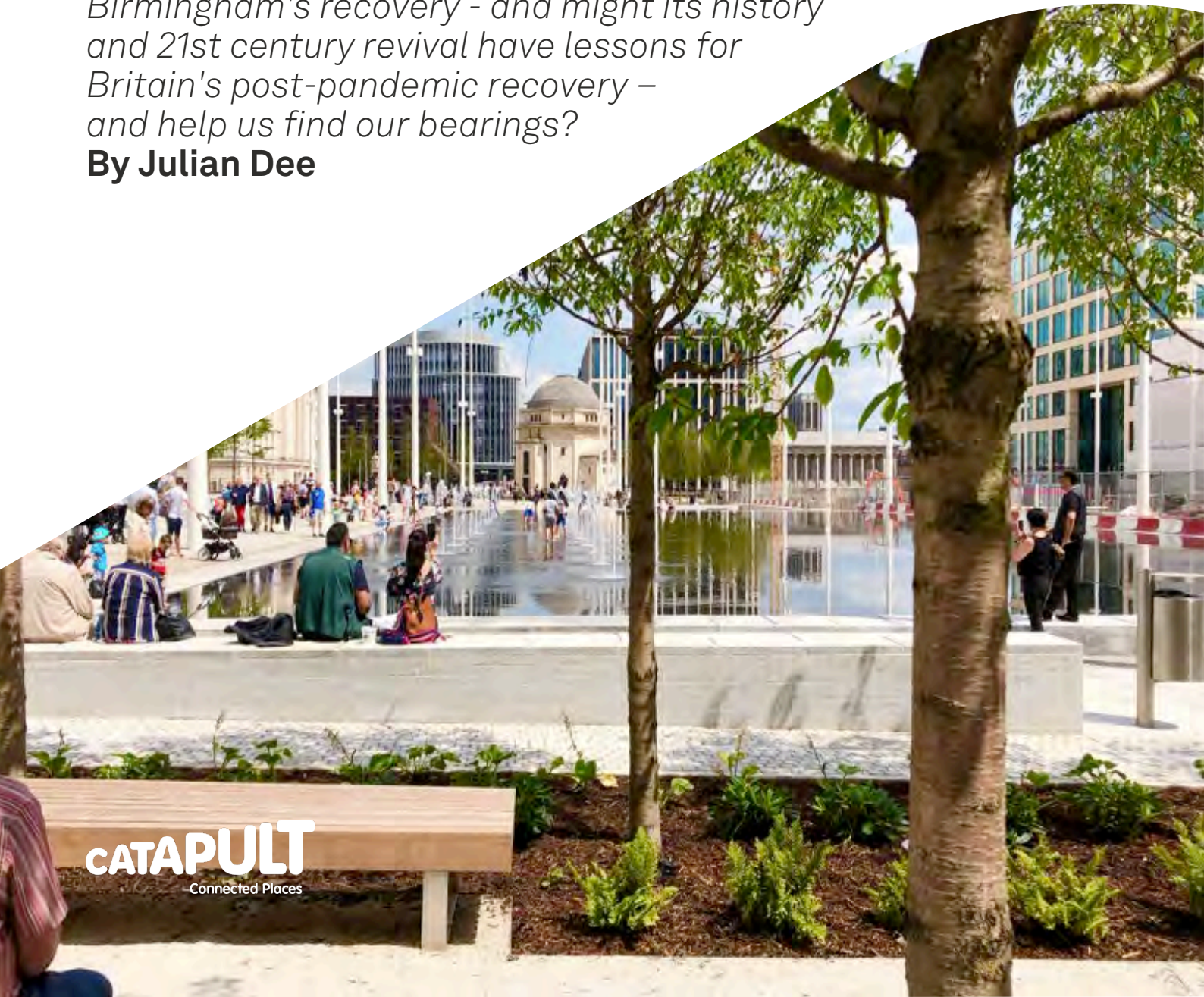# Britain After Coronavirus: Birmingham And How We Recovered and Rebalanced 'Last Time'

Part two: **First Conclusions**

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

Note to readers:

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1 'Imposed decline' on a self-made global city: 20ᵗʰ Century Birmingham's relationship with central government and the wider country

'Even as William Blake's poem was put to music by Parry & Hastings, 'building Jerusalem' became more than ever a national, rather than city-led endeavour.'

When, following that first conversation, I first read that Economist blog title 'How To Kill A City', the LSE blog and the similar FT and Birmingham reporting, I could not have been the only one to imagine the spectre of a distant, faceless, pinstriped-and-bowler-hatted figure, hidden behind the thick Portland stone walls of Whitehall, conspiring after world war two to cut Birmingham down-to-size with 'a deliberate government policy to undermine economic growth' - as the Birmingham Post quite reasonably related it.

After all, even with the nuanced interwar years context that Sutcliffe & Smith give us, which outlined local - as well as national - initiatives to restrict Birmingham's growth, these writers of 1939 - 1970 Birmingham's 'official biography' could not resist taking a pot-shot at the proverbial Man From The Ministry as they wrote that Birmingham 'from Westminster's point of view was too large, too prosperous, and had to be held in check'.

A narrative of postwar decline being centrally imposed on Birmingham might variously play to any number of caricatures (and no doubt lived experiences) of historic British 'social hierarchy' tensions

and national identity - not to mention the instinctive distrust potentially inherent in any country, between a 'metropole' and its 'provinces'.

A centrally imposed postwar decline would also have been a cruelly poetic reversal of Birmingham's fortunes, at least to the extent that ancient seeming local disadvantages had been overcome as it grew from being one of Warwickshire's 'poorest' areas, valued at 20 shillings in the 1086 Domesday Book (as the city's Centenary publication noted!) to being the [third largest Warwickshire town in 1327](#), and eventually into one of the very first global metropolitan centres of the industrial revolution - and then Britain's second city.

