The English Urban Renaissance Revisited

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Edited by

John Hinks and Catherine Armstrong

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INTRODUCTION

JOHN HINKS, ROSEMARY SWEET
AND CATHERINE ARMSTRONG

These essays revisit the concept – a pivotal one in urban, social and cultural history – of the 'English Urban Renaissance', first posited in 1977 by Professor Peter Borsay in a seminal article[1] and developed in his 1989 monograph.[2] Borsay's 'urban renaissance' refers to a specifically urban phenomenon of cultural revival that took root in the late seventeenth century, leading to the flowering of a wide range of cultural forms and the extensive remodelling of the townscape along classically inspired lines. This collection, which includes an important contribution from Borsay himself, offers a wide-ranging exploration of the continuing and still developing impact of his ground-breaking concept and investigates the wider relevance of 'urban renaissance' beyond England. Established urban historians and some scholars who are relative newcomers to the field offer here essays on many aspects of the English Urban Renaissance. Their contributions reiterate the importance of provincial towns as hubs of economic, cultural and political activity, and the strength and vitality of urban culture beyond the metropolis. Most of the essays focus on England but several discuss the influence of the concept of an urban cultural renaissance further afield: Scotland, Ireland, the Netherlands, Hungary and England's North American colonies. The development of urban culture is traced over time in the light of the concept of urban renaissance, showing how townscapes and cultural life were transformed throughout the long eighteenth century. Some of these essays originated in papers presented to a very successful symposium held in July 2014 at the Centre for Urban History, University of Leicester, marking the twenty-fifth anniversary of the publication of Borsay's monograph. Others were later commissioned especially for this collection with the aim of ensuring a broader approach

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[1] P. Borsay, 'The English urban renaissance: the development of provincial urban culture', *Social History*, 2: 2 (1977), pp. 581-603.
[2] P. Borsay, *The English Urban Renaissance: Culture and Society in the Provincial Town 1660-1770* (Oxford University Press, 1989).

to the topic in both geographical and subject terms. The volume establishes the continuing impact and importance of Borsay's concept, demonstrates the breadth of its influence in the UK and beyond, and points to possible areas of research for the future.

Peter Borsay's contribution to this collection is a thought-provoking revisiting of his concept. The author of *The English Urban Renaissance* reflects on the origins of his study and the concept that underpinned it; and on how the history agenda that it addressed has evolved since the book was published. He explores the broad influences – particularly the rise in Britain after the Second World War of social and urban history – that led him as a final year undergraduate in 1972 to frame the subject of his doctorate. He goes on to examine how these influences evolved, and new intellectual trends emerged – especially in cultural history – that shaped the researching and writing of his doctorate and the monograph that grew out of it. Since its publication in 1989 the historiographical landscape has continued to change rapidly, and Borsay discusses how this has been problematized – raising concerns about, and revealing gaps in – the original thesis, and speculates on how far the notion of an urban renaissance has informed the direction of his own research in recent years.

Several essays are local studies of the urban renaissance in England, the first being an account of architecture and national identity in York by Ann-Marie Akehurst, demonstrating how the interaction between new social structures, architectural and urban forms, and their representations, constructed urban identity. Current research relates the urban renaissance to architectural, intellectual and urban historiography and phenomenology, producing a nuanced understanding of collective identity, poised between modernity and the past. This essay illustrates how such methodology extends Borsay's interpretation of York's identity as the premier northern tourist destination. Akehurst indicates how York's history links the urban renaissance to a constructed British national character: the walled city acted metonymically as a touchstone of national history that morally and legally validated societal innovation through continuity with the past.

In their essay, Jonathan Barry and George Tatham explore one of the more surprising features of the eighteenth-century provincial press: the publication of two newspapers in Sherborne, Dorset. The *Sherborne Mercury* was founded in 1737 by William Bettinson and run from 1749 by Robert Goadby and his family; the *Sherborne Journal* was established by William Cruttwell in 1764. Barry and Tatham consider the business and intellectual history of Goadby and the *Mercury* as a contribution to the debate over the place of the press in the urban renaissance and address the relationship between the exploitation of commercial opportunities posed

by the growing 'consumer society' and the ideological divisions within eighteenth-century society. Their conclusions contest conventional accounts of an essentially commercialized and non-controversial press, one of whose major impacts was to spread demand in the provinces for lifestyles based on a polite metropolitan culture.

It is frequently proposed that the Victorian period witnessed the emergence of a female-inclusive world of public leisure, in particular for women of the middle class. Rose McCormack argues that while the nineteenth century witnessed advancement in women's public leisure, the urban renaissance of the long eighteenth-century introduced a similar range of commercial leisure pursuits considerably earlier, in particular at the English spa town. Utilizing the letters and diaries of several elite and middling women, alongside printed primary materials, McCormack illustrates how varied the public sphere of women's leisure could be at the eighteenth-century spa. Using Bath and Tunbridge Wells as case studies, she explores the range of leisure activities available to elite and middling women who visited the resorts.

The fashion for a big house in a provincial town was a key part of the culture of urban sociability highlighted by Borsay. Adrian Green explores the phenomenon of the big house in the English provincial town, focusing on Newcastle upon Tyne, where New House was established on the site of a former monastery, signalling the importance of the Reformation in transforming the topography and power relations of the English provincial town, and Durham, where the Bowes family became wealthy from coal and created big houses on the most prestigious streets in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The big house in the provincial town was a particular phenomenon of the sixteenth through eighteenth centuries.

