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Explorations in European urban history. Perspectives from Leicester

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1. Introduction

Historians, all species of historians, are expert at dissecting the past. Detective skills combined with forensic analysis in relation to textual and material sources are required to understand and interpret the dynamics of time. For the urban historian, preoccupied – or obsessed? – with long run changes in towns and cities, these skills allied with social science concepts and theories facilitate that grasp of the temporal. Issues of space and place, of meaning and motive, transcend the particularity of a place. These are the qualities that distinguish the urban historian from the antiquarian, the local historian, and other species of historians. The historical hunt is not just for the sake of the acquisition of details, or of knowledge for its own sake, but rather for a comprehension of the fundamental forces and experiences of urban life.²

Is it, therefore, any surprise that such preoccupations cross boundaries? That form and function within the city might differ with topography but also share commonalities? That trade and commerce, sociability and worship, birth and death, as well as age, social status, shelter, gender and poverty confront urban dwellers daily, wherever they reside? That the diverse geographies of Europe should spark a shared intellectual curiosity of such issues should be unsurprising.³

¹ I am grateful to Peter Clark, Bob Morris, Eric Grosso, Rosemary Sweet, and to the late David Reeder, all of whom over the years have shared their thoughts, insights and information about the nature of urban history. I am grateful, too, to Richard Harris for the opportunity to read his as yet unpublished work, and to the Editors for their comments.

² Cf. H. S. J. Jansen, *Wrestling with the angel. On problems of definition in urban historiography*, in: *Urban History* 23:3, 1996, p. 277-299; revised in H. Jansen, *The Construction of an urban past. Narrative and system in urban history*, Oxford 2001, p. 31-59; R. Rodger, *Theory, practice and European urban History*, in: R. Rodger (Ed.), *European urban history. Prospect and retrospect, Leicester 1993*, p. 1-18; R. Rodger/R. Sweet, *The changing nature of urban history*, in: *History in Focus* 13, 2008, 'The City', <http://www.history.ac.uk/ihr/Focus/City/articles/sweet.html> (01.11.2020).

³ Cf. A. Huyssen, *Present pasts. Urban palimpsests and the politics of memory*, Stanford 2003; N. Kenny/R. Madgin (Eds.), *Cities beyond borders. Comparative and transnational approaches to urban history*, Farnham 2015, p. 3-26; S. Ewen, *What is urban history?*, Cambridge 2016, p. 114-128.

Of course, the particularities of place are important. Knowing the city is first base. Urban biography provides the bedrock from which questions can be asked about processes and relationships which are systemic and thus provide critical issues for comparative research.⁴ The extent to which a place is typical is invariably a useful question to pose. The urban laboratory, which is the city, is also the locus of knowledge exchange and technological innovation within and between settlements and civilisations, and these forces play out in different ways according to prevailing local circumstances. Furthermore, the town or city itself has reflexive characteristics. The particular mix of social and political factors is responsive to a variety of forces; the city absorbs, amends and rejects these, and induces behavioural changes accordingly. The city itself has agency.

Key international perspectives on urban history emerged in the context of rebuilding and redeveloping European cities after 1945. Bomb damaged cities and unprecedented mass refugee movements under the Displaced Persons and inappropriately named European Voluntary Workers Programme were both part of a continental phenomenon which raised questions about the regenerative capacity of towns and cities. Continental European cities also had to adapt to new post-war political geographies under the extreme pressure of depleted resources.⁵

Centralised resource management also affected post-war British cities. Seismic political and social changes were underway, and most, if not all, had implications for towns and cities. Most conspicuously, the Town and Country Planning Act, 1945, amended in 1947, required local councils to undertake a survey of housing and related amenities and to formulate and implement plans within three years.⁶ It was a stocktaking exercise of urban assets and amenities on an unprecedented scale, and underpinned, amongst other things, housebuilding completions, which averaged 200,000 annually during the six-year period of the Labour government, 1945-51.⁷ Furthermore, the nationalisation of the means of production and distribution (iron, steel, coal, gas, electricity, and rail

⁴ Cf. D. Reeder, The industrial city in Britain. Urban biography in the modern style, in: *Urban History* 25:3, 1998, p. 368-378.

⁵ Cf. S. Goebel/D. Keene (Eds.), *Cities into battlefields. Metropolitan scenarios, experiences and commemorations of total war*, Farnham 2011; J. Winter/J.-L. Robert, *Capital cities at war. Paris, London, Berlin 1914-1919*, Cambridge 1997.

⁶ Cf. P. J. Larkham/K. Lilley, Plans, planners and city images. Place promotion and civic boosterism in British reconstruction planning, in: *Urban History* 30:2, 2003, p. 183-205. Table 1 identifies 87 reconstruction plans between 1941 and 1952. Generally, a historical introduction was required as part of the reconstruction assessments. The Town and Country Planning Ordinance, 1945, Cap. 84 came into force on 21st April, 1945.

⁷ The Conservative Party pledge in 1950 was to build 300,000 housing units annually.

transport) was complemented by ambitious plans in 1948 for a Welfare State – free medical care within a new National Health Service and universal social benefits. The giants of poverty – want, ignorance, disease, squalor and idleness – each had major implications for the cities of the future, whether under the umbrella of William Beveridge’s proposals in Britain (1942), or those proposed in the ravaged cities of continental Europe.