If we briefly comprehend some ancient and geographical local disadvantages overcome by Birmingham, we may better comprehend a possible temptation represented by a negative focus on a simplified 'pinstriped bogeyman' narrative, which if it took root might conceivably dampen the resurgence of the city's instinctive optimism and proud independence - as exemplified by industrial Birmingham's historic, diverse nonconformist communities and freethinkers - and their entrepreneurialism.

A danger of any narrative not rooted in nuance and context as to postwar central government restriction of Birmingham, may include that we overlook factors such as *initial* local support for restricting the city's growth - and the economic and social impacts associated with both: widespread detrimental postwar planning policies towards working class communities; and racist attitudes towards postwar immigration.

By seeking nuanced perspectives on the city's postwar decline in so far as it may relate to public policy restrictions, perhaps we might even uncover or leave in our wake clues and trails that in time, may potentially link twentieth century postwar urban racism to attitudes originally forged by and associated with, the role of slavery and colonialism in the industrial revolution era economies of our cities.

At the same time we may glean clues as to some other drivers behind Birmingham's once and now re-emerging success and its huge global potential as one of the youngest and most diverse cities in Britain.

So let us turn to 'ancient times', to Birmingham's seeming overcome local disadvantages. How might this city have seemingly escaped in those days the stifling writ of feudal barons or feudal culture, only to be restricted in the mid-twentieth century by postwar central government economic planning?

We might say that industry and entrepreneurialism are 'in the very soil' of Birmingham. Ironically then, the first apparent overcome disadvantage - widely known in the city's narrative - was Birmingham's poorer quality soil. When Peter de Birmingham famously secured a market charter in 1166 AD, it may have already been selling the agricultural and related products of its own and neighbouring areas. Being one-step removed from the soil made for an earlier evolution towards becoming an early manufacturing centre in the centuries prior to the industrial revolution.

The second apparent disadvantage relates to that and may have been Birmingham's one-time peripheral *geographical* status, despite its location in the heart of England. Much of what became Birmingham and its hinterland straddled the peripheries of three counties: Warwickshire, Staffordshire and Worcestershire. In that once peripheral area grew a local culture where industrious and entrepreneurial people were left alone and were unusually free to 'get on with it', with less of the legacy of stifling agrarian feudal control and deference - and without the kinds of [restrictive trade guilds of](#)

other towns. The sheer range of local commerce and industries that developed in the centuries approaching the industrial revolution is astonishing. Sources cited on Wikipedia suggest that by the 1300s, Birmingham was a centre of the wool trade and was already a national centre of high value jewellery manufacturing - while in the 1400s, Birmingham had dealers in iron, linen, wool, brass and steel, as well as cattle. John Leland noted while travelling around 1538 that iron goods manufacturing was a key part of Birmingham's economy, with links to the part of Staffordshire that became the Black Country.

The third apparent disadvantage links to the second - the former peripheral *social* status of many leading Birmingham historical figures. On a 2018 Jewellery Quarter tour with Brummie entrepreneur Tim Guidotti, I heard renowned Birmingham historian and public figure Professor Carl Chinn MBE describe industrial era Birmingham as a city that (sounded to us) like it was an inversion of industrial revolution era wider British society. Birmingham was, as I recall his explanation, a city perceived as - and often and widely led by - a predominately nonconformist elite with a more largely Anglican workforce. Linked to this, it is often remarked by Brummies that their city had a notable absence of resident aristocracy as would rule more socially stratified rural areas or older cities. Consequent higher social mobility seemingly encouraged early entrepreneurial collaboration of a kind that grew supply chains sufficiently large, cooperative and flexible to tempt the likes of steam engine pioneers Boulton & Watt to locate in Birmingham.

The 'self-made' Joseph Chamberlain and his son Neville, sons of Birmingham's industrious nonconformist (in their case, Unitarian) chapels, famously riled against aristocratic colleagues as they reached the pinnacles of their Westminster careers.   Until just before Joseph's birth, protestant nonconformists, together with Catholics, were banned from holding public office, while Oxbridge entry restrictions remained until later. So, many nonconformists, most notably (but not only) the Quakers, were among those who put their energies into pioneering industry and sometimes, social reform or Abolitionist campaigning. Their consequent wealth and sometime ethical leadership contributed towards pressures on Parliament, which would eventually have to allow representation for them - and better representation for their areas.

Nonetheless, narratives about slavery abolition have tended to lionise campaigners in Britain such as Quaker industrialists, and later parliamentarians, when, by comparison one considers the lesser focus on both the: first and subsequent leaders of the Abolitionist movement who came from enslaved backgrounds in the Caribbean; and the sheer scale and brutality of enslavement itself. This focus may also have taken attention away from both: the British and overseas industrial competitors of those Abolitionist industrialists, who profited from slavery; and the extent to which industrial towns including Birmingham profited from it.

Taking all the aforementioned together, given all these deep histories, myths and realities of many Brummie outsiders 'succeeding' and for good or ill impacting the whole world and the shape of society at multiple levels, it would be so tempting to conjure up that postwar 'Whitehall', 'Westminster' or 'London' old establishment bogeyman, putting Birmingham down, putting the 'upstarts' back in their place. After all, as previously noted, national legislative and economic planning provided much of the framework for Birmingham's postwar restriction.

However, we cannot escape the fact that those restrictive Acts were passed by successive, democratically elected National, Conservative and Labour governments that had considerable

electoral support in the new era of equalised universal franchise, which further and rightly tipped the bicameral parliamentary balance towards Commons supremacy.

Before world war two, the National Government (which included Birmingham MP Neville Chamberlain as Chancellor) passed that 1934 Special Areas Act (while the Air Council made the 1934 'intermediate danger' designation) which conceivably stymied investment into Birmingham. A Conservative government passed a 1937 Special Areas (Amendment) Act.

After world war two, Labour governments passed the 1945 Distribution of Industry Act, (following the Churchill-Attlee wartime coalition's 1944 Employment Policy white paper); and the 1965 Control of Office Employment Act. The recommended population cap was made in the 1946 West Midlands Plan; while Sutcliffe & Smith tell us that in 1963, Conservative Housing Minister Keith Joseph announced plans for a Redditch New Town which would move some Brummies away from their city.

