Birmingham's Built Environment in the Twentieth Century: commentary and bibliography

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## CONTENTS

### INTRODUCTORY ESSAY

1. Birmingham’s built environment from medieval to Victorian times 1
2. The development of Birmingham’s built environment in the twentieth century 2

### BIBLIOGRAPHY

#### 1. General histories

- Growth of the city: medieval and early modern 7
- Growth of the city: nineteenth and twentieth centuries 8

#### 2. Housing

- General 9
- Georgian housing 9
- Victorian housing 9
- Working-class and slum housing 10
- Municipal (or social) housing 10
- Private-sector housing (see also ‘Suburbs’) 11
- Philanthropic housing: Bournville 11

#### 3. Planning

- Planning pre-c. 1939 12
- Post-war redevelopment (especially city centre) 13
- Urban clearance and renewal (from 1970s) 14
- Urban regeneration (from mid-1980s into the 2000s) 14
- Birmingham Heartlands Development Corporation 16
- Economic development: especially built environment implications 17
- Planning, culture and society 18
- Other planning-related issues 18
- Alternative (unofficial) visions for the city 20
- Different views of social and professional groups 21
- Other Local Planning Authority documentation (including that prepared by consultants) 21

#### 4. Infrastructure

- Parks, gardens and recreation 22
- Transport 23
- Water supply and sewerage 24
- Others 25

#### 5. Industry

- Industry before c. 1840 25
- Industry 1840-1945 26
- Industry in the post-war period 26
- The Jewellery and Gun Quarters 27
6. Architecture
   - Archaeological evidence  
   - Churches and other religious buildings  
   - Secular buildings

7. The Urban Landscape
   - Townscape
   - Conservation and heritage
   - Education: the universities and schools
   - Suburbs

8. Local History Photographic Publications (a small sample)

9. Local History Sources

10. Other sources of relevant information
Birmingham's built environment from medieval to Victorian times

Birmingham was a comparatively small market town until the seventeenth century. It therefore has neither copious written records nor spectacular early buildings to attract historians. Such interest as historians have shown has been concerned with the economic development of the town. Holt's essay, *The early history of the town of Birmingham, 1166-1600*, is the best academic study of the early town. Skipp's *A history of Greater Birmingham down to 1830* is for a more general readership and includes the villages that were absorbed by the growing industrial city. Skipp also published an excellent book on *Medieval Yardley* based on the researches of a university extra-mural class. Medieval church studies from greater Birmingham loom large in the early volumes of the *Transactions of the Birmingham Archaeological Society*, as do analyses of the few remaining timber-framed buildings. The *Transactions* also contain a study of early Edgbaston, by Chatwin, which was later republished as a book. Archaeology adds to the story with excavation reports on Weoley Castle and Birmingham's moated manor house.

Researchers interested in the growing early-modern industrial town have the considerable advantage of a detailed survey of 1553. Hopkins's book, *Birmingham, the first manufacturing town in the world, 1760-1840*, is the most recent academic treatment of this period but, again, is entirely economic and social in its emphasis. It says almost nothing explicitly on the environmental history of the town (although much is implicit). One of the most important new areas of development in the eighteenth century was the Colmore estate to the north of the early core of the town. This was to form the basis of both the office quarter of the developing Victorian town centre and the manufacturing district of the Jewellery Quarter. Its development is one of the case studies in Chalklin's *The provincial towns of Georgian England*. There are a number of important studies of Birmingham's Georgian houses in the *TBAS* and a book, by Hill and Dent, *Memorials of Old Square*, which re-populates the Georgian houses around the square.

From about 1770, Birmingham's developing industrial base meant that its population expanded rapidly. Earlier growth had infilled every garden and courtyard in the older part of the town and so, increasingly, new building took place on the urban fringe. Purpose-built working-class housing in Birmingham took on distinctive regional characteristics: specifically the back-to-back courtyard of dwellings. There has been much academic interest in analysing this housing and its consequent slum living conditions over the past thirty years. This work considers both the specifics of Birmingham, and compares it with other industrial cities. As conditions in the town centre deteriorated to the considerable detriment of the health of inhabitants, those who could afford to do so left for the suburbs. The carefully-planned development of their Edgbaston estate by the Gough-Calthorpe family and their agents gave Birmingham one of the most distinctive Victorian middle-class suburbs. Cannadine's study of *Lords and landlords: the aristocracy and the towns, 1774-1967*, uses Edgbaston as a principal example.