Is the idea of urban renaissance applicable beyond England? Bob Harris discusses whether there was a Scottish urban renaissance, exploring in his essay the key characteristics of a process of urban renewal and transformation that took root in a small number of Scotland's burghs in the 1730s, spreading thereafter to a much larger number in the following decades. Harris questions whether this process should be seen as a variation on a common British theme, or were its distinctively Scottish elements such that it is best considered primarily within a national context? Within this framework, he reflects on the usefulness of Borsay's model of an urban renaissance in England as a way of thinking about urban change in Scotland in the long eighteenth century.

Toby Barnard reflects similarly on the possibility of an urban renaissance in Ireland. Many of the features in Borsay's model have been used by historians of Irish towns. While much of the Irish experience

resembles the situation in Britain, Ireland is complicated by the conspicuous role accorded to towns in the 'civilizing' and anglicizing of the island. The possible exceptionalism of Ireland, not conforming exactly to Borsay's scheme, is examined. The ideology that equated towns with civility in Britain coincided with the notion that the indigenous Irish had shunned the formation of towns and that this aversion had been important in their recalcitrance and apparent backwardness, though in practice Irish Catholics embraced urban life. Much has been written about Irish towns in individual studies and in thematic collections; Barnard addresses the extent to which Borsay has influenced the questions that have been asked, to see where his model does not seem to fit Ireland, and to suggest topics requiring further investigation.

This collection of essays does not permit sufficient space for a detailed examination of urban renaissance in Europe and beyond but the editors are pleased to be able to include two European case studies and a North American one, to suggest the usefulness of Borsay's thesis as the starting-point for an examination of urban renaissance in other situations, though local conditions will naturally vary widely from the original English model. In contrast to the situation in English provincial towns the changes that took place in Amsterdam were not a rehabilitation of cultural prestige and recovery after the ravages from civil war and economic crisis had been overcome. Yet, as Clé Lesger demonstrates, many of the elements that Borsay identifies are also visible in Amsterdam albeit in an earlier period. During Amsterdam's seventeenth-century Golden Age the urban landscape was refashioned to meet the demands of the mercantile elite, civic pride was demonstrated in city descriptions and maps, the luxury industries expanded, theatre visits became a fashionable pastime and many shops catered for the demands of the wealthy. At the same time patterns of residential segregation emerged, as in English provincial towns in the eighteenth century. Lesger relates these themes to the rapid expansion of the Amsterdam economy, concluding that the English urban renaissance perhaps expresses a broader pattern of change associated with urban economic growth and the diffusion of early modern cultural innovations.

To what extent is Borsay's concept relevant when researching an urban environment that is totally different from that of eighteenth-century England? Zsusi Kiss's essay begins by outlining the reception of Borsay's ideas in Hungary, especially after the end of the Soviet political regime in Hungary in 1989. The 1990s witnessed a theoretical renewal whereby 'old-fashioned' structuralist historiography was overtaken by an approach that was more open to cultural and social historical impulses, but it was not until the early 2000s that Borsay's book became well-known and

referred to in Hungary. Kiss herself used Borsay's theory when researching the nineteenth-century public life of the major towns of a county in Hungary, and concludes that, despite a very different situation and timescale, some of Borsay's concepts are not specific to time and place but may be universally useful in describing urban phenomena.

Catherine Armstrong's essay reflects on whether the changes identified by Borsay influenced the designers of one of the 'non-cities' of colonial America. Robert Mountgomery's proposed settlement of Azilia of 1717 was designed but never founded. Armstrong considers how Azilia was intended to operate in its hinterlands, placing it into its broader imperial contexts, and examines plans for the design of the city. Mountgomery, never having visited North America, was unencumbered by considerations of the reality of the landscape, the natives and the settlers of the region in his planning of Azilia. To what extent did his city reflect Borsay's definition of 'prosperity, cultural refinement and prestige'?[3] Mountgomery envisioned his city building on overseas trade as Borsay suggests, but also as an imperial bulwark against Spanish encroachment from the south. It shows that Borsay's interpretation of the urban renaissance is valid for the North American colonies too, even in this unusual case of the city that never was.

The aims of this collection are threefold: to celebrate Peter Borsay's groundbreaking work, to indicate the broader applicability of the concept of urban renaissance, and to suggest just some of the many areas that would merit further research. The editors are grateful to the contributors for their thought-provoking essays and hope that the volume will inspire fruitful research on the wider aspects of urban renaissance for years to come.

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[3] Borsay, *The English Urban Renaissance*, p. viii.

CHAPTER ONE

THE ENGLISH URBAN RENAISSANCE REVISITED[1]

PETER BORSAY

Introduction

History has a date code. We make it, and very quickly we throw it away; or, perhaps more accurately, simply forget it. In the vast majority of cases the latest piece of research, or the latest fashion in approach, rapidly replaces its predecessor, only to be itself displaced just as expeditiously. So it is a surprise, and against all the odds that this collection of essays is reflecting on, and considering the current relevance of, a monograph published twenty-five years ago. Quite rightly, the question must be asked, have the book and the thesis that it propounded any continuing relevance? Or, should they now be consigned to the graveyard where most history writing is finally buried, of interest only to the 'body snatchers' of the profession, the historiographers? As the author of the *English Urban Renaissance* I am not the person best placed to answer these questions, though I will reflect a little on the matter at the end of this essay. What I may usefully do is say a little about the context out of which the book emerged, and how subsequent research has exposed the gaps and flaws in the original concept of an 'urban renaissance' and helped to modify its character without entirely supplanting the concept.

Context

Today there are huge pressures on young and established researchers – associated with career development and national assessment exercises – to move rapidly from the initial formulation of a project, through the core

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[1] I am grateful for the comments on this piece made by those who attended the colloquium at Leicester in 2014 on which this volume is based.

research, to a finished product such as a monograph. A period of five years might be considered the 'ideal'. In the early 1970s in Britain there were still the remnants of a system in which the processes and stages of research production were more relaxed and protracted. A consequence of this is that *The English Urban Renaissance* had a long gestation spread over seventeen years. This complicates the circumstances in which the book emerged. It was not the product of a single moment in time, so the context of its development is best analysed in terms of a series of stages.