Sutcliffe & Smith surely also demonstrated that as, or perhaps even before, Parliament passed the 1934 Special Areas Act, leading Birmingham industrial and academic figures played an important role in supporting a national garden city or new town movement which sought to answer their own local concerns about slum housing and Birmingham getting too big.

Ernest Barnes, was Bishop of Birmingham, 1924-1953, in my own Anglican tradition. That he was a 'respectable' voice advocating not only new towns but also his repugnant views on ethnicity - and eugenics, is a chilling reminder of the warped, detached, pseudo-scientific lens through which postwar BAME communities who had been invited to help rebuild Britain and working class communities were sometimes viewed by significant public figures across the political and civic spectrum at that time. (In their aforementioned chapter on immigration, Sutcliffe & Smith also referenced the apparently 'far more constructive attitude' of other Birmingham Anglicans and other churches.)

Of course, it would be utterly ridiculous to link the new town movement, let alone all forms of paternalism or even all class snobbery, to the early twentieth century growth in the advocacy of eugenics. But, partly prompted by the undercurrent in that immigration chapter (flagged in the previous section) and contexts that we will explore in possible future follow-up sections, it would also be unwise to entirely discount the influence that prejudice may have had in: fostering a culture of brisk arms length treatment of communities by widespread mid-century national and local officialdoms that were confident 'they knew best'.

The ebb-and-flow of Birmingham's historic traditions of religious diversity and freethinking had demonstrated that tolerance can build not only social cohesion but also power creativity and inventiveness, the cross-fertilisation of ideas - and even build supply chains. So barriers of postwar class or racial prejudice surely cannot be discounted from any narrative about the decline of the city itself - or indeed of many industrial cities.

The 'Nimbyism' of middle class Birmingham managers who did not want working class colleagues living near to their suburban or rural homes also played a part. When the progressively-motivated Cadbury family and others donated stunning green spaces such as the Worcestershire Lickey Hills, it is as easy on reflection to feel sympathy with their green belt aims as it is to lament the restrictions placed and economic decline that seemingly resulted in people and new businesses going elsewhere. If only they had realised that not least with natural attrition of businesses - green belt and economic growth aims could perhaps have been somewhat reconciled.

So not only was there arguably no Whitehall bogeyman, successive governments' efforts at 'geographical planning of the national economy' had at least initially, local Birmingham support and perhaps even were responding to a national consensus that Birmingham civic and academic figures were eager to help shape. Even as William Blake's poem was put to music by Parry & Hastings, 'building Jerusalem' was becoming an increasingly national, rather than city-led and city-focused endeavour.

Some enlightened industrialists in cities like Birmingham may have attended to their own workers' factory conditions, and they or charities or churches - even to citizens' education, health, housing and retirement needs. But twentieth century central government increasingly called the tune as it uniquely could 'level-up' in the provision of such basic, essential matters, as by statutory right. In the interwar years, even a member of the Royal Family, Prince George, Duke of Kent, joined the civil service as a Home Office factory inspector, reviewing working conditions in our dark satanic mills. What was once the *preoccupation* of 'self-made' Birmingham Quaker industrialists was now the *occupation* of London headquartered civil servants - including one that was a prince of the blood royal.

Lord Briggs recounted that at the start of the twentieth century, Birmingham was known as 'the least self-centred of cities'. Perhaps he meant this in the sense of being outward looking - a 'regional' city with an economic focus on the area beyond its own city boundaries. In any case, it occurred to me that in the 1918-1939 interwar years, Birmingham's world-renowned civic spirit must still have been harnessed to a sense of national solidarity and purpose created by world war one - and also galvanised by the anticipation of possible aerial bombing in, and industrial response to, a future second world war.

As local pre and postwar 'informed opinion' believed Birmingham was in any case too large, it was easier for the city council to support the national effort to redirect industry, and perhaps later, office employment, to Wales, the North of England and Scotland. City council interwar cooperation with central government might logically have been incentivised, as any future wartime armaments manufacturing would have been located by central government (eventually led by Neville Chamberlain). Leaving all pragmatic considerations aside though, Birmingham's remarkable apparent civic commitment to the economic wellbeing of the United Kingdom - as represented by local support for national economic planning and associated local restriction - seems especially interesting given the strains on that Union today.

It was a tragedy that in the centralised postwar world, Joseph Chamberlain's once mighty trailblazing 'city state' effectively lacked the basic autonomy to unilaterally revoke their circa 1934 directive, that the Birmingham Information Bureau should only provide information on existing firms, rather than also seek new industry for the city. It would appear that from 1958 until perhaps as late as 1982 or after, it could merely plead, in vain, with central government over their fears of Birmingham becoming 'precariously over-specialised' - while for many years, any new science-based or other industries that took root in Britain, were more likely to do so elsewhere, while existing firms were also restricted for want of being granted Industrial Development Certificates.

Christopher Law noted that 1960s central government financial support and incentives for the Assisted Areas (renamed Development Areas) in Wales, the North of England and Scotland under the 1945 Distribution of Industry Act, should be set against the subsidies received by London Transport and 'special programmes like Concorde in the South West'. Although Law's book was not written from a West Midlands perspective, I have to admit that it was hard to read this part of it without getting the

impression that the West Midlands was perhaps somewhat overlooked for a time! This is all the more so as Law's 'Assisted Areas' (sic) maps for 1970 and 1978 and 'Proposed Assisted Areas 1982' map showed expansion of the 'Assisted' or 'Development' designation to more parts of the country, but not to the then-struggling West Midlands. Furthermore, as a region focused on industry, the West Midlands would surely have been impacted by:

- The rising sterling, energy costs and interest rates which Spencer et al cited in the case of the collapse of the Duport steel company;
- The negative impact of other national policies on the West Midlands economy, which Spencer et al attempted to outline in Chapter 6. These included:

  o Moving from Commonwealth preference and sterling area arrangements;
  o Postwar 'stop-go' consumer credit controls;
  o The lifting of tariffs reducing the ability of the UK car industry to re-equip and invest.

