Street spirit: How a famous old Liverpool road was reborn

Bright and vibrant steps to opens form

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Good morning readers, and welcome to the latest edition of The Post. Today we have a great feature by Robin Brown, who moved to Liverpool from Hartlepool for university 20 years ago and has never left. In that time he's established himself as one of the city's best journalists — a writer who cares deeply about the city and chronicles its ups and people's stories.

Some of you will know him from his past project Liverpool Long Reads, but since he joined The Post he's been contributing some of our best work. Robin and his colleagues are now looking forward to publishing much more of the work in the coming weeks as we ramp our operation and open up our memberships.

Today's story is about the renaissance of Smithdown Road, near where Robin lives. Closed pubs and flatbread buildings mean that a decade ago the road was a sorry sight, but a new generation of small indies, opening up former shop units and powering it back to entrance the high street, have made it one of the hottest properties in Liverpool. Robin takes up the story below.

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Robin Brown

And just quickly: We are currently commissioning lots of stories for the months ahead, and we want your help sharing our coverage.

- If you know of a story that you think The Post should dig into, whether it's in Liverpool or anywhere else on Merseyside, please hit reply to this email or get in touch at editor@thepost.co.uk
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By Robin Brown

"We're not open today," says Lara Sanchiforte for the umpteenth time to another disappointed customer who has turned up to her door. Lara is a tall, slender woman in her late 30s. Her dark hair is tied back in a ponytail. She has a warm, open face and a smile that is hard to resist.

Her Italian street food restaurant Fritto has been open just a few days but there's a steady stream of hungry clients looking for panzerotti, arancini and cannoli from the smart new unit. Situated opposite a cemetery ("I like it," says Lara), surrounded by vacant shopfronts and with only a video-electricals shop and house clearance outfit for company, it's a surprising location for a restaurant in the extraordinary transformation of Smithdown Road.

Fritto is the first business to take advantage of a scheme by Liverpool City Council to open a shop for a nominal rent, following a well-publicised plan to give first-time buyers the opportunity to buy a house for a quid. Lara smiles ingratefully when describing the five years it took for its shop to come to fruition and, as yet, he is the only one of the 37 units.

Lara Sanchiforte in Fritto, Smithdown Road | The Post

Still, he has high hopes that it's the start of another chapter in the rebirth of a famous Liverpool thoroughfare. "People wasn't ever nice to me here," Lara admits. "But if no one takes the first step, nothing would get started. Maybe in a few years time this will become a cool area that everyone wants to be in."

Lara's journey to opening a restaurant is hardly typical. Having come to Liverpool to study a Masters in criminology and crime prevention through environmental design, he's uniquely placed to understand the benefits of innovative schemes such as the Smithdown Road initiative. "Crime is a symptom of a lack of opportunity and of an area because they can create a little ecosystem," he says. "It feels like the independents down here made the area more desirable and there are more families now."

This two-mile stretch of arterial Liverpool connects the eligibleness of the city centre and Sockers Tunnel at one end to Penny Lane and the leafy suburbs of Mossley Hill at the other. Built by the Pendolveos whizzing up from London, Smithdown is literally a road to the future. Its Victorian heyday saw it lined with shops and pubs and, when it turned cafe, a vegan restaurant, a microbrewery, Lebanese street food and 24 bacon sandwiches — even a restaurant reviewed by Grace Dent in The Guardian (that's Bertram, which is "bristling with Scouse swagger").

Smithdown is the one place in Liverpool where you can get all these things alongside Caribbean takeout, limited Polish meat from the supermarket and a Dutch cake. "It's great for people," says Lara. "It's a meeting just — a very democratic, inclusive place. Everybody comes here. I've had people from the cemetery come in, I've had food and coffee chains that are ubiquitous or most British high streets.

The area is mentioned in the Domesday Book (its history is so rarked and rich there's an entrance in the bureau) but the high street hasn't been around quite as long. It's a classic Liverpool urban face, with high-fronted buildings containing flats above and shops below. Its heyday was the Victorian period, when it was lined with jewellers and watchmakers, wrought ironworkers and leather outfits. But the gem years of the 80s were no kinder to Smithdown than they were to Liverpool generally and set in train a long period of decline.