First, the idea was conceived in early 1972, in my third year as an undergraduate at Lancaster University, as I was preparing an application for postgraduate funding. Second, between 1972 and 1975 I undertook the postgraduate research, funded by an award of the then Social Science Research Council, again at Lancaster, which formed the basis of the article which was published in 1977 under the title of 'The English urban renaissance', in the then new journal of *Social History*.[2] Third, the doctoral thesis was not completed until 1981. In a scenario that would be unthinkable today, the University of Wales Lampeter had already employed me on a permanent contract for six years prior to this. Fourth, the book was finally published in 1989. The whole project had thus taken seventeen years, so that the idea as finally presented was developed over a period of time and subject to a range of influences.

The Influences up to 1972

There were two key early influences: social history and urban history. The first of these – social history – was the rising force in British history when I began my undergraduate career. Lancaster happened to be a new university committed to social history, particularly through the presence of Harold Perkin, who had joined the university in 1965 and published his pioneering work *The Origins of Modern English Society* in 1969, the year that I arrived as a raw undergraduate. The emergence of a class society was at the heart of the *Origins*, and class, though read in different ways, was the principal concept underpinning the rise of social history, reflected in the influential *Age of Improvement* (1959) by Asa Briggs, and – above all – Edward Thompson's monumental *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963).[3] As it turned out Perkin's principal influence on me came

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[2] P. Borsay, 'The English urban renaissance: the development of provincial urban culture c. 1680-c. 1760', *Social History*, 2: 2 (1977), pp. 581-603.
[3] H. Perkin, *The Origins of Modern English Society, 1780-1880* (London, 1969); A. Briggs, *The Age of Improvement, 1783-1867* (London, 1967), pp. 65, 286-343: E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London, 1963).

about negatively. I went to university fired up by the idea of studying the
Industrial Revolution, as a consequence of the efforts of an enthusiastic
and able history master at school, and was determined to take Perkin's
special subject on this topic in my third year. By one of those curious
strokes of fate, this coincided with a period of research leave for Perkin, so
that I was forced to take another special subject. I knew nothing about
Augustan England, or more broadly the century between the Restoration
and the accession of George III; nor to be honest did I want to know
anything. The period 1660-1760 was neglected for very good reasons; it
was the boring interlude between the two great moments in English history
that came to dominate much of post-war English historiography: the
English Revolution and the Industrial Revolution. But I did know that
Geoffrey Holmes, who taught the special subject on Augustan England,
was a first-rate historian and would provide me with an excellent training.
He had in fact been recruited to Lancaster from Glasgow in 1969, the same
year as my own arrival, and two years after the publication of the book
that transformed the reading of the Augustan political world, *British
Politics in the Age of Anne*.[4] What I did not quite realise was the extent,
despite his formal demeanour and formidable reputation as a political
historian, to which he was being influenced by Lancaster University and
more broadly the trend towards social history. The result was that his
special subject contained a good deal of social matter and in particular,
through the use as a primary text of Defoe's illuminating *Tour through the
Whole Island of Great Britain* (1724-6), a good deal of urban material.[5]

This leads to the second key influence, the rise of urban history. How
much in 1972 did I know about the 'new' urban history of Jim Dyos and
others? In truth, probably not a lot, though John Marshall, who introduced
me to the regional history of the North-West as an undergraduate was a
contributor to the first conference of British urban historians at Leicester
in 1966 and the volume that followed.[6] Of the new *pre-modern* urban
history I knew even less. Then in 1972 a book appeared in the Lancaster
bookshop under the title of *Crisis and Order in English Towns 1500-
1700*.[7] I would like to say that it changed my life, but in some respects it
had quite the opposite effect. First, the chronology, with its termination
point of 1700, made little sense in terms of what I was learning in my

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[4] G. S. Holmes, *British Politics in the Age of Anne* (London, 1967).
[5] P. Borsay, 'Geoffrey Holmes and the urban world of Augustan England',
Parliamentary History, 28: 1 (2009), pp. 126-36.
[6] H. J. Dyos (ed.), *The Study of Urban History* (London, 1968).
[7] P. Clark and P. Slack (eds), *Crisis and Order in English Towns, 1500-1700:
Essays in Urban History* (London, 1972).

special subject, which was revealing the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century as a pivotal period of change, not an end point. Second, the gloom which pervaded much if not all of *Crisis and Order* – Penelope Corfield's essay on late seventeenth-century Norwich was a striking exception – bore little resemblance to the urban dynamism that I was discovering in the post-restoration and Augustan town. *Crisis and Order* therefore provided me with the opportunity to construct a counter-thesis regarding the post-1660 period; at the same time I could accept its findings for pre-1660, since this would justify the notion of an urban recovery implicit in the idea of an urban *renaissance*.

There were of course other less tangible influences. A childhood and teenage years spent in Manchester, Crawley new town, and – as the postal frank had it – 'historic Warwick', bred a curious mixture of admiration of the new and a love of the past. Georgian towns served both purposes; they were the acme of modernism in their own day – lauded as such by Daniel Defoe and Celia Fiennes – but today their built environment is among the most celebrated aspects of the heritage movement. The early 1970s was in fact a key moment of transition in changing attitudes to the past in general and urban planning in particular.[8] The idealistic if overweening modernism and confidence of the post-war planners was being replaced by the equally overbearing 'pastism' and evangelicalism of the conservationists. A study of the later Stuart and Georgian town allowed me to celebrate modernizing tendencies at the same time as luxuriating in the timeless beauties of Georgian classical architecture.

