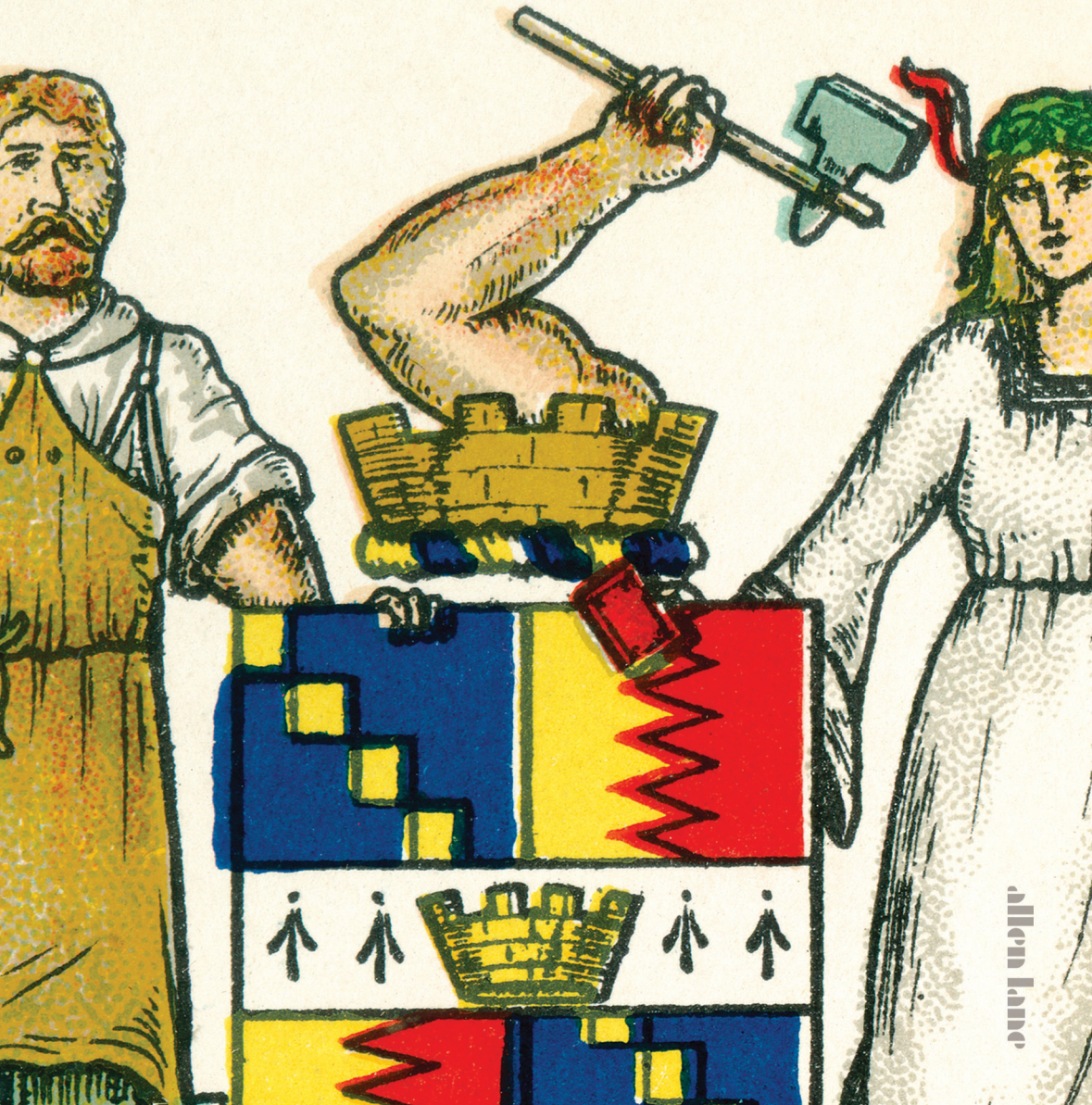
RICHARD VINEN

Second City

Birmingham and the Forging of Modern Britain



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In memory of W.F. ('Joe') Vinen
Professor of Physics, University of Birmingham, 1962–97

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Introduction: The 'Wrong Kind of Vulgarity'

When I was growing up in Birmingham in the 1960s and 70s, history was something that happened somewhere else. On school trips, we would pile into coaches to visit the castles at Warwick and Kenilworth but I never knew that the remains of a real castle could still be seen in the middle of the Weoley Castle council estate, a short walk from my house. Birmingham did not feature in the kind of history that I learned from Ladybird books. It had no obvious links with monarchy or aristocracy. Since my youth was haunted by images of the Second World War, I was also struck by Birmingham's absence from military history. On three occasions England's fate hinged around a 'battle of Birmingham'. The first of these came in 1897 when patriotic defenders fought a valiant rearguard action against Russian troops around 'the high crest on the Hagley Road'. The second took place in 1940 during 'Operation Victor' as German paratroopers attacked the city. The third came in 1984, when the Warsaw Pact dropped a nuclear bomb over Winson Green prison – thus reducing the whole of Birmingham to a radioactive ruin which, after the war had been brought to a halt, was preserved as a memorial 'Peace City West'. These three battles, though, were all fictional. The first occurred in William Le Queux's 'invasion scare' novel of 1894, *The Great War in England in 1897*. The second was part of an official exercise when 'battle raged on paper for three days'.[1] The third featured in General Sir John Hackett's novel *The Third World War: The Untold Story* (1982). All of these fictions felt immediately implausible. Indeed, one suspects that Birmingham featured in the work of Le Queux and Hackett precisely because the notion of a battle there seemed so incongruous and also, perhaps, because Hackett might have assumed that the sacrifice of Birmingham was a price his fellow generals would be willing to pay.

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There was a sense, of course, in which I was right to assume that my home town had no history. Though the word 'Birmingham' first appears in the Domesday Book of 1086, it referred to nothing more than a tiny hamlet. Weoley Castle was for much of the Middle Ages part of a separate entity that was more important than Birmingham itself.[2] It was not formally assimilated into Birmingham until 1911. In 1928, a journalist visited the city and commented on the effigies of the old Lords of the Manor of Birmingham in St Martin's parish church: 'They lie, inexpressibly remote in the silence, deserted, forgotten, the men who pegged out the claim had no idea that they had founded anything larger than a green village.'[3] Rodney Hilton, one of the great historians of the Middle Ages, spent most of his professional life at Birmingham University, but when he wrote about the 'West Midlands' he was referring primarily to places such as Evesham and Pershore.[4] Birmingham was still a village, albeit a large and prosperous one, until the end of the sixteenth century.

In more recent times, the very pace of Birmingham's growth and the accompanying social and economic upheaval sometimes discouraged its inhabitants from dwelling on the past. The motto the city adopted on its incorporation in 1838 was 'Forward'. In 1835, the Frenchman Alexis de Tocqueville wrote that the town's inhabitants lived as though 'they must make their fortunes today and die the next day'.[5] Until recently, making one's fortune did not entirely exclude concern for the past. Some nineteenth-century Birmingham industrialists were sufficiently interested in history to devote much energy to correcting the first historian of the city – William Hutton – who had himself made a modest fortune. After 1945, however, it sometimes seemed that Birmingham was seeking to obliterate its own past. The poet W.H. Auden came to Birmingham in 1967 to receive an honorary degree from the university at which his father had been a professor. He had not set foot in the city since the 1930s and remarked that it seemed less associated with its own past than any other place that he had seen in his travels:

> [N]o city was more striking in the changes it had made in itself, not even New York. New York City rebuilt more, but you could always discern the old city behind or beneath. In Birmingham they seemed simply to have cleared away the whole thing and started again.[6]

The campaign against old buildings in Birmingham was notoriously epitomized by the words of Herbert Manzoni, the city's engineer:

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> 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. Its replacement should be an improvement . . . As for future generations, I think they will be better occupied in applying their thoughts and energies to forging ahead, rather than looking backward.