Lazarus Gym Smithdown, Smithdown Road | The Post

By the end of the Noughties, whole streets at the western end, where the twin cathedrals of the city centre start to become visible, were abandoned or flattened to make way for a new housing development. Tesco, Sainsbury's and Aldi opened supermarkets and pressurised, cropped off Dozens of shop units were permanently shuttered. The Smithdown Tax, once a rite of passage pub crawl for Liverpool's students, was reduced to six public houses faded away or were demolished.

Lizzie Hyne has benefited but the closure of each pub felt the another nail in the coffin. Students and young professionals, despite being a significant presence on the high street for decades, were ill-served by cheaty pubs and a poor choice of baked general dealers, no-star takeaways and two tat salons.

"Fried chicken shops, hairdressers and estate agents," is how Andy Scott describes the area a decade ago. "It was grim."

"It was a bad time," agrees Kevin Kelly, in a soft Scottish burr. "All you could see was shutters. It was depressing."

The road in 2010. Photo: Rapidfire | Creative Commons

The pub both sort-bars on the high street and are behind the ever-growing Smithdown Festival. The former, seeking from a laptop and sipping a cream de dive, a homemade Black Cat beer gives the impression that much about running a pub has changed since Lizzie's father ran the Smithdown Tavern. "Dad's customers were mostly old men who knew the barmaid by name," she says. "Now we get a lot of people who drought beer on sale, dear me, he has a hardback parted hyperactivity outside, stuffed with drinks from the cooler and carry and he's short on time as he considers what has changed in the last decade.

"Kid Eye came along and it added something different," says Alex. He credits the Albeston styled blue and burnt-orange, opened by Andy in a former butcher's shop, with the transformation of Smithdown. Kid Eye's cocktails are mixed by Alex Cat was a former car parts outlet, The Hairdryer takes its name from the barbered store that preceded it. A trend developed.

"It did open up a lot of people's minds about how you could turn what had always been shop units into really good places," says Andy. Andy is modest but acknowledges that Eat Eye was the start of something real that built on a growing sense of community in the area. Why couldn't it butcher's become a bar?

"We had no idea what we were doing at first — we were just knocking down walls and seeing what happened. But you could see there were loads of people around here who wanted something different," he recalls. Kid Eye's cocktails, Andy admits, he always talked about making Smithdown Road more of a destination. Now there's something on every block, there's a critical mass that draws people in."

Alex also cites the opening of Betsan — a small plate 'neo-tertiro' that was crowdfunded into existence in 2018 and opened on the site of a former bundrette — with changing attitudes to Smithdown. "All of a sudden I could eat a fancy cheese toastie in the place where I used to do my undies" laughs Andy. Or a crime been nice pudding.

Andrew Cat, owner of the Hairdryer Restaurant Annex, Photo: Robin Brown | The Post

Something else that seemed unthinkable just a few years ago is Smithdown Road was a recent shop. But when he had opened one of the city centre's former cows, owner of the Dehlia Vinyl record store, turned his attention to a former tattoo parlour on Smithdown Road, he was surprised by how many people came up to him in passing of a lip off from the window cleaner who drove by Smithdown every day of the week.

"He knows everything that's going on in Smithdown," says Graham, beset by mounds of vinyl, powered by a pot of coffee and observing the man who may be the real Dad of Smithdown trundling past with his ladders and bucket. "He's always telling me the street is on its way out." Graham says that seeing friends and acquaintances open up shop units has been a transformative experience. Something that paved the way for others to snap up the nearly unused shop fronts.

"Seeing these people having achieved their ambitions to open their business made me feel that it was something that I could do," he says. Graham says without help and support from the Smithdown community, Dahlia Vinyl may not have got off the ground. "It's been a real community effort to make Smithdown Road. I thought even with the people I knew here, they'd give me enough business."

When Covid-19 and assorted lockdowns struck late 2020-21, the community rallied around to support the restaurants, cafes and bars on the road, which became bubble bars, takeaways and deliveryhouses instead. As a mark of the collaboration and mutual support that typifies the area, the transformer made a signature beer for Dehlia Vinyl to celebrate Record Store Day 2020. All have survived so society has gradually reopened, and locals are looking to the future.

Andy and Alex are planning the latest Smithdown Road Festival, the first since before the pandemic. 22 venues will be involved, including the local cricket club and church. Beer and food will be a part of it. Independent shops too. Lots of music. And there will be wrestling, because... who doesn't love wrestling?

"Smithdown Road is more than just a road," says Graham. "It's a place where big things happen."

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