The developing built environment of the Victorian city (and much else besides) is splendidly summarized in Skipp's *The making of Victorian Birmingham*. There are surprisingly few overviews of the physical development of Birmingham. Cherry's
Birmingham: a study in geography, history and planning is the most recent 'academic' study, but his strength is in twentieth-century planning history. Upton's A history of Birmingham concentrates just on the city and has a wealth of topographical information for all periods, including the nineteenth century. However, there are numerous thematic books which use Birmingham and other cities as case studies. These include Kellett's book on The impact of railways on Victorian cities, for example, as well as Briggs' seminal Victorian cities, which is more concerned with government than environment. The end of the nineteenth century was marked by a number of major histories which provide contemporary commentary on recent growth and development. Langford's Modern Birmingham and its institutions dates from the 1870s; whilst Dent's Old and new Birmingham: a history of the town and its people was published in 1880 and republished with a new title in 1894. The first two volumes of the modern History of Birmingham, by Gill and Briggs respectively, continue this tradition, but contain far less topographical information.

There is little published on Birmingham's industrial areas, (as against its industries) other than the jewellery district, and a few studies of early mills. The British Association handbooks of 1886 and 1913 provide summary information but it is the innovative handbook of 1950 which puts this in broader geographical context. There are excellent period studies by Johnson and Wise on industry, as well as good surveys of the spatial growth of the city in early modern, industrial and modern times.

The development of Birmingham's built environment in the twentieth century

Conventionally, the development of Birmingham throughout the twentieth century may be described as expansion (to about the Second World War), redevelopment (to about 1975) and retrenchment (to the end of the century). This is covered in many sources, the best of which are Development Department, City of Birmingham: Developing Birmingham 1889-1989, for a general readership, and Cherry, Birmingham: a study in geography, history and planning, for a more academic overview.

It is certainly true that the area administered by the City Council expanded vastly during the century as the industrial population grew and required housing. Farmland was converted to housing estates, both of speculative semi-detached suburbia and municipal housing. Traces of this process can still be seen today in terms of surviving estate (field) boundaries, trees and hedgerows, place names, and a few pre-urban farmhouses. Birmingham was among the country's leaders in municipal housebuilding in this period (Manzoni, The production of fifty thousand municipal houses). Infrastructure to support these urban functions was also developed, although much depended upon late-Victorian origins: drainage and sewerage, gas and electricity, water supply from the Elan Valley in Wales, and the expansion of the network of public parks and open spaces.

From the middle of the century outward growth slowed, with the exception of the acquisition of the Royal Borough of Sutton Coldfield in the 1960s. The poor condition of much nineteenth-century building stock, both residential and commercial, had already been recognised; and bomb damage provided some impetus for slum clearance and comprehensive redevelopment schemes in much of the city's middle ring districts. Much, although not all, of the new municipal housing was provided as system-built blocks of flats, some 400 in all. Industrial redevelopment proposed the sweeping-away of established districts such as the Jewellery Quarter and their replacement with 'flatted factories' and factory units. Inner and middle ring roads were planned,
together with much new infrastructure including the country's first 'grade separated interchange' outside the capital, at Perry Barr. Significant private redevelopment also occurred with, for example, the Bull Ring, advertised as Europe's first major covered shopping centre. The National Exhibition Centre, partly owned by the City, was constructed at the edge of the city next to the airport.

The general national economic downturn had a significant impact on the city's built form, resulting from the general reduction in traditional heavy industry (City Council, *The Birmingham Economy Review and Prospectus*). This led to the under- or dis-use of many industrial buildings, and their decay and demolition. Municipal development programmes virtually ceased. Where funding was available, though, Birmingham produced some innovative housing rehabilitation programmes, such as the 'envelope' scheme.

From the late 1980s a new economic and political enterprise culture led to a series of 'flagship' schemes, including the National Indoor Arena, the International Convention Centre and Symphony Hall, and Brindleyplace. These, and promotions such as bids for international games and festivals, and for the Millennium development, put Birmingham and its urban environment in the international eye. The redeveloped Bullring and iconic Selfridges building – also appearing on a Post Office stamp – has still further raised the city's profile. A wide range of public and private developments and environmental improvements has also occurred, along with a rising consciousness of conservation and of urban design. Some schemes have had a protracted gestation, however, as the economy, planning fashions, and public involvement have changed: for example the Bullring redevelopment, first proposed in 1987, only began on site in 1999. The Eastside regeneration seems likely to have an equally protracted gestation period.