Future generations have, as it turns out, applied Manzoni's words more quickly than he might have hoped and many of the structures that were most associated with his period of influence have now themselves been demolished.

Birmingham lacks old institutions as well as old buildings. Unlike Hamburg or Barcelona, it was never a 'second city' in any formal sense. It is not the centre of a regional government or of regional patriotism, and even institutions such as courts of law have only existed in Birmingham for a relatively short time.[7] London, by far the largest city in England as well as its political capital, its financial centre and, since the editor of the *Guardian* left Manchester in 1964, the base for every national newspaper, overshadows Birmingham as it overshadows every provincial city.

There was a brief period when Birmingham seemed, in the eyes of contemporaries and later historians, to enjoy a special status. This came in the nineteenth century – especially its latter half. This was the time when the city had a distinctive civic culture – particularly associated with the mayoralty of Joseph Chamberlain from 1873 to 1876 – and it was also a period when some believed that Birmingham incarnated a particular kind of society – one that was often held up as a contrast to the social divisions of large-scale capitalism seen in Manchester. In a characteristically gnomic passage, G.M. Young contrasted:

> Manchester, solid, uniform, pacific, the native home of the economic creed on which aristocratic England had always looked, and educated England at large was coming to look, with some aversion and some contempt: Birmingham, experimental, adventurous, diverse, where old Radicalism might in one decade flourish into lavish Socialism, in another into pugnacious Imperialism.[8]

The most influential academic historian of Birmingham – Asa Briggs – was primarily a historian of the Victorian age. Briggs, a spectacularly

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energetic academic entrepreneur, was fascinated by the dynamism of Birmingham's politicians in the nineteenth century. He also developed the most systematic elaboration of a social interpretation of nineteenth-century Birmingham. It was one that fitted neatly with the political climate of the early 1950s when Briggs's work was published, in which the city's social structure, supposedly revolving around small business, elasticity of trade and social mobility, was presented as a challenge to Marxism. Briggs wrote the volume of the official history of Birmingham that covered the years 1865 to 1938. His work, however, acquired a curiously elegiac quality. It was commissioned by the last members of the great bourgeois dynasties who had once run Birmingham, but at the very moment when the vestiges of their power were ebbing away. It seemed that the days of Birmingham's political importance had not been sustained after the death of Joseph Chamberlain and that its social distinctiveness had not been sustained after the arrival of the large factories that came with the twentieth century. Indeed, by the time the final volume of the official history of Birmingham was published, two decades after Briggs's work, some scholars assumed that, if Birmingham was significant at all, then it served merely as an English 'middle-town' providing sociologists and political scientists with an object of study that was statistically representative, rather than providing historians with an object of study that might be interesting.[9]

It is odd that historians should so often regard Birmingham as becoming less significant at the moment when it became England's second city (1911) and at the beginning of a period when it was to see an increase in its population and in its economic importance. In part, Birmingham's very success served to remove it from view. Inter-war writers set out to 'discover' provincial England. The conservatives among them were often seeking the deep, rural roots that they believed to underlie their country. It was a vision most famously expressed in a speech that Stanley Baldwin made in 1924, during a brief period when he was not serving in, or leading, a Conservative government:

> The sounds of England, the tinkle of hammer on anvil in the country smithy, the corncrake on a dewy morning, the sound of the scythe against the whetstone and the sight of a plough team coming over the brow of a hill, the sight that has been seen in England since England was a land and that may be seen in England long after the Empire has perished and every

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works in England has ceased to function, for centuries the one eternal sight of England.

Similar images were found in H.V. Morton's bestselling *In Search of England* (1927), which finishes with the author telling a country parson in Warwickshire 'You have England' but does not even mention the nearest big city. In fact, both Baldwin and Morton were closely associated with Birmingham – the former was a Midlands industrialist partly educated at Mason College (the institution that would later become Birmingham University) who had close political and business ties to two Birmingham families – the Chamberlains and the Kenricks. As for Morton, he had grown up in Birmingham and written his first articles for the Birmingham newspaper that his father edited.[10] However, the urbanization of Britain fostered a nostalgia for rural life – Tolkien's first evocation of 'Middle-earth' was published in 1937 and owed much to his upbringing in Sarehole, then an independent village but absorbed into Birmingham in 1911. In practical terms, the middle class who discovered rural England in the inter-war years largely did so because of the cheap Austin Seven cars that rolled off the production line at Longbridge in Birmingham.

Commentators on the left were not as culturally removed from Morton and Baldwin as they might have liked to think. George Orwell and J.B. Priestley were both fascinated by the countryside: the latter wrote that the Cotswolds was the 'most English' part of the country. Both men, however, were also interested in the poverty of the North in the 1930s. Birmingham, which had relatively low unemployment, did not fit into their vision. Indeed, as far as Priestley was concerned, the city had 'the wrong kind of vulgarity', by which he seemed to mean that its 'miles of ugliness [and] squalor' lacked the romance of real slum streets.[11]

Birmingham dropped out of the conventional picture of Britain in a literal way. Bill Brandt's photographs of working-class life in the 1930s and 40s are so ubiquitous that they probably influence even those who have never heard his name. They feature on the front cover of the Penguin edition of Orwell's *The Road to Wigan Pier* and on those of innumerable history books. Brandt's famous photographs were of London and the North – as though the working class were always either cockneys or natives of Yorkshire. During the Second World War, though, Brandt worked for a time for the Bournville Village Trust, which had

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been established by the Cadbury family, taking photographs of Birmingham domestic life. Some of them were used for a book published by the Trust, but most were simply forgotten until a sharp-eyed researcher dug them out of the archives in 1993.[12] Perhaps the notion that the Birmingham working class might be a matter of interest never crossed any publisher's mind; perhaps Brandt himself felt that there was something awkward or incongruous about the subject.

The study of British cities was fashionable for a time from the early 1950s until the mid 1970s (Asa Briggs was himself an important influence on this fashion). But urban history has changed in revealing ways. It began life as a pushy, parvenu sub-discipline – largely based, as far as its British practitioners were concerned, in Leicester. Now, it sometimes seems that academic historians of the city have risen so far from these humble origins that they mingle with a more established and patrician variety of urban specialist – John Julius Norwich or Jan Morris. There is less talk of sewers and statistics, and the cities that attract most attention are those – London, Salonika, Venice, Constantinople – that are ancient and/or beautiful. There have been at least a dozen histories of Paris, alone, in the last twenty years.

Two, partly related, historiographical shifts began in the late 1960s and 70s that served to occlude British provincial cities in general and Birmingham in particular. First, historians turned their attention towards the twentieth century. Second, they were less interested in industrialization and the organized working class. Increasingly, they focused on marginality, crime, 'deviant cultures' and sexuality. Often, these interests brought them back to London, where society seemed most variegated and subject to rapid change. Indeed, anyone who based their knowledge of male homosexuality on publications with titles such as *Capital Affairs*[13] or *Queer London*[14] might suppose that anything but the most conventional form of sexual activity was unknown outside Zone One of the London Transport network. They might also be surprised to hear that the authors of these works spent a significant part of their careers at the University of Birmingham.

Curiously, the shifting academic culture of the period was particularly associated with the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) at the University of Birmingham – so much so that anyone carrying out an internet search about class or race in Birmingham is as likely to come across studies of how class and race have been perceived

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through the prism of theories developed in the CCCS as they are to come across work on how class and race were experienced at the Dunlop factory or in the streets of Alum Rock. Sometimes, though, it looked as if the only subject that did not interest the CCCS was the society of the city in which it was based. When Kieran Connell, a historian from, and of, Birmingham, interviewed veterans of the CCCS, he asked them what role the city had played in their thinking. Some gave interesting answers but some appear never to have considered the matter.

