

Post-Industrial Place, Multicultural Space: The Transformation of Leicester, c.1970-1990

Simon Gunn and Colin Hyde

Centre for Urban History

University of Leicester

Leicester LE1 7Rh

Sg201@le.ac.uk

Ch38@le.ac.uk

Abstract

Later twentieth-century Britain experienced two fundamental historical shifts: the collapse of manufacturing industry and the emergence of a multicultural society. Taking the city of Leicester as a case-study, this article explores the interconnected histories of these two processes. In the 1970s and 1980s Leicester witnessed simultaneously the sharp contraction of its manufacturing base and the creation of a large, permanent Asian community. While Leicester's manufacturing economy and industrial neighbourhoods provided both employment and places of settlement for migrant Asian populations, these populations in turn helped to mitigate the effects of rapid industrial collapse. What the example of Leicester graphically shows is how global historical processes played out in unanticipated ways in a particular urban locale.

Keywords: de-industrialization; multicultural; migration; manufacturing; community

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In the last third of the twentieth century Britain underwent a profound historical transformation. Two features of this transformation, in particular, stand out. The first was the collapse of the country's industrial and manufacturing base: the world's first industrial nation, in effect, ceased to be a manufacturing power. The second shift was social and cultural: between the mid-1960s and the 1990s Britain was transformed from a predominantly white, Anglo-Saxon Protestant country to a multicultural society in which migrant populations from former colonies in the Caribbean, South Asia and Africa represented a permanent and expanding presence. There was of course no causal connection between industrial decline and the growth of a substantial migrant population. Nevertheless, the combined impact of de-industrialization and mass migration (itself related to another long-term process, de-colonization) had powerful societal effects. This was especially the case in Britain's large towns and cities, for de-industrialization and the creation of a multicultural society were largely if not wholly urban phenomena.

Few places exemplify this dual transformation more dramatically than the Midlands city of Leicester. In an article in the *Times*, published in 1969, the transport historian Jack Simmons observed of Leicester: 'To a degree unusual for a great industrial town it [Leicester] is the product of a long evolution Its life has been a story of steady continuous adaptation to changing circumstances and opportunities'.¹ Simmons' observation was wholly typical, prefigured by other mid twentieth-century commentators such as J.B. Priestley, W.G. Hoskins and Ian Nairn who emphasized the city's long history, its lack of distinguishing architectural features and its mild, consensual social mores. As Peter Hall commented in 1973, 'every writer on Leicester seems to conclude by stressing its unproblematic character'.² Like liberal England, Leicester's economic and social history seemed to have unravelled without any revolutionary upheaval or radical change.

What these accounts of Leicester as the epitome of liberal England failed to foresee, nonetheless, was the scale and swiftness of the changes which were to overtake the city in the two decades between the 1970s and the 1990s. It was in these years that Leicester's identity as 'a great industrial town' rapidly dissolved with the collapse of one manufacturing firm after another. In the same years the city's population went from being overwhelmingly white and – apparently – monocultural to having a significantly non-white (predominantly Asian) minority, and began to be

¹ 'Leicester – a special report', *Times* 15 December 1969.

² Peter Hall 'Leicester and Leicestershire' in Hall *et al.* (eds), *The Containment of Urban England*, Volume 1 (London 1973).

branded as an exemplar of a new urban multiculturalism.³ Unlike many other British cities – London, Birmingham, Bradford – which saw steady stream of New Commonwealth migrants from the 1950s, Leicester only witnessed mass in-migration from the early 1970s.

Until now the reinvention of urban Britain as a post-industrial, multicultural society, epitomised by the experience of cities like Leicester, has received little attention from historians. This neglect can partly be attributed to the larger lack of a developed history of the post-1970 period; while historians have begun to open up the political and social history of the immediate post-war decades, they have generally stopped short of the political and industrial crisis of the 1970s, the onset of Thatcherism and subsequent urban regeneration, leaving these to political scientists, sociologists and economists.⁴ But there are also more salient reasons for the historiographical absence. So far as it has been written, the social history of Britain in the second half of the twentieth century has taken shape around a series of discrete themes: economic and industrial decline; urban planning; and the cultural politics of ‘race’ among others.⁵ The literatures on these themes do not speak to one another: how the structural decline of manufacturing impacted on the planned reconstruction of cities like Manchester or Leeds, and how such changes related to patterns of New Commonwealth migration and settlement are not questions which are generally raised. Instead, the literatures proceed down their own separate avenues of enquiry.⁶

A central purpose of this article, then, is to consider the entangled history of these various processes in a specific place, Leicester, during the last third of the twentieth century. In so doing, we

³ ‘Leicester to the first with ethnic majority’, *Times* 8 December 2000. See also the comments about Leicester in the Cantle Report following the 2001 urban riots – T. Cantle, *Community Cohesion: A Report of the Independent Review Team* (London 2002). For a more recent commentary on the same lines, ‘We’re all in this together: how Leicester became a model of multiculturalism (even if that was never the plan)’, *Independent*, 29 July 2013.

⁴ Though there has been a recent resurgence of interest in popular history – see for example Dominic Sandbrook, *State of Emergency: The Way We Were – Britain 1970-1974* (London 2010) and Andy Beckett, *When the Lights Went Out: Britain in the Seventies* (London 2010). At the time of writing two conferences were indicative of a new wave of interest, especially among younger scholars: *New Times Revisited? Examining Society, Culture and Politics in the Long 1980s*, University of Birmingham and University of Warwick, June 2013; *The Transformation of Urban Britain Since 1945*, University of Leicester, July 2013.

⁵ The literatures here are enormous but for some examples see Jean-Pierre Dormois and Michael Dintenfass (eds) *The British Industrial Decline* (London 1999); Andrew Gamble, *Britain in Decline* (London 1994); Peter Shapeley, ‘Civic pride and redevelopment in the post-war British city’, *Urban History*, 39:2 (2012), 310-328; Simon Gunn, ‘The rise and fall of British urban modernism: planning Bradford, 1945-1970’, *Journal of British Studies*, 48:3 (2010), 849-869; Elizabeth Buettner, ‘Going for an Indian: south Asian restaurants and the limits to multiculturalism in Britain’, *Journal of Modern History*, 80:4 (2008), 865-901; David Feldman, ‘Why the English like turbans: a history of multiculturalism in one country’ in D. Feldman and J. Lawrence (eds) *Structures and Transformations in British History* (Cambridge 2011), 281-302.