This traditional story, simply viewing the changes to buildings, spaces and infrastructure, is only a partial view. Two other aspects deserve consideration, and are included (to a limited extent) in this bibliography.

First is the fact that one needs to explore the motivations behind changes to the built fabric itself. These include structural, economic and even personal factors. Structurally, one cannot ignore the growing importance of the town planning system throughout this period; and the continual production of Acts, Circulars and – most recently – national and regional Planning Policy Guidance Notes. The economy, and awareness of its cyclical fluctuations, determines the funding available for development and redevelopment. The importance of the changing planning system and economy is shown in the case of retail development by Larkham and Westlake, 'Retail change and retail planning'. Personal factors and such things as party political allegiance may determine priorities, and indeed whether proposals are put forward at all.

Secondly there is the experience of those involved in the processes of the production of the built environment. Public participation in planning is a product of only the last 30 or so years. It is difficult to chart the experiences of those affected by developments earlier in the century, although some oral history records attempt this. Otherwise, much recorded public response has been critical of process and result (Heywood and Naz, *Clearance: the View from the Street*). The socio-economic impacts of some, at least, of the major projects have been problematic (Loftman and Nevin, 'Prestige urban regeneration projects'). And, of course, the views of the public are generally not those of the professionals (Hubbard, 'Attitudes to redevelopment').
Key themes for the selection

This realisation of the range of issues affecting the study of the built form leads to some key themes for the selection of bibliographic items. Inevitably, too, a list of sources dealing with the built environment will overlap with other sections in this bibliography: political, economic and social histories, industrial development, etc. For example, housing renewal needs to be considered along with the changing socio-economic profile of population, and arguably we should also consider some of the experiences of those managing the process or living in those houses (Heywood and Naz, Clearance: the View from the Street); industrial change has to be considered along with the wider economic and structural changes (for example as set out in the major ESRC study conducted by Spencer et al., Crisis in the Industrial Heartland).

This list therefore contains much more than descriptions of individual buildings and urban landscapes: in fact, these form a minority. More commonly, consideration of the built environment – particularly its development and management, as opposed to descriptions of its form – requires broad consideration of issues such as the local planning system, politics, economic development, policy development and implementation – for example as with the example of Birmingham Heartlands and the East Birmingham urban renewal through the mechanism of the Heartlands Urban Development Corporation.

This broad view of the built environment is in line with the development of the academic study of this subject – urban morphology. Earlier studies were largely descriptive 'snapshots' (Stedman, ‘The townscape of Birmingham in 1956', which should be compared with ‘Making sense of Birmingham's townscape' by Whitehand, published four decades later). More recently it is the process of the production of the built environment that is explored – including the identification of the agents responsible for change, exploration of their motivations, the legal, administrative and socio-economic context within which they operate (for example Barrett, ‘Townscape change and local planning management').

The bibliography is organised thematically and chronologically, so we have general and specialist texts, texts dealing with issues across the city, those dealing with particular locations. Chronologically, we have identified significant shifts in types of thinking, and the associated policies and activities, between different periods. For example, Birmingham was an important focus for early planning: Bournville, the activities of Chamberlain and Nettlefold amongst others (leading to the broad influence of Birmingham's experience in the national development of planning thought) and the very early adoption of the Town Planning Schemes in the Harborne/Weoley Castle area. The significant personal initiative of one individual in proposing a complete redesign of much of the city centre should not be overlooked, particularly as it indirectly resulted in the still-incomplete ‘civic quarter' (Haywood, The Development of Birmingham: an Essay). More recently, there have been significant shifts in the local authority policy, with a greater emphasis upon urban design by the local planning authority (again, in commissioning of the Birmingham Urban Design Strategy the city is a national innovator) and upon greater environmental sustainability by the Environmental Services Department.

The bibliography also reflects the broad interests of scholars – particularly geographers – in documenting the changing form of the city: industrialisation, suburban sprawl, redevelopments, de-industrialisation, regeneration, heritage and conservation. In addition, there are accounts of particular institutional interventions which have changed perceptions or even policies, or have spurred particular publications. Examples include the visits of the British Association for the Advancement of Science (resulting in, for example, Gerrard and Slater's edited collection Managing a Conurbation), the celebration of city status, and the Highbury urban design
initiative.

