geography of transport, public housing and town planning in Manchester.

Building Towards Bicentenary: A Campus History of The University of Manchester, by Ben Blackwell, Martin Dodge, James Hopkins and Matthew Steele is available online at: archive.org/details/building-towards-bicentenary-1

'Streets in the Sky were anticipated to run from Oxford Road station almost down to Whitworth, linking together most of the planned new buildings above the traffic below'



Hugh Wilson and Lewis Womersley



Demolition of Precinct Centre bridge



Photo: Sinead Ferguson

BIG HANDS

A DIG INTO THE HISTORY OF ONE OF MANCHESTER'S BEST ROCK BARS, A BRILLIANT SPACE FOR UP-CLOSE, AFFORDABLE GIGS AND ONE OF OUR FAVOURITE SPOTS TO GRAB A BEER ON OXFORD ROAD.

The early 2000s fall slightly out of Manchester's great nostalgia era. Madchester was an increasingly hazy memory, Britpop was fading, and Oasis had shifted from defining the city to dominating the nation's gossip columns. But for actual gig-goers, it was a brilliant time. Indie and rock clubs like Jilly's and the Roadhouse were thriving, rehearsal rooms were full, and bands still drank in the same places as the people who came to see them. It was less about scenes and slogans, more about the people moving between venues, bands, bars and back again.

Big Hands arrived in late 2001 as part of that ecosystem, not as a themed bar or a nostalgia project, but as a place built by musicians, for musicians.

In a city full of bars trying to manufacture a sense of authenticity, Big Hands never had to pretend.

Sitting on Oxford Road for nearly 25 years, it's always just been itself: loud, a bit battered round the edges, and proudly so. While newer places carefully curate their "dive bar" look, Big Hands earned its bohemian, rock and roll feel the hard way, by existing, surviving and refusing to clean up its act.

"We never copied anything," says director Miguel. "We just started with the idea and never looked back."

That philosophy has barely shifted in that time. Same vibe, same wonky décor, same posters peeling across the staircase. For Miguel and fellow director Jarek, the brief has always been simple: don't mess with what founder Scott Alexander got right in the first place. "We just try to keep the same essence since day one," Jarek says. "A rock and roll hangout place."

The story of Big Hands is tangled up with music from the very beginning. Scott Alexander, who sadly passed away in 2018, was a musician from Melbourne. He opened the bar with architect Pete Bailey, whose earlier work included The Temple bar. Scott had worked in bars across the world and played in bands, including Indigo Jones with Miguel. Opening Big Hands was partly a practical decision, a way to support a life in music. "It wasn't a commercial approach," Miguel says. "We just do what we love doing."

Big Hands has always been a melting pot. Staff came from all over the world, Argentina, Australia, Scandinavia, the US, with more than a dozen nationalities behind the bar at one point. The result was a place that felt genuinely cosmopolitan without ever announcing itself as such. "It was a choir of different people," Jarek recalls. "Probably that mixture helped shape the place."

Miguel and Jarek both came up through the ranks, starting behind the bar rather than in an office somewhere. They worked at Big Hands for two decades before taking over the business in 2018. That sense of continuity runs deep. Many of the staff have been there for a decade or more, treated not as disposable bar workers but as skilled people central to the atmosphere.

Wedged next to Manchester Academy, Big Hands naturally became, and remains, a meeting point for gig-goers and bands. It wasn't designed as a live venue in the conventional sense, early shows were occasional rather than programmed, but its proximity to gigs meant musicians gravitated there before and after shows. "It was always a hangout for pre-gig and post-gig bands," Miguel says. "That just happened naturally because of where we are."

That led to moments that have passed into local folklore. In 2008, Frank Black from the Pixies announced online that he'd be playing Big Hands. Around 500 people turned up, spilling out onto the street. Jarek was managing that night and remembers thinking it couldn't possibly be true, until Frank Black simply appeared and played outside the bar. A couple of years earlier, when The Academy had technical problems, The Brian Jonestown Massacre ended up performing an unplanned set. "Completely insane," recalls Jarek.

Members of Elbow and I Am Kloot were early regulars, back when everyone rehearsed in the same rooms. Scott and Miguel were particularly close with I Am Kloot, even touring Europe with them as Indigo Jones. Over the years, the list of familiar faces at the bar has included Chris Cornell, Lily Allen, Self Esteem and the late Mani from The Stone Roses.

