A Place of Noise and Confusion: Chris Steele-Perkins in Wolverhampton in 1978.

Francis Hodgson for Café Royal Books

“There are dark pools of water, muddy lanes, and miserable habitations far below. There are jagged walls and falling houses close at hand, and through the battered roofs and broken windows, wretched rooms are seen, where want and fever hide themselves in many wretched shapes, while smoke and crowded gables, and distorted chimneys, and deformity of brick and mortar penning up deformity of mind and body, choke the murky distance. As Mr Dombey looks out of his carriage window…all things look[ed] black, and cold, and deadly upon him, and he on them.” So Dickens, although a would-be believer in industrialisation and friend of ironmasters, turns his mind to the Black Country in that incredible description of a train ride in Dombey & Son, with its rushing rhythms and repeating metallic clangs of the words ‘shriek’ and ‘roar’. The Black Country – a specific chunk of the West Midlands West of Birmingham – was blackened by prosperity. The Earl of Dudley’s mines and many other heavy industrial works made it what it was. In 1862, Elihu Burritt, the American Consul to Birmingham, said it was ‘black by day and red by night’ from the light of the hundreds of furnaces working around the clock. People suffered in nineteenth century Wolverhampton as Mr. Dombey rushed there in his train; but they suffered through a huge economic boom, with fortunes made to right and left.

A boy is horizontal, flying through the air. In a picture prescient of Denis Darzacq’s evocative and terrifying 2006 series La Chute, about the social tensions in the districts of north Paris, the boy has plainly nowhere to go but to crash. The allusion is plain. If you were young and had hope of flying in the West Midlands in 1978, the chances were all against you. Icarus was going to come to grief.

By the time Chris Steele-Perkins got to Wolverhampton, it wasn’t prosperity that brought hardship to the Black Country but its ebb, apparently for ever. The mid-1970s was maybe the low point of Britain’s spectacular economic collapse after the War. The colonies, relics of Empire, were let go in a rush starting with India in 1947 and picking up speed through the early 1960s. By the 1970s Britain simply didn’t know how to recreate itself as a modern country. Humiliation was heaped upon humiliation. There was the three-day week, a desperate attempt to conserve fuel stocks by limiting industrial output. There was the farcical dance of to-join or not-to-join the EEC. Eventually, in 1976, the government of James Callaghan had to ask the International Monetary Fund for a loan, a unique embarrassment for an industrial country. The winter of 1978-1979 became the Winter of Discontent, as all sorts of workers (many in the public sector) went on strike. There was a famous strike of gravediggers, for example, which caused widespread concern. People were told to save bath water by sharing baths.

In 1968, Enoch Powell had made his famous ‘Rivers of Blood’ speech. Powell was MP for the streets and closes you see in these pages. Immigration had been seen as a convenient way to boost production and strongly encouraged only a short while before: In 1956, the Wolverhampton Express and Star argued: 'If Britain's present boom is to be maintained, more workers must be found. Where? The new recruits to British industry must come it would seem, from abroad, from the colonies, Eire and the Continent.' So
in the 1950s the Tory cabinet voted by big majorities against immigration controls. Yet those same Conservative voices, Powell among them, quickly began to find immigrants – and especially non-white immigrants – convenient scapegoats for industrial unrest and declining production which had in fact much more complex and deep-seated causes. Powell’s speech was by no means the first time that overtly racist public discourse had been heard in Britain: there was a long history of discrimination against Jews, in particular. But people were marked by Powell all the same. Newly arrived non-white communities had no choice but to turn in on themselves – the chimera of welcome integration threatened almost as soon as it was imagined. In 1967 Duncan Sandys (son in law of Winston Churchill, and – as a former Secretary of State for Commonwealth relations – a specialist in breaking ties to former colonies) had told the Conservative Party Conference “We are determined to preserve the British character of Britain. We welcome other races, in reasonable numbers. But we have already admitted more than we can absorb.” Powell, although more famous for his attacks on Afro-Caribbean groups, in fact opened hostilities against Kenyan Asians. An Act of Parliament of 1968 passed with unusual speed by a Labour government caving in to Tory pressure revoked the right to stay of 200,000 of those, although they were British passport holders and legitimate migrants as a result of the processes of decolonisation.

The ‘Rivers of Blood’ speech was delivered in Birmingham. “Eight years ago in a respectable street in Wolverhampton a house was sold to a Negro. Now only one white (a woman old-age pensioner) lives there. This is her story. She lost her husband and both her sons in the War. So she turned her seven-roomed house, her only asset, into a boarding house. She worked hard and did well, paid off her mortgage and began to put something by for her old age. Then the immigrants moved in. With growing fear, she saw one house after another taken over. The quiet street became a place of noise and confusion. Regretfully, her white tenants moved out...”

That was the public background of Steele-Perkins visit to Wolverhampton in 1978, commissioned by The Sunday Times to mark the tenth anniversary of Powell’s inflammatory speech. The private background was not irrelevant, either. Steele-Perkins’ mother was Burmese – and he wasn’t himself born in Britain. So this sensitive, gifted, rather hippyish photographer, interested in music festivals and folklore at least as much as in hard news, spent ten days in Wolverhampton with the writer Gordon Burn gauging the sense of an embattled community. The results are here, and in the best of them, his high talent for composing on the hoof, for grouping people even in rapid motion across the frame like dancers across a stage, gives the lasting deliberation and poise that makes the pictures what they are. He had done something similar in many British cities before: in Glasgow and Newcastle, in Belfast and Derry. Sometimes he was formally covering racial tensions – anti-National Front marches, for example, or the barely controlled hostilities of the Notting Hill Carnival – and sometimes he was just looking at deprivation as a ‘concerned photographer’ in the good phrase of Cornell Capa’s invention. This is not isolated work, in other words. It’s a tiny, rather wonderful sample; a reminder that when a great communicator sets out to make pictures of something, he doesn’t date just because the fashions have changed or the music playing in the background is not the music of today.