Why then do I think it worth writing the history of a city that so many of my most distinguished colleagues find uninteresting? Partly the answer to this question is simply that the history of Britain is so extraordinarily focused around London that seeing it from another perspective is worthwhile. And partly it lies in a desire to explore the identity that a city might have. Writing an introduction to a monograph on the sociology of Auxerre in 1950, the historian Lucien Febvre remarked that, though the population of the city had been transformed by industrialization and migration, it seemed, like one of the regiments whose soldiers were slaughtered and replaced during the First World War, to preserve a certain continuous identity.[15] I feel the same way about Birmingham. Though the powerful personalities who attract most attention are concentrated in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, I feel that the city itself has a kind of personality which can be discerned at different times – though sometimes, rather like Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*, it assumes very different guises in its successive incarnations.

Partly in search of continuities, I have written a history that goes back to the earliest times, but there is obviously a sleight of hand in this since Birmingham has grown so much in recent years that the number of people who have lived in the city since 1900 must be greater than the number who lived there in the whole of history before 1900. My book, therefore, focuses on relatively recent times and especially on the twentieth century. Indeed, a key argument of this book is that the history of Birmingham in the twentieth century should not be treated as merely the postscript to a Victorian golden age. Birmingham, more than anywhere in Britain, perhaps more than anywhere in Europe, illustrated the social transformation that went with mass production from the early twentieth century until the mid 1970s. It also exemplifies in particularly stark form the painful transition that came when there was no work to be had in a city that had been founded on work.

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Birmingham forged modern Britain in a literal sense. It was a great centre of metalworking, engineering and, for most of the twentieth century, motor manufacture. More generally, Birmingham was at the centre of many of the greatest dramas of modern British history. Moving to Birmingham – first from surrounding counties, then from other parts of the United Kingdom, especially South Wales, and finally from overseas – changed hundreds of thousands of lives. One consequence of this was that, especially during the 1960s, Birmingham was recognized across the world as a cauldron of racial hostility. Questions about labour relations (why unions were weak in the 1930s and why strikes, often not led by unions, were so common in the 1970s) or politics (why sections of the working class have so often voted Conservative) can be answered partly with reference to Birmingham. As for military matters, there never was a real 'battle of Birmingham', but the Battle of Britain in 1940 was won as much in the Spitfire factory at Castle Bromwich as it was on the aerodromes of the Home Counties.

I will finish with a personal note. The first words that I learned to write, after my own name, were 'Middle Park Road, Selly Oak, Birmingham, B29 4BJ'. I grew up in this street and finished writing this book at my parents' house there in the summer of 2021. This does not mean that I have some special understanding of the city in which I spent the first eighteen years of my life. My parents, like so many Birmingham residents, were migrants who came to the city when my father got a chair at the university shortly before my birth. Like many of their generation, they navigated the strange world of the middle class with the help of books – my father taught himself to write with the help of *Fowler's Modern English Usage* and my mother's dinner parties owed much to Elizabeth David. There were times when my sister and I might just as well have been growing up in London, or even – since our house had a large garden and the grand family that sold it to us still referred to the most distant part of this as 'the paddock' – in the countryside. I only once came across a reference to my own street in my researches for this book. Listening to an interview with Albert Bennett, a retired car worker and trade unionist, I heard how he had sprinted up Middle Park Road in the 1920s, on one of the occasions when Herbert Austin had kept the Longbridge factory open late to try to prevent his workers from voting in a municipal election.[16] The detail reminded me of how little I knew about one of the largest factories in Birmingham – even though, when I

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look back on it, I realize that I must have gone to primary school with children whose fathers worked there. I make no claim to being an insider who is uniquely equipped to explain Birmingham to the world. Rather I regard myself – as I suspect many people who live, or have lived, in Birmingham might – as a curious stranger trying to make sense of this extraordinary place.

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City Limits: A Note on Geography

French scholars, especially those who wrote during their country's period of relative social stasis from 1870 to 1940, make much of natural features. André Siegfried wrote that the politics of the west of the country could be explained in terms of a difference between areas of granite and areas of limestone. It would be hard to do this with Birmingham. Anyone looking at Spaghetti Junction or the Rotunda, or for that matter Corporation Street, would understand that this is a place where people make the landscape rather than vice versa. Roy Fisher, born in 1930, was the poet of post-war Birmingham and his poems are about a universe 'centred . . . just beyond the garden path of Seventy-Four Kentish Road Handsworth'. He writes of buildings and roads and buses. His references to the natural landscape are mocking. The title of his most famous work – 'Birmingham River' – is a joke because the rivers in Birmingham have long been culverted.

Among the many artificial things in Birmingham are the city limits. One rarely knows when one enters or leaves Birmingham. Approaching the city from Coventry in 1933, J.B. Priestley came across a Birmingham Corporation sign saying 'This is Birmingham' in the middle of what seemed to be 'russet tranquillity'. Passing through Edgbaston or Bournville, one can feel as though one is in the countryside while still in Birmingham. The expansion of Birmingham in the twentieth century blurred the distinction between countryside and city. In the early 1950s, 9 per cent of Birmingham's area was covered by working farms and 40 per cent of these lay in the relatively built-up areas of the town: there were two working farms in Handsworth as late as the 1930s. There could be odd juxtapositions. Purely residential areas, especially in the prosperous suburbs of South Birmingham, could feel like villages. On the other hand, working farms sometimes looked like depressing urban wasteland. Their soil had often been damaged by industrial pollution, and farmers were discouraged from investment in their land and buildings by the fact that their tenure was insecure – the

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corporation owned the freehold for many farms and usually had plans to build on them.[1]

Birmingham has expanded over the centuries. At first, it was one 'manor' among eighteen on the site of what is now the city. Then it was a parish – taking in most of what is now the centre of the city. Then it became a parliamentary borough taking in other parishes, notably that of Edgbaston. As Birmingham came to be defined as a 'city' in 1889, it continued to annex new areas. The last major acquisition – Sutton Coldfield – happened in 1974. For most of the post-war period a 'green belt', at first only informally recognized, constrained the city's further expansion, but even this was sometimes encroached on.

Birmingham is partly bounded by farming country. To its north-west is an area that has been industrialized for as long as Birmingham itself. A shallow, and thus easily mined, seam of coal underlay the prosperity of an area around Dudley and was exploited extensively from the eighteenth century. Iron manufacture also developed, partly as a result of accessible coal. The area centred on Dudley, and including places such as Rowley Regis, Halesowen, Smethwick and Brierley Hill, came, from the 1840s, to be known as the 'Black Country'. This area was sometimes contrasted with Birmingham. It had a more homogeneous economy and one that in the inter-war period seemed less prosperous than that of Birmingham. However, parts of the Black Country blend into Birmingham without any obvious break.

I have adopted a common-sense definition of the town. I have excluded places – such as Coventry or Wolverhampton – with a clear civic identity of their own. And I have included places, – such as Smethwick and Solihull – that adjoin Birmingham and intertwine with its history, even though they have never been, formally speaking, part of it. Doing otherwise would generate peculiar results with regard to some of Birmingham's most famous inhabitants. It would mean that Samuel Boulton was part of the city's history when he first established his works on a site in Snow Hill, but ceased to be so when he moved to Handsworth, outside the city limits then, but inside them now, or when he moved on to Smethwick, which is outside them even now. It would mean that the Kenrick family were part of Birmingham's history when they were at home in Edgbaston or in the Council House (three members of the family were mayors or lord mayors of Birmingham) but ceased to be part of its history when they commuted to their factory in West Bromwich.