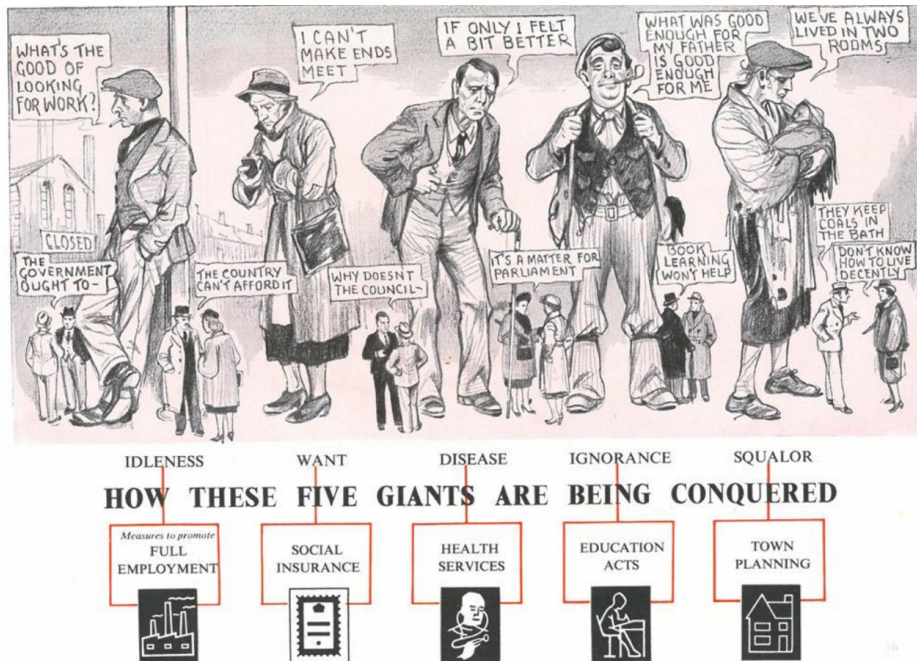


Fig. 1: The Five Giants of Poverty, 1943.

Keynesian macroeconomics had little to offer in terms of localities, so the “Five Giants” of poverty was conceived at a national scale rather than at the level of implementation – the city. Even though almost every policy development had a city-based dimension, urban studies was largely uncharted terrain as a field of study in the 1950s. There had been many traditional town biographies – the narrative, normally self-contained history of a specific place, sometimes developed as a by-product of the history of local administration, and arguably a retarding factor in understanding the development of the historical urban past.⁸

⁸ “Urban Biography” was the section of the Annual Bibliography in the Urban History Yearbook and Urban History which for many years had most entries.

Urbanisation – the processes by which existing populations were concentrated in particular places – also attracted some attention, often as a by-product of studies on industrialisation. However, the field of scholarship that came to be known as “urban history”, which systematically examines the historical relationships and interactions within and between different places in an effort to comprehend wider socio-economic, cultural and political forces, was largely neglected until the 1960s.⁹ What follows is an examination of this emergence of an area of study from the four stances: scholarship; friendship; partnership and trusteeship.

2. Scholarship

The social science basis of urban history developed partly as a by-product of university expansion in Britain. It was just a matter of simple arithmetic that the post-war baby-boomers would finish their secondary schooling in the early- and mid-1960s. The capacity to fulfil political commitments to extend higher education access to a greater number of students, including those who had missed the opportunity during the war, could not be met without systemic changes. Given the resistance of the existing “old” universities, specifically Oxford and Cambridge, to respond positively to this challenge, the alternative and more expensive option was to re-badge selected existing colleges and to build new universities.¹⁰ Leicester University College, already rebranded to full degree awarding university status in 1957, was one of many educational institutions to which additional staff were appointed.¹¹ This expansion, based on the Robbins’ Report (1963), concentrated almost inevitably on the humanities and emerging social science disciplines, since laboratory-based subjects – medicine, engineering and science – were capital intensive, and generally less suited to short term expansion.¹² Economic and social forces powered the institutional change, but political circumstances determined its shape and character. It was

⁹ Cf. G. W. Davies, *The rise of urban history in Britain 1960-78*, University of Leicester PhD thesis, 2014, p. 1-27; For the emerging focus on urban history and an elaboration of the early work of Asa Briggs and Jim Dyos in the 1950s and 1960s, cf. D. N. Cannadine, *Making the Fabric of History: Asa Briggs and Jim Dyos as Urban Historians*, CUH Annual Lecture 2016, https://www2.le.ac.uk/departments/urbanhistory/cuh_videos (7.11.20120).

¹⁰ Cf. O. Filippakou/T. Tapper, *Policymaking and the politics of change in higher education. The new 1960s universities in the UK, then and now*, in: *London Review of Education* 14:1, 2016, p. 11-22.

¹¹ The list of “new” universities included Sussex (1961); Keele (1962); East Anglia, York, Newcastle (all 1963); Lancaster, Strathclyde (1964); Kent, Essex, Warwick (all 1965); Loughborough, Aston, Brunel, Surrey, Bath, Bradford, City, Heriot-Watt (all 1966); Salford, Dundee, Stirling, (all 1967); Ulster (1968); Open (1960).

a transformation from “an elite university system into a system of mass tertiary education”.¹³

The University of Leicester was noted in the 1950s and 1960s for its interdisciplinary focus on Victorian Studies.¹⁴ As staff members at Leicester, Ilya Neustadt’s and Norbert Elias’ insistence on the importance of comparative and historical sociology was continued by Joe and Olive Banks (Sociology). Philip Collins (English) was the pre-eminent Dickens scholar, and Jack Simmons (History) acknowledged as the country’s “finest transport historian”.¹⁵ These were amongst the staff members whom Jim Dyos joined when he was appointed as an assistant lecturer in economic history in 1952. Following war service, he had a degree from London School of Economics, and an outstanding doctoral thesis, subsequently published as “Victorian Suburb. A Study of the Growth of Camberwell”.¹⁶ At just the moment when University College Leicester gained its charter as a full degree granting institution, this mix of 19th century scholars from different disciplines, later strengthened by Bill Brock (History of Science) and David Reeder (Education), provided a powerful intellectual background in which historical perspectives of cities were a common denominator.¹⁷ This cluster of illustrious scholars with urban related research interests provided a distinctive brand for the newly elevated University of Leicester, and beyond. It was perhaps no accident that the undergraduate curriculum at Leicester required first year social science students to follow five disciplines – economics, politics, sociology, geography and economic history. This was a tactic to avoid both premature specialisation on the part of students and disciplinary ghettos amongst the academic staff.

¹² Report of the Committee on Higher Education (Robbins Report), 1963, Cmnd. 2154. <http://www.educationengland.org.uk/documents/robbins/robbins1963.html> (01.11.2020). For an overview of the British university system cf. R. Anderson, The “Idea of a University” today, Policy Papers, 1 March 2010 on the Robbins Report and the Oxbridge model.

¹³ M. A. Trow, Reflections on the transition from elite to mass to universal access. Forms and phases of higher education in modern societies since WWII, University of California Berkeley. Institute of Governmental Studies, <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/96p3s213> (02.11.2020); W. Whyte, Redbrick. A social and architectural history of Britain’s civic universities, Oxford 2015. A further 78 institutions were accorded university status after 1992.

¹⁴ There were, of course, other specialisms for which Leicester was particularly known. These included Space Physics, Genetics and Museum Studies.