⁶ For a critique of the work of Gordon Cherry and other planning historians on these grounds see Wun Fung Chan, ‘Planning at the limit: immigration and post-war Birmingham’, *Journal of Historical Geography* 31 (2005): 513-27.

are interested in the larger historical questions posed by the creation of a post-industrial, multicultural urban society in modern Britain. In particular, we examine the social transformation of Leicester using changing patterns of work and employment to investigate the re-formation of community and neighbourhood in a city where neighbourhoods possessed distinct occupational characteristics and social identities. Work, we argue, was the often unacknowledged basis of neighbourhood and community, not least because work, as one social historian put it, 'got under the skin of life'.⁷

The local was likewise important because it was here that much larger forces – international flows of migration and capital for example – were registered. Local history matters, in this account, because it is the lens through which inter-connected historical processes were lived by the people concerned as well as the frame in which these processes become visible to the historian.⁸ For this reason, the source base here draws on oral testimony collected for two major projects, *Migration Stories* and *Manufacturing Pasts*, which document respectively the economic and demographic transformation of modern Leicester.⁹ Oral history enables us to capture the local, lived experience of that transformation, in conjunction with the statistical and documentary sources that illuminate the processes that issued from an increasingly interconnected, global modernity.

Leicester and Industrial Decline

The prospect of industrial decline was not on the horizon in late 1960s Leicester. The same edition of the *Times* in 1969 which labelled it a 'great industrial town' jauntily affirmed that 'the variety of trades in Leicester and district, spearheaded by a thrusting engineering industry, assures a continuance of conditions which make it one of the busiest and most prosperous cities in Britain'.¹⁰ A survey of the city in 1971 reported the claim that Leicester 'is the richest city in the United Kingdom and the second richest in Europe city in Europe after Lille', while acknowledging that it was difficult to substantiate; the claim seems to have had its roots in the inter-war period when the city avoided the worst effects of economic depression.¹¹ Prosperity was based on a number of factors,

⁷ Patrick Joyce, *Work, Society and Politics: The Culture of the Factory in Later Victorian Britain* (Brighton 1980), 97.

⁸ This kind of approach is fostered by the introduction to *International Journal of Regional and Local History*, 8:1 (2013) especially the editorial by Krista Cowman and Ian Packer and the essay by Raingard Esser.

⁹ NEED REF FOR THE TWO PROJECTS PLUS EMOHA. All interviewees have given permission for their names to be used and catalogue references are given where possible. In the case of uncatalogued interviews a link is given to the video on You Tube that features extracts from the interviews.

¹⁰ *Times*, 15 December 1969.

¹¹ W.K.Smigielski, *Leicester Today and Tomorrow* (Leicester 1971), 37.

notably the stability and importance over time of Leicester's main industries, hosiery, boot and shoe manufacture – hence the slogan 'Leicester clothes the world' – and engineering, and the opportunities for women's factory work as well as that of men, allowing for households to benefit from dual incomes. There had been periodic cracks in the economic fabric. Between the wars the boot and shoe industry suffered from overseas and domestic competition; the number of firms in Leicester almost halved, in part due to amalgamation, and there were serious strikes by women workers, an increasingly important component of the footwear labour force.¹²

However, industrial Leicester remained solidly intact in the post-1945 decades with manufacturing employing 53% of the city's workers in 1966 as against a national average of 43%. After a brief recovery, the boot and shoe sector declined as a source of employment, but engineering and new strands of manufacturing such as scientific instruments expanded to compensate in the 1950s and early 1960s.¹³ In fact, between 1950 and the early 1970s the city's manufacturing base remained buoyant despite the vicissitudes experienced by much of the national industrial economy in these years. The total of factory operatives stood at 82,458 in 1970, an increase of 1,335 over the 1947 figure. While the number of manufacturing firms in the city declined marginally over the same period from 1585 to 1572 units, the average number of workers per firm rose marginally from 51 to 52. Similarly, the pattern of firm size remained much the same between 1947 and 1970 with roughly 1 in 10 firms employing over 100 workers while almost half worked in firms with fewer than 10 operatives.¹⁴

This stability was the basis for a generalized optimism about Leicester's economy and industry, echoed in the Structure Plan for the city and region prepared in the early 1970s. The Plan stated: 'The area is fortunate in having a relatively diverse and sound industrial structure. The major industries have prospered over the years and the national indications are that many of them will grow and offer increased job opportunities.' To this end the Plan predicted a rise of almost 30,000 jobs in manufacturing between 1966 and 1991, with marked increases anticipated in both electrical engineering and hosiery in particular.¹⁵ It was an optimism that was mirrored in popular experience and expectations. John Nixon worked in a series of manual jobs as a teenager and young adult during the 1960s and his memory of the period is a common one: 'Jobs in those days were so easy to

¹² R.A. McKinley (ed), *A History of the County of Leicester: Vol. 4* (Cambridge 1958), 314-326.

¹³ East Midlands Planning Council, *The East Midlands Study* (London 1966), 154-5.

¹⁴ J.J. Fagg, 'The distribution of manufacturing industry in Greater Leicester 1947-1970' (University of Leicester PhD 1977), 74-86.

