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Britain After Coronavirus: Birmingham And How We Recovered and Rebalanced ‘Last Time’

*Did central economic planning sabotage postwar
Birmingham's recovery - and might its history
and 21st century revival have lessons for
Britain's post-pandemic recovery –
and help us find our bearings?*

By Julian Dee

Cover Image: 'A Birds Eye View of Birmingham, 1886' HW Brewer, focusing on Chamberlain Square. Left foreground: roofs of Liberal Club (demolished 1965) and Mason Science College (later part of Birmingham University - demolished 1964); centre foreground: Chamberlain Memorial and smaller Dawson Memorial; right foreground: Reference Library (demolished 1974); mid-centre: 'Big Brum' clock tower of Museum & Art Gallery and dome of Council House; centre-right: Town Hall; right background: Christ Church on Victoria Square (church demolished 1899) and New Street Station. (Picture: [Wikipedia](#), [Public Domain](#))

Note to readers:

To keep your place in the essay, open links in a new tab.

To do this:

On a PC - hold the 'ctrl' key down when you click on the link

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1 Global Birmingham – 'The Workshop of The World' and 'The Best Governed City in the World'.

I have never talked to anyone about Birmingham's 20th century postwar decline before I have first told them about the 21st century revival I have witnessed – and what I've learnt to date about its history, since moving here from London in 2016. While exploring our new city, my wife and kids found inscribed in Birmingham Museum & Art Gallery, historian William Hutton's description of his 1741 first visit to Birmingham:

"I was surprised at the place, but more so at the people. They were a species I had never seen. They possessed a vivacity I had never beheld. I had been among dreamers, but now I saw men awake. Their very step along the street showed alacrity..."

The British cities of Birmingham and Manchester have strong claims to being metropolitan birthplaces of the global industrial revolution. Widespread recognition today of Birmingham's pioneering industrialisation comes in the form, for example, of the city's 18th century steam engine pioneers **Boulton & Watt, who have had their own £50 note - and the unit of power named after Watt**

In Birmingham was built **Britain's first monumental town hall**. Modeled on the Temple of Castor & Pollux, seat of the Roman Senate, it opened in 1834 - just a week before the old and neglected Houses of Parliament burnt down. Here, regular visitor **Felix Mendelssohn** premiered his Elijah oratorio - and Dickens gave readings of **A Christmas Carol** - while everyone from **Queen Victoria to the Shah of Persia** visited and celebrated the city.

The business acumen of Birmingham's city council famously inspired Julian Ralph in 1890 to describe it in New York's Harper's Magazine as 'the best-governed city in the world'. Historian and Crossbench Peer Lord Asa Briggs (1921- 2016) gave us many examples as to why, from Joseph Chamberlain's 1873 -

1876 mayoralty. His municipalisation of the gas works, for example, not only resulted in modernisation of, and better working conditions in, the gas works - but also lower local taxes, cheaper gas for Birmingham's citizens and subsidies for public improvement projects and the Birmingham Museum & Art Gallery.

To his admirers, **Chamberlain brought widespread interest to the rather serious business of local authority finance.** Lord Briggs relayed that after a Birmingham Mail reporter listened to the Gas Committee's annual presentation of its stunning 1881 statistical surpluses, he wrote that it was: *'a sound...which is musical, and a sound which is captivating'*. Perhaps it is not a surprise that in our straightened times, our [previous Prime Minister and her chief of staff, are such fans of Joseph Chamberlain.](#)

As recently as 1959, British Pathé described [Birmingham as a 'city of elegant squares and impressive buildings - a city of space and prosperity'](#). This was sadly, not a narrative of postwar Birmingham that many people of my generation would have recognised when growing up in the late twentieth century. But it was still the case for a time after world war two that what had been called the best-governed city in the world was also famed, with its West Midlands city region, as **'The Workshop of the World' - and as 'The City of a Thousand Trades'**. So more perspective on this global pioneer city's later and former postwar decline is relevant today to policymakers - and placemakers *all around the world.*

This is more especially the case as nations plan their post-pandemic recoveries from what represents the biggest economic upheaval since the world wars. Birmingham's postwar experience might caution us to try and gauge in this context at what point the 'peacetime' retention and adaptation of centralised 'wartime' powers by national governments may eventually become a counterproductive pitfall, capping the dynamism and disconnecting the million-and-one relationships, businesses and organisations that make our cities and towns thrive.

