

History or heritage: perceptions of the urban past

A review essay*

British urban history emerged as a coherent academic discipline in the 1960s. The establishment of the *Urban History Yearbook* in 1974, under the enthusiastic tutelage of Jim Dyos, was but one indication of the emerging strength of the subject. Subsequent years have seen a growing volume of publications in the field, and a widening focus to include not only the era of the Industrial Revolution but also the pre-modern period. Parallel with this trend has been an upsurge of 'popular' interest in historic towns. In recent decades such centres have flourished as tourist resorts and salubrious residential enclaves, exploiting the rising social cachet of 'the world we have lost'. The task of interpreting the urban past to the general public has by and large fallen not to academic publications but to a special brand of popular literature – tourist leaflets, guides, coffee-table books, and so on. In itself this is hardly astonishing; what is surprising is the extent to which, outside the areas of architecture and artefacts, the popular genre appears to have been largely unaffected by developments in its academic counterpart. Urban historians may feel that there has been a revolution in their subject, but its impact has been generally confined to the academic world, especially its higher reaches. Not that there has been any lack of output in the popular

***Main books reviewed**

Mark Girouard, *The English Town*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1990. 330pp. 416 illustrations. £19.95.

Dan Cruickshank and Neil Burton, *Life in the Georgian City*. London: Viking, 1990. xv + 288 pp. Illustrated. £25.00.

Consulted for comparative purposes

Russell Chamberlin, *The English Country Town*. Exeter: Webb and Bower, and the National Trust, 1983, reprinted 1986.

David W. Lloyd, *The Making of English Towns: A Vista of 2000 Years*. London: Victor Gollancz, 1984.

Anthony Quiney, *The English Country Town*. London: Thames and Hudson, 1987.

sphere. The last decade has witnessed a positive eruption of heritage maps and town trails to guide tourists on their perambulations through the urban past. This has been matched by a stream of more heavyweight, lavishly illustrated general surveys; to name but three examples referred to later, Russell Chamberlin, *The English Country Town* (1983), David Lloyd, *The Making of English Towns* (1984), and Anthony Quiney, *The English Country Town* (1987). The most recent, and in many respects most distinguished additions to their ranks, are the two volumes under review here, Mark Girouard, *The English Town* (1990), and Don Cruickshank and Neil Burton, *Life in the Georgian City* (1990). Both, it should be emphasized from the outset, have a substantial academic content, and are publications which no urban historians in the relevant fields will want to miss. However, it is clear that they are aimed at the non-academic market, and in their approach share many of the characteristics of the popular category of town history.

Mark Girouard has enjoyed a noted career as an architectural historian, particularly as one who has attempted to 'widen understanding of architecture by trying to understand the way of life which produced it' (p. 5). His award-winning study of *Life in the English Country House* (1978) demonstrated how liberating this approach could be, and encouraged him to apply it to the urban form. The result was a two-part project; an internationally-oriented volume on *Cities and People*, published in 1985, and now an investigation of the English town, a subject evidently close to his heart. The book is divided into three sections. The first five chapters outline a series of key long-term features of urban landscape and life; the market-place and corporation, water communications and the waterside, county government and the county hall, churches and charities, and building 'plots'. The theme of the second section is the Georgian town. This is introduced by a chapter (somewhat inappropriately entitled 'interlude', given its central significance) on what the author perceives are the twin cultural forces initiating urban development in the period, politeness and improvement. The physical manifestations of these social trends are explored in essays on the house, assembly rooms, walks, units of multiple dwelling (terraces, squares and crescents) and the 'new street', introduced to improve and order urban centres from the later eighteenth century. This is followed by another 'interlude', on this occasion to trumpet the virtues of Victorian architecture, the author boldly declaring that 'a walk round a town like Bradford is still as worthwhile an experience as a walk round Bath' (p. 190). We are then led on a lengthy circumnavigation of the Victorian town by way of chapters on the town hall, the high street, warehouses, industrial buildings, the back streets (essentially working-class housing), parks, suburbs, and leisure. The book concludes with a brief 'epilogue' - though given its content 'epitaph' might be more appropriate - on the twentieth century, when it is argued that forces originating in the Enlightenment and

rural romantic movement eventually mature to drain the town of its human life-blood and to despoil its landscape.