The Influences 1972-1989

The *Social History* article of 1977 set out my stall. The PhD thesis of 1981 did not do a great deal more than build on what was already there in outline in 1977.[9] But the book of 1989 took things further. In essence, whereas the thesis was largely describing the changes underway, the book attempted to provide an explanatory framework. In preparing this, and in adding to the more descriptive aspects of the thesis, important new work had emerged between 1972 and 1989 that had a considerable influence on me.

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[8] H. Meller, *Towns, Plans and Society in Modern Britain* (Cambridge, 1997), pp. 85-95; J. Delafons, *Politics and Preservation: a Policy History of the Built Heritage, 1882-1996* (London, 1997).
[9] P. Borsay, 'The English urban renaissance; landscape and leisure in the provincial town c.1660-1760', Ph.D thesis,
 University of Lancaster (1981).

During these years research on the early modern town flourished, with an incisive survey of the urban history of the period by Peter Clark and Paul Slack (that built on their introduction to *Crisis and Order*), the published notes for the innovatory Open University course *English Urban History 1500-1780* (1977), compiled by a starry list of historians and containing a good deal of new research, and monographs from the likes of Alan Dyer, Charles Phythian-Adams, David Palliser, John Patten, Paul Slack and Peter Clark appearing.[10] More pertinently from my point of view the post-Restoration and eighteenth-century town was now attracting attention with publications from figures such as Alan Everitt, Christopher Chalklin, Malcolm Falkus, Eric Jones, Tony Wrigley, John Money, Angus McInnes, and in particular Penny Corfield, all of which put a positive spin, in contradiction to the pessimism of *Crisis and Order*, on the urban fortunes of the period.[11] In addition to, and in parallel with this, the results of what may be called the 'new' local history, emanating from the Leicester Department of English Local History, were becoming increasingly available for integration into my formulation of the urban renaissance. The medieval and the rural have probably been more at the heart of the Leicester tradition than the Georgian town, but among the departmental heads W.G. Hoskins, Alan Everitt and Charles Phythian-Adams were all also early modern urbanists, and the department's approach was influencing the production of some valuable local studies. I made considerable use, for example, of the splendid papers produced by the Ludlow Historical Research Group (in which David Lloyd played a key role), and which revealed the extent of the classical remodelling of the town's landscape in the eighteenth century.[12]

A change was also occurring in the study of English eighteenth-century history in general; it was becoming fashionable and sexy, not least because

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[10] P. Clark and P. Slack, *English Towns in Transition, 1500-1700* (London, 1976); A. Dyer, *The City of Worcester in the Sixteenth Century* (Leicester, 1973); C. Phythian-Adams, *Desolation of a City: Coventry and the Urban Crisis of the Later Middle Ages* (Cambridge, 1979); D. Palliser, *Tudor York* (Oxford, 1979); J. Patten, *English Towns, 1500-1700* (Folkestone, 1978); P. Slack, *The Impact of Plague in Tudor and Stuart England* (London, 1985); P. Clark, *The English Alehouse: a Social History, 1200-1830* (London, 1983).
[11] For essays by Everitt, Wrigley, Money, and Falkus and Jones see P. Borsay (ed.), *The Eighteenth-Century: a Reader in English Urban History, 1688-1820* (Harlow, 1990); C. Chalklin, *The Provincial Towns of Georgian England: a Study of the Building Process, 1740-1820* (London, 1974); A. McInnes, *The English Town 1660-1760* (London, 1980); P. J. Corfield, *The Impact of English Towns, 1700-1800* (Oxford, 1982).
[12] D. Lloyd, *Broad Street*, Ludlow Research Paper No. 3 (Birmingham, 1979).

research was addressing subjects like fashion and sex. The new social history began to permeate research into the period, and several of the established big guns and rising stars of the profession, many of whom had begun life as 'straight' political historians, turned their attention to matters such as leisure, consumerism and pleasure; one thinks of J. H. Plumb, John Brewer, Neil McKendrick, Roy Porter and Paul Langford.[13] What emerged from much of their work was the dynamism and modernity of the period (though a minority conservative counter-strand was developing in the work of J. C. D. Clark)[14], the key role of the middling orders – especially the professions, about whom Holmes and Corfield were to publish specialist studies – and the role of towns as engines of change.[15] Many of these themes had been signalled in Plumb's pioneering Stenton lecture of 1972 on the 'Commercialisation of leisure in eighteenth-century England'.[16]

   The 1980s was the decade of the 'cultural turn'. In the sense that new research on the eighteenth century, including my own work, dealt with a cultural subject matter – architecture, leisure, material goods, print culture and the like – then English historians were clearly very influenced by this trend. But it is difficult to argue that 'theory' – Foucault, Derrida, White, and even Habermas and his paradigm of the 'public sphere'[17] – played much part in the process at this stage, which was underpinned by traditional English empiricism. Where 'theory' influenced me, it was to be much more likely to be through notions of class, and the work of Edward Thompson, particularly his attempts in later years to accommodate the full eighteenth century in his canvas.[18] Thompson's work was critical in the

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[13] N. McKendrick, J. Brewer and J. H. Plumb, *The Birth of a Consumer Society: the Commercialization of Eighteenth-century England* (London, 1983); R. Porter, *English Society in the Eighteenth Century* (Harmondsworth, 1982); P. Langford, *A Polite and Commercial People: England, 1727-1783* (Oxford, 1989).

[14] J. C. D. Clark, *English Society, 1688-1832: Ideology, Social Structure and Political Practice during the Ancien Regime* (Cambridge, 1985).