It was a chance conversation with an old London friend in 2017 that gave me cause to question my previous assumptions about Birmingham's one-time protracted and painful postwar decline. As this friend - who, since we'd lost touch in the mid-1990s had made his fortune in Birmingham - understood it, Birmingham's fortunes had in fact been in some way *deliberately* capped by postwar central government economic planning. If true, this might conceivably add an overlooked dimension to the already complex story of postwar Britain's one time industrial and economic decline. When I discussed it with some members of the House of Lords, their reply was the same: 'You really must tell people about this.'

But before proceeding any further, we will shortly read how the words 'forgotten' and 'ignored' have been applied to postwar Birmingham. In a talk to a Birmingham entrepreneur's group in 2019, I suggested that the importing in previous centuries to Birmingham of (for example) materials produced by enslaved people was also forgotten - was 'something as a city we've got to look into'.

Whilst the focus of these blog pieces is post world war two central government planning and Birmingham, where I have drawn upon wider historical contexts or places, I am deeply conscious that the role of enslavement and colonialism in relation to British cities evidently needs to be properly examined and debated. [Birmingham's slavery links uncovered \(BBC - 2007\)](#) and [Did Birmingham Profit? \(BBC - 2014\)](#) may be helpful starting points to at least begin that process of educating ourselves and our children. The aforementioned Boulton & Watt's business decisions and financing, for example, are mentioned in the latter.

2 Whatever the world's post-pandemic economic outlook, by the 21st century Birmingham had significantly bounced back.

Before broaching a matter as deeply painful as Birmingham's former postwar decline, please allow me, as a native Midlander, to first give you a rough thumbnail sketch of how much Joe Chamberlain's 'Midland Metropolis' has achieved in our day to reverse that mid-to-late twentieth century decline.

When Birmingham celebrated its city centenary in 1989, the City Council's ambitious plans to reverse the city's then flat-lining fortunes were well under way. **The National Exhibition Centre** adjacent to Birmingham airport, opened in the previous decade. **Its subsequent growth upended the received wisdom that major national events could not be held outside of London.** And the completion in 1991 of the **International Convention Centre** - and the moving of the **Sadler's Wells Royal Ballet Company**, to Birmingham from London, the year before provided further powerful early signs of economic and cultural revival in the then struggling city centre. Regeneration around the city centre's charming **'Brindleyplace' canal-side** was also underway from 1993. In 1994, **Simon Rattle** received a knighthood in the later part of his long tenure at the **City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra.**



Birmingham's 1834 Town Hall (centre) in 2020 from Victoria Square; Alpha Tower and HSBC Building on Centenary Square (left); PwC Building on Chamberlain Square behind Town Hall (right). The West Midlands Metro tram stop at the Town Hall. (Photo: Julian Dee)

Thirty years from the centenary, Birmingham's city centre economy was booming. As outlined in a 2015 Centre for Cities report, **thousands of knowledge intensive business services (KIBS) jobs were moving into Birmingham from London**. Walk around the city centre today - and you will see cranes and gleaming office blocks and new shops popping up everywhere as billions of pounds pour in.

During the 1960s and 1970s, uncompromising brutalist structures such as the former Central Library, landed like vast concrete motherships from dystopian space invasion movies. Many (but not all) Brummies felt alienated by them - believing them to have flattened, disconnected and jarred against entire areas of the city centre. But today's developments are truly something to sing about:

- On 5 May 2020, during lockdown, the stunning 49 storeys Octagon residential tower proposal was published. The concepts and video for the 'first pure residential octagonal high rise building in the world' also show some [great views and maps of Birmingham landmarks such as Centenary Square and Chamberlain Square](#);
- The former brutalist city library - widely regarded as a barrier between Centenary Square and Chamberlain Square - has now been replaced by the sleek curves and impressive-yet-human scale of the **PwC Building at No.1 Chamberlain Square**. **Over 2,000 personnel moved in on 2 January 2020**, in PwC's biggest single investment outside London. **DLA Piper** will soon be joining at No.2;
- The centrepiece of the vast Centenary Square - it could easily fit a Trafalgar Square or two - is the iconic **Library of Birmingham**, opened with a moving speech to her fellow Brummies by **Malala Yousafzai**. It is Europe's largest cultural space and Britain's largest public library and tenth most visited tourist attraction. This £189 million structure was built complete with a sky garden - and houses **Britain's most important Shakespeare collection**;
- And next door to that are Centenary Square's **Rep Theatre** (rebuilt 2013), the 1991 **Symphony Hall** (now undergoing a £22 million upgrade), and the aforementioned **convention**

centre. Opposite at No.1, HSBC's UK personal and business banking headquarters opened in 2018, bringing 1,000 head office jobs with it.