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I should, however, admit that a 'common-sense' definition is not always a good guide to how things are commonly sensed. The expansion of Birmingham and the spectacular changes that its fabric has undergone mean that even those who have lived there all their lives sometimes have trouble orientating themselves. Henry Green left Oxford and went to work at his father's factory – it made beer-bottling machines – in Yardley in 1926. He found that his workmates would often argue about the location of 'a certain Stoney Lane that, soon after the war [i.e. the war of 1914–18], had been obliterated in a clearance scheme in the district'.[2]

Birmingham's transport network makes it particularly hard to get a sense of the city as a whole. William Hutton published the first history of Birmingham in 1781 and began it with a description of a walk around the town – he regarded carriages as a symbol of aristocratic frippery. In 1807, the street commissioners, who provided much of Birmingham's municipal government at the time, began to 'perambulate' the boundaries of the towns that they were to administer.[3] Now, however, Birmingham has become one of the least walkable cities in Britain – not just because it is large but because it is cut up by busy roads that divide its different quarters. A few years ago, a sociologist interviewed young people from the Alum Rock Road. One of them, Ashfaq, recalled having walked five or six miles to the west to the Bristol Road. It felt like alien territory and 'when we got back to Alum Rock and saw the Saltley Viaduct bridge we started praying and thinking "Thank God, we're back home." '[4] A little later another sociologist, studying young Muslim men in Birmingham, conducted 'walked interviews with his subjects'. He found that walking triggered interesting conversations as men saw places that had been important to them when growing up or met people they knew. 'This was this road for many years . . . I used to go every day . . . So it's a case of these roads (being) special to me. Every road I look at I've seen them develop. I've seen them change. It's part of my personal history.'[5] But they walked only in a narrow area. A man who had moved to Kingstanding, a mainly white council estate, chose to come into the city centre for his interview. Different parts of Birmingham can feel sharply divided from each other. Those studying children at a primary school in Small Heath in the 1970s concluded that they were more familiar with 'David Attenborough's Borneo', which they had seen on television, than with neighbouring districts.[6]

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If Birmingham people have any sense of their city as a whole, it often derives from buses – hence the special part that the No 11 (outer circle) route plays in the public imagination. John Taylor, the bass player from Duran Duran, regarded himself as a 'Birmingham flâneur' during his youth in the 1970s, but he saw the city through the windows of a Midland Red bus:

> Past the Maypole and Bates' Toy Corner, through Kings Heath with its massive Sainsbury's supermarket where I now worked a weekend job, past Neville Chamberlain's old residence in Moseley [he is actually referring to Joseph Chamberlain's residence, which the family gave up during the First World War] and the Edgbaston Cricket Club and past the ABC cinema (now a McDonald's), peeling off at the Albany Hotel, taking a right at the Crown pub and past the Jacey cinema, where Mum and I used to watch cartoons and shorts, but by then showed twenty-four-hour porn. Then, in a moment, out of the daylight and into the depths of the bus depot. [7]

Roads sometimes tie in with more complicated psychological frontiers in Birmingham that only partly relate to formally defined areas. Birmingham University organized a conference in 2014 revolving around photographs of Varna Road, 'the wickedest street in Britain', that had been known for prostitution before it was demolished to make way for the Belgrave Middleway in the 1970s. Varna Road is usually described as being part of Balsall Heath, a famously rough neighbourhood, but a member of the audience at the conference said that he had always considered the road to be part of Edgbaston, the eminently respectable suburb in which the university is located. Edgbaston is one of the most clearly defined parts of Birmingham because, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, it was largely controlled by a single aristocratic family: the Calthorpes. Even Edgbaston, however, is blurred around the edges. Eric Dodds came to Birmingham in the 1920s and lived first in George Street 'between opulent Edgbaston and the adjacent slumland'.[8] The architectural historian Nikolaus Pevsner first lived in Birmingham in the 1930s and recalled later that Duchess Road, where he lodged, was in Edgbaston but 'on the wrong side of the Hagley Road'.[9]

On the edges of Edgbaston runs the Bournbrook. This tiny stream is now mainly underground and invisible but it has marked frontiers for centuries. Once it was the border between Worcestershire

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and Warwickshire and, from at least 1291 until the establishment of a cathedral in Birmingham in 1905, between the dioceses of Worcester and Lichfield. There may even have been a time when it divided the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms of Hwicce and Mercia.[10] More recently, it has come to mark the boundary of Edgbaston and Selly Oak: an important frontier because the industry that the Calthorpe family excluded from Edgbaston concentrated on the edge of Selly Oak, so that the leafy campus of Birmingham University was once bordered by factories. The factories are gone now but somehow the division persists. The Bournbrook Hotel was once a rough pub frequented by bikers – a brief attempt at gentrification that entailed renaming it 'The Old Varsity Tavern' seems to have failed.

Sometimes Birmingham residents imbued natural features that might seem almost unnoticeably small to an outsider with a significance that derives from social history as much as from physical geography. Longbridge in Birmingham and what was until recently rural Worcestershire are divided by a small hill. It is not much of an obstacle, and in the 1930s a Birmingham student could still cycle past Longbridge to pick apples in a Worcestershire orchard. However, for trade unionists trying to organize the car plant at Longbridge, the workers who commuted in from Worcestershire came from a different world, in which the notion of social class counted for less. The trade unionists talked with exasperation of 'brow people' – meaning those who lived over the brow of the hill.[11]

Even the recent landscape of Birmingham – that which derives from buildings rather than hills or streams – can be interpreted in unexpected ways. The Sentinels, the two high-rise buildings that loom over the inner ring road, were intended as a symbol of pride in the new modernistic city that was built after the Second World War. However, they soon acquired a significant population of gay men – who valued them for their proximity to the city centre – and became known in the more louche Birmingham clubs as the Fairy Towers. Things turned darker during the AIDS epidemic of the 1980s – when they were sometimes called 'the pearly gates'.

I should perhaps finish by saying that Birmingham cannot be defined with exclusive reference to its own immediate area; the city has colonized other places. Birmingham's water comes from reservoirs in Wales and these are in an odd kind of way outposts of the city. There were

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once Birmingham Corporation signs around the dams, and the buildings associated with them were constructed in what locals referred to as 'Birmingham baroque' – though they were built of Welsh stone rather than red brick. Birmingham policemen were sent to guard the dams at the outbreak of the First World War. In the 1950s and 60s, the council paid for houses to be constructed for Birmingham residents, some of whom then commuted back to work in Birmingham, in satellite towns that included Daventry, which is sixty-eight miles away.

Most importantly, Birmingham has always been a migrant city. Those people who are most likely to be presented as quintessentially local are usually, in fact, the children or grandchildren of someone from somewhere else. The family of Enoch Powell, born in 1912, were from the Black Country a generation previously and from Wales a generation before that. In his father's factory in the late 1920s, Henry Green was struck by the accent and idioms of the workers. He thought such vivid turns of phrase as 'eyes started out of his head like a little dog's testicles' were characteristic of Birmingham working-class speech.[12] Perhaps some men did indeed speak a local patois but the whole factory and a large part of its workforce had moved from London in the comparatively recent past. After 1945, migration to Birmingham came from ever more distant lands, and a history of the city needs to take account of ways in which the partition of the Punjab or the construction of the Mangla Dam in Pakistan displaced people who would end up in Birmingham. It also needs to allow for the way in which remembered, and misremembered, pasts structured how people related to the city in which they lived – even if their links to those pasts amounted to nothing more than a picture of St Kitts on their grandmothers' tea towels.[13]

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Modern Birmingham, showing the city and district boundaries

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Modern Birmingham, showing the city and ward boundaries

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Birmingham, 1838–1931, showing the borough and city boundaries and areas added between 1891 and 1931