¹⁵ The Guardian, 13 Sept. 2000.

¹⁶ J. Dyos, Victorian suburb. A study of the growth of Camberwell, Leicester 1961.

¹⁷ David Reeder was a Research Fellow in Economic History at the University of Leicester in 1966–67 and appointed to a lectureship in 1973. Dyos Collection, University of Leicester, 1/19/2b.

The administrative and intellectual home for urban history within the university system in Britain was logically based in economic history departments throughout the country. The wide-ranging chronology, combined with a heavy dependence on empiricism and theoretically informed analysis was at odds with most existing departments of history, and so a close relationship was forged with the Economic History Society in terms of joint conferences and research funding initiatives.¹⁸



Fig. 2: University College, Leicester, Fielding Johnson Building (Administration), 1952.

H. J. Dyos' intellectual interest in the history of London, transportation and topography, and his willingness to integrate images and material objects into his teaching and lecturing, enriched an understanding of the experiential aspects of urban life.¹⁹ This eclecticism reached out to a new wave of social science scholarship. It was an approach that embraced and legitimated complex and interconnected modes of scholarly analysis in both historical and contempora-

¹⁸ At various dates, Jim Dyos, Peter Clark, Tony Sutcliffe, David Reeder, and Richard Rodger were all members of the Department of Economic History at the University of Leicester.

¹⁹ Cf. D. Reeder, H. J. Dyos. An appreciation, in: *Urban History Yearbook* 1979, p. 4-10, provides an illuminating insight into the mindset and historical approach of Jim Dyos, and his energetic promotion of urban history. A useful bibliography of Dyos' works is also provided.

ry urban studies. As Asa Briggs commented in his “Foreword” to Dyos’ edited collection, “The Study of Urban History” in 1968: “There is particular urgency behind urban studies ... because of the speed of the process of urban transformation – the obliteration of many signs of the past; the destruction of so much of the environment blighted or beautiful; the break in continuity both of feelings and of policies and of the symbols associated with them. There are particular assets ... in being an urban historian ... because of the strong sense of identity of particular places, the number of historical layers, and the variety of urban experience.”²⁰

“The Study of Urban History” was the publication that resulted from a formative international round table conference held in Leicester in 1966.²¹ Over 40 delegates considered themselves to have urban history interests. The published proceedings, which included transcriptions of the taped discussions, provide a sense of the energy of the occasion. Sidney Checkland’s thoughtful conclusion to the meeting still resonates, though in the language of the moment. In his attempt to synthesise the event, three urban history approaches were proposed by Checkland: The identification and analysis of long term perspectives of urban change and development; thematic elements of urban life studied on a comparative basis; and the nature and context of the urban experience over time. Checkland concluded: The urban historian’s “job is that of synthesis”.²² Dyos subsequently tried to assist future scholars by providing a definition of what urban history is not: “Urban history differs from local history to the extent that it is concerned with a more pervasive historical process, and from municipal history in being concerned with vastly more than certain types of local government; it differs from social history in its quite specific commitment to explaining the development of both the urban milieu and its uses, and from sociology in its dominant concern with explaining the urban past; ... differences with economic history, geography and other areas – business history, transport, town planning – in not being concerned with specific forms of activity.”²³

²⁰ A. Briggs, Foreword, in: H. J. Dyos (Ed.), *The study of urban history*, London 1966, p. vii.

²¹ Cf. Dyos Collection, University of Leicester, 1/1/3-24 contains correspondence concerning the Round Table itself, and of the participants wider interest in urbanism.

²² S. G. Checkland, Toward a definition of urban history, in: H. J. Dyos (Ed.), *The study of urban history*, p. 343-361. Cf. also S. G. Checkland, Urban history in the British idiom, in: *Urban History Review* 1, 1978, p. 57-77, and his later formulation of the branches of urban history in: An urban history horoscope, in: D. Fraser/A. Sutcliffe (Eds.), *The pursuit of urban history*, London 1983, p. 449-466. This was a memorial volume for Jim Dyos.

²³ H. J. Dyos, Editorial, in: *Urban History Yearbook* 6, 1974, p. 1-9. This editorial provides a useful summary of activities and approaches to the study of urban history in the mid-1970s.

Social concerns of the 1960s amplified interest in historical urban issues. For example, in “Family and Kinship in East London” (1957) Peter Wilmott and Michael Young provided a sociological analysis of housing policy and relocation in London that captured the imagination of the public. “Cathy Come Home” (BBC TV, Ken Loach, 1966) foregrounded homelessness, and Thames TV’s drama (1969), based in St. Ann’s in Nottingham, stressed grinding poverty and its human consequences.²⁴ The challenge to the status quo through these and other artistic mediums contributed to student interest in the social sciences. City studies were sexy. Challenging the academic status quo in the 1960s also found a home through urban history. Dyos’ view that the city was a palimpsest, a series of historical layers, each of which contributed to the distinctive character of the place, encapsulated a political moment in which urban planning and reconstruction were located.²⁵ To understand the layers was to understand the city and city development past, present and future. Replacing the rubble of bombed sites was not particularly controversial; to replace the past by the conscious demolition of historic sites was quite different. In 1961, the removal of the iconic Euston Arch, the entrance to the London railway station built in 1837, captured the public imagination, stoked by amenity groups such as the Georgian Society and SPAB – the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings. Under Dyos’ catalytic leadership, urban history in the 1960s, therefore, found itself as a sub-discipline of history with leanings to city planning and able to forge interdisciplinary partnerships across the social sciences on contemporary topics with considerable public appeal.

The “Dyos phenomenon”, as David Cannadine called the impact of Dyos’ initiatives in urban history, was founded on twin platforms.²⁶ Firstly, in terms of scholarship, a major research contribution was to reveal more of the mechanisms of urban development, to explore the interlocking relationships between the metropolitan and provincial, and, in another crucial polarity, to unlock the interplay between slums and suburbs. Dyos and Reeder together used slums and suburbs as a vehicle for capital and labour, wealth and poverty, and inequalities of power relations in cities more generally. Dyos’ language was crucial. It captured the reader’s attention: “The physiognomy of the suburb, its anatomy, its locomotion – these we now recognise on sight; its physiology, its taxonomy, its social tendencies we do not.”²⁷ The language of urban history was

²⁴ Cf. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FK-cSNAas2k> (02.11.2020).

²⁵ Cf. G H Martin, *The town as palimpsest*, in: H. J. Dyos (Ed.), *The study of urban history*, p. 155-169.