¹⁵ Leicestershire County Council, *Leicestershire Structure Plan: Written Statement* (London 1976), 93. Earlier versions of this same plan were produced; this was the version actually approved by Department of the Environment.

get, they were ten a penny, jobs. They really were, you never had to worry about a job, and when you were in a job you felt secure.’¹⁶

One side-effect of economic stability was that between the end of the Second World War and the mid-1970s Leicester possessed a series of distinct and cohesive industrial neighbourhoods. In part this was related to the long-term durability of factory-based employment but it also reflected the relative balance of the urban economy in gender terms. In 1951 39% of the city’s active workforce was female, rising to 48% in Leicester’s staple industries. In textiles women outnumbered men by 2:1, while in boot and shoe the numbers were more or less equal. In two of Leicester’s three major industries, in effect, women were a major part of the workforce while they were also a significant presence in the retail trades and education.¹⁷ Moreover, this proportion was growing so that by 1987 women made up 48% of the total labour force in the city.¹⁸ Leicester compared favourably in these respects with industrial towns and cities elsewhere in England. In 1951 women made up 37% of the workforce in Coventry, 46% in Bolton in 1961. In Coventry, dominated by engineering and vehicle manufacture, women were more likely to be employed in white-collar than industrial jobs. In the textile town of Bolton, some 35% of active women were employed in the mills in 1961, a smaller proportion than in Leicester’s staple industries.¹⁹ For Leicester’s women workers employment in manufacturing was as much part of the family inheritance as it was for men. ‘I imagined I would work in the shoe factory’, reported Tracey Joseph, an interviewee from the Highfields district of the city. ‘Our Great Gran worked in shoes. We all worked in shoes, my sister, everybody ... Mum had a top class job as a skiver in the factory and she had a skiving machine in my bedroom for doing outdoor work. Generations worked at British Shoes, whole families. Leicester was the shoe capital of the world.’²⁰

The integration of women in the workforce and the security of factory-based employment were two of the more important factors contributing to the cohesion of working-class communities in the 1950s and 1960s. Community and neighbourhood were experienced as synonymous by many in reality as well as in retrospect, as one retired architect emphasized, recalling the area in which he grew up: ‘A community in which you lived, you worked and you played, and you shopped. It was all there, that’s really what it was all about.’²¹ As well as local shops, schools, places of worship, pubs,

¹⁶ J. Nixon, East Midlands Oral History Archive (EMOHA), 1602 EM/105/YC.

¹⁷ *Census 1951, England and Wales: Industry Tables* (London 1957), 48-50.

¹⁸ David Nash and David Reeder, *Leicester in the Twentieth Century* (Stroud 1993), 84.

¹⁹ Figures from *Census 1951. England and Wales. Occupational and Industry Tables* (London, 1956); *Census 1961. England and Wales. Occupation, Industry, Socio-Economic Groups: Lancashire* (London, 1966), Table 3.

²⁰ Tracey Joseph cited in Penny Walker, *We are South Highfields* (Leicester 2012), 64. A skiver was someone who thinned the edges of leather sections for sewing together.

²¹ J. Revis, EMOHA, 1366, WS/003/2.

cinemas and youth clubs, Leicester's neighbourhoods fostered family, social and business networks that stretched over several generations. The results, of course, were not invariably benign. Social workers like Grace Fox were especially exposed to the problem of generalising and sentimentalising community: 'I think there is a danger that we stereotype this terraced community image and that wasn't happening in every household. There were people hiding in some of the houses that were run down who were in a terrible situation, isolated, having a child on their own, hiding from their family, alongside the families that had these networks'.²²

'Community' was as much a matter of shared rhythms and routines as of affective relationships. This applied to industrial places as well as rural ones as Miriam Glucksmann has shown for the Lancashire textile towns between the 1920s and the 1960s.²³ For many in Leicester's factory neighbourhoods work provided a timetable that structured the family day, as in the Revis household: 'There were factories so that people went to work and got home at lunch time, and you went home from school at lunch time, and your mum was there. Even my mum did this when she was in munitions [in the Second World War] – would be home at lunchtime – and my dad came home and we all had lunch together and then they'd go back. It was our job to wash up and then go back to school.'²⁴ Such rituals shaped daily routines not only of families and neighbourhoods but also of the city as a whole. Konrad Smigielski's *Leicester Traffic Plan* of 1964 reported the diurnal rhythm of industrial Leicester in which large populations moved back and forward between home and workplace at regulated intervals in the day.²⁵ Affective relations of kin and neighbourliness, in sum, were only one dimension of what held neighbourhoods and communities together. As the social theorist Alfred Schutz long ago observed, an integral element of what makes a community is the acceptance of a shared temporal order.²⁶

By the mid-1970s, however, the long-term durability of Leicester's staple industries was coming into question. A string of reports on the local economy commissioned by the City Council in these years highlighted the mounting concerns about the condition of the city's manufacturing base. As one such report published in 1980 commented, 'The decision to initiate the Economic Study of Leicester in 1975 was prompted by dramatic and unprecedented increases in unemployment levels in Leicester and feelings of unease with regard to the local economy'. Between 1973 and 1976, the report noted, manufacturing industry in the city lost 9,000 jobs. Employment in engineering alone

²² G. Fox, EMOHA, 1372, WS/009/8.

²³ Miriam Glucksmann, *Cotton and Casuals: The Gendered Organisation of Time and Space* (Durham 2000), ch.5.

²⁴ J. Revis, EMOHA, 1366, WS/003/2.

²⁵ Konrad Smigielski, *Leicester Traffic Plan* (Leicester 1964), 100.

²⁶ Alfred Schutz, *The Phenomenology of the Social World* (New York 1967), 163.

fell by 25% in these three years to a level below that in 1958. Losses in textiles were less dramatic, prone to five-year cycles of growth and contraction, but commentators noted that each new trough was deeper than its predecessor. Declining quality, high labour costs and, above all, overseas competition were blamed for the growing problems, while the reports themselves also expressed concern about Leicester's over-reliance on staple industries – textile machinery, clothing and footwear – that were all vulnerable to the challenge of international trade.²⁷ As the reports noted, these problems were structural, not cyclical. Whereas in 1966 manufacturing had accounted for over half of all Leicester's employment, by 1991 the figure had sunk to just over a third.²⁸ In 1992 the City Council spoke openly of 'de-industrialization' (carefully placed in inverted commas) as an inexorable trend affecting the city with unemployment rates 5% above the national average.²⁹ At the height of the recession in the early 1980s some 15% of the economically active population were unemployed, with figures as high as 38% and 45% among Asian and West Indian youth respectively.³⁰