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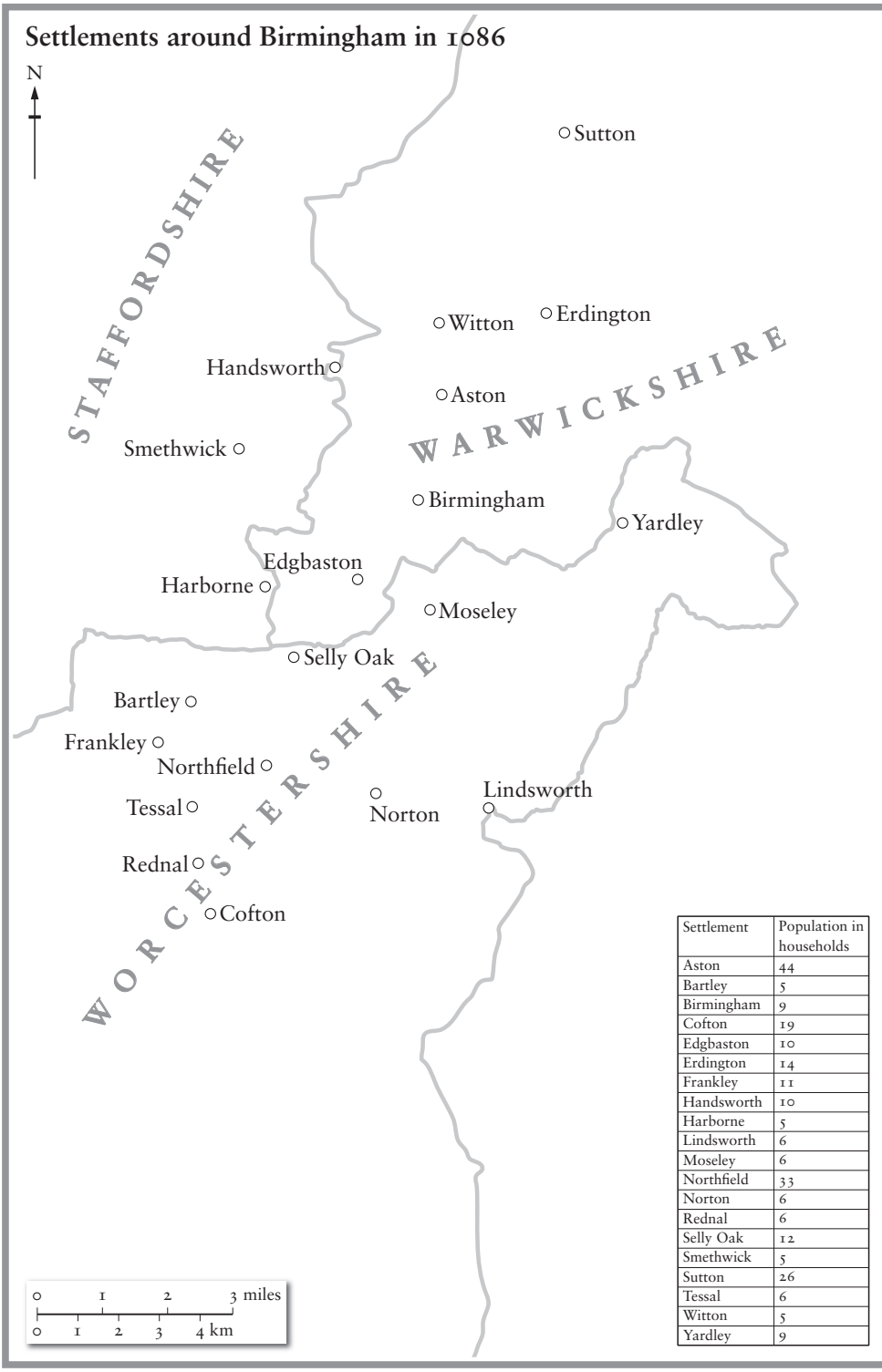
Settlements around Birmingham in 1086



Settlement	Population in households
Aston	44
Bartley	5
Birmingham	9
Cofton	19
Edgbaston	10
Erdington	14
Frankley	11
Handsworth	10
Harborne	5
Lindsworth	6
Moseley	6
Northfield	33
Norton	6
Rednal	6
Selly Oak	12
Smethwick	5
Sutton	26
Tessal	6
Witton	5
Yardley	9

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Birmingham's foundation myth. The name Birmingham seems, originally, to have meant 'the land of Beorma'. Some date the town's origins from the arrival of Anglo-Saxons led by a man of this name in the seventh century. In 2002, the Beorma Arch, designed by Stephen Field, was built in Gooch Street, near the river Rea. The inscription under it reads 'Near this river crossing an Anglian tribe led by Beorma founded Birmingham'.

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1

Minute Beginnings

Towns as well as everything in nature, have exceedingly minute beginnings.

William Hutton, *History of Birmingham*, 1781

Why does Birmingham exist? It is not explained by any natural feature. It has no navigable river and no hill that would make defence easy. There are no valuable natural resources there. Planners in the 1960s, concerned to move industry to the 'development areas' of the North, were sometimes perplexed as to why Birmingham had been settled in the first place.

There was a time quite recently when Birmingham schoolteachers told their pupils that in the seventh century Beorma led 'a small group of axe-wielding Anglo-Saxons' who cleared a space in woodland near the river Rea and established the settlement that became Birmingham. It is curious that some in Birmingham have made so much of the city's Anglo-Saxon roots at a time when much of its population is not of Anglo-Saxon descent and when its economy depends so heavily on investment from abroad. In 2002, a Beorma arch was constructed in Deritend by the river Rea – in reality little more than a stream. The inscription under it reads: 'Near this river crossing an Anglian tribe led by Beorma founded Birmingham.' There are, or were, plans for a 'Beorma quarter' to be constructed around a high-rise office block devised by a Kuwaiti company.

In fact there is not much evidence that Birmingham's existence can be traced back to a single event and certainly not one that involved an Anglo-Saxon tribe. One historian counted only seven written references to the Birmingham area (and none to a place called 'Birmingham') in the whole

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Anglo-Saxon period.[1] Indeed, historians who study the Midlands before 1086 often depend on surviving objects, or on conclusions that they draw from the landscape, rather than documents. Birmingham's Roman past was disinterred only in the twentieth century – because new construction, especially around the medical school, went with an increasingly sophisticated approach to archaeological finds. But Birmingham, unlike say Chester or London, never felt like a place with a Roman past. William Hutton, writing the first history of Birmingham in the eighteenth century, assumed that the Roman fort at Metchley, which was partly visible in his day, had been built by the Danes – those 'pilfering vermin'.

The first written record of Birmingham's existence comes with the Domesday Book of 1086. The entry read:

> From William, Richard holds four hides in Birmingham. There is land for six ploughs, in the demesne, one. There are five villagers and four smallholders with two ploughs. The woodland is half a league long and two furlongs wide. The value was and is twenty shillings. Wulfwin held it freely in the time of King Edward.

Richard was a sub-tenant for William Fitz Ansculf, who held Dudley castle. William was a Norman, though from a family that had settled in England before the conquest, from which they greatly benefited. A 'hide' was a unit of measurement (usually around 124 acres) considered sufficient to support a household – though in practice most ordinary people did with much less. The term 'demesne' referred to the land directly controlled by Richard, rather than by his tenants. Wulfwin had been the independent lord of Birmingham before the conquest – though some sources suggested that Richard was himself an Anglo-Saxon.

The manor called 'Birmingham' was only one, and not the most important, of the manors in the area of what is now Birmingham. There were six in Warwickshire, nine in Worcestershire, one in Staffordshire, one that stood on the boundary between Warwickshire and Staffordshire one that stood on that between Worcestershire and Warwickshire. One of the Warwickshire manors, Aston, covered a sprawling area that included several villages. The largest compact settlement was Northfield, in Worcestershire, a few miles south of what is now Birmingham city centre, which had thirty-three residents. Its value was several times that of Birmingham.

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The first nobleman who is known for sure to have borne the name of Birmingham is William in the twelfth century and it is unclear whether he was related to the family that had occupied the manor at the time of the Domesday Book. His son, Peter, obtained a charter to establish a market at Birmingham in 1166 and the degree of care with which this market was laid out suggests that it may have been a deliberate creation rather than simply a recognition of a long-established fact.