If initial local Birmingham support for economic and population restriction policies had not anticipated the need for replacement in respect of inevitable industrial attrition, it may also have not been ready for the extent to which so much basic decision making would be centralised in postwar Britain so that Birmingham could but plead in vain with central government for policy change, as deeply damaging local economic contraction occurred.

Additionally, it seems to me that we have enough of a picture to ponder whether, in that highly state-controlled postwar economy, central government had also failed to appreciate the impact of those aforementioned other 'indirect' national policies on Birmingham that went beyond those 'direct' economic and population restrictions already impacting the city. Even though Law tells us that fear of losing British firms to the EEC in the 1970s started to weaken the IDC regime, central government also seems to have failed to take account of the West Midlands so as to mitigate impacts as Britain underwent significant postwar global position changes. To my layman's eyes, it seemed complacent at a time when other parts of the UK were quite rightly receiving assistance and consideration.

In centuries long past, the once-peripheral places dispersed among the three counties that became Birmingham, may have been able to connect and grow across county boundaries, because they escaped the attentions and agrarian focus of feudal lords. (A conclusion that might chime with Tim Marshall's Prisoners of Geography.)

It is tempting to grieve what might have been, had postwar Birmingham not sadly come within the sights of a Whitehall machine that previously had a global empire to run. But we have already seen in the interwar years that the centralising policy direction was already evolving long before the Colonial Office absorption into the FCO, 1966-68.

Other postwar factors strengthened that centralisation trend and state focus such as: nationalisation of industry; the welfare state, cold war anxieties; and even expansion of nationally licensed broadcasting and the aforementioned development of Concorde. While reflecting on the postwar legacy of wartime dispersal of Birmingham industry, I came across a US academic's research on the atomic bomb age and population and industry dispersal policies and related city centre decline in the USA. (Christopher Law took a different view to this.)

All the above gave greater sheer visibility to the executive power of the nation state than had perhaps been known since before the 1688 Glorious Revolution - and at the expense of the 'city state' and the civil society 'little platoons' associated with it. All these might go towards understanding why Birmingham's apparent eventual warnings of over-specialisation fell on deaf Whitehall ears in the mid-to-late twentieth century.

There was an anomaly in the aforementioned accounts, as to whether the 1965 Control of Office Employment Act only briefly restricted Birmingham office building as related by Sutcliffe & Smith, or continued to do so for nearly two decades, taking us into the 1980s. If there was a ban or restriction of nearly two decades duration, it begs the tantalising question, might late twentieth century Birmingham have otherwise built a Midlands Manhattan skyline in that time? (While I will argue in the next section about the negative impact of much of the 1960s Birmingham city centre redevelopment - in 'newer' (for want of a better term) Birmingham city centre areas such as Centenary Square, the 100 metre high Alpha Tower (1973) has triumphantly come into its own with neighbouring twenty-first century buildings making it no longer the 'lone book on the shelf'.

The goldmine chapter of Spencer et al., chapter 6, provides some excellent case studies and sourced statistics and perspectives that chime with much of the scale of what was sketched out in the newspapers and blogs outlined earlier, not to mention Sutcliffe & Smith's authoritative account, including of the key central-local government relationship context.

So to summarise, here is what I think seems to have happened around postwar Birmingham's former decline in so far as it related to central government regional planning - and what perhaps need to be variously remembered, debated or researched. Academics may already have found answers to all or many of these points - in which case, as a society, we need to give space to listen to them as we build a consensus vision for the UK as a whole.

The communities that became Birmingham had connected and grown from the shelter of their geographic and social peripheries into one of the original global pioneering cities of industry.

As social reforms, economic and population growth restriction policies and related greenbelt and new town initiatives - that leading Birmingham citizens and others had helped develop - were adopted by wider society and ultimately the state itself, consequent centralisation of power by the state was further galvanised by several factors. These included: war or the threat of war on the one hand; and the longed-for development of the welfare state and its protections, on the other.

It would appear that Birmingham's later postwar over-specialisation warnings were unheeded by central government; and that now lacking the autonomy to revoke growth restriction policies which were eventually centrally-imposed, Birmingham was prevented for some years from attracting new industries to the city in order to prevent its (now thankfully, former) decline. During the period of Birmingham's economic contraction, the evidence offered by representative bodies that existing industries within Birmingham and the West Midlands were unduly restricted, was met with scepticism from central government, even as some of those industries were incentivised to relocate to other UK nations and regions with perhaps sometimes questionable benefit to those firms' long-term viability.

The next section may give us a little more context to contemplate the impact of 'utopian' 20th century policy on the city's confidence and wellbeing, from the hindsight, and through the prism, of its 21st century city centre revival.

2 *'Forward':* City Planners, bulldozers and the abolition of Birmingham's past

'To sense the devastating psychological impact on many Brummies of losing the historic Bull Ring, imagine if London's Covent Garden and Piccadilly Circus were to be demolished and replaced by vast multi-storey concrete shopping centres complete with car ramps vaulting over the remaining outdoor market stalls…'

The Old Bull Ring and High Street (from St Martin's Church tower) demolished to make way for the now former 1964 Bull Ring Shopping Centre (Picture: Julian Dee)

Left: Bull Ring Shopping Centre in 1964 (photo: Birmingham Mail); Right: 'Third Time Lucky!' The magnificent new 'Bullring' & Grand Central Centre, Including the iconic Selfridge store (right hand side) and St Martin's Church, with High Street, top right (photo: West Midlands Police, used without alteration or prejudice under the Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 2.0 Generic license)

Let us reflect on Birmingham's changing relationship with itself, and on its postwar history. Specifically, what accounts for the hugely dramatic postwar changes to Birmingham's stunningly beautiful Victorian city centre - and the way it answered postwar housing and transport challenges? And how, despite Kojak's best efforts, (!) did those changes for a time come to both symbolise and contribute towards postwar Birmingham's onetime decline? Thinking about these questions may help us to: better appreciate why the 'shocking truth' about Birmingham's postwar decline was (as the Birmingham Post put it), 'little remembered'; get a brief glimpse of the impact on working class communities of postwar planning; and gauge whether some kind of elusive 'collective memory' or sense of belonging is growing or returning today, even amidst the cranes and bustle of the newly-emerging city centre. We may also gain some conceivably useful background context for other urgent conversations that have come to the fore in 2020 about other potentially forgotten or ignored issues such as relating to racism and historical legacies.