For all the gloomy prognoses, the onset of de-industrialization in Leicester was in certain respects less sharp than in other comparable manufacturing areas of Britain; overall rates of employment in manufacturing fell less rapidly than the national average and the effects on the urban landscape were less starkly visible than in cities such as Bradford and Sheffield where whole districts were blighted by industrial dereliction.³¹ Although the engineering firm Stibbes closed abruptly in 1975, as did Imperial Typewriters, many of the major companies lasted into the 1980s and in some cases the 1990s. Hosiery employer Russell Kempton remembers the mid-1980s as being the worst period for hosiery and engineering; his firm closed in 1989.³² The collapse of manufacturing was also cushioned economically in Leicester by the growth of the service sector, especially for women and part-time workers. Unemployment among economically active men in 1983 (15.5%) was more than twice that for economically active women (6.6%).³³ There were also significant differences between parts of the city. The wards which suffered highest rates of unemployment in the trough of 1983, predictably, were the industrial suburbs immediately

²⁷ C.R. Harrison, A.R. Sills and M.T. Roper, *The Economic Structure and Performance of Leicester: Monitoring Report* (Leicester 1980). For an earlier iteration see Harrison, Sills and Roper, *Employment, Unemployment and Income* (Leicester 1976).

²⁸ The respective figures were 53% (1966), 37% (1991), 23% 2001; East Midlands Planning Council, *ibid*; Leicester City Council, *Census 1991* (Leicester 1992), employment statistics.

²⁹ John Dean, *City of Leicester Local Plan* (Leicester 1992), 55-6.

³⁰ Leicester City Council, *Survey of Leicester 1983: Initial Report* (Leicester 1983), 53.

³¹ For example, the 1991 census for Leicester showed manufacturing employment at 38% as against a national figure of 25%, Leicester City Council, *Census 1991*. The scale and nature of de-industrializing urban landscapes in British cities are best caught in photographs of the period such as those by Don McCullin, *In England* (London 2013).

³² R. Kempton, EMOHA, 1443, EM/074.

³³ Leicester City Council, *Survey of Leicester*, 38-9.

encircling the centre – Abbey, Latimer, Spinney Hills – and those of the interwar and immediate post-war period, like Saffron and North Braunstone, slightly further out.³⁴

Nevertheless, the passing of the major firms in these decades was registered as a profound psychological shock by those who worked there as well as by the firms' owners. The closure of Corah in the late 1990s, founded in Leicester in 1815 and one of the largest hosiery manufacturers in Europe for much of the twentieth century, was a prime example of the sudden fall of what was regarded as a Leicester institution. Two long-term employees, Tony and Barbara Taylor, expressed their feelings in visceral terms: 'In the end Corah became, in the main, a cotton house, it processed cottons – it did polyester and all the rest of it - it had that smell to it and it weren't until it had all gone that you realised it didn't have any smell anymore, it had gone. Dye houses always have some kind of smell, I mean, processing polyester can be pretty foul, but it was never the same again. When all that closed I can remember walking out of that door, and standing on those steps, and standing in silence. It had gone, the buzz. It had finished. It was over. (Mrs Taylor: There was always movement and always sound) Ever so sad.'³⁵ With the passing of landmark firms like Corah, Liberty and Pex, so it seemed, went an integral part of the city's identity. By the 1990s Leicester had ceased to be recognisable as a 'great industrial town' in the terms so glowingly recorded a mere quarter century before; it appeared to have become 'post-industrial'.

Planning, De-industrialization and the Making of Multicultural Leicester

The decline of industrial Leicester occurred at the same historical moment as the city's demographic profile was transformed by a substantial wave of in-migration on the part of two groups: an Indian-born population and Indians from Amin's Uganda, the so-called Ugandan or East African Asians. As we have indicated, there was no causal relationship between these developments: the East African Asians who were to become the largest single migrant presence in the city were political refugees not economic migrants.³⁶ What is not always recognised, however, is that the making of multicultural Leicester was entwined with the nature and timing of the industrial crisis between 1970 and 1990, as also with a third related process, the physical and spatial planning of the post-war British city.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ Tony & Barbara Taylor, *My Leicestershire History*, University of Leicester, 2012, <http://cdm16445.contentdm.oclc.org/cdm/ref/collection/p16445coll3/id/26> (accessed 19/7/13)

³⁶ V. Marrett, *Immigrants Settling in the City* (Leicester 1989), ch.1.

Before 1970 migrant labour and migrant communities had only a small demographic and economic presence. There had been successive waves of Irish and Jewish migration in the nineteenth and twentieth century and there were further flows of Jewish refugees in the 1930s and Caribbean workers from the 1950s.³⁷ But the numbers were few. The Irish-born peaked at 4,920 persons in 1971, 1.7% of the city's population; likewise the African Caribbean population numbered some 2,920 in 1971, roughly 1% of the total. Significantly, the major migratory phase for both these groups was the 1950s and 1960s and their respective populations were both to enter decline during the 1970s and 1980s. People self-identifying as Pakistani likewise remained a minor presence in Leicester, roughly 0.3% of the urban population in 1971, a proportion that was to increase only to 0.4% over the next twenty years.³⁸

It was the Indian populations, therefore, that were to be the catalyst for the creation of multicultural Leicester in the later twentieth century. The Indian-born population expanded from 11,364 in 1971 to 20,837 in 1991; the East African-born population grew even more dramatically, from 6,920 in 1971 to 18,621 in 1981, accelerating after their expulsion from Uganda by General Idi Amin in 1972.³⁹ By 1991 some 63,994 people in Leicester were defined as 'Asian' and 28.5% of the city's population were described as belonging to a minority ethnic group compared with 5.5% in Great Britain as a whole.⁴⁰ In general, the reasons for selecting Leicester were not substantially different from those attributed to other industrial towns, particularly places with an established textile industry like the Lancashire cotton and the West Yorkshire woollen towns. Economic opportunities in textiles and patterns of chain migration were prominent among the factors apparent in the flow of South Asian migrants to Leicester as to other manufacturing centres.⁴¹ Once established in the city, South Asian migrants followed local patterns of employment in factory-based industries, with substantial numbers of women employed from the early 1970s in firms such as Imperial Typewriters and large hosiery manufacturers such as Corah. Economic migrants were joined by political refugees, most obviously in the case of the Ugandan Asians who were to make a significant contribution to the urban economy. As Joanna Herbert has observed, by the 1990s 'Leicester boasted the highest proportion of minority ethnic population, outside the London boroughs' and the largest proportion

³⁷ For overviews of the history of different ethnic groups in Leicester see N. Jewson (ed), *Migration Processes and Ethnic Divisions* (Leicester 1995); L. Chessum, *From Migrants to Ethnic Minority: Making Black Community in Britain* (Aldershot 2000)

³⁸ Population figures for all groups from Henrietta O'Connor, *The Spatial Distribution of Ethnic Minority Communities in Leicester, 1971, 1981 and 1991: Analysis and Interpretation* (Leicester 1995).