Perhaps the most striking feature of *The English Town* is its sheer readability. Girouard is a master wordsmith, writing crisply, elegantly and evocatively - but never sentimentally - as the occasion demands; and he has the 'common touch' in the best sense of the term, skilfully drawing readers into a wider theme by initially engaging their attention with a particularly interesting example. The book is brilliantly illustrated (sometimes quite breathtakingly), a refreshing contrast to the arid acres of monochrome text normally found in historical monographs. Not that the visual content papers over any paucity of intellectual substance. The volume is based on a good deal of original research (the chapters on the Georgian town all represent important contributions to the subject), is well annotated, and replete with perceptive comments. However, by way of criticism two major points may be raised. First, the grand title of *The English Town*, no doubt constructed to exploit as wide a market as possible, is clearly inappropriate. The vast majority of the book is about the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and - for all the excellent economic and social allusions - the predominant focus is the built fabric. It may also be added that the lower orders scarcely figure in the Georgian section, giving a somewhat one-sided perspective on 'politeness', and though they enjoy a more substantial treatment under the Victorians, they play second fiddle to a triumphant middle class. These are matters to which I shall return later. Second, there is a lack of what may be called *process*. In part this reflects the physical focus of the book. The architecture and plans of courts, prisons, town halls, warehouses and factories are adroitly analysed, but what of the economic, social, legal and political processes enacted in these buildings? And, even more to the point, how do all the individual themes explored mesh together to form a comprehensive view of the town? This no doubt is the function of the curiously titled 'interludes', whose aim appears to be to provide a wider context for the physically-oriented chapters which follow. However, concentrating the economic, social and cultural evidence in one chapter simply has the effect of marginalizing it and preventing a sense of process and wholeness of view emerging. Significantly, one of the most effective chapters, and the one most sensitive to the complex interactions of social class, is 'The Bright Lights', where Girouard combines architectural analysis with the work of leisure historians like John Walton, Peter Bailey and Robert Poole. These more substantial issues apart, there are a number of minor quibbles, such as the omission of any serious treatment of the religious fabric of the town, and the misnumbering of footnotes between pages 20 and 28. However, any queries one may have about this volume are more than outweighed by its positive features; quite simply, it is a beautifully written, magnificently illustrated, perceptive and - above all - hugely enjoyable book.

Cruikshank and Burton's *Life in the Georgian City* is also a work which will give great pleasure, and from which historians can learn a great deal. However, like Girouard, the apparent comprehensiveness of the title is misleading. As the authors readily admit, the 'book is not a social or political history of the Georgian city', and the 'emphasis . . . has fallen heavily [in truth, virtually exclusively] upon London' (p. xiii). In fact the volume has 'two main purposes: to describe how life was lived in the modest town house during the Georgian period, and to provide information about the construction and decoration of the house itself' (p. xiii). The emphasis on the house is leavened a little in the opening two chapters, with a fascinating description of aspects of 'street life' (lighting, paving, cleansing, watching and hazards), and an account of the daily routine of Londoners, particularly as it relates to eating. An exhaustive reconstruction of arrangements for dinner in a well-heeled residence leads into the main subject of the book, the house. The authors begin by examining the functions and internal arrangement of the various floors and rooms, and by investigating the provision of domestic services - lighting, heating, food preparation, fuel, water and waste disposal. The construction process next commands attention with discussion of the leasehold system, speculation, building finance and costs, building materials, and the trend towards architectural uniformity. Proportion is seen as the principal element in Georgian house design, and the theory and practice of this receives detailed treatment. But the lengthiest chapter in the book is reserved for the somewhat recondite subjects of wall treatments (wainscot, paper, hangings, stucco and mouldings) and paints. An essay on town gardens rounds off the main text, and this is followed by a series of appendices, including detailed case studies of three properties.

Not the least of the virtues of this book is that it is firmly rooted in primary sources, such as contemporary travellers' accounts, pattern-books (from both of which there are extensive literary or visual quotations) and surviving structural evidence. The authors are clearly experts in their subject, and the whole work carries the stamp of authority. Particularly in the field of the domestic urban interior, about which relatively little seems to have been written, this book is a mine of information. But from the historian's point of view the material will require further interpretation if it is to contribute to a genuine social analysis of house and home. It is unlikely that the authors had this purpose in mind. Their aim is to provide an authentic descriptive account of the structure and workings of the urban house. In doing this they are, at least partly, motivated by a conservation imperative. However, their hope that the volume may 'prove useful to those repairing or restoring a Georgian house' (p. xiii) does mean that the text occasionally becomes bogged down in what seems esoteric detail about the form of mouldings or the ingredients of paint. It is also unfortunate in a book committed to using primary sources that though references are given page numbers are omitted,

a real drawback to the historian but presumably of little interest to New Georgians bent on salvaging and restoring a piece of the eighteenth century.