**Editorial method**

In common with many other towns and cities, the built environment of Birmingham during the twentieth century has been recorded in a fragmentary and episodic fashion. Birmingham appears as a passing example in much literature on many issues, such as the development of architectural styles (the favourable comments on a few houses in H. Muthesius' *The English House*, 1904, for example), high rise housing, urban renewal, and so on; yet these can scarcely merit inclusion in a bibliography such as this.

Likewise, the experience of Birmingham has been heavily used in national and international comparative studies. A few examples of this literature are given in order that Birmingham can be seen in a wider context (Loftman and Nevin, ‘Going for growth'; Webman, *Reviving the Industrial City*).

Instead, we concentrate on books, chapters and papers (rather than electronic material and ephemerae) where the principal focus is on Birmingham; for example Sutcliffe's contribution on the early-twentieth century resistance to high-rise flats in his edited collection *Multi-Storey Living*. Infrastructure, from the inner ring road to the provision of public parks, is included. Where the infrastructure or the ecology (from the Elan Valley aqueduct and River Tame catchment area) is remote or larger but still has an impact on the built environment, these studies have also been included. Items that focus on the built environment through another aspect, such as the works of Birmingham architects or the agents and agencies of urban change, may be included here.

A substantial number of items are drawn from the relevant Departments of Birmingham City Council. Some were published and quite widely available in the City; others had much more limited circulation, but all are available in the Central Reference Library's local collection. Such documents are of increasing importance in the post-war period with the rise of the formal town planning system. Their scope is broad: from statutory plans to newer themes such as conservation and urban design.

We include a number of higher degree theses – particularly products of the Centre for Urban and Regional Studies at the University of Birmingham – especially where such material is not otherwise generally available. These theses are available in the Heslop Room of the University Library.

Lastly, we include a small sample of a fast-growing literature: the local history studies, particularly photographic, that focus on specific areas or aspects within the City.

We have generally not included manuscript material – including the range of photographic and cartographic material in the Central Reference Library's Local Studies Collection – or newspaper reports and related commentary, although both can form important sources of information on the changing built environment (see Sutcliffe, in *Multi-Storey Living*, for an example of its use). Promotional literature from developers also exists, from the 1960s Bull Ring to the late-1990s Arena Central proposal. Short notes on individual buildings can be found, for example in the *Architects' Journal*; but we have restricted ourselves to more substantial commentaries. Lastly, for specific development proposals, the planning files of the local authority are detailed and invaluable (again see, for example, Barrett, 'Townscape change and local planning management', for the use of this type of material).
Note that, for consistency, City Council publications are listed under “City Council”, although some give individual Departments or merely “City of Birmingham”.

Acknowledgement

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**Growth of the city: nineteenth and twentieth centuries**


2. Housing

General

Bournville Village Trust (1941) When we build again: a study based on research into conditions of living and working in Birmingham Allen & Unwin, London. [Of wide national influence in the period of post-Second World War reconstruction.]

Nettlefold, J.S. (1908) Practical housing Garden City Press, Letchworth. [Key text developed using Birmingham examples, by important local politician.]


Georgian housing


Victorian housing


Working-class, and slum housing


Municipal (or social) housing

Anon. (1901) The housing of the labouring classes Birmingham Reference Library 156537.


Manzoni, H. (1939) The production of fifty thousand municipal houses City Council, Birmingham. [Manzoni was the long-serving and influential City Engineer and Surveyor].


Sutcliffe, A.R. (undated) The production of municipal houses in Birmingham 1939-1966,


**Private-sector housing (see also ‘Suburbs’)**


Calthorpe Estate (undated) *Window on Edgbaston* Calthorpe Estate, Birmingham.


**Philanthropic housing: Bournville**

Anon. (1922) *Bournville housing* Bournville Village Trust, Birmingham.


41.


Harvey, W.A. (1906) The model village and its cottages. Batsford, London. [Harvey was architect of most of the early Bournville housing development.]


See also ‘urban renewal’, which concentrated on housing issues

3. Planning

Planning pre-c. 1939


Cadbury, G. (1915) Town planning with special reference to the Birmingham schemes, Longmans Green, London.


Post-war redevelopment (especially city centre)


Cadbury, P. (1952) Birmingham – fifty years on Bournville Village Trust, Birmingham


Manzoni, H. (1943) Duddeston and Nechells redevelopment area, Report to the Public Works Committee (bound with the Committee’s Minutes, Central Reference Library, Local Studies).