Dr Chris Upton in his 1993 A History of Birmingham wrote that: 'At some point in the early 20th century, Birmingham decided to abolish the past. It was not a decision ratified by the City Council, but it was entirely in harmony with an image cultivated over a century or more. Here was a city and people more interested in tomorrow than yesterday: brash, energetic, financially astute and innovative. Even her coat of arms bore the legend "Forward".' As we will see later, reflecting Dr Upton's point, some truly iconic major city centre buildings were demolished in the *early* 20th century - well before the postwar era of vast utopian town planning schemes. But the then-Birmingham Post editor Stacey Barnfield's article 'Sir Herbert Manzoni: The man who changed the face of Birmingham', may suggest that later on, in the *mid* 20th century, not least in the person of its 1935 - 1963 City Engineer and Surveyor, the Council did at least endorse if not ratify, in common with many other cities across the country, the postwar 'abolition' - indeed 'demolition' - of much of 'the past'. Sir Herbert, a onetime President of the UK's Institution of Civil Engineers, is quoted as pointedly saying:

'I have never been very certain as to the value of tangible links with the past. They are often more sentimental than valuable. As to Birmingham's buildings, there is little of real worth in our architecture. As for future generations, I think they will be better occupied in applying their thoughts and energies to forging ahead, rather than looking backward.'

Mr Barnfield interviewed Professor Chinn, who acknowledged that Manzoni cared deeply for the city, and was motivated to help the tens-of-thousands who lived in Birmingham's unsanitary back-to-back housing - while trying to address traffic problems and shopping modernisation.

But it wasn't only history that was 'forgotten'. Professor Chinn suggested that with regards to the city centre: 'no-one asked the stallholders, the barrow boys or the flower sellers for their opinions about the changes to the Bull Ring markets'. Similarly, where communities were summarily split up: 'How much better it would have been if slum clearance had been more thoughtful and if working-class people had been asked for their views?'

As he sought to influence legislation, Herbert Manzoni could see the state as a means to realise his Le Corbusian-scale vision, which went well beyond rebuilding what was lost in the Blitz. His March 1943 assertion perhaps resonates with a French constitutional indistinction between city and state: 'vesting of development rights in the State should apply to all land, whether undeveloped or developed.'

Presciently, in that same year, 1943, CS Lewis in his The Abolition of Man perceived that educational trends might encourage 'the belief that all emotions aroused by local association are in themselves contrary to reason and contemptible'.

Nonetheless, it has to be admitted that some postwar development in Birmingham could have been a source of local pride, for a time. Some readers who viewed late 1970s BBC1 Pebble Mill at One will remember the daily view - afforded to the nation with jaunty music and camera angles - of Birmingham's modern skyline. *From a distance* at least - from the roof of the former BBC Pebble Mill studios - it was not an unimpressive skyline, with its wide leafy girdle provided by Edgbaston green spaces (which were thankfully not built on). Some of those postwar buildings built by Birmingham-born architect John Madin, housed businesses and banking services. It is significant that also, from Madin's BBC Pebble Mill building, Birmingham maintained some positive national visibility on daytime and evening weekend television especially in the 1970s and 1980s. The stylish 28-storey Alpha Tower was built for ATV, helping bring to Birmingham the likes of Morecambe & Wise and shows such as Blockbusters and Tiswas (and em, Crossroads). So we cannot completely discount some positive modernist contribution to the city's later postwar prosperity, such as it was, and its positive national profile.

But closer up, as argued earlier, the huge brutalist, concrete utopian schemes, built with fanfare and wrecking ball, generally fell out of fashion even before many Brummies had finished mourning lost swathes of the beautiful Victorian city. After a brief frisson, concrete girders became emblematic of the city's later postwar decline - and surely in aggregate contributed directly towards that decline. The Alpha Tower was built in the 'right place', but many others were not.

Booming early postwar Birmingham was true to its heritage in that it had the drive to 'be first' - but paid a high price for being able to claim - as Pathe News put it in 1964 - that 'no other city can match the Bull Ring anywhere in the world'.   The tragically obliterated pre-1960s historic Bull Ring area, with its Doric-columned 1835 market hall and Nelson Monument was a kind of Covent Garden-and-Trafalgar Square of the Midlands, the ancient nucleus of Peter de Birmingham's town. In 1989, the Prince of Wales wrote that: 'The Bull Ring in the eighteenth century (was) apparently a place of almost bucolic calm'. He painted an idyllic scene of it in the 1950s, 'alive with shoppers, traffic and stall holders shouting their wares...'

To sense the devastating psychological impact on many Brummies of losing the historic Bull Ring, imagine if London's Covent Garden and Piccadilly Circus were to be demolished and replaced by vast multi-storey concrete shopping centres with car ramps vaulting over the remaining outdoor market

stalls - or if a concrete motorway collar were to strangle London. Simon Jenkins recently reminded us that exactly that was proposed for London and was eventually stopped by 'people power' and by at least one London 'resident aristocrat', Lady Dartmouth. She was better and later known as Lady Raine Spencer, stepmother to Princess Diana...and daughter of Birmingham-born romance novelist Barbara Cartland! What a shame Lady Spencer had not been a 'resident aristocrat' in her mother's birth city before the old Bull Ring went.