[15] G. S. Holmes, *Augustan England: Professions, State and Society, 1680-1730* (London, 1982); P. J. Corfield, *Power and the Professions in Britain 1700-1850* (London and New York, 1995).

[16] J. H. Plumb, *The Commercialisation of Leisure in Eighteenth-century England* (Reading, 1973).

[17] Jürgen Habermas's *Habilitationsschrift Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit* (1962) was not available in English translation until 1989; J. Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, trans. T. Burger (Cambridge, 1989).

[18] E. P. Thompson, *Whigs and Hunters: the Origin of the Black Act* (London, 1975); E. P. Thompson, *Customs in Common* (Harmondsworth, 1991); E. P.

development of a concept of popular culture (important in a reactive sense
to understand the eighteenth-century passion among the well-off for the
cults of civility and politeness) but also crucial for me was the work of
Keith Thomas and Peter Burke.[19] They introduced an anthropological
element into my thinking, and an interest in ritual – boosted by reading
figures like Victor Turner and Clifford Geertz – which affected the way
that I read elite socializing.[20] It was Keith Thomas who invited me to
contribute a volume to his newly established Oxford Studies in Social
History series. The explanatory framework that I had added to the PhD
thesis was primarily about the role of wealth creation, the expanding
middling orders, competition for status, and social polarization in the
creation of the urban renaissance. As far as I can recall, I had intended to
finish the book with a chapter called 'social polarization', following the
Thompsonian position on this, and his paradigm of patricians versus
plebeians. When the comments on the manuscript came back from Keith
Thomas I sensed some unease at this notion, and agonized over redrafting
and re-titling this chapter. In the end I plumped for 'Cultural
differentiation', reflecting the fact that the polarized social models of
patricians and plebeians, and elite and popular had, for understandable
reasons, come under attack; but perhaps also more broadly because the
whole Marxist model of social change, with its relationship between
economic base and political superstructure, was losing its grip in academe.
Class was increasingly being replaced as the force behind historical
change by a notion of culture that on occasions drifted dangerously loose
from any social structural moorings.[21]

So when *The English Urban Renaissance* appeared in 1989 it was, like
any historical work, a child of its time – or, to be more accurate, the
offspring of a series of changing times spread over two decades. It relied
heavily upon the ideas and research of other historians, and if it enjoyed
success it was because it caught the mood of the times in the historical

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Thompson, 'Eighteenth-century English society: class struggle without class',
Social History, 3: 2 (1978), pp. 133-65.
[19] K. Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic: Studies in Popular Beliefs in
Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-century England* (London, 1971); P. Burke, *Popular
Culture in Early Modern Europe* (London, 1978).
[20] V. Turner, *The Ritual Process* (Chicago, 1969); C. Geertz, *The Interpretation of
Cultures* (New York, 1973); P. Borsay, '"All the town's a stage": urban ritual and
ceremony, 1660-1800', in P. Clark (ed.), *The Transformation of English Provincial
Towns, 1600-1800* (London, 1984), pp. 228-58.
[21] P. Borsay, *A History of Leisure: the British Experience since 1500* (Basingstoke,
2006), pp. 75-9.

community, and with its synthesis focused on towns, maybe was just a little bit ahead of the curve. It also, though this was not the intention, caught another more popular mood that was abroad during the zenith of Margaret Thatcher's Britain; that of a dynamic and confident urban middle class, a rampantly consumer-driven society, and a heritage movement that was carrying all before it, happily celebrating the seemingly classless Georgian summer before the onset of the class-driven Industrial Revolution. In reinforcing, however innocently, this agenda, *The English Urban Renaissance* prompted my next book, which was an attempt to investigate how the image of Georgian Bath was manipulated and used at the time and by subsequent generations, including our own, for their economic, social and political purposes.[22] But that is another story.

Post 1989: the Gaps Revealed

Several of the themes touched on in *The English Urban Renaissance* – such as consumerism, politeness, sociability, civility and improvement – would in the years after 1989 be explored further, and with greater sophistication, by historians, some making an explicit link to the concept of the urban renaissance, as in the case of John Beckett and Catherine Smith's study of consumerism in Nottingham 1680-1750, or Jon Stobart's, Andrew Hann's and Victoria Morgan's more wide ranging exploration of consumption and shopping in the towns of the Midlands and North-West c. 1680-1830.[23] However, as a child of its time it was inevitable that the problems with – or the gaps in – the English urban renaissance thesis would become increasingly obvious. New approaches to the past developed, and new in-depth research was undertaken of topics that I had only scratched the surface of or simply ignored.

Leisure Towns. The first challenge came with a gentlemanly exchange, worthy of the polite eighteenth century, in *Past and Present*, between myself and Angus McInnes. He had been working on the regional centre of Shrewsbury, and we debated whether the urban renaissance was a widespread urban movement, as I argued, or something confined, as he claimed, to a certain class of towns, that he categorized as 'leisure towns',

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[22] P. Borsay, *The Image of Georgian Bath, 1700-2000: Towns, Heritage and History* (Oxford, 2000).