Despite their academic content, *The English Town and Life in the Georgian City* are evidently intended primarily for the general public. To explore further the approach to urban history embodied in 'popular' surveys, it would be useful at this stage to draw into the discussion the works of Chamberlin, Lloyd and Quiney listed at the beginning of this essay. History is as much defined by what it leaves out, as by what it includes. Certainly this is true for popular perceptions of the urban past, at least to judge from the volumes examined here. All sport broad-ranging titles that purport to offer a comprehensive view of the town. In practice this is a mirage. Economic, social, political and, to some extent, cultural matters, receive little attention when compared with the principal concern of these works, the landscape and especially buildings. Lloyd, who claims to survey 'physical, architectural, social and commercial' issues (p. 13), and certainly has more on industry than most books of this type, is still ultimately focused on the urban fabric. The extensive use of illustrations in these volumes, often constituting a substantial proportion of the total book, further accentuates their physical orientation. A selective view of the past is also found in these works' attitude to time. Cruickshank and Burton apart, the titles of all appear to offer a survey of towns from their origins to the present. What is delivered is rather less. Quiney's introduction almost stops at c. 1700 and his copious illustrations are very largely of pre-Victorian structures; Chamberlin has little on the nineteenth and twentieth centuries; Girouard, as we have seen, is firmly located in the Georgian and Victorian periods; and Lloyd terminates his 2000-year 'vista', a brief epilogue excepted, in c. 1900. The twentieth century, which is now itself almost consigned to history, is peculiarly taboo territory. Quiney and Chamberlin might claim that their brief is the *country* town, and this exempts them from having to encompass more recent centuries. But country or small towns suffered no fatal catastrophe in 1800. In 1901 there were almost 700 towns in England and Wales with fewer than 10,000 inhabitants, and today these smaller centres are still a vibrant part of the urban system. A final aspect of selective vision is that of social class. Plebeian society and the working class feature relatively little, and in some cases scarcely at all, in these volumes. Cruickshank and Burton make clear that their subject is the 'modest town house', though their definition of modest might raise some eyebrows when it is discovered that 'even a relatively modest house like No. 15 [Elder Street, Spitalfields] would have been occupied by a member of the rich merchant class' (p. 220). Popular leisure features strongly in Girouard's chapter on 'The Bright Lights', and both he and Lloyd tackle nineteenth-century working-class dwellings, though very much from the progressive angle of 'by-law housing' and 'model housing schemes'. Occasionally a working-

class presence is implied when in truth this is difficult to discern. Girouard maintains that 'The cross-section revealed by Samuel Scott's picture [of upper Broad Street, Ludlow, c. 1765] corresponds reasonably closely to a cross-section of Ludlow society as a whole: doctors, attorneys and clergymen; widows (in large numbers), local gentry and retired professional military or businessmen; and tradesmen or manufacturers' (p. 104). This is a somewhat restricted view of a social cross-section, though he may have drawn nearer the truth had lower Broad Street also been included. However, Girouard's definition demonstrates who are the true protagonists of his volume, the middle class. Early on he declares that 'If this book has heroes, they are the corporations of Victorian towns, especially of northern industrial towns' (p. 8), and later bluntly asserts that 'it was the middle class who created the towns' (p. 310). It may be argued that this comes dangerously close to a socially specific definition of heroism and creativity.

Why do these popular accounts of urban history project a *particular* view of the past? It will be helpful to deal with the three issues of content, time and class separately, though they are clearly inter-related. The emphasis in the contents upon the physical fabric seems to reflect the wish to treat the town's past as an aspect of heritage, rather than as history as such. Built into the former concept is the notion of inheritance, something passed on from generation to generation. Though this could easily take the form of an experience or tradition, in western capitalist culture inheritance carries strong proprietorial overtones. In this context, therefore, buildings represent a tangible bequest, a solid visible link with the past. Heritage is also now deeply bound up with commercialized leisure; indeed, tourists tend to treat historic towns as grand adventure playgrounds, through which they can ramble and scramble. From this perspective what appeals are the immediate physical and visual records of the past (or modern reconstructions of them), not some cerebral history conjured up from abstruse documents and books. However, it should be emphasized that in the heritage nexus the appeal of the urban fabric is not merely a superficial one. Like images and icons, historic buildings and landscape are often charged with powerful symbolic meaning. For example, Quiney writes how 'just off the High Street' at Shaftesbury 'surprisingly unmarked and reached almost unawares, is one of the best-loved views in the country. Here town suddenly meets country, strongly evoking the past. Cobbled Gold Hill, modest stone cottages to one side, buttressed abbey walls to the other, curves down towards far-off Blackmoor in a breathtaking sweep' (p. 76). It is clear that this view is invested with a significance far beyond its immediate aesthetic appeal. It has come to represent and celebrate a lost (if idealized) harmonious relationship between town and country, which has extraordinary emotive appeal to twentieth-century urban Englishmen.