The Birmingham family had a tumultuous history which often involved conflict with their feudal overlords at Dudley. They fought for Henry II when Dudley rebelled against the king in 1173–4, but against the king when Dudley stayed loyal to him during the rebellion of Simon de Montfort – William de Birmingham was killed in the Battle of Evesham of 1265.[2] The Birminghams were, though, never particularly important and in any case never wholly attached to the village that bore their name – the part of the family that migrated to Ireland was probably more significant.[3] The last male member of the family, Edward, was born in 1497, was imprisoned in the Tower of London from 1533 to 1537, apparently the result of another quarrel with the Dudley family, and died shortly after this.

The death of Edward de Birmingham might be seen, at least in retrospect, as marking a kind of social revolution. His second wife, Elizabeth, was the daughter of a wealthy Worcestershire lawyer and was described by her relations at court as a 'poor gentlewoman' who was 'like to go a begging'. She may, though, have been less vulnerable than her defenders suggested. She survived her husband by over twenty years and contrived to have the pension the king had granted her husband doubled to £40 per year. She also married two more times and the second of these marriages was to a prosperous miller, Thomas Askrigge.

Elizabeth's second marriage illustrated a broader change. Noble families who could trace their lineage back to the Norman Conquest were less important to the life of Birmingham. By the late eighteenth century, William Hutton, a keen believer in the virtues of social mobility, could claim that: 'The families of those ancient heroes, of Saxon and Norman race, are, chiefly by the mutations of time, and of state, either become extinct, or . . . reduced to the lowest verge of fortune.'[4] They were being replaced by 'yeomen' – the Rastells, the Veseys, the Smalbrokes (or Smalbrooks) and the Colmores – who had risen through their own enterprise or good fortune.

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Charitable foundations preserve some traces of these families. In 1526, William Lench, a cattle grazier who had no children, left his money to help the poor (the charity that bears his name still administers alms houses in Birmingham) and to repair roads. Wealthy men also endowed guilds. The assault on religious foundations that began under Henry VIII and took its most severe form under Edward VI spared Lench's charity, which had aims that went beyond religion. The Guild of the Holy Cross was dissolved along with the Guild of St John in Deritend. However, Richard Smalbroke managed to persuade the authorities that the Guild of the Holy Cross should be transformed into an educational foundation – though curiously it was the Guild of St John that had until that point supported a school. The result of these manoeuvres was the establishment of King Edward VI's grammar school in 1552. Its charter declared that it was to be governed by 'twentie honest and discrete men inhabitants of the town and parish of Birmingham or the manor of Brymychan to the same town adjoining'. The governors of King Edward's School were a self-appointing group who chose the successors for members who died or left the area. They were an oligarchy who continued to exercise power, and arouse resentment, into the nineteenth century. They seem, however, to have been drawn from tradesmen rather than nobles or from those who were recognized at the time as gentlemen. The first twenty included William Ascrigg (presumably a descendant of the miller who had married the widow of Edward de Birmingham). They also included Richard Smalbroke and two members of the Colmore family.

In spite of the injunction that they should be honest and discreet the governors were soon divided among themselves. One source of friction was the bitter mutual hostility of the Smalbroke and Colmore families – a hostility that seems to have been exacerbated, rather than appeased, by inter-marriage. The conflict was waged on every front and with every possible weapon. It involved not only expensive libel suits, but also an apparent attempt to murder Thomas Smalbroke in 1604 and the subsequent siege of the Smalbroke family home by the Colmores. Only the intervention of Sir Thomas Holte, owner of Aston Hall and one of the few individuals in the area whose power exceeded that of the Colmores, brought this violent episode to a close.[5]

Three broader points can be drawn from the study of the notable families who emerged in sixteenth-century Birmingham. First, they were

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growing rich. In 1566, William Colmore left £300 to each of his five children.[6] The family eventually came to own the Newhall estate on which much of modern central Birmingham is built. Even those more modest families who were still tied to particular trades could have substantial fortunes. The wealthiest of the sixteen tanners for whom an inventory of possessions at his death exists left goods with a value of around £235.

Secondly, their wealth derived from both agriculture and trade. Often, they made money from milling or weaving that involved the processing of agricultural goods. Occasionally they practised more than one trade. Thus Thomas Rastell was, like other members of his family, described as a draper but his belongings at his death in 1591 included sixty-seven cheeses, a balance and lead weights and six loads of hay.[7] Henry Greisbroke, who died in 1557, was a butcher but his possessions included three spinning wheels.[8] Men who themselves had more than one source of income sometimes bequeathed different kinds of resources to different sons. When Richard Smalbroke died in 1575, his will endowed his younger son Thomas with the more obviously mercantile part of his property – leases, land, shops, building timber, half a ton of iron and weights and scales – while his older son, Richard, inherited 'things belonging to husbandry'.[9]

Thirdly, despite all the mutual accusations of criminal behaviour, the families aspired to gentility. Sometimes the term 'gentlemen' was applied to men who still lived in the town and still practised a trade. Becoming a gentleman sometimes involved acquiring property in the country – which often meant simply that urban merchants returned on a larger scale to the agricultural lives their families had lived just a generation or so previously.

Sometimes 'gentility' meant education, which led to the Church or the law. At least fifty Birmingham men who passed through King Edward's School between 1566 and 1692 subsequently went to the universities of Oxford or Cambridge, and most of these were then ordained or called to the Bar. Some came from families that had already escaped from mercantile origins. At least eight had fathers in holy orders, four had fathers with titles (three baronets and a baron) and a number of fathers were described as 'gentleman'. However, there were also five Colmores on the list (as well as two members of the Porter family who were related to them) and three Smalbrokes (as well as four members of

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families related to them). Many of the names on the list were the sons of ironmongers or mercers or, in two cases, bakers. One was the son of an innkeeper.[10] Thomas Rastell, who was admitted to Christ Church Oxford in 1644, was only a generation or two away from his namesake the draper and, from Dorothy Rastell, who had been fined in 1571 for selling wine at an excessive price, having already been fined a little earlier for committing the same offence with regard to fish.[11]

John Vesey (probably born in the mid fifteenth century) went to Oxford, became an associate of Cardinal Wolsey and was eventually appointed Bishop of Exeter. He established Bishop Vesey's grammar school in Sutton Coldfield. Sir Richard Shelton, whose father, John, had been a mercer in Birmingham, was admitted to the Inner Temple and attracted the support of the king's favourite, the Duke of Buckingham. He became solicitor general, but his career ended in the mid 1630s – according to Clarendon he was 'old, illiterate and useless' – and was thus spared from direct involvement in the Civil War. Clement Colmore (1550–1619) was the son of William Colmore from Birmingham and, having studied at Oxford, became a judge at the ecclesiastical court in the diocese of Durham.[12] Richard Smalbroke (1672–1749) went from Oxford to become chaplain to the Archbishop of Canterbury and then Bishop of Lichfield.

THE ECONOMY OF EARLY MODERN BIRMINGHAM

By the early fourteenth century, the manor of Birmingham had become the most important of the settlements in the area that would eventually become the city of Birmingham. In 1327 it had seventy-five inhabitants whose goods were worth more than 10 shillings and it paid tax of £7 6d. Among neighbouring manors, only Edgbaston, Duddeston and Erdington paid more than £1. Edgbaston was the next most important with nineteen inhabitants whose property was valued at more than 10 shillings. Aston, which had been larger than Birmingham in 1066, was now known as 'Aston juxta Birmingham' and paid just under 15 shillings of tax. Villages in the West Midlands – such as Solihull and Stratford – were, however, not far behind Birmingham. All of these places were still overshadowed by the more established towns in the region. Worcester and

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Lichfield – administrative and ecclesiastical centres – were bigger than Birmingham, and Coventry, an industrial and commercial town, was six or seven times its size.