Urban clearance and renewal (from 1970s)


Urban regeneration (from mid-1980s into the 2000s)

Centre for Urban and Regional Studies, University of Birmingham.

Bianchini, F., Fisher, M., Montgomery, J. and Worpole, K.: *City centres, city cultures: the role of the arts in the revitalization of towns and cities*: Centre for Local Economic Strategies, Manchester. [Significant Birmingham examples in wider context.]


The City’s series of local area studies in this period are helpful: for example

City Council (1987) Handsworth/Soho/Lozells: area studies Development Department, City Council, Birmingham.

Birmingham Heartlands Development Corporation


Heartlands Ltd, Birmingham.

Birmingham Heartlands Ltd, Birmingham.

Birmingham Heartlands PLC (1996) Bordesley urban village: the partners and their investment
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Economic development: especially built environment implications

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City Council (undated) Birmingham action plan: economic strategy City Council,
Birmingham.


Routledge, London.


Planning, culture and society


Other planning-related issues


Evans, J. (2004) *Political ecology, scale and the reproduction of urban space: the case of Vincent Drive* Working Paper no. 66, School of Geography, Earth and Environmental Science, University of Birmingham. [This is the site of part of the new Queen Elizabeth Hospital, a major store, etc.]


Goodey, B. (1971) *City-scene: an exploration into the image of central Birmingham as seen by area residents*, Research Memorandum 10, Centre for Urban and Regional Studies, University of Birmingham.


**Alternative (unofficial) visions for the city**


Birmingham for People (1991) *Rebuilding Broad Street: planning for people at Brindley Place,*
Birmingham for People, Birmingham.


Birmingham for People’s Women’s Group (undated) *Women’s access to architecture and the built environment*, Birmingham for People’s Women’s Group, Birmingham.


Haywood, W. (1918) *The development of Birmingham: an essay* Kynoch, Birmingham. [A personal view; almost an “outline plan”. Haywood was appointed Special Lecturer in Town Planning at the University of Birmingham largely on the basis of this.]


**Different views of social and professional groups**


**Other Local Planning Authority documentation (including that prepared by consultants) – a sample**

City Council (1952) *City of Birmingham development plan: written statement*, City Council, Birmingham.

City Council (1960) *Development plan: statement and maps, as approved by the Minister of Housing and Local Government 21 December 1960* City Council, Birmingham.

City Council (1973) *Structure plan for Birmingham: written statement* City Council, Birmingham.

City Council (1980) *Central area district plan* City Council, Birmingham.
City Council (1989) *Birmingham: a greener future: a nature conservation strategy for the 1990s* Department of Recreation and Community Services, City Council, Birmingham.


City Council (1993) *The green action plan: the environment in Birmingham* Environmental Policy Unit, City Council, Birmingham.

City Council (1996) *Soho Road shopping centre: draft local action plan* Department of Planning and Architecture, City Council, Birmingham.

City Council (undated) *City centre strategy* Department of Planning and Architecture, City Council, Birmingham.

City Council (undated) *A transport strategy for Birmingham* Department of Transportation, City Council, Birmingham.


*Urban Design Studies: framework strategy and Quarter Plans (sample)*

Tibbalds, Colbourne, Karski, Williams (1990) *Birmingham urban design strategy* City Council, Birmingham. [Popularly referred to as BUDS.]

City Council (1998) *Bull Ring/Markets Quarter: planning and urban design framework* Department of Planning and Architecture, City Council, Birmingham.


*Design guides (sample; some others are under specific location headings)*

City Council (2001) *Places for all* Planning Department, City Council, Birmingham. [Promoting generic good design.]

City Council (2001) *Places for living* Planning Department, City Council, Birmingham. [Design guidance for residential development of all forms.]

City Council (2003) *High places* Strategic Directorate of Development, City Council, Birmingham. ["A planning policy framework for tall buildings."]

City Council (undated) *Designing for parent and child: guidance notes* Department of
Architecture and Planning, City council, Birmingham.

City Council (undated) Car park design guide Department of Architecture and Planning, City Council, Birmingham.

4. Infrastructure

Parks, gardens and recreation


City Council (1892) Public parks and pleasure grounds City Council, Birmingham.

City Council, Parks, Smallholdings and Allotments Department (1973) The parks and open spaces of Birmingham City Council, Birmingham.