Other 21st century Birmingham regeneration projects have also stunned by both their impressive design and scale - such as the 2015 **New Street Station** redevelopment and the overlapping **Bull Ring & Grand Central shopping centre with the iconic design housing Selfridges**. These replaced the concrete former 'Bullring' shopping centre, which for but a fleeting moment in the 1960s, looked to some like the 21st century future of shopping.

Investment, people and greater local political power are returning. In 2017, the new **West Midlands Combined Authority** provided Birmingham and its neighbours with a new **directly elected mayor**, coordinating strategy for transport, housing and the economy. **The West Midlands' automotive and healthcare industries, together with its science & tech-focused universities**, are getting a boost from being **the UK's national 5G testbed**.

And with the expanding [West Midlands Metro](#) tram system joining-up the area alongside **HS2 high-speed rail** - Europe's largest infrastructure project - greater connectivity of the Midlands and northern Britain finds itself at last front and centre on the policy agenda.

By the second decade of the 21st century, Birmingham was at long last retaking its place on the national and world stage. On 5 March 2015, The Birmingham Post heralded the aforementioned report: ***'Birmingham finally bouncing back after 70 years says Centre for Cities.'*** On 22 May 2015, a Financial Times article headlined: ***'Why Birmingham is now one of Europe's best cities for investors'*** - and reported that Birmingham 'had become a magnet for businesses, workers and home buyers'.

And with the **Commonwealth Games** currently scheduled for 2022, Birmingham will have an even bigger global audience than that of **Peaky Blinders!** A city revival that you can occasionally read about, will be beamed onto a billion screens. Visitors will find no shortage of **great restaurants and hotels**, including the renovated, palatial [Grand Hotel](#) opposite the cathedral, scheduled to reopen in 2020.

The shadow of former postwar decline has still to be lifted, for example: in many of the city's housing estates; in the need for further economic diversification; and from residual public perception. As recently as 2016, CityMetric labelled Birmingham a 'forgotten city' when it asked ***'Why do we ignore Birmingham and the West Midlands?'*** But having left you in **no doubt** that anyone ignoring Birmingham is missing out, let us go back to that conversation I mentioned at the start of this piece.

Five views of Centenary Square in 2020

(All photos: Julian Dee)



Centenary Square from under the Library of Birmingham entrance. Left to right: a Chamberlain Square vista; Hall of Memory (look for stone dome); Alpha Tower (1973); HSBC at One Centenary Square; Birmingham University; a building site and the Hyatt Regency Hotel tower; Symphony Hall & International Convention Centre; Rep Theatre. The recent and on-going building between the Alpha Tower and Hyatt Regency tower 'bookends' gives the pleasing appearance of a full bookshelf!



Left: Connected Places - since the 1974 Brutalist Library was demolished, the 'Big Brum' clock tower on Chamberlain Square can be seen from Centenary Square in a vista between 1 & 2 Chamberlain Square. Right: View of Centenary Square buildings from Regency Wharf / Gas Street canal basin.



Left: Commonwealth Games Countdown - Centenary Square, in front of the Library. Right: Centenary Square and Hall of Memory (left); Alpha Tower (centre) and HSBC / No.1 Centenary Square (right).

3 Postwar Birmingham: 'imposed decline'?



*The Birmingham Council House, on
Victoria Square, 2020 (Photo: Julian Dee)*

My friend Jonathan Pearson moved to Birmingham from London in the 1990s when today's northerly-flowing graduate river was still just a trickle. One of many hugely successful 'Brummie' entrepreneurs of my generation, Jonathan was co-owner of Fynamore. When we reconnected in Birmingham, he had sold it to GE Healthcare for a cool eight-figure sum.

Tucking into an agreeable Sunday lunch at Jonathan's family home in Birmingham's leafy Harborne area in 2017, I struggled to conceive his account of how Birmingham had apparently been deliberately restricted and 'cut down to size' by postwar central government economic policy. To make sure the city centre couldn't grow, a 'concrete collar' ring road was put around it. The narrative that Jonathan had heard was that Birmingham had got too big, and had got into the intolerable position, it seemed, of being able to challenge London's dominance.

When I worked as a researcher and press officer for the 180 House of Lords Independent Crossbenchers, I took an interest in both the policy issue at hand - and how it was widely understood and reported in the media. I would do so knowing that whatever the field of public policy I was relating in briefings or to the media, there would always be on the red benches experts that knew infinitely more than I ever could. My aim then and now is to provide enough supporting context to help 'start the conversation' especially between fields of public policy expertise and civil society.