Industry, such as existed in Birmingham, sprang at first from agriculture and involved leather and wool, the latter being treated in a number of mills that drew water from the river Rea. As textiles declined, metal-working industries, with which Birmingham was to be so associated, rose – though the rise was probably less dramatic than casual visitors, their attention drawn by the sparks and noise of workshops, assumed. The prosperity of Birmingham at this stage did not derive from natural resources (though it benefited from the relative proximity of coal and iron ore in Staffordshire and charcoal from the Forest of Dean) nor from access to the sea. Mainly the town seems to have grown because of its relation to other places. It stood at a point where a number of roads, none of them very important in themselves, converged, and it provided a relatively easy place to cross the Rea by ford. This mattered because the Rea, though small, was often an obstacle to travel when it was in flood and because, at many points, it was surrounded by marshland that made it hard to approach. Cattle being driven east from south Wales crossed the Rea at Birmingham.

Birmingham was an entrepôt – a place where things were traded but also where finished goods were made from raw materials supplied elsewhere. Of course, simply being close to other places does not in itself explain economic success. Perhaps, curiously, it was the very absence of a single obvious advantage that made Birmingham what it was. It became a place where other regions traded the various commodities in which they specialized. It also became a town that gave a high added value to products – increasingly it made things that were light, easily transported and relatively valuable. In the eighteenth century, Hutton would write with disdain of the primitive rural hinterland in Staffordshire where production revolved around simpler goods – nails in particular – that depended on easy access to raw materials rather than skill and sophistication.

The population of Birmingham probably reached 1,500 in the middle of the sixteenth century, and there were around then forty baptisms per year – which rose to seventy per year by the first decade of the seventeenth century. But one should keep all this in perspective. At the end of the sixteenth century, Birmingham was still a large industrial

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village – less developed, as one of its twentieth-century historians was to point out, than the Suffolk town of Lavenham.[13]

RELIGION

Birmingham had no cathedral or abbey, or, until after the Reformation, any notable school. There is no evidence that the dissolution of religious foundations in Birmingham in the mid sixteenth century produced great suffering or evoked much protest. The town did have one unusual feature in that the congregation of St John's chapel at Deritend had enjoyed the right to select their own priest since its foundation in 1380. It is tempting to suggest that this made them sympathetic to reform of the Church in the sixteenth century. John Rogers, born in 1505, had worshipped at this church as a young man before being educated at Cambridge and ordained. He participated in Tyndale's English translation of the Bible, and in 1555 became the first Protestant to be burned during the Marian persecution. There is no evidence, however, that Rogers had acquired his Protestant inclinations in Birmingham – he had been radicalized during his time as chaplain to the Merchant Adventurers in Antwerp.

It is hard to discern a social pattern behind support for, or opposition to, the Reformation in Birmingham. Some country gentlemen in Warwickshire – such as the Throckmortons and the Catesbys – remained Catholic and, indeed, supported the Gunpowder Plot against James I in 1605. Meanwhile, the Earls of Warwick and Leicester were strongly Protestant. It is possible that the kind of families who were rising in Birmingham in the sixteenth century – those with links to trade, a propensity for making up their own minds and, increasingly, a taste for book learning – may have provided fertile ground for Protestantism, though it may be more likely that they simply found it prudent to align themselves with the religion of the state. Some prominent figures in Birmingham, including some with links to trade, opposed the Reformation. Bishop John Vesey was hostile to reform – though sufficiently discreet in the expression of his opinions to die in his bed. The Middlemore family, lords of the manor of Edgbaston, were staunch Catholics: Humphrey Middlemore, a Carthusian priest, was executed for treason in 1535 after refusing to recant his belief in papal supremacy.

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POLITICS

During the Civil Wars of the 1640s, Birmingham was considered to be on the side of Parliament. Clarendon later wrote that the town had 'as great fame for hearty, wilful affected disloyalty to the King as any place in England'. The town appears, though, to have been governed by a hard-headed realism rather than religious or political conviction. Some prominent families, such as the Smalbrokes, remained mainly interested in their businesses. Even the Colmores, those most involved on the parliamentary side, were careful to take no stand, especially after the execution of the king, that was likely to be held against them later. The exception that proved the rule was John Sanders of Harborne. He was a radical visionary who combined calls for peaceful restoration of the monarchy and reform of the Church with the suggestion that the nail-makers of Birmingham should cease work for a month as a means to extract money from their oppressive employers. Sanders was treated as mad by his own family and especially by that of his wife – who beat him, arranged to have him arrested and seized his property.[14]

Birmingham was not an important centre of the English Civil War. King Charles stayed at Aston Hall as a guest of Sir Thomas Holte, a Royalist, for a single night in October 1642. There was to be much inconclusive discussion of whether Kingstanding, later the site of Europe's largest council estate, had been so named after a spot on which Charles had stood to review his troops. Birmingham itself was directly affected by the Civil War only in April 1643, when supporters of Parliament improvised defences to try to prevent Prince Rupert's forces from passing through and thus provoked the Battle of Camp Hill and subsequent pillaging of the town by Rupert's men. Clarendon remarked that but for the death of Lord Denbigh, killed in fighting with the Royalists on this occasion, he would not have mentioned 'an action of so little moment as this of Birmingham'.

William Hutton, writing in the late eighteenth century, suggested that, for Britain as a whole, the accession of Henry VII in 1485 marked the divide 'between ancient and modern' – or between 'medieval and modern' as historians of a later generation would put it. Hutton added, however:

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> But the ancient and modern state of Birmingham, must divide at the restoration of Charles the Second. For though she had before held a considerable degree of eminence; yet at this period, the curious arts began to take root, and were cultivated by the hand of genius. Building leases, also, began to take effect, extension followed, and numbers of people crowded upon each other, as into a Paradise.

The Restoration of 1660 might simply be an arbitrary moment in political history that happens to coincide with a moment when Birmingham's economy and society began to change for reasons that were only indirectly related to politics. There were, however, some respects in which the Restoration, or, at least the period between the Restoration of 1660 and the accession of William and Mary in 1689, mattered. This was not so much because of what happened as because of what did not happen. Old structures in Birmingham had gone in the mid sixteenth century when the local branch of the Birmingham family had become extinct and the religious institutions had been dissolved. At the same time, families basing their wealth on trade had begun to assume new importance, but this new importance was not accompanied by the creation of bourgeois institutions (or at least not ones that would be recognized by the bourgeoisie of the nineteenth century). Indeed, the bourgeois liberals of the nineteenth century were offended by the institution that had best incarnated the power of the Birmingham elite of the sixteenth century – the governing board of King Edward's School.

The Restoration might have brought change in either direction. It might have produced a counter-revolution by which the Birmingham families would have been subordinated to the country gentry in the surrounding area while political and religious orthodoxy was restored. Certainly, the king's ministers urged Sir Charles Holte, the most prominent local notable, to supress Nonconformist ministers in the areas. Equally, the Restoration might have brought a more modern form of municipal government that went with incorporation – the Royal Borough of Sutton Coldfield (later to be a suburb of Birmingham) had its municipal charter confirmed by Charles in 1664, thus attaining a formal status that Birmingham would not match until the early nineteenth century. As it turned out, however, there was no dramatic change in Birmingham after the Civil War.

In the last years of his reign Charles II sought to extend monarchical

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power, a project that was continued by James II when he succeeded in 1685. Among other things, this entailed revising many municipal corporations. Perhaps partly because Birmingham did not have a corporation, the governing board of King Edward's School became a political battlefield. In 1684, the school was given a new charter and a new board of governors. The requirement that governors reside in Birmingham was abolished. This meant in effect that country gentlemen were given authority that had formerly belonged to townsmen. Lord Digby and Sir Charles Holte were the most important figures behind the move, but the old governors resisted it and continued to meet at the Red Lion Inn in Birmingham. In 1689, the attorney general brought an action against the old governors – arguing that they had been corrupt and inefficient. The action was stalled by the deposition of James II and, after the accession of William and Mary, some expensive litigation restored the old governors.

