

A Tale of Two Oldhams: The Divide Between Alexandra and Saddleworth

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In the Metropolitan Borough of Oldham, a mere five miles separates Alexandra and Uppermill, yet the contrast between these two areas is stark. One is a charming, historic village adorned with Yorkshire roses, nestled amidst rolling fields and woodlands. The other is a densely packed urban sprawl, where terraced houses stretch beyond Alexandra Park, and local shops are scarce. This isn't merely a rural-urban split; it's a chasm in living standards that shapes the lives of residents in profoundly different ways.

A child born in Saddleworth enjoys a life expectancy nearly 12 years longer than one born in central Oldham. They're more likely to secure qualifications, find employment, and earn double the income. "It's like two worlds," says Rebecca Lee, an Oldham resident familiar with both areas, in an interview with local media. "The wealth gap is glaring. They're worlds apart, yet both fall under Oldham's banner."

Oldham frequently ranks among Greater Manchester's most deprived boroughs, with central wards like St Mary's, Alexandra, and Coldhurst bearing the brunt. Median incomes here range from £20,000 to £23,000, with unemployment hovering at 12%. In contrast, Saddleworth's two wards boast median incomes of £46,000 to £47,000, with unemployment at just 2%. Property prices reflect this divide: homes in central Oldham average £120,000, while in Saddleworth, they start at £344,000. Homeownership in Saddleworth stands at 80%, compared to less than a third in central wards.

The most jarring statistic reveals that one in three children in wards like Coldhurst lives below the poverty line. Meanwhile, Saddleworth's high streets brim with artisan cafes, boutiques, and craft shops, creating an almost idyllic bubble that feels worlds away from such hardship.

"It doesn't feel like we're part of the same borough," says Eileen, 60, a Denshaw resident of 28 years, speaking near Uppermill's high street. "The countryside, cafes, good schools, and sense of safety here make it a different world. I haven't been to Oldham town centre since before Covid, I'd rather go to Manchester."

However, not all residents see the divide as absolute. Pam and Dave, a couple in their seventies who moved to Grasscroft from Huddersfield, appreciate Saddleworth's charm but note its lack of diversity. "It's very white and middle-class here," Dave observes. "We're used to more mixed communities, like in Oldham's centre." Pam adds, "Some locals claim Oldham's been 'ruined' by immigration, but we don't share that view. Reducing the divide to ethnicity is lazy thinking."

Saddleworth's population is 95% white British, compared to 39% in Alexandra, 20% in Coldhurst, and 23% in St Mary's. Yet, the roots of this disparity run deeper than demographics. Oldham's central areas, once hubs for migrant workers drawn by industrial jobs, suffered economic decline, making them more affordable but less prosperous. Saddleworth, with its historic wealth, tourism appeal, and direct train link to Manchester, has been insulated from such stagnation.

Gareth Cornell, a 38-year-old Saddleworth father, highlights structural factors. “Access to education, green spaces, and transport links like the Greenfield train station make a huge difference,” he explains, overlooking Uppermill’s picturesque King George V playing fields. “Housing here caters to the affluent, not social need.”

Yet, in Alexandra and St Mary’s, residents paint a different picture. “I love it here,” says Mohammed, 64, using a communal gym near Alexandra Park. “The community is strong. I came from Pakistan 15 years ago and feel at home.” A local mother, waiting outside Zaf’s News Agents, agrees, citing family support as a buffer against rising costs. “Things are expensive, but we look out for each other,” she says.

Despite rundown homes and fly-tipping, central Oldham’s community spirit shines through. Shannon, a 24-year-old local, questions the divide’s scale. “Saddleworth’s seen as posh, but it’s more about perception than reality,” she argues. “Money aside, the gap might not be as wide as people think.”

The Labour government’s policies have yet to bridge such divides, with critics arguing their focus on urban regeneration often overlooks entrenched inequalities. In Oldham, the tale of two worlds persists, shaped by history, economics, and opportunity—or the lack thereof.