In the months following my conversation with Jonathan, almost no one that I spoke to either in Westminster or Birmingham itself had heard of anything remotely like this. It was even news to a very

senior retired city council officer I spoke to. But one former Birmingham MP and a senior cleric *had* heard this narrative. So it wasn't a complete surprise to find that Birmingham Post article from 5 March 2015, describing how [*'the little remembered truth behind Birmingham's postwar decline is shocking'*](#). What was especially shocking, if their story was more or less correct, was that it was so 'little-remembered'. For as a 31 May 2013 Economist blog headline put it, the postwar public policies imposed on Birmingham might be nothing less than a recipe describing: [*'How To Kill a City'*](#).

But could it possibly be true?

The Economist cited a 28 May 2013 blog by Professor Henry Overman of the LSE Spatial Economics Research Centre entitled [*'Booming Birmingham and the Need for Rebalancing'*](#). The Birmingham Post also quoted Professor Overman. His blog suggested that postwar Birmingham's story was 'a fascinating lesson from history' for those worried about London's current dominance of the UK economy and who perceive an 'urgent need for rebalancing'.

So, what were Professor Overman's sources for this account? According to his blog, the details come from two substantial paragraphs taken, he believed, from 'Birmingham 1939-1970 History of Birmingham Volume 3 by A. Sutcliffe and R. Smith', and which were sent to him by a colleague who had in turn been sent them by another person he mentioned in his blog. Having borrowed this 1973 volume, it became apparent that the piece reproduced on Professor Overman's blog did indeed draw from and cover points from that volume, but was not entirely lifted directly from it.

The aforementioned 2015 Financial Times article did not reference Professor Overman, nor particular Acts of Parliament, but did reference: the 'now-defunct Statist magazine'; an unnamed study in the early 1960s; and a 'JE Dolby, general manager of Northampton Town and County, in 1964'. The article was especially notable for having separately related in the global finance community's newspaper, what we might call an 'imposed decline' narrative of postwar Birmingham, which went some way to accounting for Birmingham's one-time decline which was notable to my generation, even in an era of widespread urban decline in Britain and other countries. The FT mourned that: 'instead of nurturing Birmingham's brilliance, the UK's increasingly centralised state made it share' as industry was steered out of the region.

The aggregated story told by the LSE and Economist blogs and by the Birmingham Post and Financial Times articles, may be summarised as follows:

1. The **1945 Distribution of Industry Act** was used to deliberately limit Birmingham's industrial growth, which was described by central government as a 'congested area'. Industry was to be moved to less affluent parts of the UK;
2. **The West Midlands Plan** was commissioned in 1946 by the Minister for Town and Country Planning from town planners Sir Patrick Abercrombie and Herbert Jackson. It **set Birmingham a recommended target population of 990,000** - it stood at 1,113,000 in 1951. This actually meant up to 220,000 people would have to leave the city in the following 14 years. An unnamed plan in the early 1960s suggested that 500,000 people needed to be 'decanted' from the region to prevent overcrowding;
3. **Between 1945 - 1963, some 200 firms were steered away from the region, taking 100,000 jobs with them;**
4. **The 1965 Control of Office Employment Act** effectively banned all further office development in Birmingham city centre for almost two decades. Service sector growth had

previously been encouraged in Birmingham, before central government declared the city's growth in population and employment a 'threatening situation';

5. **In the 1970s, unemployment rose from almost zero to 20%. As the car industry declined and other industries moved away, 200,000 jobs were lost;**
6. **The city centre was further restricted and decimated by a 'concrete collar' ring road, pedestrian underpasses, and a wider 1960s fashion for concrete utopian schemes.**

As the FT put it: 'In a couple of decades Birmingham had turned from being the strategic heart of a fast-growing Britain to being an unfashionable, unloved and largely ignored symbol of its industrial failure.'

Brummies of my generation and others are astounded when they learn that early postwar era Birmingham had by some accounts been by one measure richer than London (and at a time when Britain was still, just, the biggest European economy). According to Professor Overman's blog:

- Birmingham was second only to London for the creation of new jobs between 1951 and 1961, with Birmingham unemployment between 1948 and 1966 rarely exceeding 1%;
- 1961 household incomes in the West Midlands were 13% above the national average, exceeding those of London and the South East.

The above figures chime with the FT article. Just as today, London has sometimes been blamed for supposedly sucking the life out of the rest of Britain, Professor Overman's LSE blog highlighted that postwar governments took a similar view of Birmingham's immediate postwar boom in relation to stagnating economies in Wales, the North of England and Scotland.