Celebrity, however, has never carried much weight behind the bar. One oft-repeated story involves Jarek refusing to serve Elijah Wood for not having ID, only discovering later, via someone in the bathroom, that he'd just turned away Frodo Baggins.

Inside, there are no flashing fruit machines or corporate distractions. Just walls layered with stickers and memorabilia, each with its own story.

Now, after nearly 25 years, the crowd is properly multi-generational. Original regulars come in with their kids; others discover the bar years after first walking past it. "We've got second-generation drinkers now," Jarek says. "People come in and tell me their parents met here." But it's not just students or long-standing faces, it's also the city's latest generation of gig-goers and musicians, the pull is the same: loud guitars, affordable pints and a sense that this is a place that hasn't been smoothed down for mass appeal.

That commitment to music hasn't faded. Through a partnership with Sour Grapes Records, run by Borja, Giorgio and Alex, Big Hands actively supports emerging artists. What began as a monthly gig night has grown into regular weekly live shows featuring local, national and international bands, alongside Psych Jams that give young musicians space to experiment and meet people. True to form, none of it is shouted about. "We don't want to over-advertise," Jarek says. "It is what it is. Be brave and walk in."

Today, Big Hands remains proudly independent and grassroots, and that independence shows in the offer. A lovingly tended roof garden provides one of the best outdoor drinking spots on Oxford Road in the summer, alongside food and a broad selection of beers at prices that remain accessible by city-centre standards. At weekends, vinyl DJs play late into the night, often until 3am, keeping the focus firmly on music rather than trends. Gig tickets are kept deliberately low, often around six quid, making live music something people can stumble into rather than plan months ahead for.

After Scott Alexander's death, the sense of responsibility only deepened. Miguel and Jarek see themselves not as reinventors but as caretakers. "We just want to carry on what Scott created," Miguel says.

The aim remains rooted in the basics: good booze, good company, and space for music to exist without being over-packaged or over-sold. If they have their way, Big Hands will still be there in another 25 years welcoming whoever appears to wander in next and quietly pulling them into the fold.

Follow @bighandsbar on Instagram

Spring '26

There are thousands of gigs and concerts across the Corridor each year, including free lunchtime performances at The Martin Harris Centre and RNCM, countless cinema screenings at HOME, and loads of literary happenings in this designated UNESCO City of Literature.

Follow us on socials and visit oxfordroadcorridor.com for more inspiration.

Please double-check listings before making a journey. All events are subject to change.

Exhibitions

IT REQUIRES GETTING LOST

Castlefield Gallery
Until 22 Feb
A group exhibition exploring what can be discovered when we let go of certainty and embrace unfamiliar paths.

TRICERATOPS

Manchester Museum
Until 22 Feb
Journey into the heart of the Cretaceous to meet a true prehistoric icon.

YUKI KIHARA: DARWIN IN PARADISE CAMP

The Whitworth
Until 15 Mar
A visually stunning exhibition centring Indigenous, queer worlds by Japanese-Sāmoan artist Yuki Kihara.

ARTEFACTS OF INTERACTION

HOME
Until 29 Mar
Discover four large-scale collaborative paintings shaped by artists' lived experience of neurodivergence, substance use and recovery, where creativity, care and collective practice become acts of connection.

PERFORMING TREES

The Whitworth
Until 4 Apr
An exhibition exploring the changing role of trees in art, showcasing more than 50 works from the Whitworth's collection.

ANINDILYAKWA ARTS

Manchester Museum
Until 30 Apr
Hear stories from the Anindilyakwa People or Warnumamalya (true people), who are the Traditional Owners of the Groote archipelago off the north coast of Australia.

THE ARTEFACTS OF PREDICTION

Manchester Museum
Until 28 Jun
Exploring how people from 1900 to the present have tried to glimpse, design, or control what comes next.

RECOVERIST CURATORS

The Whitworth
Until 5 Jul
A co-curated exhibition exploring the Whitworth's collection through the lens of recovery.

UN-FAIR-GROUND

The Whitworth
13 Feb–31 May
A new major solo exhibition by Delaine Le Bas, following her recent nomination for the 2024 *Turner Prize*.

BENEATH THE GREAT WAVE: HOKUSAI, HIROSHIGE, AND UKIYO-E PRINT

The Whitworth
14 Mar–15 Nov
The Whitworth's first exhibition dedicated to Japanese prints in over 100 years explores the evolution of traditional ukiyo-e woodblock prints and paintings.