³⁹ *Ibid.* All figures should be taken as approximate; quite apart from the usual provisos about the census data, the distinction between 'Indian-born' and 'East African Asian' was not always clearcut in the figures.

⁴⁰ Leicester City Council, *Leicester Key Facts: Census 2001* (Leicester 2003).

⁴¹ Joanna Herbert., *Negotiating Boundaries in the City: Migration, Ethnicity and Gender in Britain* (Aldershot 2008), 20.

of urban population of Indian descent in the country.⁴² In 2001 over a third of the population (36%) were from ethnic minorities, with some 30% of the population designated 'Asian'.⁴³

This demographic transformation early aroused concerns. Just as the state of the city's economy attracted increasingly urgent attention from the city's authorities in the 1970s and 1980s, so too did Leicester's ethnic minorities. In 1983 the City Council published an innocuous sounding study, the *Survey of Leicester*. This was not a general demographic or economic overview, however, but a specific enquiry into the growth and social composition of the ethnic populations, as the introduction made clear:

The 1981 Census returns indicated that some 21.3% of the population of the City of Leicester lived in households whose head was born in the New Commonwealth or Pakistan ... Until now the local authorities have lacked accurate information about the size and character of Leicester's various minority communities. Both Councils [City and County] had hoped that a question on ethnic origin would have been included in the 1981 Census of Population. After a review of the data which confirmed their fears that the Census would not provide the information which they needed, they decided to undertake a sample survey on a joint basis.⁴⁴

Using broad categories of 'white' (including the Irish), Asian and West Indian people, the *Survey* examined a range of socio-economic variables, from rates of employment to car ownership. Based on a sample of Leicester households it sketched spatial distribution by ethnicity in different parts of the city, although this was only detailed on a ward basis by later analysis of the Small Area Statistics.⁴⁵ It was not until 1991 that a direct question on ethnic self-identification was included in the Census questionnaire.

What the *Survey* and the studies of ethnic Leicester that followed sought to measure – almost obsessively, it seems in retrospect – was the degree of social segregation of Asian, black and white populations. The official discourses of multiculturalism articulated in the 1980s were expressive of a concern about the social and political effects of ethnic separatism as much as they

⁴² Herbert, *Negotiating Boundaries*, 21-22.

⁴³ Office for National Statistics, *Census 2001. Key Statistics for Local Authorities in England and Wales* (London 2003), 89.

⁴⁴ Leicester City Council and Leicestershire City Council, *Survey of Leicester 1983: Initial Report* (Leicester 1983), 11.

⁴⁵ An early example can be seen in the maps produced in A.J.Strachan, *Atlas of Leicester* (Leicester 1985), esp. Maps 9.13-9.17.

were about celebrating diversity; in the aftermath of the 1981 and 1985 urban riots it could hardly be otherwise, though Leicester itself saw only sporadic disturbances in multi-ethnic neighbourhoods such as Highfields.⁴⁶ The 1983 *Survey* thus detailed for the first time the residential concentration of ethnic populations in different areas of the city.⁴⁷ It showed the socio-spatial division of the city by language, religion and diet. It revealed that 23% of the Asian population, predominantly women and the elderly, spoke no English. At the same time it suggested to those who examined the findings carefully, the fragmentation of the categories of 'Asian', 'black' and 'white' into multiple distinct communities characterized as Gujarati or Urdu-speaking, Hindu or Muslim religion, nuclear or extended families. Accordingly, Leicester appeared in the *Survey* as an urban society not so much divided into the blunt categories determined by the authorities as splintered into myriad sub-groups in which the sole common denominator appeared to be economic, the need to engage in productive activity.

From our viewpoint here, the significance of the spatial distribution of the ethnic minority population in Leicester apparent in these studies lies less in the extent to which segregation was (or was not) occurring, than in the patterns of settlement themselves. By the early 1990s official sources were showing unequivocally the high levels of Asian concentration in specific parts of the city. Statistics derived from the 1991 census revealed that Asian people made up near half or more of the population in nine of the city's 28 wards: Abbey, Belgrave, Charnwood, Crown Hills, Latimer, Rushey Mead, Spinney Hill, Stoneygate and Wycliffe. In Crown Hills, Latimer and Spinney Hill, Asian people composed between 67% and 71% of the total population.⁴⁸ What characterized these areas was their location in or close to the old industrial neighbourhoods that engirded the city centre. The 1952 Development Plan for Leicester had noted the spatial ordering of the city's staple industries: hosiery next to the river and canal 'in a ring around the Central Area', including Abbey and Belgrave; engineering principally located in the northern and eastern wards such as Latimer and Crown Hills; footwear spread across the city, including parts of Wycliffe and Spinney Hill wards.⁴⁹ In effect, there was a striking correlation between the zones of ethnic minority settlement in the 1970s and 1980s and the areas of contemporaneous industrial decline.

⁴⁶ The literature on the riots is voluminous but see John Benyon, *Crime, Disadvantage, Politics and Disorder: Social Disintegration and Conflict in Contemporary Britain* (Leicester 1993).

⁴⁷ The *Survey* was made up 35 tables with accompanying maps and diagrams, and a commentary that drew attention to the most significant differences between the broadly-conceived ethnic groups.

⁴⁸ Leicester City Council, *Ethnic Minorities in Leicester: Facts from the 1991 Census* (Leicester 1996), 8.

⁴⁹ John Beckett, *City Development Plan: Written Analysis* (Leicester 1952), 101.