Given the passing of postwar national legislation to redistribute industry and control office employment, together with central government planning, it is not surprising then that the 2015 Birmingham Post article, like the FT, summarised this chapter of postwar history in a manner congruent to a *central government-imposed decline* narrative. Birmingham citizens read in the Post that:

- Birmingham is only now overturning a deliberate government policy to undermine economic growth, which led to 70 years of decline;
- The rise of the city in the immediate years after world war two led to fears at the top that its success came at the expense of the rest of the country;
- In a policy that would have a devastating impact on Birmingham, the decision was made to deliberately move industry and economic activity away from the West Midlands.

The LSE blog suggested however, that historic central government growth restriction policies imposed on Birmingham, did eventually gain city council support. Whilst Birmingham council leaders considered it their role to encourage the city's growth *up until* the 1930s - by 1957 they had accepted a requirement to restrain the city's population and employment growth, the blog recounted. (As I will outline later, I discovered indications that that local support may eventually have been reversed some time before central government was prepared to oblige and duly reverse its nationally-imposed restrictions on Birmingham.)

Also relevant to city-level decision-making, the Economist blog further suggested that Birmingham suffered more than most cities from the widespread postwar trend for 'utopian' town planning, inspired by the likes of Le Corbusier etc. This saw so many of Birmingham's beautiful Victorian

buildings destroyed and replaced by ugly concrete boxes and the city centre 'strangled with great elevated roads'. Similarly, the problems associated with breaking up working class communities as they were moved to suburban council estates during slum clearances, were alluded to - although the city-level (rather than national) decision making context for town planning may perhaps not immediately occur to many readers.

Taken together, perhaps the overall impression that many readers would be left with after reading through the aforementioned blogs and newspaper features would be of central government imposed decline - with any local acquiescence (where indicated) easily overlooked.

If decline was imposed on Birmingham by national, and even city, government - what on Earth was going on in postwar Britain? My first thought was that the miracle of the wartime home front was that rationing ensured fair shares for all. So perhaps postwar Whitehall planners and their elected governments felt they had proven a model of centralised planning at scale that could continue in some form in peacetime. In other words, if food, clothing and fuel could be fairly shared in wartime, why not continue and extend control of the economy to 'fairly' ration the means of generating prosperity itself and evenly distribute it across what we now call the UK nations and regions? The devastating postwar consequences for Birmingham and the West Midlands may arguably be obvious to us now, especially in an age when, prior to the coronavirus pandemic, cities and city living had long returned to fashion and as a public policy priority. Perhaps the sheer scale and shock of the pandemic has given my generation at least some moments to better appreciate the collective wartime trauma and resulting national solidarity that emerged as the postwar era sought through central government to 'build a land fit for heroes'.

Before lockdown, I borrowed from the Library of Birmingham a copy of Sutcliffe & Smith's aforementioned Birmingham 1939-1970, published for Birmingham City Council in 1974 - to see if this 514 page third volume of a series could help build a clearer picture of what happened. I was also able to obtain three of the four tomes cited in a few 'corroborating' lines of Birmingham's Wikipedia page. I will get back to the Library's local history shelves after lockdown. But in the mean time, what I read in Sutcliffe & Smith and those three other references will be enough - at least for now - to continue the conversation began in the aforementioned blogs and newspaper reports - and with my friend - a few years ago.

On page 471 of Sutcliffe & Smith's concluding chapter, I found a directly quoted line from the aforementioned LSE blog excerpt, that Birmingham ***from Westminster's point of view was too large, too prosperous, and had to be held in check***. Postwar central government restrictions and directives, the book concluded, 'effectively transferred control of the city's local affairs to Westminster'. One such consequence was that local capital spending was restricted at a time when Birmingham was the focus of 'Britain's most prosperous postwar provincial region' - presumably missing the chance to further leverage this seemingly forgotten early postwar West Midlands revival. Where that centralising influence had positive effects with housing, road and school building, it also had, it suggested, the effect of making Birmingham dependent on Westminster.

Now, whilst I couldn't claim to have read all 514 pages of this dense tome, particularly pertinent sections that leaped out included:

- Chapter IV, *The End of Expansion: Planning Strategies In An Era Of Restricted Growth*, which, along with other sections, details quite a nuanced picture of the deep and wide policy context for before, during and after world war two;
- Chapter II, *Birmingham versus Hitler 1939-1945*, which detailed how a confluence of pre-war strategic war planning and economic planning was to have a restricting effect on Birmingham. In 1934, the Air Council designated the South and South East areas of Britain as 'unsafe' and the North as 'safe' from bombing in a future war. At the same time, the 1934 Special Areas Act status was granted to encourage employment in the North. Birmingham's intermediate status meant some pre-war industrial build-up may have consequently gone elsewhere. (After WWII, Special Areas were also known as Development Areas.)