Transport


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MacMorran, J.L. (1973) Municipal public works and planning in Birmingham, 1852-1972, Public Works Committee, City Council, Birmingham. [Includes municipal road improvement works.]
Manzoni, H. (1961) ‘The Inner Ring Road, Birmingham’, *Proceedings of the Institution of Civil Engineers* vol. 18 [Also issued as a pamphlet apparently by the City Council.]


The Yearbooks of the City Council's Public Works Department are also a useful source.

**Water supply and sewerage**


MacMorran, J.L. (1973) *Municipal public works and planning in Birmingham, 1852-1972*, Public Works Committee, City Council, Birmingham.  [Includes water infrastructure such as the Elan Valley reservoirs and aqueduct.]


The Yearbooks of the City Council's Public Works Department are also a useful source.

See also Auden (1913) below.

**Others**

Auden, G.A. (ed.) (1913) *A handbook for Birmingham and its neighbourhood: prepared for the meeting of the British Association* British Association, Birmingham.  [Chapters on water supplies, gas, electricity, public open spaces, tramways, hospitals, schools, the University of Birmingham.]

British Association (1886) *Handbook of Birmingham prepared for the meeting of the British Association* British Association, Birmingham.  [Chapters on education, libraries, charitable institutions, churches and industry amongst others.]

Muirhead, J.H. (ed.) (1911) *Birmingham institutions: lectures given at the University* Cornish, Birmingham.  [Papers on industry, the University, hospitals, School of Art, BMI, council schools, free libraries, the Museum and Art Gallery, and King Edward’s Schools.]

**5. Industry**


**Industry before c. 1840**


**Industry 1840-1945**


**Industry in the post-war period**

Community Development Project (1975) *The costs of industrial change*. CDP/Home Office, London. [Saltley was one of 7 cases.]


The Jewellery and Gun Quarters


6. Architecture

Archaeological evidence


Churches and other religious buildings


City Council (undated) *Sacred spaces: a guide to Birmingham’s varied religious buildings* Department of Planning and Architecture, City Council, Birmingham.


Foster, A. (2005) *Birmingham Pevsner Architectural Guides*, Yale University Press, New Haven.  *[For the city centre, replaces Pevsner and Wedgwood, 1966. Churches are given some prominence; this incorporates some of Foster's research on Birmingham churches.]*


**Secular buildings**


Simcox, J.W. (1896) *Some records of an old house* Cornish, Birmingham.  [Stratford Place.]


Tyack, G. (1994) Warwickshire country houses Phillimore, Chichester. [Includes Aston Hall, Billesley, Edgbaston, Castle Bromwich.]

Various decade-by-decade guides, published during the 1990s, including:


City Council (1997) Signalling the 60s: 1960s Architecture in Birmingham Department of Planning and Architecture, City Council, Birmingham.

Various individual buildings are featured from time to time in the Royal Institute of British Architects, West Midlands Region, Yearbook, and the journals Architecture West Midlands (1970-1980s) and Architects' Journal.

7. The Urban Landscape

Townscape


**Conservation and heritage**


**Local Planning Authority publications**


Various subject- and area-specific design guides including:

City Council (1998) *Bournville village: conservation area design guide* Department of Planning and Architecture, City Council, Birmingham.

City Council (undated) *Bournville village character appraisal* Department of Planning and Architecture, City Council, Birmingham.

**The Jewellery Quarter**

City Council (2005) *Jewellery Quarter conservation area design guide* Planning Department, City Council, Birmingham.


Segal Quince Wicksteed (1987) *Jewellery industry and Jewellery Quarter development study* Segal Quince Wicksteed, Birmingham.


**Education: the universities and schools**


Mulcahy, S. et al. (1967) *The University of Aston in Birmingham: Development Plan report*
University of Aston in Birmingham.


**Suburbs**


8. Local History Photographic Publications (a small sample)


9. Local history sources


West, J. (1983) *Town records* Phillimore, Chichester. [Uses Birmingham and the West Midlands as its main examples.]
10. Other sources of relevant information

A range of national and local organisations can provide further detailed information on this topic. There is a range of local Residents' Associations, addresses of which can be obtained from the City Council. Some wider-scale voluntary amenity societies exist, including the Birmingham Civic Society, which can be contacted via the Civic Trust. National voluntary societies which have a statutory consultative role in the planning system, and often operate through local groups, include the Ancient Monuments Society, the Victorian Society, the Thirties Society, and the Twentieth Century Society. Some of these organisations publish specialist journals and other well-researched items, such as the Victorian Society's 'walking guides'.