There were a number of obvious reasons for this pattern of settlement, which were not unique to Leicester.⁵⁰ To begin with there was the need for first-generation and other migrants to live close to places of work, which were frequently manufacturing sites: in a 1987 survey some 64% of economically active Asian men and 57% of Asian women were employed in the manufacturing sector in Leicester, over twice the proportion among the white population. Some 78% of Asian men and 69% of Asian women at the same date lived within 20 minutes travel of their workplace and a third within ten minutes.⁵¹ New migrants, above all Indian and East African Asians, settled in significant numbers into the old industrial neighbourhoods because they were close to factory employment.

But there were also more complex reasons at play in shaping the pattern of settlement, not least the effects of slum clearance on inner-city areas, implemented by local authorities under the promptings of central government. Slum clearance started in Leicester in the 1930s and continued intermittently to the mid-1970s. Planned clearance focused in the immediate post-war decades on what were perceived as the worst areas of inner slum housing, such as Wharf Street.⁵² As in other British cities new suburban council estates were also built at New Parks, Saffron Lane and Braunstone, mainly to house white families from the old central districts. But slum clearance in the main band of nineteenth-century housing around Leicester's city centre area was relatively slow and patchy, not least because it was here that the majority of Leicester's major manufacturing works remained located. No large industrial estates were developed outside the central area in Leicester, like Trafford Park in Manchester or Team Valley in Gateshead. The 1952 Development Plan instead proposed to retain the majority of manufacturing industry in its existing central location along with the large tracts of Victorian terraced housing for factory workers. By the 1960s the Council had begun to target some of this housing for demolition in areas such as Belgrave, St Matthews and the West End. Progress by this time was hampered by stop-go government funding and contradictory policies – from 1969 the Council began to favour grants for the restoration of later Victorian housing – which meant that areas such as these were often left in a limbo state.⁵³ As Leicester's industries themselves began to suffer while local authorities lacked the funding or, increasingly, the will to pursue large-scale clearance and redevelopment, such areas became 'twilight zones', marked by

⁵⁰ See Badra Dahya, 'The nature of Pakistani ethnicity in industrial cities in Britain' in A. Cohen (ed), *Urban Ethnicity* (London, 1974) for examples of similar patterns of settlement in Bradford and Birmingham.

⁵¹ K.B. Duffy and I.C. Lincoln, *Earnings and Ethnicity: Principal Report on Research Commissioned by Leicester City Council* (Leicester 1990), 29, 47.

⁵² Ned Newitt, *The Slums of Leicester* (Leicester 2009), 5ff.

⁵³ Smigielski, *Leicester Today* 39-42. A fully-fledged policy of providing grants for the restoration of existing older housing was instigated by Leicester's Labour council in 1975. For a fuller account of clearance policy see Newitt, *Slums*, 13-24.

cheap housing and dwindling facilities in terms of shops, schools and services. It was an urban condition aptly caught in the account of an Indian businessman, Suraj Khandelwal, who sought a shop to sell saris in the 1970s:

When I saw one shop in Belgrave Road I went to the City Council to ask them what the future of the shop was. They replied by saying the area was under the demolition, but there was no time scale. So I stood there and thought for a few minutes as to whether take this risk or not, but decided to take a plunge and aim for these premises. The mainstream shops moved to the city centre so many shops became vacant. Many Asian people started to buy business premises as they were cheap.⁵⁴

The multicultural city of the late twentieth century, in effect, was formed at the intersection of a series of formally unrelated historical processes. In centres of manufacturing like Leicester, the pattern of Asian settlement was not simply a product of cheap available housing or racist Council policy. Post-war council housing was designed for white working-class populations because no large-scale in-migration from the new Commonwealth or elsewhere was envisaged in the Development Plans of the 1950s which laid the framework for slum clearance and rehousing.⁵⁵ Equally, the preference of migrants for cheap, often sub-standard housing, does not explain why housing in the areas of settlement was in this condition. Understanding these patterns in Britain's industrial cities like Leicester means investigating the connections between long-term city planning; industrial policy shaped at local as well as national level; and the corrosive effects of de-industrialization evident not only in the successive collapse of manufacturing firms but also in the deteriorating fabric of industrial neighbourhoods themselves. It was these conditions that created the 'inner city', a term connoting poverty, social problems and ethnic populations which entered public discourse in Britain from the mid-1960s.⁵⁶

The (post-)industrial and the multicultural were further imbricated by the direct engagement of Asian communities in Leicester's manufacturing economy. Aspects of this engagement have already been noted: the pull of factory-based employment, especially in textiles, to Asian migrant populations seeking work; and the high levels of Asian employment in the city's manufacturing

⁵⁴ Bill Law and Tim Haq, *Belgrave Memories: Tales of Belgrave Transcripts, 1945-2005* (Leicester 2007), 197.

⁵⁵ This of course is not say that housing policy was not racist in practice by the 1960s, as sociologists like John Rex and Robert Moore argued in the late 1960s – Rex and Moore, *Race, Community and Conflict: A Study of Sparkbrook* (London 1969).

⁵⁶ Like other terms such as 'urban renewal' the concept of the 'inner city' seems to have been borrowed from the United States. It was used in the Local Government Act of 1966 to allocate grants to minority migrant populations for the first time, thus indicating its racially-inflected meanings, Gordon Cherry, *Cities and Plans* (London 1991), 176-7.

sector, especially its staple industries: a fifth of economically active Asian men (21%) in 1987 were employed in engineering, for instance, almost a third of Asian women (32%) in hosiery and knitwear.⁵⁷ Women's engagement in the paid economy was especially important among Indian groups, enabling families to purchase rather than rent housing and providing greater security in the new society.⁵⁸ Rates of full-time employment among South Asian groups in 1980s Leicester were higher than for any other section of the population, with 60% actively occupied compared with 56% among the white majority.⁵⁹ In many cases migrants were seen to compensate for shortage of white labour. A former manager at Corah recalled, 'I think it was the female side where this was most noticeable, it wasn't so much on the male side ... quite frankly, just as well because we couldn't get sufficient of the home product.'⁶⁰ But a further factor was the lower wages received by Asian workers compared to their white counterparts, some 10% less in engineering for men and a similar level in hosiery and knitwear for women according to a 1990 survey - this in a situation of chronic low pay, where average gross earnings in Leicester had sunk to two-thirds the UK average for both men and women.⁶¹ Unequal and low pay could become combustible issues when combined with 'race' in workplace relations, as at Imperial Typewriters where a major nationally-reported strike took place in 1974 over suggestions that management was ignoring the claims for promotion of Asian and black employees in favour of their white co-workers; and in campaigns in the 1980s to expose the use of sweated labour in the Leicester textile trade.⁶²