Having gleaned valuable likely context from those and other chapters, we learn that Birmingham City Council accepted a move towards a 'geographical planning of the national economy' that would favour the Special Areas designated in 1934, at the expense, we might suppose, of Birmingham and other areas. As a result of this acceptance, **Birmingham's Information Bureau, whose 1930 remit had been to attract firms to Birmingham, subsequently and remarkably restricted its activity to providing general information and connecting buyers to existing Birmingham firms.**

Not surprisingly then, between 1939 - 1970, few new science-based or other industries moved to Birmingham, with wartime aero engineering not enduring into peacetime. Sutcliffe & Smith tell us that **although central government placed few restrictions on Birmingham's already established industries (a point I will shortly question) - crucially, Westminster tragically ignored local fears that the city's economy was becoming 'precariously over-specialised'.**

Nineteen years after the 1939 - 1970 time period covered by Sutcliffe & Smith's Council-commissioned study, Birmingham City Council's city centenary publication **Developing Birmingham 1889 to 1989: 100 years of City Planning** suggests that central government restrictions in the succeeding decade, the 1970s, did impact existing local Birmingham firms who were denied '**Industrial Development Certificates**' that would permit them to expand beyond certain floorspace limits. With perhaps a hint of exasperation, the centenary publication states: 'Over the years, **despite government arguments that businesses were still allowed to expand in Birmingham, the City's Chamber of Industry and Commerce produced sufficient evidence to show that it was very difficult for a firm wishing to develop in the region to obtain an IDC.**' It quoted a commentator who warned that such central government policies were 'hindering **"the natural self-regeneration of businesses in Birmingham, leaving it top-heavy with the old and the infirm"**'.

That the publication also cited **a 1971 report by the West Midlands Economic Planning Council**, which further corroborated the Chamber's concerns, may indicate that restriction was impacting local firms in the 1960s as well - in a way that Sutcliffe & Smith may have been unaware. The centenary publication additionally indicated that IDCs also continued to be denied to would-be incoming industrial investment in the 1970s, as well.

Writing in 1980, Christopher Law in **British Regional Development Since world war one**, indicated that (subject to a 1981 review) the IDC exemption limit was expected to be raised from August 1982 to 50,000 square feet in the UK's non-assisted areas (such as Birmingham), where it would previously have been 15,000 square feet (12,500 square feet in the South East). Law echoed Sutcliffe & Smith, by **pinpointing that from 1948, with central government prioritising of exports, IDC controls were**

relaxed by successive governments until 1958, when old industries in the 'former depressed areas' began further decline.

Curiously, while the LSE blog suggested that the 1965 Control of Office Employment Act effectively banned all further office development for nearly two decades, Sutcliffe & Smith suggest that only a 'temporary ban' was placed after 1965 (presumably under the same Act).

Sutcliffe & Smith outlined how **the City Council's sometime cooperation with 'geographical planning of the national economy' was not only inspired by what we might assume was a wartime-inspired spirit of national solidarity, but by local concerns that the city was getting too big which required restrictions as to its economic and population growth.** Council figures from Birmingham's Cadbury and Nettlefold families had, they wrote, 'advanced views on town planning' having recognised public opinion shifting against 'unrestricted growth'. Cadbury Brothers Limited helped the Council obtain land around Birmingham in pursuance of one of the UK's first Council-initiated greenbelt policies in the 1930s.

The Cadbury family had implemented their progressive Quaker values with the pioneering of advanced worker pay and conditions which gained their most visible expression in the [creation of the famous Bournville model village](#) (near the southern edge of the city where I live). This was an influence on Britain's emerging garden city movement - yet another thing we Brummies are proud of!

As well as these progressive influences, **social class and what we today call 'nimbyism' also played a part in early locally-led efforts to restrict the growth of Birmingham,** according to Sutcliffe & Smith. Neighbouring local authorities that had received Birmingham people 'escaping' higher rates and population density, apparently opposed city boundary extensions. Birmingham middle class managers did not want their workers accompanying them on their commutes to live as municipal tenants outside the city.

Sutcliffe & Smith also referenced the success that growth restriction campaigning had on Birmingham and UK public policy during and after world war two. The 1937-1940 Barlow Royal Commission on the Distribution of the Industrial Population recommended the decentralisation of population and industry and related prioritisation to the Special Areas by 'proper distribution of industry'. Further growth of large cities was undesirable. The Council's renunciation of expansion, in its submission to Barlow, was further echoed in its 1946 decision not to seek any boundary extensions.