²⁶ D. N. Cannadine, *The “Dyos phenomenon” and after*, in: D. N. Cannadine/D. Reeder (Eds.), *Exploring the urban past. Essays in urban history* by H. J. Dyos, Cambridge 1982, p. 208.

²⁷ D. Reeder, *An appreciation*, p. 6.

inclusive in disciplinary terms. Secondly, as a supreme publicist and organiser, Dyos foundation of the Urban History Newsletter (1963) followed by the Urban History Yearbook (1974) appealed to scholars with interests both central and tangential to the urban. This proved to be especially appealing to social historians in Britain, since the Social History Society and its journal, *Social History*, were not founded until 1976. Consequently, social historians in large numbers attended another Dyos creation, the annual Urban History Group meeting (founded in 1968), which at its height in the late-1970s had over 200 registrations. Dyos' formulation of "the urban" possessed a catholicity that enabled social historians to find an intellectual home in the 1960s and 1970s.

3. *Friendship*

From the early 1960s until his sudden and unexpected death in August 1978, Jim Dyos was "the chief inspiration, proselytizer and ambassador of urban history in Britain".²⁸ The production of a Newsletter and Yearbook, however, required the development of a team of contributors prepared to collect materials for these publications. This process and occasional editorial meetings forged working relationships and, in many cases, career long friendships. The objective was to use the Urban History Yearbook also to provide research materials – not just the customary articles and book reviews, but to enrich the scholarly process, particularly for younger scholars. These tools included lists of theses, review essays concerning recent journal articles, an annual bibliography of publications classified by a multitude of subheadings, reports of proceedings at national and international conferences, and a register of research – a *Who's Who* doing *What* in urban history.²⁹ These were onerous tasks to compile for relatively junior colleagues at different universities, and by some mysterious process the components were drawn together every year. Importantly, this also initiated many of the younger scholars to the mysteries of publication and dealings with copy editors and publishers. Lasting academic and personal friendships were also forged. In the late-1960s and early-1970s, Dyos corresponded through his American networks with Zane Miller (Cincinnati), Gil Stelter (Guelph), Clyde and Sally Griffen (Vassar College), each of whom became attached to the Yearbook as Overseas Correspondents. He also collaborated with another Victorian Studies specialist, Michael Wolff (Massachusetts), and toge-

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ It is important to remember that in the era before online searches the physical collection, typing, setting and publication of bibliographical items and other tasks required a monumental input of time and effort.

ther they edited the remarkable two-volume “The Victorian City. Images and Realities”.³⁰

After 1973, and no doubt influenced by the inclusion of the United Kingdom in the European Community that year, “Dyos made a pivot towards Europe and went on major lecture tours on the continent promoting European urban history. In consequence he had numerous European visitors.”³¹ One such contact was Vera Bacskai (Budapest). Others included Maurice Aymard (La Maison des Sciences de L’homme) and Bernard Lepetit (École des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, Paris). Soon after the first Urban History Yearbook was published in 1974, existing European scholarly contacts with François Bedarida (Fondation Nationale des Sciences Politiques, Paris), Alberto Caracciolo (Perugia), and Lutz Niethammer (Essen) resulted in them becoming overseas correspondents.³² By 1979 Herman Diederiks (Leiden), Ingrid Hammarström (Stockholm), Antoni Maczak (Warsaw), and Jean-Claude Perrot (Sorbonne, Paris), who replaced François Bedarida, were added to the team of overseas correspondents.³³ Friendships established between Dyos and Lynn Hollen Lees and Andrew Lees during a sabbatical year they spent in Leicester, and with Paul Hohenberg brought American interest in European urban history into sharper focus.

In the post-Dyos period the Urban History Yearbook remained an important point of contact between the Leicester urban historians and their European counterparts. In the 1980s, under the editorships of David Reeder (1980-87) and Richard Rodger (1987-2007) continuity was achieved and the European personnel remained unchanged until Marjatta Hietala (1989, Helsinki), Clemens Wischermann (1991, Münster), and Jose-Luis Oyon (1991, Polytechnic University of Catalonia) joined the panel of overseas correspondents, as did Alan Mayne (Melbourne) in 1988.³⁴

The fact that it was possible to call on European scholars to act as correspondents to the Urban History Yearbook bears witness to a parallel interest in urban history and its development at several universities on the continent. The process of rebuilding and redeveloping European cities and the impact of wider societal forces had therefore already stimulated similar intellectual interests,

³⁰ H. J. Dyos/M. Wolff (Eds.), *The Victorian City. Images and realities*, 2 Vols., London 1973, partly re-issued in paperback 1976 and 1978.

³¹ Personal correspondence with Peter Clark.

³² François Bedarida, then at the Maison Française (Oxford), attended the 1966 Conference, as did Wolfgang Köllmann (Historisches Institut der Ruhr-Universität, Bochum).

³³ Other non-European correspondents included Stuart Blumin (Cornell), Graeme Davison (Melbourne), Narayani Gupta (Delhi) and Kaoru Ugawa (Tokyo).

³⁴ As for the “home team” there was an infusion of “new blood” – David Cannadine, Martin Daunton, Joyce Ellis, Stana Nenadic, Callum Brown, Anthony Sutcliffe, Peter Borsay, and Bill Luckin all made contributions to the Yearbook in some scholarly capacity.

and it would be simplistic to claim that Leicester was more than an influential facilitator in the field that we now know as “urban history”.³⁵

4. Partnership

The fact that the post-1978 era required the involvement of so many individuals was testimony to the scale of Dyos’ personal effort.³⁶ However, the 1980s saw a fundamental realignment of the Leicester-Europe relationship. Much depended on Peter Clark, who had been appointed to a lectureship at the Department of Economic History at Leicester in 1975. With social history interests in the early modern period, he established the Pre-Modern Towns Group in 1978. This was a splinter from the Urban History Group with an essentially British membership, which still meets annually at the Institute of Historical Research in London.³⁷ Another initiative in 1980 was a teaching exchange between Leiden, Amsterdam and Leicester universities in which academics visited partner institutions, but which was subsequently based on student mobility as European Community programmes began to engage more fully with this teaching model. Peter Jansen (Amsterdam) and Herman Diederiks (Leiden) were both involved in this initial programme, which was the first history exchange programme in the EC.³⁸ It was also the forerunner to a more elaborate teaching exchange, again choreographed by Peter Clark. It was funded through the ERASMUS programme, which from 1978-96 also included a graduate research workshop and undergraduate exchanges. The participating institutions were Leicester, Leiden, Leuven, and Gießen in 1987.³⁹ This was subsequently expanded to include Ghent, Antwerp, Santander and Lisbon (New University).