Increasingly, though, Asian groups began to engage in the manufacturing economy as entrepreneurs and employers in their own right, as a series of investigations in the 1980s revealed. The East African Indian community was especially active in this sphere, although it was by no means confined to them. Jaffer Kapasi, who was to become a successful business leader in Leicester, put the matter bullishly:

[In the 1970s] the garment and textile industry was completely in decline. Particularly the Ugandan Asians, we revived it – and also quite a few Asians who had come from Malawi as well - so we actually created a new business which lasted another 30 or 40 years. I know we used to export quite a lot of garment manufacturing to France, Germany, and many of the

⁵⁷ Duffy *et al.*, *ibid.*, 29.

⁵⁸ Herbert, *Negotiating Boundaries*, 79.

⁵⁹ Leicester City Council, *Ethnic Minorities*, 30. On women's employment more generally see Irene Hardill, 'Diasporic business connections: an examination of the role of female entrepreneurs in a South Asian business district', *Economic Geography Research Group Working Papers* (Hull 1999).

⁶⁰ E.M. Lodge, EMOHA, 2409, EM/155.

⁶¹ Figures based on the *New Earnings Survey* 1990, Duffy *et al.*, *ibid.*, 72, 89, 90.

⁶² The campaigns can be followed in the *Leicester Mercury* in 1974 and 1984 respectively. They can be accessed online at the *Manufacturing Pasts* collection, <http://cdm16445.contentdm.oclc.org/cdm/landingpage/collection/p16445coll2>

European countries. I remember huge trucks coming to Leicester to pick up the garments made by, mainly, the Ugandan Asian businesses. That really lasted for another 30 years or so. You still meet people who speak very little English, even today, because they were working with Asian businesses as manufacturers of garments – sewing machinists, overlockers, lockstitchers – and they never actually came into the mainstream. It's a shame really.⁶³

The entrepreneurial zeal of the East African Asians, attributed to high educational qualifications and business experience acquired previously in Uganda, was something of an urban myth in Leicester, but there was evidence to support it. The 1983 *Survey of Leicester* found the level of self-employment to be twice as high among Asian groups as among their white counterparts and over four times that of the West Indian community.⁶⁴ A further study in 1984 estimated that 23% of economically active East African Asian men and 18% of women were self-employed, significantly higher than figures for the white population (16% and 6% respectively) and Indian-born groups (11% and 12%).⁶⁵ In practice, Asian entrepreneurship in 1980s Leicester consisted less in innovation than investing in pre-existing economic sectors, especially manufacturing. Alongside an estimated 446 South Asian owned businesses in retail, there were a further 391 in textiles.⁶⁶ Over half the Asian employers interviewed by a Leicester University team in 1983 were in hosiery and knitwear, with a further substantial group in engineering.⁶⁷ The firms were mostly small with turnover of less than £1 million a year, family owned and financed. In hosiery and knitwear such firms also tended to rely on family labour, though less so in engineering where employers were likely to have technical training and qualifications. Their works were situated in the old industrial suburbs surrounding the centre – Belgrave, Abbey and Latimer wards – often, indeed, in the former works of now closed industrial firms. Imperial Typewriters, where so many Asian men and women had been employed, was bought by the local property millionaire Shonki brothers, who sub-let parts of the premises to small hosiery entrepreneurs. 'Gwendolen Road in the Crown Hills ward' - the former site of engineering works -, it was reported in 1984, 'is now totally dedicated to the manufacture of jeans, with 100% Asian ownership of small factories'.⁶⁸

⁶³ Interview with J. Kapasi for *Migration Stories* project, EMOHA, 2012, uncatalogued.

⁶⁴ Table 23, 'Employment status by ethnic origin', Leicester City Council, *Survey*, 52.

⁶⁵ C. Brown, *Black and White in Britain: The Third PSI Study* (London 1984).

⁶⁶ Leicester City Council, *Asian Businesses in Leicester* (Leicester 1984), 29-31.

⁶⁷ Michael H. Freeman, 'Asian enterprise in Leicester' (MA Dissertation, University of Leicester 1984).

⁶⁸ Freeman, *ibid.*, 29.

Recording the expansion of such firms was a problem for the authorities, since there were only three factory inspectors for the county and an unquantified number of small enterprises operated out of the home or unlicensed premises such as garages, using cheap domestic and other labour. According to the Indian Workers' Association, around 8,000 Asians, mainly women, were used as sweated labour in the city in the early 1980s.⁶⁹ Nor was the upsurge of Asian enterprise ephemeral; by 2002 some 10,000 South Asian businesses were registered in Leicester across retail, wholesale and manufacturing sectors.⁷⁰

Statistical and documentary evidence suggests that Jaffer Kapasi's boast that Leicester's East African Asian and Indian communities extended the existence of the city's textile industry for thirty or forty years was not an idle one. It demonstrates that the contribution of these migrant groups was far from limited to corner shops and curry restaurants as popular legend might have it, but took the form of a major investment of labour, capital and enterprise in formerly dwindling manufacturing sectors of industrial cities like Leicester. Production was neither small-scale nor merely local; like their forerunners, Leicester's Asian-run hosiery firms had contracts with major national chains such as Marks and Spencer and Top Shop, and exported internationally to markets in Europe and India.⁷¹ More generally, the recognition of this after-life to Leicester's manufacturing economy brings into question the periodization of industrial decline in twentieth-century England. It forces us to ask, most fundamentally, whether we can speak of cities such as Leicester as 'post-industrial' at all before the early twenty-first century.