Simon Jenkins suggested that 'What Covent Garden showed was that sensitive conservation lay at the root of economic dynamism and revival.' When I walked around Birmingham city centre having watched the 2019 Tolkien movie, I grieved that JRR Tolkien would not recognise entire neighbourhoods of the city centre he grew up in.   Much of what would have generated West End-levels of global profile in the wake of the film - and millions of tourist dollars, euros and yen - had more or less survived the Blitz only to be lost from the 1960s. Thoroughfares such as Bull Street, home to Barrow's Tea Rooms where Tolkien's school pals' 'TCBS' secret club plotted and schemed over tea, was entirely redeveloped. Thankfully, the conservation movement gained ground in time for significant areas of the city to be spared.

The beautiful Birmingham   that JRR Tolkien knew

All demolished: Bull Street & Barrow's Store & Tea Rooms.
*(Picture: mikeyashworth, Flickr)*

Demolished in 1963: Grand Theatre, Corporation Street
(Picture: Birmingham Mail)

Left: The 1865 Birmingham Exchange, with its Middle Earth-looking turret on New Street, demolished in 1965.
Immediately behind it was the King Edward VI Grammar School (demolished 1936), which Tolkien attended.
Right: same view today. (Both pictures: Julian Dee)
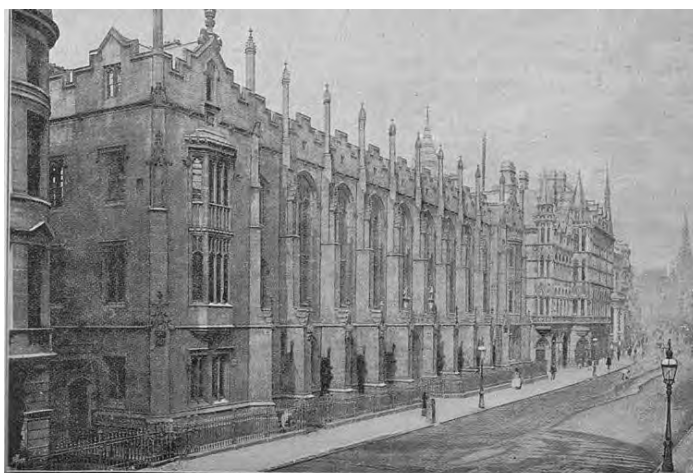
Barry & Pugin's 1835 King Edward VI Grammar School, New Street,, demolished, 1936. Notice the Birmingham Exchange, further in background. (Picture: [Wikipedia, Public Domain](#))

Left: Cobden's 1883 Temperance Hotel & Coffee Palace, Corporation Street, demolished 1957. (Picture: Historic England Archive)
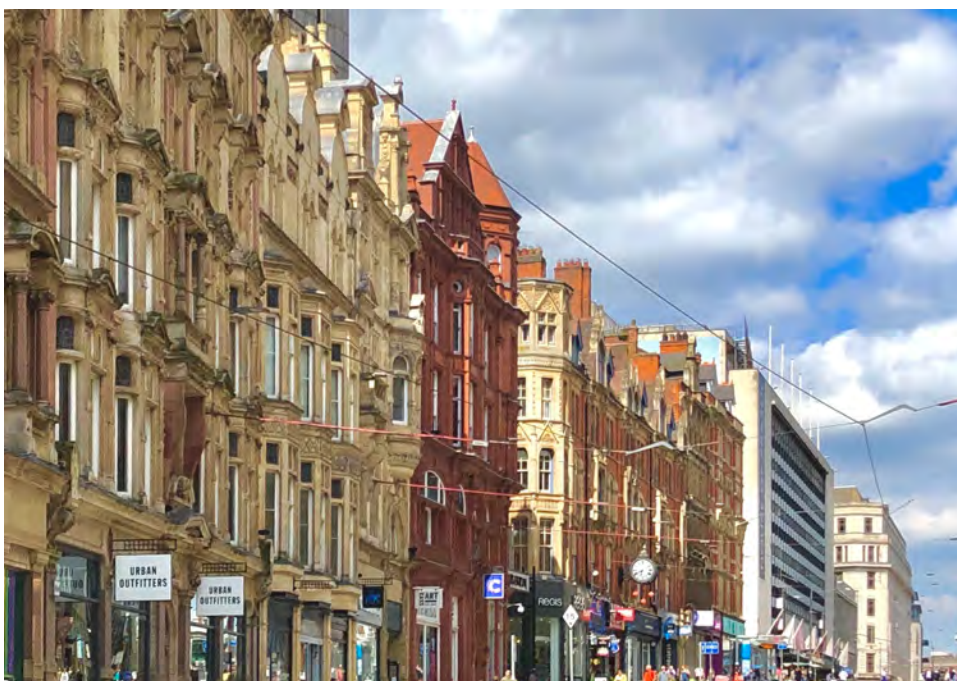*Right: Stork Hotel, Corporation Street. (Picture: [Wikipedia, Public Domain](#))*

But the splendour of New Street and [Snow Hill](#) stations was lost. Much of the neo-gothic and classical splendour of Joseph Chamberlain's Corporation Street was also lost as arcades, boutique shops, hotels and theatres were demolished together with much of its roofline of spires and pinnacles. Where those spires, pinnacles and elegant shop-fronts survived - they appear to have been generally sawn off.

Roger Ward relates how Corporation Street was nicknamed by Chamberlain's critics *Rue Chamberlain* - an echo of Haussmann wielding considerable authoritarian power in his remodelling of Paris. Despite using slum clearance legislation to build the street, which consisted of businesses and (both sound and slum) housing, [Chris Upton](#) noted that the Council did not build municipal houses to replace most of the over eight hundred houses that had been cleared.

'Rue Chamberlain': Corporation Street (late 19th century). Notice the steeple and clock
(far right) of the former Cobden Temperance Hotel & Coffee Palace.