³⁵ For the development of urban history in Italy, Spain, Portugal, France, Belgium, The Netherlands, and the Nordic countries cf. Rodger (Ed.), *European urban history. On teaching urban history in Europe* cf. R. Rodger/D. Menjot (Eds.), *Teaching urban history in Europe/l'Enseignement de l'Histoire Urbaine en Europe*, Leicester 2006.

³⁶ For a rather mean spirited and partially informed assessment of H. J. Dyos and his contribution to urban history, cf. S. Mandelbaum, H. J. Dyos and British urban history, in: *Economic History Review* 38, 1985, p. 437-447. Since Mandelbaum by his own admission considered himself “a stranger in the land of urban history” it seems odd that he felt moved to write this article, and perhaps stranger that the *Economic History Review* editors accepted it.

³⁷ For further details cf. <https://www2.le.ac.uk/departments/urbanhistory/pmtg/conference-2020> (02.11.2020).

³⁸ A Reader was prepared to complement the teaching, P. Clark/H. Diederiks (Eds.), *Urbanisation in Western Europe. A reader in Dutch urban history*, Leicester 1980.

³⁹ Cf. *Ibid.*; Herman van der Wee, a distinguished economic historian, was particularly supportive at this stage of the Leicester-Europe exchanges.

The contractor for these EU programmes was the Department of Economic History at Leicester University, within which a newly founded Centre for Urban History (CUH) was formed in 1985 in College House on the main University campus. Peter Clark, David Reeder and Richard Rodger were all variously involved in the initial stages, supported in various roles by James Moore, Wynn Rutt and Kate Crispin. Undergraduate and postgraduate teaching and training in research methods were core activities. What the dedication of physical space in the form of College House facilitated was the creation of a community. This took time to build, but with dedicated space and a specialist library, research seminars and training programmes for undergraduate, masters and doctoral students, and a common room, the newly established Centre for Urban History attracted visiting staff and students from all over Europe through various exchange and enrichment programmes. It was a place to meet and greet scholars, young and old, to engage in intellectual conversations, and to plot future initiatives in urban history.



Fig. 3: Centre for Urban History, College House, University of Leicester, 1985.

With a physical presence on campus at College House, the home of the former Vice-Chancellor's house (F. L. Attenborough), the CUH began another developmental phase. With improved physical visibility and increased administrative responsibilities associated with project grants, the standing of urban history was enhanced both with students and, importantly, with university administrators. There can be little doubt that this formal presence and legal standing assisted funding applications made to domestic and international bodies. It was not, as was the case elsewhere, a "paper centre" – something on a letter-head with little substance. When constructing a publicity profile for the University, the CUH provided an international humanities profile alongside space physics and genetics where DNA fingerprinting had been developed. Undergraduate courses were provided within economic and social history and a Master of Arts course was designed, including in 1996 an MA in European Urbanisation with the partner universities Stockholm, Leiden and Dublin. The transfer of Tony Sutcliffe from Sheffield to Leicester also strengthened the menu of graduate courses available in the 1990s by offering a history of planning strand. Personal friendships with Lars Nilson, Herman Diederiks and Annagret Simms were instrumental in developing academic courses for Leicester exchange students. Despite its reputational lustre, there was little direct financial support for the CUH. Indeed, CUH was internationally famous for its academic successes and infamous for its parsimony.

As the geopolitical configuration of Europe changed with German reunification, further partnerships developed. An early indication of things to come was the academic relationship established with Heinz Reif (Technical University of Berlin), who also acted as conference organiser for the 5th European Association of Urban Historians Conference in Berlin (2000).⁴⁰ From 1990 onwards, predictably, EU initiatives became more inclusive towards Eastern and Central Europe. The TEMPUS programmes in the early 1990s meant that Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest and Warsaw University were partnered with Leicester University for the purposes of research funding applications and research enrichment generally. Specifically, significant sums of research funding were available for computers and research materials, as well as for graduate student workshops, as in Keszthely, Hungary (1992) and Warsaw (1993), organised by Vera Bacskai.⁴¹ In this wider geopolitical climate, the EU TEMPUS programme also encouraged EU-USA partnerships, and once again CUH at Leicester nego-

⁴⁰ Cf. R. Rodger, *Stadtgeschichte an der Universität Leicester*, in: *IMS 1/2000*, p. 15-16. Heinz Reif initiated further partnerships with New York Universities based on the shared themes of metropolitanism. A conference on the metropolis resulted in D. Brantz/S. Disko/G. Wagner-Kyora (Eds.), *Thick space. Approaches to metropolitanism*, London 2012.

⁴¹ Participants included Gabor Sonkoly, Katalin Szende and Erika Szivos.

tiated such an agreement with both William and Mary College and the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, which resulted in American students participating in EU funded urban history workshops. A similar approach was adopted between the CUH and Moscow State University, which produced mainly staff exchanges between the two institutions.

It might be argued that the Leicester-Hungary relationship took twenty years to build. This track record of sustained cooperation and academic programme design and delivery with Central and East Central European institutions enabled the CUH at Leicester, Peter Clark and Richard Rodger, to develop other initiatives. One of these involved the SOROS Foundation, which financed Hungarian students to attend the Leicester MA in urban history during the 1990s until that funding stream was withdrawn in 2004. There were also contacts through exchange visits, research seminars and publications with Suzanne Zimmermann and the Central European University, Budapest, and in the Ukraine with Harald Binder's imaginative foundation in Lviv of the Center for Urban History of East Central Europe, where Richard Rodger gave the Inaugural Lecture in 2006.⁴² It was typical of the workings of urban history links between Leicester and Europe that intellectual links were forged in the course of such lectures and seminars – in the Eastern European context specifically with Katalin Szende, Markian Prokopovich, Erika Szivos, and Katalin Straner.