Conclusions

So how far was Leicester transformed, economically and socially, in the last quarter of the twentieth century? It has not been our purpose to under-estimate the scale or pace of the changes that have been described here; rather, our aim has been to place them on the agenda of local, social and urban history and to contribute to the ongoing evaluation of society, economy and politics in post-imperial Britain. In Leicester the collapse of the city's major manufacturing giants across engineering, textiles and footwear – Stibbe, Corah, Liberty, British United Shoe Machinery, Imperial Typewriters - occurred within a single generation. In the 2001 census manufacturing was surpassed by the service sector as a source of employment in the city.⁷² This shift had significant repercussions whose

⁶⁹ *Leicester Mercury*, 17 February 1984.

⁷⁰ G. Singh, 'Multiculturalism in contemporary Britain: reflections on the "Leicester model"', *International Journal on Multicultural Studies* 5:1 (2003), 45.

⁷¹ Freeman, *ibid.*

⁷² Manufacturing accounted for 23.4% of the economically active population of Leicester in 2001, health, education, public administration, banking and insurance 27.2%. Statistics located at

dimensions we are only beginning to grasp. One was the break-up of old-established industrial neighbourhoods, previously dominated by white communities, partly under the pressure of slum clearance but both accelerated and inflected by industrial decline. As Robert Colls memorably observed in 2004 the old industrial working-class neighbourhood was now extinct: 'The world [Richard] Hoggart described not so very long ago is a way of life as dead as that of the North American Plains Indian or the Mississippi sharecropper'.⁷³ In the case of Leicester, the city was transformed socially after 1970 by mass migration, making it one of the most culturally diverse places in Britain.

The thrust of this article, however, has been to suggest that Leicester's transformation in this period can be overplayed and that its effects were less dramatic than appeared at the time. One key to this lay in the way mass migration and industrial decline interacted. The involvement of large sections of the Asian population in the industrial economy, first as labour, later as employers and managers of firms in textiles and engineering, mitigated some of the worst effects of manufacturing crisis. It cushioned the local economy against the sudden collapse of firms by extending the life-span of old industries and industrial works. This life-span was not infinite but its extension ensured a less painful transition to a new post-industrial economy than would otherwise have been the case.

There were, too, other social consequences. Settlement of migrant populations in the old industrial neighbourhoods encircling the central area breathed new life into houses and streets that suffered the effects of planning blight and under-investment. Belgrave, a Victorian industrial district just north of the city centre, was a notable example.

The City Council had earmarked this road (Belgrave Road) for demolition and expanding the road for communication. The conditions of the shops had deteriorated, people had not invested money in refurbishing the shops, and there seemed to be a lack of investment in the area, and even if we look at the local housing in the area it was very poor housing and we have seen that those who were on the lower strata were actually living in this area when we (Ugandan Asians) came. It was generally a run-down area.⁷⁴

By the mid-1980s, though, with its food-stores, clothes shops, restaurants and cinemas Belgrave Road had become known as the 'New Asian City Centre' and a magnet for Indians from all over

<http://www.leicester.gov.uk/your-council-services/council-and-democracy/city-statistics/employment/> accessed 29 July 2013.

⁷³ Robert Colls, 'When we lived in communities: working-class culture and its critics' in Richard Rodger and Robert Colls (eds), *Cities of Ideas: Civil Society and Urban Governance in Urban Britain* (Aldershot 2004), 306.

⁷⁴ J. Kapasi, *Belgrave Memories*, 182.

Britain.⁷⁵ Elsewhere too in Leicester migrant communities maintained inner-city neighbourhoods against the worst ravages of industrial dereliction.

The differences between the cultures and family structures of migrant communities and those of the host population can likewise be exaggerated. As a manufacturing centre throughout the twentieth century, Leicester offered significant opportunities for women's employment and dual household incomes. On arrival both black and Asian populations replicated this gendered pattern of labour, even when it had not been the custom at 'home'. As one female respondent from Uganda put it:

Women who came here, they were probably 30, 35, 40. Now, women in Africa didn't go out to work, their priority was working within their family looking after the children and looking after the home. The same things were happening here but people couldn't afford to live here with fathers working and mothers not going to work. I saw a lot of my aunts starting work, which was very alien to them.⁷⁶

Socially, it can be suggested, such factors helped to ease the transformation towards a post-industrial, multicultural city. Leicester experienced 'race' tension as we have seen, expressed in the riots of 1981, in industrial disputes such as that of Imperial Typewriters in 1974, and not least in the activities of the National Front, which polled 17,000 votes at the 1973 local elections and was only narrowly defeated in Abbey ward three years later.⁷⁷ Yet unlike other cities Leicester did not witness major race riots or violence; the transformation we have set out was achieved comparatively peacefully. This stability, we suggest, owes much to the long-term continuity of patterns of industrial work, of community settlement and of women's participation in the paid economy.

Finally, through this analysis of late twentieth-century Leicester we have attempted to show how different historical processes – city planning, de-industrialization, mass migration – intersected in unexpected ways in a particular place and time. The locality became the site through which these larger processes permeated, with consequences that were often opaque to those who experienced them. No individual or agency willed the developments described; there was no policy determining where migrants should settle, no way of predicting their effects on Leicester's manufacturing economy. Industrial decline itself was never envisaged by businessmen, trade unions or politicians. Instead historical processes were entangled and produced outcomes largely unforeseen by

⁷⁵ J. Seliga, 'A neighbourhood transformed: the effect of Indian migration on the Belgrave area of Leicester 1965-1995', *Local Historian* 28:4 (1998), 225-41.

⁷⁶ J. Khoda-Atara, *Kampala to Leicester*, <http://youtu.be/euUvGzuSBwk> accessed 19 July 2013.

⁷⁷ Nash and Reeder, *Leicester in the Twentieth Century*, 107-8. For a fuller discussion of the politics of race see Marrett, *Immigrants*.

contemporaries. Comprehending the changes that overtook industrial England in the late twentieth century requires us to bring together analytically processes that are normally seen as separate or distinct in order to understand how they interacted in practice. It involves, in sum, relating what happens in a particular local place to the global forces of modernity.⁷⁸

⁷⁸ For further discussion of these ideas see Timothy Mitchell, *Rule of Experts: Egypt, Techno-Politics and Modernity* (Berkeley 2002), Introduction and Ch.1.