Corporation Street (2019). Notice the mid-photo tower has had its turret shorn off. Further right is
the 1961 Rackham's Store on the site of the former Cobden Hotel.
(Both pictures: Julian Dee)

One wonders if the Civic Gospel-in-boulevard-form might have better survived the 1960s had that particular shadow of Victorian hypocrisy not been cast over it and perhaps by association, other, probably commendable contemporary initiatives. This one particular instance may give an easily overlooked tight point of comparison to the 1960s developers, who may not have consulted communities, but did at least build them homes, however imperfectly built, situated and served.

Furthermore, as though making Chris Upton's point about the *early* twentieth century abolition of the past, at least three breath-taking Birmingham edifices were demolished well before the sixties got under way: Barry & Pugin's elegant pre-Westminster gothic collaboration, the King Edward VI School

on New Street, where Tolkien studied (1936); Hyam's *Champs Elysees*-like department store on New Street (1950s) and the Royal Birmingham Society of Artists' Corinthian-columned building on New Street (1912).

Slum clearance and the shock of the Blitz were amongst the key original rationales and legislative platforms for Joseph Chamberlain and Manzoni's respective city plans. Both ambitiously responded to the wider challenges and technological changes of their day, while influenced by none less than Haussmann and Le Corbusier respectively.

Chamberlain came under passing scrutiny for failing to build replacement houses; as has Manzoni for not apparently consulting those whom he was at least rehousing. Both were criticised as authoritarian by their detractors, but while Joseph Chamberlain's memory and legacy may have been neglected while Manzoni once reigned supreme, history might be kinder to Chamberlain's city centre vision. Lord Briggs noted that people flocked to Chamberlain's city; the same was soon not the case for Manzoni's now disappearing postwar city. Having also praised the Birmingham of Chamberlain's and earlier centuries, Prince Charles asked in 1989: 'Why do sightseers and tourists in this country visit what is left of our old towns and villages rather than rush off to see the centre of Birmingham…?' As I have shown (and as you will see in the photos at the end of this section) - in the twenty-first century people are now once again rushing off to do just that as the new 21st century Birmingham emerges.

It would seem that in contrast with its postwar economic growth restriction policies, central government was enabler, rather than restrictor, at least with respect to realising the Le Corbusian scale of Manzoni's projects. A bitter irony is that the one way that postwar central government empowered the city, was to lead to the widespread destruction of so much of its beautiful Victorian and earlier city centre.

We previously noted that the dynamism of a less socially stratified society is widely regarded as having helped power Birmingham's early rise and expansion. One ponders, not entirely tongue-in-cheek though, that if an older city, rather than Birmingham, had had the drive and means to 'be first' to bulldoze and pour concrete, perhaps one or two of the 'resident aristocrats' (previously noted for their historic absence in Birmingham) such as Lady Raine Spencer might have put the brake on it.

Birmingham-based town planner and author Nick Corbett's 'Breaking the Concrete Collar' outlines how in 1988, in contrast to Chamberlain & Manzoni's paternalism, the city assembled urbanists from around the world *and listened to local people* before work began on dismantling the inner ring road 'concrete collar' in 1991 - and a new city centre design strategy. These have: liberated the city centre from domination by the car; and created an interconnected sequence of new and historic squares with vistas, canal bridges and leafy spaces for promenading. These are now once again the sorts of places you would want to linger around after work, dinner or theatre - for a stroll or another drink.

On a sunny day, young families play in the Centenary Square water features and garden spaces. As we saw on the BBC 10 O'Clock News on 4 June 2020, Birmingham's squares are once again becoming spaces where people naturally congregate to peacefully protest, remember and witness. They are again becoming places from which citizens connect with national movements, moments and conversations - while knowing that there will be others, who sitting, paddling or strolling nearby, might then stop for a moment to look, learn and listen. They are becoming significant Connected Places that foster citizenship and chance meeting.

In 1993, Dr Upton discerned that for Birmingham, the past was suddenly highly marketable: 'We are now in a world of conferences, service industries and tourism. Selling the city is a means to survival in a changing world, and the past is part of the package'. Birmingham's city centre is now looking like a place where people not only survive, but thrive. The historical awareness that Dr Upton wrote about is even now reflected in some of its 21st century buildings. The PwC building, One Chamberlain Square, stands on the site of John Madin's former 'concrete Ziggurat' Birmingham Central Library - and opposite the site of Charles Barry's former and much-mourned Birmingham Reference Library. As you can see in the photos below, the curves and scale of One Chamberlain Square are clearly reminiscent of those of Barry's Victorian library building.

In the current building boom, Birmingham was determined to 'get it right this time'. With both One Chamberlain Square and the new Library of Birmingham (amongst many others), the reaction of many Brummies I know is that the right buildings are going up in the right places.

Julian hopes to complete in the near future a further follow-up, exploring the relationships between 'the individual, the city and the state'.

Five views and three centuries in and around changing Chamberlain Square

The builders' fencing will soon be down! Chamberlain Square in August 2020. Left: The Town Hall; Centre: Two Chamberlain Square (DLA Piper) with Chamberlain Memorial in front. Right: One Chamberlain Square (PwC). Far right: The Museum & Art Gallery. Notice the pleasant steps on the right. (Photo: Julian Dee)

Left: Midland Institute & Birmingham Library (demolished 1974) looking towards Chamberlain Square with the Town Hall on the right.
Right: Library (demolished 1974) with Chamberlain & Dawson Memorials in right foreground. Right background: Mason's College, which was later part of Birmingham University. (Pictures: Julian Dee)


Left: Madin's now demolished 1974 Central Library on Chamberlain Square.
(Photo: Wikipedia Commons)
Right: Chamberlain Square (May 2020). Notice the curve of One Chamberlain Square (PwC), reminiscent of the Library demolished in 1974. Also: the Town Hall (left); Two Chamberlain Square (DLA Piper, next to Town Hall); Museum & Art Gallery's 'Big Brum' clock. (Photo: Julian Dee)