During world war two, the Cadbury's anti-expansionist influence was continued through two key Birmingham groups identified by Sutcliffe & Smith. The first was the influential Bournville Village Trust. In 1941 it submitted a report to the City Council entitled *When We Build Again*, which argued that Birmingham was already too big and supported greenbelt city boundary restrictions and a distant new town development(s). The second was the West Midland Group on Postwar Reconstruction and Planning, established 1941. It included Birmingham University academics, local industrialists and key city council figures. At the time City Council policy was influenced or enforced by them, city leaders accepted prevailing projections that Britain's population would decline after 1950. Wartime air raids and the successful enforced dispersal of industry apparently made many firms more willing to countenance postwar expansion outside of the city. It also persuaded the Council and Government as to the strategic dangers of concentrating industry, Sutcliffe & Smith noted.

The aforementioned Birmingham Wikipedia page cited the Economic & Social Research Council publication, **Crisis in the Industrial Heartland: A Study of the West Midlands, Spencer et al. (1986)** as a source for prosperity figures which in turn came from Sutcliffe & Smith. However, chapter 6 of Spencer et al., 'Central Government Policy and Economic Change' is a hugely relevant goldmine of case studies and context as to central government restriction of Birmingham's postwar economy. For example:

- 'BMC (presumably, British Motor Corporation, headquartered at Longbridge) was 'instructed' to spend £20 million of its £50m expansion in 1961-62 in the Development Areas'. It was suggested that costs of such compulsory relocation of motor industry expansion out of the West Midlands were not covered by government financial incentives;
- While GKN told a 1973 Commons committee that regional policy did not impact investment decisions, Chrysler confirmed to it that: 'were there no IDCs or were there no constraint, we would undoubtedly have developed in Coventry as one major complex...we had plenty of space...The refusal of IDCs meant we expanded at Linwood (in Renfrewshire) which necessitated the purchase of land leaving the land at Coventry unutilised';
- Warley, West Midlands-based Duport's failure to obtain IDCs in 1961 and 1971 necessitated the building of a steel plant in Llanelli, South Wales. Consequently, their 'integrated operation' involved scrap being transported from the West Midlands to be smelted in Llanelli into steel billets, which were then returned to the West Midlands to be rerolled and formed into metal components. (I calculate that to be a roughly 274 mile round trip!)

Spencer et al. were anxious not to rush to the conclusion that central government regional planning was always or mostly responsible for the decline of existing West Midlands firms. For example, they were nervous about giving undue weight to disruption of 'company linkages' (where government required expansion to be out-of-region, forcing interregional integrated operations where a company would otherwise prefer a single West Midlands site operation). In the case of Duport, Spencer et al. cite other factors such as rising sterling, energy costs and interest rates and how those related to a major late 1970s company investment decision, prior to Duport collapsing.

From our perspective in 2020, we are thirty-five years and a world away from when Spencer et al. wrote (actually in 1985). The postwar industrial policies outlined above that were starting to draw to a close, surely today seem like state-imposed obstacle courses that prompt our sympathy for the workers and management of the above companies, trying to negotiate them.

Spencer et al. cites an estimate that in 1960-74, 'a minimum' 39,000 jobs were diverted from the West Midlands 'in policy induced moves' and remarkably suggested: 'there is disagreement over the effect this had on the local economy.' They did at least acknowledge that 'many authors' saw a detrimental effect on the West Midlands of central government regional planning.

For the wider period 1945 - 1975, Spencer et al. cite Department of Industry information suggesting that 387 West Midlands-based firms moved from the West Midlands or another part of the UK. 63% of these moves were to Development Areas that enjoyed various government incentives not available in the restricted West Midlands.

In the same 1945 - 1975 period, they suggest that 111,700 jobs were transferred out by West Midlands-based companies. (It does not seem immediately apparent whether Spencer et al. include in these figures West Midlands-based companies' operations outside of the West Midlands.) That 387 firms figure, almost tallies with an associated by-region destination breakdown in the same chapter:

Destination of Moves by Firms from the West Midlands to Other UK Regions, 1945 - 1975

Destination	Total	% of moves to all regions
Scotland	42	10.5
Wales	125	31.1
North	25	6.2
North West	63	15.7
South West	48	11.9
Yorks & Humber	13	3.2
East Midlands	30	7.5
East Anglia	5	1.2
South East	38	9.5
Northern Ireland	13	3.2
Total	402	100.0

Source: Spencer et al. (1986) page 125, quoting Law (1980).

Original table in Spencer et al. also showed breakdown by periods: 1945-51; 52-59; 60-65; 66-71; 71-75.

