The car left Didsbury and headed down School Lane passing the site of the ABC television studios where Bob Dylan had performed on 14 May 1964. The traffic slowed on approach to Rusholme where many people were already heading for an early lunch at the many restaurants of Manchester’s ‘curry mile’. This was the place where the first edition of *Top of the Pops* was broadcast from a converted church on New Year Day 1964. The show was beamed into living rooms introducing working-class youths to the visual spectacle of the Rolling Stones, the Beatles and Dusty Springfield. Along Princess Road and through Moss Side, where the shebeens and street sounds had given the city a particularly multicultural dimension to its youth culture. Here was the former site of the Reno Club that had been opened in 1962. Primarily frequented by Manchester’s West Indians and their children, it had also introduced the city’s working-class youth to the sounds of rhythm and blues, ska and reggae music – into the city centre and now passing the Edwardian Radisson Hotel. This had formerly been the Free Trade Hall where Dylan was branded a ‘Judas’ in 1966, and ten years later, a performance by the Sex Pistols would lead to the creation of a multiplicity of groups that would later find their own place in the mythology of English popular music.

Leaving behind the city centre, the car picks up speed along the ‘East Lancs’ road, and within 15 minutes, the remains of the county’s working-class and industrial heritage sweep into view. The head-gear of Astley Green Colliery had stopped winding in 1970, but it remains as a reminder of a past built on coal, class and a radical politics that had contributed to the growth of the trade union movement and the electoral success of the Labour Party in the twentieth century. A little further down the road, a once thriving but long closed cotton mill stands as a monument to the region’s contribution to the Industrial Revolution. A sign at the side of the road welcomes visitors to Leigh with images of a coal mine, a cotton mill and rugby players.
Arriving in the town the number of boarded-up pubs is noticeable yet the place still seems to have a spirit and character that has survived the ravages of Thatcherism and the closure of its coal mines and cotton mills that had forged such a collective political and social identity. Just out of town now on ‘the road to Wigan Pier’ and passing the site of Parsonage Colliery. The mine never really survived the dramatic year-long miners’ strike of 1984–5, and it closed in 1992 along with Bickershaw and Golbourne that were part of the same complex. On the last day of production before closure, miners and their families, many of them in tears, marched behind banners depicting a century of industrial, political and social struggle. These mines had provided thousands of jobs to the working-class of Leigh and Wigan across the decades of the twentieth century. A retail park now stands in place of the colliery with the only reminder of its existence being the retention of the ‘Parsonage’ name and a colliery ‘winding wheel’. The shopping complex consists of the usual array of fast-food outlets and chain stores with little evidence of an underground world that once existed below its foundations. Yet a stone’s throw from the retail park Georgie Fame’s house on Cotton Street still stands. The inhabitants of Number 5 are no longer employed in coal mining and cotton and are perhaps unaware of the importance of the address in providing a home to an important figure in the history of English popular music and a crucial link between northern working-class culture and the shifting social identities of ‘swinging London’.

More terraced streets lead on to examples of the modern type of post-war council housing, and within a short time, Leigh becomes Wigan. The town is synonymous with coal mines, working-class culture, a mythical pier and a teenage hedonism that was located in its clubs and dance halls. Again there are more closed pubs but enough pie shops to suggest that the town’s working-class retains a link to the dietary culture of coal miners that no longer dig coal because of retirement, disablement and the rapid process of de-industrialisation that impacted on parts of North West England from the 1960s through to the 1980s. Now passing the Ritz, the site of Buddy Holly’s electrifying show in 1958, which is now closed, boarded-up and showing little sign of the bright lights, thumping music and Teddy Boy culture of its heyday. A quick swing by the site of the legendary Wigan Casino, the club that dominated the Northern Soul Scene between 1973 and 1981 and was once voted the ‘Best Disco in the World’ by the American Billboard Magazine. The club had played a key role in the development and popularity of a music scene that had attracted working-class youth from Northern England, the Midlands, Wales and Scotland.

The journey on the ‘road to Wigan pier’ is almost complete. The car stops at the venue that forms part of the ‘Wigan Pier Experience’, which had been opened by the Queen in 1986. The complex consists of a collection of buildings hosting the ‘Way We Were Museum’, ‘Trencherfield Mill’ and the ‘Museum of Memories’. Here was heritage and nostalgia at its best.