BROKEN ECOLOGIES

Castlefield Gallery
15 Mar–19 Apr
Through large-scale print works, film and sculpture, this exhibition reflects on power, protest, memory, and survival.

MICHAELA YEARWOOD-DAN

The Whitworth
17 Apr–18 Oct
The first institutional solo exhibition by Michaela Yearwood-Dan, a rising star in contemporary painting.

Stage

QUEER CONTACT 2026

Contact
12–21 Feb
Queer Contact is back with a bang! Featuring theatre, cabaret, art, film, line-dancing and more.

PRISCILLA QUEEN OF THE DESERT THE MUSICAL

Palace Theatre
19–28 Feb
The classic musical is back with a dazzling, brand new 30th anniversary tour production.

MAMMA MIA

Palace Theatre
3–21 Mar
A daughter's quest for her father sparks love, laughter, and ABBA's timeless songs in this unforgettable musical.

CRIME AND PUNISHMENT

HOME
19–21 Mar
A penniless student murders, spiraling into paranoia while a cunning detective closes in, as love hints at escape.

TURN 2026

Contact
20 Mar
Word of Warning's annual whirlwind of new North West dance returns to Contact.

A GRAIN OF SAND

HOME
26–28 Mar
A powerful one-woman show based on testimony of Gazan children.

BOG WITCH

HOME
26–28 Mar
Performance artist Bryony Kimmings brings acclaimed new show to Manchester.

MATILDA THE MUSICAL

Palace Theatre
26 Mar–25 Apr
Multi-award winning musical from the Royal Shakespeare Company inspired by the beloved book by Roald Dahl.

THE CITY FOR INCURABLE WOMEN

HOME
2–4 Apr
Explore 1880s hysteria in Paris as fish in a dress reveals medical misogyny, connecting past trauma to the present.

TROMPE L'OEIL

Contact
18 Apr–2 May
A hilarious circus and musical romp - combining queer theatre, cabaret, circus and illusion.

TROUBLED

HOME
7–9 May
An extraordinary tale of love, loss and human connection - told with tea and biscuits.

SPLIT ENDS

Contact
19–20 May
A tragi-comedy solo show using puppetry and physical theatre, exploring love, coercive control, obsession, and the chaos of desire and loss.

WAITRESS

Palace Theatre
26–30 May
Jenna, a pie-making waitress, finds laughter, love, and friendship with help from colleagues, in this witty, heartwarming musical.

IN THE BRAIN

HOME
27–30 May
A visceral, high-voltage celebration of movement, music, and pure, unfiltered energy.

NATION

HOME
28–30 May
A dark, brutal fable of community, storytelling, and violence, where a perfect town unravels after a stranger knocks at the door.

Special Events

INTERNATIONAL MOTHER LANGUAGE DAY

Various
17 Feb–5 Mar
Manchester celebrates its 200 languages with free, family-friendly events, workshops, performances, and cultural activities showcasing the city's rich linguistic diversity.

INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY WALKING TOUR

Grosvenor East, Manchester Metropolitan University
4 Mar
A guided exploration of Manchester's rich history of women connected to the Oxford Road Corridor. The walk uncovers the stories of artists, writers, scientists, medics and campaigners who were pioneers in their fields, many of whom remain under-recognised today, including Elizabeth Gaskell.