[23] J. Beckett and C. Smith, 'Urban renaissance and consumer revolution in Nottingham, 1688-1850', *Urban History*, 27: 1 (2000), pp. 31-50; J. Stobart, A. Hann and V. Morgan, *Spaces of Consumption: Leisure and Shopping in English Towns, c. 1680-1830* (Abingdon, 2007), pp. 36-8.

such as spas, seaside resorts and county towns.[24] Behind this lay a broader concern, reflected in Penelope Corfield's work, to identify a shift – which prefigured the impact of the Industrial Revolution century – in the eighteenth century towards urban specialization.[25]

Chronology. A more significant problem arose over chronology. Does the time period 1660-1770 make a lot of sense? A number of historians, such as Rosemary Sweet, have suggested that though this chronology might be appropriate for certain towns, especially the wealthy county and cathedral centres, 'for most towns the real impact of urban improvement was not felt until rather later in the century, after the end of the Seven Years War in 1763'.[26] Arguments about when the urban renaissance occurred melded into a wider debate about periodization. The concept of the urban renaissance had emerged as part of a challenge to the significance of 1700. But why stop in 1770? Historians now tend to argue that 'a "long" eighteenth century between 1688 and 1832 makes a good deal of historical sense'.[27] The extent to which this is as applicable to social as political and religious matters remains an open question. What is clear is that more attention needed to be given in my 1989 volume to the issue of chronology, and in particular to variation according to type of town and region, with the North and Midlands generally appearing to absorb the influence of the urban renaissance later.

The Provinces. A concern about the need to recognize regional variation in respect of chronology was part of a bigger issue relating to a proper acknowledgement of the provincial and regional input. There was a risk, despite the provincial focus of the book, of seeing the urban renaissance as essentially a metropolitan phenomenon, in which provincial towns simply mimicked, though at different rates, what they saw at the centre. In Roy Porter's words 'the key fact about provincial opinion in the eighteenth century is that ... it repudiated its own provinciality'.[28] A number of historians rejected vigorously this view, and the urban renaissance

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[24] A. McInnes, 'The emergence of a leisure town: Shrewsbury, 1660-1760', *Past and Present*, 120 (1988), pp. 53-87; P. Borsay and A. McInnes, 'Debate: the emergence of a leisure town: or an urban renaissance', *Past and Present*, 126 (1990), pp. 189-202.
[25] Corfield, *Impact of English Towns*, p. 16.
[26] R. Sweet, *The English Town, 1680-1840: Government, Society and Culture* (Harlow, 1999), p. 254.
[27] F. O'Gorman, *The Long Eighteenth Century; British Political and Social History, 1688-1832* (London, 1997), p. xi.
[28] R. Porter, 'Science, provincial culture and public opinion in Enlightenment England', in Borsay, *Eighteenth-century Town*, p. 251.

as a whole if it implied a notion of 'metropolitanization'. Such a critique is reflected in Jonathan Barry's discussion of the relative importance of 'urbane 'and 'civic' influences, with, as he saw it, the risk that the urban renaissance is simply perceived as disseminating a monolithic gentrified London-based culture, failing to take into account the rich provincial civic input to cultural change.[29]

London. This raises the problem of London. It was a truly exceptional city, with 500,000 people by 1700, and a million by 1800. It was almost twenty times the size of the nearest provincial city, Norwich, in 1700, enjoying dramatic rates of growth over the entire early modern period.[30] Yet it was excluded from my book – taking on London *and* the provinces seemed simply too large a task – and was therefore only an incidental if important element in the thesis developed. However, the question arises, to what extent was London part of the urban renaissance? Any answer to this question is complicated by an inherent ambivalence, as Peter Clark's research into the remarkable efflorescence of clubs and societies in the eighteenth century demonstrated.[31] On the one hand, the metropolis was undoubtedly a huge engine of cultural innovation and change, and it is difficult to conceive that the provincial urban renaissance could have progressed in the manner that it did – and maybe in any manner at all – without the presence of London. On the other hand, provincial towns absorbed metropolitan influences in a manner that reflected their own traditions, circumstances and chronology.[32] Resolving the issue of London's involvement in the urban renaissance remains hampered by the fact that the wealth of research that has been undertaken on the metropolis in recent years tends – with some notable exceptions[33] – to be inward looking, largely ignoring the impact beyond the city's boundaries.

The British Isles. If London is a problem, so is England. Why an *English* urban renaissance? In preparing the book I had very limited consciousness of the 'new British history'. The 'new' urban history had

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[29] J. Barry, 'Provincial town culture, 1640-1780: urbane or civic?', in J. H. Pittock and A. Wear (eds), *Interpretation and Cultural History* (Basingstoke, 1991), pp. 198-233.
[30] Corfield, *Impact of English Towns*, pp. 8, 15, 66-7.
[31] P. Clark, *British Clubs and Societies, 1580-1800: the Origins of an Associational World* (Oxford, 2000), pp. 401-3, 454-8.
[32] P. Borsay, 'The London connection: cultural diffusion and the eighteenth-century provincial town', *The London Journal*, 19: 1 (1994), pp. 21-35.
[33] E. A. Wrigley, 'A simple model of London's importance in changing English society and economy, 1650-1750', *Past and Present*, 37 (1967), pp. 44-70; S. Porter, *The Great Fire of London* (Stroud, 1996), pp. 154-7.

focused heavily on England, and relatively little attention had been paid
for the early modern period to Scotland, Wales and Ireland. *The
Cambridge Urban History of Britain*, published in 2000, might be seen as
an opportunity to have addressed this issue. However, early on the
decision was made to omit Ireland, and though undoubtedly rich in new
research and insights, and despite the best efforts of the editor and
contributors to volume two (1540-1840) to incorporate Wales and
Scotland into the picture, the 'other' parts of Britain often appeared as
something of an appendage to a predominantly English picture.[34] So there
remains the question, was there something specifically English about the
urban renaissance, or was it a common phenomenon that spread across the
Atlantic archipelago, or indeed the colonies? Were the chronologies
similar or different? Did Scotland, Wales and Ireland simply absorb in an
unmediated fashion influences from London and the English provinces, or
did they adapt these influences to their own needs, and put their own
stamp on the phenomenon? To what extent was the urban renaissance part
of a wider exercise in colonial cultural hegemony, the incorporation and/or
suppression of the periphery by the centre? Research since 1989 has begun
to address several of these issues. There have, for example, been the two
British Academy volumes on London and Dublin, and Irish and English
provincial towns, a special issue of *Urban History* on Welsh towns, and
most recently Bob Harris and Charles McKean's deeply researched
volume on Scottish towns 1740-1820. Harris and McKean explicitly locate
their study within the wider British context, recording both the dynamism
of Scottish urban society in the period but also a later chronology than was
apparently the case in England – something also suggested by Clark and
Houston in the *Cambridge Urban History* – looking to the 1770s for take-
off. Harris and McKean, while registering the continuities with England,
Britain and indeed Europe, also argue that 'to be aware of these broader
contexts does not mean that national, or indeed local, *distinctiveness* did
not matter or that they are relatively insignificant'.[35] Their study excluded
Edinburgh (along with Glasgow and Aberdeen) but one way in which the