Between 1991 and 1994, two major collaborative grants, both of about €1.25 million, were awarded by the EU to the CUH and its partners. One on “Comparative Urbanisation from the Middle Ages to the Present” involved a programme of research and publications on themes with each partner collecting international data and statistics on a specific topic – including population, crime, migration, and poverty – with seminars and exchanges of young researchers between participating institutions – Leicester, Leiden, Ghent, Lisbon, Strasbourg, University College Dublin, Groningen, Santiago de Compostela. A number of the student beneficiaries of the Leicester-EU liaison included individuals who have gone on to develop their own successful academic careers. There are too many to name, but they include Petra van Dam, Paolo Capuzzo, Pedro Lorente, Peter Stabel, Bruno Blonde, Anne-Laure van Bruaene, and Zsuzsi Kiss.

The other successful partnership was financed by the EU Social Fund Transnational Programme. Under the programme, Leicester and Leiden both trained about 30 graduate students in information technology and historical research methods each year. At Leicester, this was linked to an Economic and Social Research Council Project on Small Towns (Clark), and in developing bibliographi-

⁴² R. Rodger, *The future of the urban past*, Lviv, 21 October 2006.

cal tools and research methods and materials (Rodger).⁴³ The IT element crucially enabled the CUH and the Department of Economic History to develop computing laboratories, thus transforming the nature and content of teaching and research. In the days before online help and DOS for Dummies, a trio of Leicester academics – Beck, Maynard and Rodger – spent weekends developing simplified guides to software for undergraduate support in the computing laboratories, initially funded by the EU programme. Subsequently, these guides published under the title “Software Made Simple” won highly regarded Chrystal Awards from the Plain English Campaign for their clarity and were widely used in the Higher Education sector in Britain.⁴⁴ The documentation in support of the MA in European Urbanisation at the CUH was further enriched in 2003 with the publication of “Testimonies of the City” based around the East Midlands Oral History Archive project financed by the Heritage Lottery Fund.⁴⁵

Friendships generated partnerships and scholarly initiatives and were evident at many levels of activity related to the study of urban history.⁴⁶ Nowhere was this more important than in the European Association for Urban History (EAUH), established in 1989 with modest financial support from the European Community in 1989 and 1990. The EAUH goal remains to provide a multidisciplinary forum for historians, geographers, sociologists, anthropologists, art and architectural historians, planners and other scholars working on various aspects of urban history from the middle ages to the present. The academic collaboration and ensuing friendships between Herman Diederiks, Peter Clark, Vera Bacskai, Maurice Aymard and Bernard Lepetit provided the inspirational platform for the organisation. Initially bilingual, English and French, the EAUH has become less so. At the same time it grew from a modestly sized meeting of about 140 participants to a biennial conference with 700-800 registered participants in recent years (see Table 1). It is difficult today to appreciate the logistical difficulties of organising a large conference in the 1990s. Even in Western

⁴³ Cf. B. Haynes/P. Clark (Eds.), *Register of European urban history teaching, research and publications*, Leicester 1990; *Special Publications Series 1*, 1990; *Special Publications Series 2*, 1991; R. Rodger, *Research in urban history. A classified survey of doctoral and masters theses*, Aldershot 1994; R. Rodger, *A consolidated bibliography of urban history*, Aldershot 1996; R. Rodger/I. Backouche/D. Menjot, *L'Histoire Urbaine en France. Guide Bibliographique 1965-96*, Paris 1998.

⁴⁴ The A Chrystal marque was the imprimatur of clarity in the exposition and accessibility of published works.

⁴⁵ Cf. C. Brown/L. Faire/T. Hooley, *Testimonies of the city*, Leicester 2003. A similar approach was adopted to support the school curriculum in S. Ferrier/T. Hooley, *Toys and games. An oral history*, Leicester 2002.

⁴⁶ For purposes and activities of EAUH cf. <https://www.uantwerpen.be/en/centres/eahu/about-the-eauh-top/eahu-statutes> (02.11.2020).

Europe, organising a meeting on such a scale and across borders was reliant on European postal services for circulating programmes, submitting proposals and registration forms, reliant on primitive bank transfers and cheques, and dependent on photocopying and faxing papers. Communications in ex-Soviet spheres like Hungary were significantly more challenging – the absence of dependable international phone and financial sponsors, the tensions at universities between reformers like Vera Bacskai and the reactionary old guard, and the limited experience of conference agents produced nightmares for conference organisers.

Table 1: Locations, Organisers and Attendees. European Association of Urban History International Conferences, 1992-2021.

year	city	organiser	attending
1992	Amsterdam	Herman Diederiks	140
1994	Strasbourg	Jean-Luc Pinol	350
1996	Budapest	Vera Bacskai	270
1998	Venice	Donatella Calabi	300
2000	Berlin	Heinz Reif	446
2002	Edinburgh	Bob Morris	310
2004	Athens	Lydia Sapounakis-Dracaki	250
2006	Stockholm	Lars Nilsson	460
2008	Lyon	Denis Menjot	500
2010	Ghent	Marc Boone	560
2012	Prague	Luda Klusakova	700
2014	Lisbon	Amelia Andrade	650
2016	Helsinki	Marjaana Niemi	650
2018	Rome	Carlo Maria Travaligni	803
2021	Antwerp	Peter Stabel	

Source: Personal attendance, and correspondence with several conference organisers.

Sadly, nothing marks the depth of friendship more than loss, and the EAUH lost two of its founding stalwarts to freak road accidents in 1995 (Bernard Lepetit) and 1996 (Herman Diederiks). Their deaths meant premature losses for the Leicester-Europe axis and the wider European urban history movement in general. Of course, others have passed on too, but the gratifying result has been the vigour and number of a new cohort of urban historians in Leicester and in Europe in general. The energy and quantitative growth of the EAUH is testimony to that.

In the 1990s, another break in an urban history partnership occurred. After 30 years, Leicester University Press (LUP) decided in 1991 to cease publishing the *Urban History Yearbook*. This marked the end of a relationship going back to the first edition of Dyos' "Victorian Suburb" in 1961. It was a rupture. It was not just that LUP had published every *Yearbook* since 1974. Other urban history manuscripts had found LUP a willing publisher and a critical mass of titles in urban history had accumulated.⁴⁷ Richard Rodger as editor of the *Urban History Yearbook* took the decision, in consultation with David Reeder, to move to Cambridge University Press (CUP) and to begin a new phase as a *Journal* re-titled as *Urban History* with two issues annually.

