

The City of Birmingham, Early Days

Birmingham gained city status in 1889 and seven years later the title of Lord Mayor was first conferred on its chief magistrate. By the second half of the nineteenth century important changes were taking place in Birmingham's industrial structure. Larger premises and the requirements of the factory system led to congestion in the central area. New factories were built along the main rail or canal routes, especially along the Wolverhampton Canal to the north-west and in the north-east, along the Fazeley Canal.

Joseph Chamberlain became Lord Mayor in 1873 and his period of influence on the Borough Council led to many reforms and improvements. The era of municipalisation began in earnest in 1875 when the town's private gas companies were acquired by the Borough. Joseph Chamberlain also pushed through a similar measure for the municipalisation of water supplies. This did lead to rapid improvements and before long better quality water was available to an extra 47,000 houses. There was no doubt that this measure was one of Chamberlain's most important in view of the unsanitary conditions prevailing before 1875. He ordered a sanitary census to be undertaken and this revealed all the evils which rapid industrial and urban growth had bequeathed to the region.

Chamberlain has been described as the founding father of the City of Birmingham and certainly he was the guiding force pushing the town into providing the sort of civic services and amenities demanded by its growing importance as an industrial and commercial centre. By 1889, Birmingham had acquired better roads, sewers, water and gas supplies, more libraries and parks, higher standards of public health and an expanding transport system - soon it was to be described as "the best governed city in the world". It had become a leading provincial city and its fame and reputation had spread worldwide through its manufactures.

However, such rapid growth was bound to have adverse effects and these were to be seen in the appalling living conditions of many of the citizens, submerged as they were in a congested urban sprawl. In the next fifty years many of these problems were tackled and the Warwickshire Photographic Society highlights many of the changes that were necessary.

The biggest and most influential redevelopment scheme in the central area was undoubtedly the building of Corporation Street. The rapid industrialisation and population increases in the mid-nineteenth century had resulted in some of the worst slums in the country in the area between New Street and Aston Road. After the Artisan's Dwellings Act was passed in 1875, the local authority was provided with extensive powers to acquire, clear and redevelop slum areas and to rehouse the residents. Joseph Chamberlain grasped this opportunity to rid Birmingham of these slums. In the process, he had a vision of driving across the cleared space "a great street, as broad as a Parisian boulevard" which would "open up a street such as Birmingham has not got and is almost stifling for want of".

The Improvement Committee under the chairmanship of Councillor William White supervised the scheme. By 1889 Corporation Street had filled up with fine buildings which accommodated a wide range of shops, restaurants, coffee houses, hotels and offices.

The photographs in this microfiche edition give a vivid picture of the city centre in the 1890s, as well as providing evidence of the changes made in the next few decades.

The general atmosphere of the central area is well captured. In the 1890s this was in sharp contrast to the faster pace and greater mobility of the modern times. Everything seemed slower then and the principal mode of transport, apart from walking, was by horse-drawn bus or tram, although some new-fangled stem trams had recently made their appearance on the city's streets. Horses were used in every trade and there were milk and bread carts, railway carts, brewer's drays and delivery wagons bringing fresh supplies to the shops and carting fruit, meat and vegetables from the Bull Ring markets. Horse-drawn vehicles of all sorts rattled over the cobbled, granite or wood road surfaces, which were covered with sand or sometimes wood shavings, to prevent the horses from slipping - asphalt was considered too slippery and dangerous for horses, especially on city's steep gradients.

In 1901, housing powers were delegated to a new Housing committee in recognition, at least, that there was a social problem. Its Chairman was Councillor J S Nettlefold, who opposed municipal housing and

wholesale demolitions. Instead, his policy was to re-condition back courts by demolishing the two buildings on either side of a court entrance to allow more air and light to penetrate. These came to be called "Nettlefold Courts". This policy of limited rehabilitation did produce some beneficial results, mainly through firm but friendly pressure upon the property owners so that a good deal of property was overhauled and repaired.

The committee also saw a partial answer to the problem of the central slum area in encouraging the outward migration of the city's population and it concluded that the average working man required better housing accommodation than he had in the past. The Housing Committee aimed to do everything possible to encourage and nothing to discourage a high standard of living and most significantly to encourage the exodus to the suburbs.

In 1905, Nettlefold's Housing Committee took a more radical look at the housing situation and a delegation visited Germany to examine the ways in which new houses had been planned and built here. The Committee's basic problem was to find ways of improving inner area conditions as well as to assist in the provision of healthy, cheerful houses on the outskirts of the city, whilst at the same time not unduly or unnecessarily increasing housing rents. The German experience proved to have a considerable impact on the Committee's thinking and some fairly advanced Town Planning principles emerged.

The delegation found that every sizable town in Germany had adopted a Town Expansion Plan. This provided for the future development of all land within their boundaries settling direction and widths of streets and generally controlling the types of development in particular areas. This was a novel concept compared to the English experience of a haphazard methodology. Enthused by what they had seen, the Housing Committee recommended that there should be powers to control development in new areas to ensure a better distribution of houses and provision of roads, and to buy land in the suburbs where private enterprise could be encouraged to build working men's houses at moderate rents. In moving in this direction, Birmingham was emerging as one of the first British local authorities to espouse Town Planning ideas which have since been taken as basic Principles influencing the type and direction of development. These ideas were soon to have legislative support in the Housing and Town Planning Act of 1909.

Notes courtesy of Adam Matthew Publications.

This puts into context Nettlefold's subsequent project with the Moor Pool garden village which demonstrated his ideas.

Nettlefold wrote several books on this subject with extracts available elsewhere on the website.