If the attempt to depose the old governors had been a reactionary policy, their restoration was not a revolutionary one. The important families of Birmingham had already begun to move away from radicalism even before the restoration of Charles II. This was reflected in another piece of litigation relating to King Edward's School. In 1650, Captain Robert Girdler, a sword cutler and parliamentarian from Birmingham, brought an action against the governors of the school – arguing that the headmaster and a number of governors (including two Smalbrokes and a Colmore) had failed to honour the legal obligation to swear allegiance to the Commonwealth. The recalcitrant governors then swore the required oath – though their initial reluctance suggested they were a group of men primarily concerned to avoid taking any stand that might later be held against them. William Colmore had been the most prominent parliamentarian from the town, but he argued that he had held no office after the execution of the king. His son, also called William, sat in Parliament from 1689 to 1695 – and he did so as a Tory.

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given on the 14th of July by the —— Revolution Society.

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A cartoon showing the dinner of July 1791 designed to celebrate the anniversary of the fall of the Bastille. It provoked the Church and King riots that effectively ended the Birmingham Enlightenment.

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2

Enlightenment Birmingham

I consider my settlement in Birmingham the happiest event in my life.[1]

Joseph Priestley

The town was large, and full of inhabitants, and those inhabitants full of industry. I had seen faces elsewhere tinctured with an idle gloom void of meaning, but here, with a pleasing alertness: Their appearance was strongly marked with the modes of civil life.[2]

William Hutton describing his first arrival in Birmingham in 1741

What has come to be called the Birmingham or Midlands Enlightenment brought together an unusually curious and energetic group of men (they were all men, though their wives and daughters were often shrewd and well-informed commentators on their activities). Joseph Priestley and William Hutton epitomized the atmosphere of optimism, uninhibited enquiry and material prosperity some associated with Birmingham in the eighteenth century. The former was a minister of religion, though mainly known to posterity as a scientist; the latter was a well-to-do bookseller, though mainly known to posterity as a writer, particularly as the author of the first history of his adopted city. Both men, however, came to have less happy memories of Birmingham than those implied by the quotations above because both their houses were burned down in the Church and King riots of 1791.

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DEMOGRAPHY

Priestley and Hutton were typical of Birmingham. Both were immigrants – having been born respectively near Batley in Yorkshire and in Derby. Hutton first came to Birmingham as a runaway apprentice in 1741 but then returned to settle in the city in 1750. Priestley came to Birmingham in 1780 to serve as the senior minister at the New Meeting House. Both men were partly drawn to the town by what they took to be its tolerant and open atmosphere. Hutton was, like Priestley, a Dissenter and believed that religious dissent was made easier by the fact that Birmingham was not an incorporated town and was thus free from the provisions of the 1665 Act that had forbidden Nonconformist ministers from living within five miles of a town from which they had been expelled.* Hutton and Priestley were also drawn by Birmingham's prosperity. Priestley's stipend of £100 per annum at the New Meeting House was relatively modest but was supplemented by the subsidies that local businessmen provided to his scientific ventures. The commercial opportunities of Birmingham made Hutton a wealthy man.

Birmingham grew rapidly in the eighteenth century as new arrivals came seeking employment – though most, unlike Hutton and Priestley, had not travelled far. The majority of those who arrived in the period up to 1757 came from the counties of Warwickshire, Worcestershire and Staffordshire – about a quarter of them from places that would become part of Birmingham by 1937.[3] In 1700, Birmingham's population probably stood at between 5,000 and 7,000 (Hutton with characteristic exuberance estimated it at 15,000); it reached over 23,000 by the middle of the century and then tripled again in the second half of the century.

Birmingham's growing population was contained in a relatively small area. At the time Hutton wrote his history of the town, which was first published in 1781, most of Birmingham's population still lived within a quarter of a mile of his shop. An act of Parliament in 1746 allowed the

* There is not much evidence that Birmingham Dissenters were treated very differently from their co-religionists in, say, Coventry, and the notion that Birmingham had been especially welcoming to Nonconformists only seems to have become widely accepted in the late nineteenth century – i.e. at the time when its municipal government was largely in the hands of Unitarians and Quakers.

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development of the Colmore estate and thus opened up fresh territory for building in the north of the town, as well as making the Colmore family even richer than it already was. For various reasons the other major owners of property around Birmingham were unable or unwilling to permit building on their land. In any case, the direction of Birmingham's travel was north, where reserves of coal and iron ore lay.

The town of Wolverhampton was expanding almost as fast as Birmingham and places such as West Bromwich moved quickly from being villages to being centres of industry. Some observers talked of the roads (and soon canals) leading from Birmingham to Staffordshire as being so built-up that they looked like a single town. The county and cathedral towns around Birmingham – Lichfield and Worcester – remained important as cultural and political centres but they expanded less fast, which was partly why they were seen as more genteel.

A French visitor was told in 1784 that six tenths of the houses in Birmingham had been built in the previous twenty years.[4] In 1700, there were 2,500 houses in Birmingham, spread over 28 streets; by 1731 there were 3,756 houses and 51 streets; in 1781, there were 9,556 houses and 133 streets and by 1791 there were 12,681 houses over 203 streets.[5] Most of the new houses were relatively cheap – having a rateable value that was too low to make them liable for the Poor Rate, which became a problem as time went on. Many of Birmingham's houses were owned by people of comparatively modest means who rented them out. In 1765 Henry Gough, a 'bricklayer' (presumably a builder rather than a labourer), had eight houses that were insured for a total of £390.[6]

ECONOMY

The Birmingham economy flourished partly through the production of light goods – ones that were comparatively cheap to transport and derived their value largely from skilled workmanship. Such goods were known as 'toys' though they were nothing to do with children's playthings. Most manufacturers specialized in working a single metal – steel or brass – and often produced a single item, such as buckles. A letter from a particularly ambitious industrialist, however, captures the range of products that were on offer in 1772:

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> Snuff Boxes, Instrument Cases, toothpick Cases – gilt, glass and steel Trinkets, Silver filigree Boxes, Needle Books etc etc – all manner of plated Goods, as Tea Kitchins, Tankards, Cups, Coffee potts, Cream Juggs, Candlesticks – sauce boats, Terrines etc etc – Bronz'd Tea Kitchins and Tea Kettles as well plated as Tin'd inside, Saucepans, Cheese Toasters etc etc etc.[7]

The Birmingham economy was changed by increasingly efficient means of transport. The speed and frequency of stagecoach travel increased. In 1731, there were weekly carriages to London, and the time taken to reach the capital was cut from two and a half days to fourteen hours between 1750 and 1782. A traveller could get to Paris in six days.[8] Speedier travel meant that information circulated more quickly and that Birmingham came to feel part of a wide world – connected to other provincial towns and to the continent as well as to the capital. Sometimes commercially significant events in Europe were known in Birmingham before they were known in London.

CANALS

Travel by water was slower than travel by road but it permitted the movement of heavy goods. Canals had a particular impact in Birmingham because it had no natural navigable rivers. In 1769 the first cargoes on the new canal, whose construction had been overseen by James Brindley, were unloaded in Birmingham. The canal linked Birmingham to Staffordshire and reached Addersley near Wolverhampton in 1772. The most dramatic effect of the canal was to lower the price of raw materials, particularly coal. The price of coal from Wednesbury dropped from 13 shillings per ton just before the opening of the canal to 7 shillings in 1772.

From the late eighteenth century onwards, Birmingham industries were often grouped around canals, and, since they followed the contours of the land, the railways that came in the nineteenth century were often built parallel to them. As well as bringing raw materials in, canals provided a means of getting finished goods out of the town. The latter became particularly important in 1772, when the Birmingham Canal linked up to the Staffordshire and Worcestershire Canal to provide access to the sea.

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