The migration to CUP proved highly successful. Within three years, in 1995, CUP were keen to move to three issues each year, and by 2012 this became four issues annually. The partnership had become part of the larger consortium of Cambridge Journals Online, and the number and geographical range of the readership expanded accordingly.⁴⁸ For European scholars of urban history, this transition from Leicester University Press to a partnership with Cambridge University Press has been significant. Over the four-year period 2014-17, Western Europe accounted for 15% of worldwide subscriptions to *Urban History*. However, over the nine-year period 2010-18, the percentage of articles submitted to the *Urban History* from Europe averaged 32%, from Britain 33%, and from the Americas averaged 19%. This was and is an important structural change. The European presence in *Urban History* has doubled from 16% to 32% between 1997 and 2017.⁴⁹ This was a reflection both of the increased pressure on European urban historians to publish in high-ranking English language journals, and of the enhanced exposure of *Urban History* amongst scholars participating in the EAUH conferences.

⁴⁷ Leicester University Press titles included: D. Cannadine, *Lords and landlords. The aristocracy and the town 1774-1967*, Leicester 1980; D. Fraser (Ed.), *Municipal reform and the industrial city*, Leicester 1982; M. Tebbutt, *Making ends meet. Pawnbroking and working class credit*, Leicester 1983; R. J. Morris (Ed.), *Class, power and social structure in British nineteenth century town*, Leicester 1986; B. Lancaster, *Radicalism, cooperation and socialism. Leicester working class politics 1860-1946*, Leicester 1987; R. Rodger (Ed.), *Scottish housing in the twentieth century*, Leicester 1989; T. Slater (Ed.), *The built form of western cities*, Leicester 1990; R. Sindall, *Street violence in the nineteenth century*, Leicester 1990; P. J. Corfield/D. Keene (Eds.), *Work in towns 850-1850*, Leicester 1990; M. J. Daunton (Ed.), *Housing the workers. A Comparative history 1850-1914*, Leicester 1990; J. K. Walton, *Fish and chips and the British working class 1870-1940*, Leicester 1991; C. Pooley (Ed.), *Housing strategies in Europe 1880-1930*, Leicester 1992; A. Mayne, *The imagined slum. Newspaper representation in three cities*, Leicester 1993.

⁴⁸ Rosemary Sweet became co-Editor with Richard Rodger (2002-08), then joint editor with Simon Gunn (2008-) and Shane Ewen (2015-).

⁴⁹ Cambridge University Press, Publisher's Data.

Another indicator of the strengthening European-Leicester scholarly engagement, which was undoubtedly influenced by friendship and partnership, was the publication of 37 books in the series “Historical Urban Studies” published by Ashgate, now part of Routledge, under the general editorship of Richard Rodger.⁵⁰ Of these 37 titles, 37% of the authorship came from continental Europe. Sometimes the proposals emerged as edited collections from a panel submitted at one of the EAUH conferences, as with the volume edited by Clemens Wischermann and Elliot Shore “Advertising and the European City. Historical Perspectives”, which came out of the 1998 EAUH conference in Venice. Sometimes it was the distillation of a doctoral thesis into a monograph, as with Håkan Forsell’s “Property, Tenancy and Urban Growth in Stockholm and Berlin, 1860–1920” (2006) and Michael Miller’s “The Representation of Place. Urban Planning and Protest in France and Great Britain 1950–1980” (2003). On other occasions, the volumes published in the Historical Urban Studies series were the product of sustained research over a long period by experienced urban historians.⁵¹

5. Trusteeship

Economic history was an important umbrella for urban history in Britain. The discipline enjoyed approved status from the Social Science Research Council (subsequently the Economic and Social Research Council), which provided access to UK research funds and studentships.⁵² Taught graduate courses were vetted and reviewed regularly for their research components, and doctoral funding was decided on a highly competitive basis. So the Leicester urban historians were well placed and experienced in writing UK grant applications when the EU’s strategic, collaborative cultural and educational funding initiatives were announced. Further advantages included the requirement to apply in English, and knowledge of quality control and monitoring mechanisms that were invading the British university system in the 1990s. Brussels administrators were reassured, not least because Leicester was one of the first British universities to employ a representative in Brussels charged to explore and exploit the research agendas and funding streams of the EU.

⁵⁰ Cf. <https://www.routledge.com/Historical-Urban-Studies-Series/book-series/ASHSER-2010> (03.11.2020).

⁵¹ For a review of the series cf. B. M. Doyle, A decade of urban history. Ashgate’s Historical Urban Studies series, in: *Urban History* 36:3, 2009, p. 498–512.

⁵² No parallel funding stream existed for arts and humanities subjects until 1998, extended in 2005 so history, literature, languages, philosophy, and creative arts were disadvantaged.

The Leicester-Europe bond has remained durable. It has also been regenerated. This is largely because of an infusion of different perspectives and networks resulting from new appointments at Leicester University. Successively, and successfully, Roey Sweet, Dieter Schott, Prashant Kidambi, Simon Gunn, Rebecca Madgin, Toby Lincoln and Richard Butler have invested the CUH with different skills and approaches. In particular, planning history and environmental history gained strength through the contributions of Dieter Schott. Roey Sweet kept the CUH input to the Pre-Modern Towns meetings alive, and has served with distinction as a member of the European Historic Towns Commission and the International Commission for the History of Towns, along with Peter Clark. Prashant Kidambi and Toby Lincoln brought Indian and Chinese urban history firmly into the focus of the CUH and in that sense shone a critical light on eurocentric visions of the city.

The sense of service to a community of urban historians alongside concern for city histories in all periods remain core values amongst CUH staff and students. Scholarship, friendships, and partnerships have been reinvented with the assistance of European colleagues. That trust in shared values continues. Recently, reinforced through heritage partnerships and a new “History of Leicester” sponsored by the City Council⁵³, and as a force for community engagement fostered through the East Midlands Oral History Archive (EMOHA) and the work of Colin Hyde, the CUH has a vigorous and respected presence in the city of Leicester. In a reversion to the oldest form of European partnerships, teaching exchanges with scholars from Antwerp, Prague, Brussels, and Leicester have taken place, funded by the EU through the Erasmus programme. CUH is also a partner in the Marie Curie European Joint Doctorate Programme, “Urban History in 20th Century Europe”, led by the Bauhaus University (2016-20). These and other initiatives continue to produce a steady stream of visitors to Leicester, and in reverse. The CUH has acted as the United Kingdom guardian of valued intellectual European partnerships in urban history.⁵⁴

On the continental European dimension, the registrations, the number of parallel sessions, in fact the quantitative scale of the biennial EAUH conferences is very positive. The sources, methods, techniques, the blend of audio and visual resources, theoretical elements and the assured confidence in presentations are impressive features of the conference sessions. The interaction amongst conference delegates and the enduring commitment of friendships

⁵³ R. Rodger/R. Madgin (Eds.), *Leicester. A modern history*, Lancaster 2016.