Classical

MANCHESTER CAMERATA & RNCM

RNCM
18 Feb

THE HALLÉ: THE PLANETS

Bridgewater Hall
19 Feb

BBC PHILHARMONIC: ROMEO AND JULIET

Bridgewater Hall
21 Feb

THE HALLÉ PRESENTS JONNY GREENWOOD

Bridgewater Hall
26 Feb

ENO: COSÌ FAN TUTTE

Bridgewater Hall
27–28 Feb

THE HALLÉ: SHOSTAKOVICH'S SYMPHONY NO.1

Bridgewater Hall
5 Mar

ABEL SELAOCOE WITH BANTU ENSEMBLE

RNCM
13 Mar

MANCHESTER CAMERATA: ONE DAMN THING AFTER ANOTHER

RNCM
15 Mar

RNS MOVES WITH CANDOCO DANCE COMPANY

RNCM
17 Mar

JANÁČEK: THE CUNNING LITTLE VIXEN

RNCM
22–28 Mar

JASON WONG

RNCM
23 Mar

VITAMIN STRING QUARTET

Bridgewater Hall
23 Mar

THE HALLÉ – THE BEST OF JOHN WILLIAMS

Bridgewater Hall
17 Apr

BBC PHILHARMONIC: BIG BEAUTIFUL DARK AND SCARY

Bridgewater Hall
25 Apr

BBC PHILHARMONIC: GRAND PIANOLA

RNCM
1 May

THE HALLÉ: SPRING WITH SIR MARK ELDER

Bridgewater Hall
7 May

MANCHESTER COLLECTIVE X THICK & TIGHT: PAPILLONS

RNCM
9 May

SIR STEPHEN HOUGH

Bridgewater Hall
12 May

BBC PHILHARMONIC: NORTHERN LIGHTS

Bridgewater Hall
16 May

THE HALLÉ: WEST SIDE STORY SYMPHONIC DANCES

Bridgewater Hall
21 May

THE HALLÉ: KAHCHUN WONG CONDUCTS MAHLER'S SIXTH

Bridgewater Hall
28 May

Gigs

SORRY

Gorilla
15 Feb

DEXTER IN THE NEWSAGENT

Deaf Institute
16 Feb

WAVVES

YES
17 Feb

DOCTOR DOCTOR & FIRE BLANKET

Big Hands
20 Feb

ADULT DVD

YES
20 Feb

SUFFRAGETTE CITY

YES
7 Mar

THE ANTLERS

YES
9 Mar

ROSA ANSCHÜTZ

YES
9 Mar

FRENCH POLICE

Deaf Institute
13 Mar

LOUDER THAN WAR LIVE

Manchester Academy Venues
14 Mar (*see page 4*)

BUCK MEEK

YES
17 Mar

JEHNNY BETH

YES
19 Mar

LADYTRON

Gorilla
21 Mar

ANISH KUMAR

YES
21 Mar

DANNY BROWN

O2 Ritz Manchester
21 Mar

ODEAL

Manchester Academy
22 Mar

YUMI ZOUMA

YES
22 Mar

STELLA DONNELLY

YES
23 Mar

BAR ITALIA

Manchester Academy
24 Mar

GHOST FUNK ORCHESTRA

Deaf Institute
27 Mar

MANCHESTER PUNK FESTIVAL 2026

Various
3–5 Apr

BROOKE COMBE

Gorilla
9 Apr

OLIVE JONES

Deaf Institute
10 Apr

JORDAN WARD

Gorilla
12 Apr

MERCY GIRL

YES
15 Apr

ART SCHOOL GIRLFRIEND

Gorilla
16 Apr

JOSHUA IDEHEN

Gorilla
17 Apr

SEKOU

Deaf Institute
17 Apr

PEACHES

O2 Ritz Manchester
17 Apr

SINN6R

Gorilla
20 Apr

AMBER MARK

O2 Ritz Manchester
21 Apr

BONGEZIWE MABANDLA

Deaf Institute
22 Apr

CHALK

Gorilla
24 Apr

FEMI KUTI & THE POSITIVE FORCE

Manchester Academy
24 Apr

ALEXIS TAYLOR

YES
24 Apr

DAVID MORALES

Joshua Brooks
25 Apr

JUST MUSTARD

Gorilla
25 Apr

TYLER BALLGAME

Deaf Institute
25 Apr

YES

Bridgewater Hall
1 May

BALU BRIGADA

Manchester Academy
3 May

RIVAL CONSOLES

Gorilla
16 May

THOMAS DOLBY

O2 Ritz Manchester
15 May

LUCIA & THE BEST BOYS

Manchester Academy
22 May

TINARIWEN

O2 Ritz Manchester
22 May

WHO SHOT SCOTT

YES
23 May

PREWN

YES
27 May

ALT BLK ERA

Deaf Institute
27 May

PUMA BLUE

Deaf Institute
29 May

Oxford Road Corridor



Delaine Le Bas
Un-Fair-Ground

The Whitworth
13 Feb–31 May

Delaine Le Bas Un-Fair-Ground detail at Unfairground Glastonbury Festival 2024. Courtesy of the artist, ISOR CIC, RTA Collection. Delaine Le Bas was assisted by Rose Waudby. Photographer: Stephen Devine.