Spencer et al. contend that while regional policy should not be dismissed as a factor in West Midlands economic decline, its effect has often been overstated. To underline that, they could have, but did not make, the point that 37% of 1945-75 moves away from the West Midlands were to non-Development Areas such as the South East, that were not incentivised. Might those non-incentivised moves be linked to the moves away associated with the labour shortage periods that they noted? If so, it is not unreasonable to assume that the national policy to reduce city population size (locally supported by Birmingham civic and city leaders from the 1930s) had contributed to that labour shortage and provided further reason for firms to move from the West Midlands to both Development Areas and non-Development Areas.

While they acknowledge that at times when IDCs were denied, migration of firms away from the West Midlands rose, Spencer et al. simultaneously minimised the impact on firms as:

- 'Only 14% of refusals of IDCs resulted in moves to Development Areas between 1958-63;
- *Companies wishing to expand could effectively make do with existing floor-space by building up.* The fact that Spencer et al. breezily note many other West Midland companies did this, only underlines the widespread scale of such obstacles put in the way of the region's industry by central government restrictions. One could imagine demoralised company directors rolling their eyes as they are told by public servants (*or academics*): 'why don't you just build up?' when the whole point of the IDC policy *was* to restrict growth;
- *Companies wishing to expand could acquire already designated premises.* One wonders how practical that would always have been in an already restricted regional industrial property market.

Spencer et al. did however question Department of Trade & Industry 1975 figures, which they suggested minimise IDC refusal rates, noting that they do not take into account those who, perhaps

unsurprisingly, did not bother to apply for IDCs and simply moved away. This last point makes it the more surprising that Spencer et al. slightly sits on the fence having presented compelling evidence that the 1945 Distribution of Industry Act and subsequent policy was more akin to being an Harassment of Industry Act! In the round, Spencer et al. seem too close to the time to sense the shock and disbelief of someone of my generation in seeing that the private sector and elected local authorities - *and the very ground they stood on* - had become in peace time, so incredibly tightly controlled by the central state. The negative impact of growth restrictions on West Midlands business confidence and morale, already hinted at by the two local business reports mentioned by Birmingham's 1989 centenary publication, was not something Spencer et al. sought to factor into their calculations.

It seems incredible that with the 1948 Abercrombie & Jackson West Midlands Plan recommending no new industry be permitted except that already linked to the area, the official postwar central government line was for so long, akin to: 'Don't Invest in the West Midlands'. Spencer et al. gives much of what we are short of in the aforementioned media and blog coverage: solid industrial case studies - and statistics and perspectives with sources, which, by demonstrating how industrial restriction worked, also show they belonged to a very different world and a different public consensus mindset to what we have today.

Before completing this section, there are certain unsettling assumptions in Sutcliffe & Smith's 1974 volume that should be acknowledged before we go any further. The authors welcomed both the building of the brutalist library (demolished in 2016) and the associated nearby inner ring-road. These reflect mere 'dated assumptions'.

However, some other assumptions are betrayed which give us some indication as to the terrible sense of 'otherness' that marked the treatment of many postwar immigrants as they settled in UK cities, before and after Enoch Powell's notorious, hate-filled 1968 'Birmingham speech'. It was disturbing to read under the index heading 'Coloured immigration', associated subheadings including: 'arguments about', 'and fear of disease'; 'problems caused by', 'and the crime rate', etc. The relevant Chapter XI, had the loaded title, *The Impact of Coloured Immigration*.

On one level, the chapter seemed to indicate clear disapproval of some really shocking examples of discrimination; yet simultaneously, at least some of its own language and terminology seemingly reflects troubling underlying attitudes that would surely even corroborate the very reports of prejudice and discrimination that the chapter referenced. Remembering that even 1980s 'light entertainment' television programmes sometimes had such undercurrents, I was unfortunately not too surprised to come across this. All the same, it ought not be left unremarked upon - and we will come back to related themes and impacts in subsequent sections.

In summarising this section, Sutcliffe & Smith and Birmingham's 1989 centenary publication echoes the kinds of 'imposed decline' narratives reported in the aforementioned articles and blogs and inevitably provides much greater nuance especially in its emphasis on local context and initial local support for a restriction of Birmingham's growth. Christopher Law and Spencer et al. provide solid case studies and sourced statistics which I have argued, slightly against Spencer et al., give sustenance to an 'imposed decline' narrative. Spencer et al. also give several other contextual leads to follow-up after lockdown. We will go into the next section with the assumption that we have demonstrated there are grounds to believe there was an imposed decline on Birmingham. We will consider the 'first order' conclusions that can be drawn from this and relevant, wider context.

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