⁵⁴ Cf. R. Sweet, *The writing of urban histories in eighteenth century England*, Oxford 1997; R. Sweet, *Antiquaries. The discovery of the past in eighteenth century Britain*, London 2004; East Midlands Oral History Archive EMOHA (AHRC project 1999-2005; ongoing), cf. <https://www.le.ac.uk/emoha/> (03.11.2020).

established and reaffirmed at these EAUH meetings leaves those in other parts of the world far behind. The national organisations in Germany, France, Belgium and the Netherlands, as well as the Nordic bloc, have, as mentioned above, contributed hugely to the vigour of scholars within their countries and to the willingness of continental European scholars to cross boundaries both intellectually and spatially. (See Appendix)

On all these counts, urban history is in a healthy state. But there is a danger – a real and present danger. Checkland’s challenge, noted above, was that “the job of the urban historian is synthesis”⁵⁵ – that is, to distil meaning and form, and to inform the larger picture. David Reeder captured this more precisely. Urban history “offers us a perspective that can help make the city more meaningful and accessible. ... For many people the modern city was, in truth, a frightening and bewildering prospect ... a landscape of surfaces and a special language of signs at once so familiar and yet so incomprehensible as to form almost the structure of chaos.”⁵⁶ The point of Dyos’ work on the urban past, and that of a subsequent generation of urban historians was to show that there were patterns and organising principles at work as the moral and physical environment of the city was being shaped and adapted to new conditions. Put differently, and operationally in research terms for urban historians, it was to be aware of studies that are only incidentally concerned with towns or cities, and which are “merely passing through”. Therefore, the analytical skill set needs to be flexible and muscular in order to uncover the distinctive character of the town or city – its DNA.

6. Entrusted

The interplay – and overlay – of scholarship, friendship, and partnership has had durable and positive consequences for the study of urban history. As towns and cities evolve so the mutations produced new pressures on existing processes and relationships. Understanding these provides no fail-safe way of managing the contemporary city, but may offer guidance as to what has or has not been effective in the past. If contemporary policy is blind to historical legacies, then the comprehension of urban issues can only be partial. For this reason, if no other, there is a relevance to knowing the past. Knowing the pitfalls of past policy is instructive and means that presentism is less speculative. Of course, historical enrichment is inherently worthwhile for the interest it generates for the general public. After all, local historians far outnumber academic histori-

⁵⁵ Checkland, *Toward a definition*.

⁵⁶ D. Reeder, H. J. Dyos and the urban process, in: D. N. Cannadine/D. Reeder (Eds.), *Exploring the urban past*, p. xix.

ans. To some extent, therefore, urban historians are the guardians or trustees of public history.

In a digital age, preservation and standardisation of the electronic record is essential, and ongoing access and inter-operability between datasets must be guaranteed over time. Just as the archivist's role was critical to historical studies in the past when only the written record existed, so it is now with digital archives if urban history – or indeed any other species of history – is to be possible and meaningful for the foreseeable future. The default position in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was to retain records, and then to cull and classify them, whereas the sampling and cataloguing of the digital record seems more immediate and negotiable in the contemporary world. Trust and cooperation with agencies to ensure deposits to an agreed standard is a priority.

Where there is a major change in urban history, it is with the democratisation of analytical techniques. The management of datasets, and the ability to deploy spatial analysis has a lower threshold than ever before. The spatial dimension has been projected to new levels. The availability of open source tools, maps and data, and a lesser dependence on high cost mapping software from proprietary companies has been fundamentally and permanently changed. OpenStreetMap and associated tools will continue to side-step the limitations formerly imposed by major software companies, and this will accelerate the interest in the urban as users move quickly and fairly easily to instructive representations of historical data.⁵⁷

We know and recognise a place or town instinctively by its distinctive features. Its DNA is coded, but recognisable. The urban variables do not change, but the mix does. Understanding just how that interplay works to produce a unique place remains elusive. For this reason, the pursuit of urban history remains an important and worthwhile endeavour, cross-fertilised by mutual Leicester-continental European connections entrusted to scholarship, friendship, and partnership.

⁵⁷ Cf. R. Rodger/S. Rau, Thinking spatially. New horizons for urban history, in: *Urban History* 47:3, 2020, p. 372-383. More specifically cf. S. Rau/R. Rodger (Eds.), *Space and spatial relationships* (=Urban History 47:3), 2020.

Appendix: Urban History Organisations at the National Level

Urban History Group (United Kingdom 1963)

<https://www2.le.ac.uk/departments/urbanhistory/uhg/uhg>

Werkgroep Stedengeschiedenis (The Netherlands 1974)

<http://www.stedengeschiedenis.nl/pages/stedengeschiedenis.html>

Australasian Urban History/Planning History Group (Australia, New Zealand 1993)

<https://apo.org.au/node/212386>

Société Française d'Histoire Urbaine (France 1998)

<https://sfhu.hypotheses.org/>

Suomen Kaupunkitutkimuksen seura (Finland 1999)

<http://www.kaupunkitutkimuksenseura.fi/tutkimus>

Gesellschaft für Stadtgeschichte und Urbanisierungsforschung (Germany 2000)

<https://gsu-stadtgeschichte.com/>

Associazione Italiana di Storia Urbana (Italy 2001)

<http://www.storiaurbana.org/index.php/en/aisu-uk>

Lviv Centre for Urban History of East Central Europe (2006)

<https://www.lvivcenter.org/>

Ceska společnost pro urbanni studia (Czech Republic 2010)

<https://rejstrik-firem.kurzy.cz/22861173/ceska-spolecnost-pro-urbanni-studia-o-s/>

For details of Centres for Research and Training in Leicester, Antwerp, Berlin, Amsterdam, Stockholm, Aarhus, Münster, Lviv, London, and Birmingham, see <https://www.uantwerpen.be/en/centres/eauh/organizations/centres-for-research/>

Source of Figures

Fig. 1: Cadbury Brothers, *The Struggle for Democracy*, no. 2, in: *Changing Britain*, 1943.

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