The idea of heritage clearly implies a respect and reverence for the

past, and perhaps also a scepticism, even downright antagonism, towards the present. However, it remains a matter of debate as to when that past was, and when the present is. For those whose interest in towns seems to end in about 1800 one suspects that the Industrial Revolution is the watershed. With the onset of industrialization, it might be argued, came the destruction of a traditional handicraft society - one which was politically cohesive and stable, and maintained a natural balance between town and country. Those holding this view would no doubt share the feelings Dorchester invokes in Quiney, of the 'morbid, brooding presence of Thomas Hardy, who darkened the whole Dorset scenery with his pessimistic view of frail values collapsing before the onrush of his own times' (p. 67). Others have a more positive opinion of the Victorian contribution. For them the real break with the past came at some point in the twentieth century, with the savage despoilation of historic town centres and the ascendancy of the modern movement in architecture (with its arrogant rejection of tradition). Their sense of outrage is scarcely concealed; Lloyd complains of 'appalling post-war redevelopment' in Portman Square, London (p. 145), Girouard of 'the holocaust of the 1950s' (p. 168) and 'the great holocaust of the 1960s' (p. 221), while for Chamberlin 'the twentieth century's major contribution to the creation of urban communities has been the construction of suburbs, fringing the centre with a mildew of small houses, filling stations, carpet warehouses, derelict lots and used-car showrooms' (p. 7). Lloyd does venture the thought that 'perhaps there has been too much of a reaction against high-rise housing' (p. 269), and even manages to describe Le Corbusier as an 'architectural genius and publicist' (p. 268), and Chamberlin recognizes that 'this generation's monstrosity may well be the next generation's cherished heritage' (p. 11). But the general tone of all of these volumes, implicitly or explicitly, is anti-modernist. It is likely that the authors see the traditional urban fabric as a crucial but fragile link with the past, part of a chain of continuity rudely severed in our present century. And it is this sense of continuity, this 'companionship with the past' (Girouard, p. 8) - such as might be experienced during a visit to Rye, 'the perfect picture of a town frozen in time' (Chamberlin, p. 98) - which gives modern tourists a restored sense of their own identity. Little does it matter that the past perceived and preserved may be an unreal one. Chamberlin sensibly warns that 'preservation can go too far, freezing and sterilizing a living fabric. Elm Hill in Norwich is a conservationists' *momento mori*' (pp. 187-8). However, he then rather undercuts his point by describing the street in a photographic caption as 'a model of urban preservation' (facing p. 57).

Finally, why does so much writing on the urban past directed at the general public display such a marked social bias? Recent developments in the world of museums, and even country houses, have shown that it is not impossible to incorporate the working-class experience into the heritage movement. The answer might simply be

a practical one. Prior at least to 1800, the physical remains of the better off are far more likely to survive than those of poorer people. A history of towns based on the urban fabric is therefore bound to be weighted against the latter group. The argument is less compelling for the nineteenth and twentieth centuries; moreover, why should there necessarily be an emphasis on buildings? However, one suspects that there are deeper reasons for the social selectiveness of these books. Their pricing and format suggests that they are aimed at an audience that would have little interest in discovering about urban riot, popular radicalism and working-class conflict; or of visiting the slums of industrial cities, Victorian or modern. But more important than commercial considerations is the fact that the whole concept of heritage, despite some recent developments, is infused with an acute social bias. Implicit in this is the assumption that it is the works of the great that are worthy of inheritance, and that the products of the common people are inherently ephemeral and inferior, not meriting preservation. In line with this it is significant that it is the country house which is still seen to be the foundation of the English national heritage. Girouard notes 'the National Trust's huge portfolio of country properties compared to its tiny portfolio of town ones' (p. 313), and his fierce championing of the middle class, and of its *métier* the town, can be seen as a bold challenge to aristocratic and rural domination of the heritage movement. Perhaps the redefinition of heritage needs to travel even further down the social scale? But there are limits to such cultural democratization as long as one of the primary motives for immersion in the past is status by association.

It has been the argument of this essay that popular presentations of the urban past, at least at the level of the guidebook and glossy illustrated survey, project a very particular view of a town's history. The booming academic study of urban history, with its emphasis on economic and social processes, might have helped broaden this popular perspective; but the ascendancy of political and cultural conservatism in the 1980s has seriously inhibited fertilization between the two genres. Academic historians, of course, should be aware that their own view of the urban past is value-laden and selective. It is, for example, noticeable how little post-medieval historians have to say about the urban landscape, fearful perhaps of becoming infected by the heritage bug and the virus of popularization. One approach to the problem for urban historians may be not to ignore the heritage idea, but to incorporate it within their subject. For heritage is now, and has been for a long time, deeply bound up with the meaning and function of towns. Today, more than ever, urban communities are engaged in a complex discourse with the past (imaginary or otherwise) that for many is fundamental to their livelihood and identity. A York or a Bath, a Glasgow or a Bradford are ample testimony to this. Urban historians, with their sensitivity to the historical process, can play a crucial role in analysing this

phenomenon; indeed, if they are to understand towns fully, they will - in the post-modernist world - need to place heritage as well as history on their agenda.

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