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[34] P. Clark (ed.), *The Cambridge Urban History of Britain*, Volume Two, *1540-
1840* (Cambridge, 2000).
[35] P. Clark and R. Gillespie (eds), *Two Capitals: London and Dublin, 1500-1840*
(Oxford, 2001); P. Borsay and L. Proudfoot (eds), *Provincial Towns in Early
Modern England and Ireland: Change, Convergence and Divergence* (Oxford,
2002); B. Harris and C. McKean, *The Scottish Town in the Age of the
Enlightenment, 1740-1820* (Edinburgh, 2014), p. 495; P. Clark and R. Houston,
'Culture and leisure, 1700-1840', in Clark, *Cambridge Urban History of Britain*,
vol. 2, pp. 577-8, 612-13.

concept of a British urban renaissance might be explored is through the notion of a British metropolitan network, in which the development of London, Edinburgh and Dublin – and possibly resorts like Bath and Brighton – became highly interconnected, and proved capable of exerting a unifying cultural force across the British urban system as a whole.[36] However, this raises a series of problems not least the risk of falling into the 'metropolitanization' trap earlier alluded to. There is clearly a lot yet to investigate about an issue that the *English Urban Renaissance* very largely ignored.

Europe, Enlightenment and Renaissance. The book also did not address the European and international dimension. One of the most pleasing aspects of the response to the book was the way that it prompted invitations to present papers in various parts of Europe. Initially I saw this as an opportunity to make the case for English exceptionalism; of dynamic economic growth and rising levels of prosperity, allied to a widening distribution of wealth due to an expanding middling order, creating conditions in eighteenth-century England unparalleled in Europe, and stimulating a process of cultural enrichment among even small towns not be found on the Continent. In some respects this was another version of the argument as to why the Industrial Revolution started in Britain and not elsewhere. However, contact with colleagues abroad made me question whether eighteenth-century England was exceptional, and ask whether the urban renaissance was not something being experienced in many parts of Europe, though in different ways. Holger Gräf's research on small towns in early modern Hesse, for example, suggests that so-called residential towns (the seats of princely rulers) were the beneficiaries of substantial cultural investment in the eighteenth century.[37] One way forward is the sort of comparative research undertaken by François-Joseph Ruggiu on French and English towns in the period.[38] Other questions also arise, especially in the context of historiographical developments in recent years. To what extent was the English/British urban renaissance part of the

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[36] P. Borsay, 'Pouvoir et culture au sein de la métropole des Lumières: les Îles britanniques, 1660-1800', *Histoire Urbaine*, 12 (2005), pp. 117-44.

[37] H. T. Gräf, 'Small towns in early modern Germany: the case of Hesse, 1500-1800', in P. Clark (ed.), *Small Towns in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge, 1995), pp. 198-9, 203-5.

[38] F.-J. Ruggiu, *Les élites et les villes moyennes en France et en Angleterre (XVIIe-XVIIIe siècles)* (Paris, 1997); F.-J. Ruggiu, *L'individu at la famille dans les sociétés urbaines Anglaise et Française (1720-1780)* (Paris, 2007). See also J.-P. Poussou (ed.), *Les sociétés urbaines au XVIIe siècle: Angleterre, France, Espagne* (Paris, 2007).

European Enlightenment? To what extent were there transnational exchanges of culture underway?[39]

These questions inevitably lead back to the use of the term 'renaissance'. Why not an English urban *enlightenment*? In part my response is that the 'Enlightenment' seemed to me – at least as represented in the historiography as I was developing the idea of an urban renaissance – a very European, and particularly French phenomenon, and was therefore a difficult concept to apply to English towns. However, it must be said that the work of Roy Porter and others has done much in recent years to broaden the notion of the Enlightenment and take it away from its narrow French focus.[40] Paul Elliott, for example, has explored the implications of this in terms of British scientific culture and its impact on locations such as county towns.[41] In fact, Chapter 10 of the *The English Urban Renaissance* opens with a section on 'the Enlightenment and the town', and it is a subject – and the problems with using the term – that I discussed subsequently.[42] But I would also say that the idea of a 'renaissance' had two attractions in terms of my project. First, the notion of renaissance, or rebirth, seemed to fit well with the late seventeenth- and eighteenth-century recovery from the urban tribulations of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, which had been so graphically outlined in *Crisis and Order*. Second, there was a real relationship between what was happening in English towns and the great European Renaissance, which had started in Italy in the fourteenth century. It is widely accepted that the Renaissance arrived late in England. Conventionally this point of engagement and absorption is taken to be the sixteenth century, with the Elizabethan period commonly referred to as the 'English Renaissance'. My feeling was that the Renaissance only impacted *deeply* on the English provinces, and especially its towns, from the later

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[39] P. Borsay and J. H. Furnée (eds), *Leisure Cultures in Urban Europe, c. 1700-1870: a Transnational Perspective* (Manchester, 2016).