Learning, Culture, Protest & Play on Centenary Square

*Left: An iconic image from 2017 - Brummie Saffiyah Khan stands her ground with bravery and dignity.
(Photo: Joe Giddens/PA) Right: Up to 4,000 joined the Black Lives Matter demonstration on 4 June 2020.
(Photo: Joe Giddens/PA)*
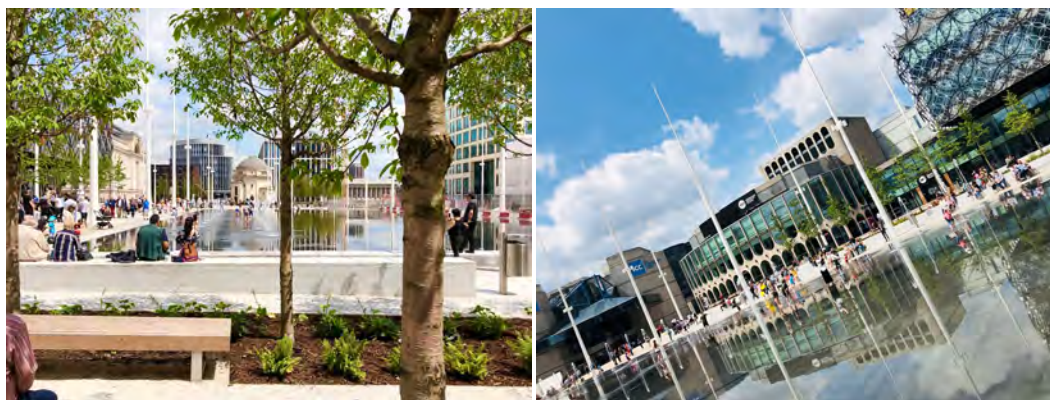
*Left: Families enjoying sun, shade and water in Centenary Square.
Right: Rep Theatre, sandwiched between the ICC & Symphony Hall (left) and Library (right).
(Photos: Julian Dee, 2019)*
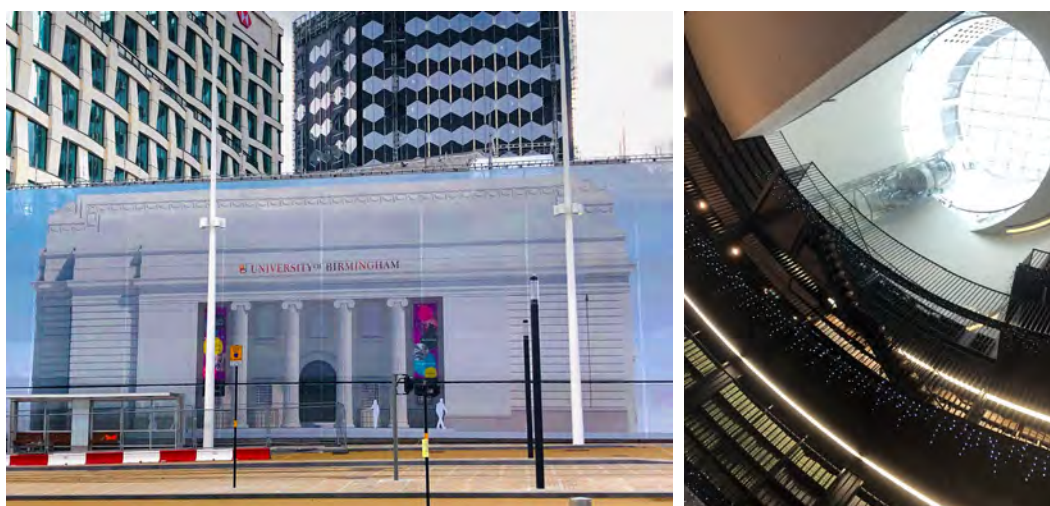
*Left: University of Birmingham building on Centenary Square, 2019. Right: interior of The Library of
Birmingham. (Photos: Julian Dee)*

The Library of Birmingham - left: interior view; right: exterior view. (Photos: Julian Dee)

Three centuries at Birmingham New Street Station

Left: New Street Station & Queen's Hotel, built 1854, demolished 1964. (Picture: Wikipedia Public Domain).
Right: New Street Station, built: 1966, demolished & redeveloped from 2010.
(Photo: Wikipedia Commons Erebus 555)

Left: Birmingham New Street station's 2015 concourse and Grand Central shopping centre. It is part of the UK's biggest city centre shopping centre, 'Bull Ring & Grand Central. Right: Exterior of Birmingham New Street and Grand Central shopping centre. (Both photos: Lianne Dee, 2020)

Connected places around Birmingham's city centre canal

Left: 'Three Brindleyplace' on the north side of Central Square; Right: Gas Street's historic Gas Retort House, repurposed by a local Anglican parish: with the Cube Building, built in 2010 as part of the Mailbox development, behind. These are connected around the Gas Street canal basin. (Photos: Julian Dee, 2020)

Oozells Square, which connects to Central Square. Left: the Ikon Art Gallery (north side). Right: south side (Photos: Julian Dee)
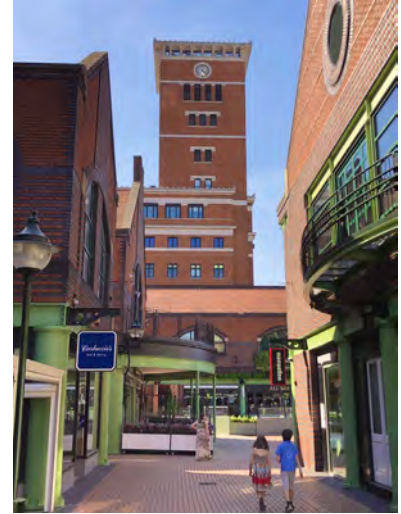
Left: bridges over the city centre canal, connecting Brindleyplace to the ICC and Centenary Square.
Right: The restaurants and bars of 'Brindleyplace' - looking towards the Three Brindleyplace clock tower.
(Photos: Julian Dee)

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