[40] R. Porter, *Enlightenment: Britain and the Creation of the Modern World* (London, 2000).

[41] P. Elliott, 'Towards a geography of English scientific culture: provincial identity and literary and philosophical culture in the English county town, 1750-1850', *Urban History*, 32: 3 (2005), pp. 391-412; P. Elliott, *Enlightenment, Modernity and Science: Geographies of Scientific Culture and Improvement in Georgian England* (London, 2010).

[42] Borsay, *English Urban Renaissance*, pp. 257-67; P. Borsay, 'Fat sources and big ideas: society, enlightenment and the town', *Journal of Urban History*, 24, no. 5 (1998), pp. 643-54; P. Borsay, 'Bath: an Enlightenment city?' in P. Borsay, G. Hirschfelder, and R.-E. Mohrmann (eds.), *New Directions in Urban History: Aspects of European Art, Health and Tourism since the Enlightenment* (Münster, 2000), pp. 3-19.

seventeenth century. Only then did it really spread beyond the Court, country house and ruling elite. The European Renaissance was an urban event, and it seemed to me that in the final analysis this was probably also the case in England. One aspect of culture in particular pointed to the significance of towns as locations, and the late seventeenth century as the turning point, and that was architecture. Though there were plenty of harbingers of change before 1660 (not least in London), it was after the Restoration that the classical revolution in building design really began to impinge on English towns. Here was a case for cultural transfer from Europe, though mediated through very special English conditions, on a grand scale. It was in an attempt to describe this process, and understand why it was happening, to discover why the English so enthusiastically embraced an international European style and rejected their domestic vernacular styles that helped initiate the whole project for me. Of course, the European Renaissance was not a single unified event, but itself a fragmented and changing process; and I did far too little to trace where the influences on England were originating – such as Italy, France, and Holland – and the whole business of transnational cultural transfer. But the picture on the front of the paperback version of *The English Urban Renaissance*, a drawing by Canaletto entitled 'Ingresso nella Piazza de varik' – entrance to the square at Warwick – seems to sum it all up. Here was the celebrated painter of eighteenth-century Venice, one of the centres of the Renaissance, abandoning his native country in search of the patronage of the new centre of European wealth and civilization, England; and drawing for his patron Lord Brooke of Warwick Castle part of the small town of Warwick which Brooke had been so influential in re-planning along classical lines after its fire in 1694.[43] Moreover, it was an illustration not just of any part of Warwick, but of the tiny square in front of the church. Squares were at the very heart of Renaissance urban classical design, and in all probability this was the first square to be introduced into a provincial English town. It was a ringing declaration that the Renaissance had finally arrived in provincial England, three centuries after its inception in Italy.

That at least was my position in 1989. My thinking on the impact of classicism on urban architecture had been heavily influenced by the work of John Summerson, especially his study of *Georgian London* (1945), and been buttressed by Dan Cruickshank and Peter Wyld's visually compelling survey, *London: the Art of Georgian Building* (1975), and provincial studies such as those of Walter Ison of Georgian Bath and Bristol. Two

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[43] D. Buttery, *Canaletto and Warwick Castle* (Chichester, 1992), pp. 42, 47-8.

books published in 1990, Dan Cruickshank and Neil Burton's *Georgian City* and Mark Girouard's beautifully written and illustrated *English Town* did little to challenge the extent of the design revolution underway in eighteenth-century towns; indeed, by weaving together social and architectural history Girouard's book, without ever using the concept, did much to reinforce the notion of an urban renaissance.[44] Since then the important research of architectural historians with a sensitivity to the social meaning of buildings, such as Adrian Green and Peter Guillery, has questioned any simple distinction between vernacular and classical in the early modern period, and suggested a much more complicated, messy and less overtly dramatic picture of changes in the design of urban buildings than might appear to be suggested by the notion of an urban renaissance.[45] This is a valuable corrective to any over-simplistic version of the transformation of the urban built environment. That said, *The English Urban Renaissance* always accepted that the pace of change would vary hugely between different towns, and parts of towns, and that much of the remodelling underway was only partial, such as seen in the widespread practice of re-fronting houses. At the same time it did want to suggest that a material and cultural process of change was taking place of real significance, and to provide some explanation for this.

   Gender. A large hole – or at least so it seems now – in the urban renaissance thesis as presented in 1989 was a systematic treatment of gender. The subject of 'women and leisure' is indexed, and 'marriage markets' is one of the topics explored in Chapter 9. However, there is little avoiding the fact that the book managed largely to avoid the strong signals emanating from women and gender studies at the time. That is especially surprising because it is difficult to imagine a territory more fertile for exploring gender identities and interactions than the eighteenth century, polite leisure and spa towns. Fortunately my omissions have been more

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[44] J. Summerson, *Georgian London*, 1st pub. 1943, ed. H. Colvin (New Haven and London, 2003); J. Summerson, *Architecture in Britain, 1530-1830*, 1st pub. 1953, 9th edn (New Haven and London, 1989); D. Cruickshank and P. Wyld, *London: the Art of Georgian Building* (London, 1975); W. Ison, *The Georgian Buildings of Bath from 1700 to 1830*, 1st pub. 1948 (Reading, 2004); W. Ison *The Georgian Buildings of Bristol*, 1st pub. 1952 (Bath, 1978): D. Cruickshank and N. Burton, *Life in the Georgian City* (London, 1990); M. Girouard, *The English Town* (New Haven and London, 1990).
[45] A. Green, 'The polite threshold in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century England', *Vernacular Architecture*, 41: 1 (2010), pp. 1-9; P. Guillery, *The Small House in Eighteenth-Century London: a Social and Architectural History* (New Haven and London, 2004).