

Birmingham, Making a Great City

Dr. Steven McCabe, Associate Professor, Institute of Design, Economic Acceleration & Sustainability (IDEAS) and Senior Fellow, Centre for Brexit Studies, Birmingham City University

Though not of the scale of the Olympics we so thoroughly enjoyed ten years ago this summer, Birmingham will be hosting a major sporting event this summer. From Thursday, 28 July to Monday, 8 August this year, Birmingham will be the location for the Commonwealth Games when 19 different sports will take place between athletes from 'Commonwealth' nations.

Being host to a major sporting event will undoubtedly put Birmingham on the map in a way that would have been hard to envisage just over half a century ago when plans for a National Exhibition Centre in Birmingham (though actually in Solihull), and where some Commonwealth Games events will take place, were then well advanced.

Birmingham in early 1972 was still very much an industrial city. Though Birmingham's landscape in the city centre had changed dramatically in the previous decade as a result of post-war reconstruction, to outsiders, was regarded as strangely parochial and, it must be acknowledged, bearing the characteristics of being a manufacturing city. The numerous factories operating across the city, some of which were only a 'stone's throw' from the city centre, provided significant employment to many citizens.

Manufacturing, welcome as it was by those enjoying relatively well-paid jobs, many having been attracted to the city by the demand for labour following the war, created pollution. Belching out of noxious fumes meant that the air quality was frequently poor.

Birmingham literally smelt of manufacturing! Indeed, in the early evening, depending on what bus route you used back in the 1970s, it was possible to detect the smell of machine oil which distinctively hung in the air as a result of workers who'd used public transport travel home.

Though a few may have considered this a problem, most accepted smells and pollution created by manufacturing as a positive sign of prosperity. Birmingham's status had been firmly rooted in its origins and development as a place in which, it was widely claimed, almost literally anything could be made and the quality of goods produced, and sold across the globe, regarded as the best money could buy.

Unfortunately, though few were aware, the 1970s, a decade of industrial upheaval and economic chaos, was to be the beginning of the end of era of mass manufacturing in Birmingham. In the quest to improve productivity and competitiveness, as well as the need to reduce rampant inflation, fewer workers would be needed in the future, capital investment, though desperately required would result in processes being increasingly automated.

Birmingham, through the construction of the National Exhibition Centre in the 1970s as well as the International Convention Centre in the late 1980s, was altering its emphasis. Whatever people may have felt about the whiff of machine oil on buses or fumes from the many factories, the alarming rate at which they closed down, resulting in a loss of jobs, created economic problems which undermined confidence in a city that'd once been referred to by influential writer Arthur Young in 1791 as "the first manufacturing town in the world".

Birmingham, which only became a city in 1889, having been granted this status by Queen Victoria, had grown rapidly as firms located there to avail of the abundance of talented individuals who were capable of working with metals. As Lambert (2022) explains, during the seventeenth and eighteenth

century, Birmingham city had developed a reputation for producing a range of goods and that “Metalworking of all kinds flourished in the town [including] buckles for shoes, blades, pins, nails, screws, bolts, and buttons.”

What transformed Birmingham from a town of approximately 6-7,000 in 1700 to a population of over half a million by the time it achieved city status, was the interconnected influence of the Industrial Revolution and so called ‘Midlands Enlightenment’. As Birmingham Museum and Art Galleries (2022) explains on its website, “Birmingham achieved global significance through its leading role in the economic, social and political changes associated with the Industrial Revolution.”

As Hopkins (1989) describes in his enthralling book, *Birmingham: The First Manufacturing Town in the World 1760–1840*, what underpinned city’s ascendancy as a location of manufacturing was availability of resources via the canals that were built and, primarily, the workforce. Most particularly, he cites the fact that labour was not just plentiful but capable of adapting their skills to suit new challenges.

What Birmingham successfully achieved in becoming the ‘City of a thousand trades’, was a combination of entrepreneurial exploration of innovative goods produced using new working techniques. This ensured large quantities made with lower costs making. Consequently, a range of items including toys, and the guns and jewellery, of high quality and repute became associated with city.

Birmingham’s development continued throughout the nineteenth century making it a place in which there was active interaction between those engaged in developing theory with practical import for industrialists. Such enlightenment was undisputedly assisted by the formation of the Lunar Society, so called because it met under a full moon to make travelling to meetings easier and safer as streetlighting had yet to be installed.

An excellent account of the Lunar Society, whose members included Matthew Boulton, Erasmus Darwin, Richard Edgeworth, Samuel Galton, Jr., Joseph Priestley, James Watt and Josiah Wedgwood, referring to themselves as “lunaticks”, is provided by Jenny Uglow in *The Lunar Men: The Friends Who Made the Future 1730-1810* (2003). As Uglow makes contends, the world we take for granted today was largely created those who not only thought big, but ensured their creative thinking and inventiveness produced wealth and employment that was the pull for so many then and in subsequent generations.

Birmingham’s political influence through the reformation of the likes of Thomas Attwood (6th October 1783 – 6th March 1856) and Joseph Chamberlain (8th July 1836 – 2nd July 1914) created reform and social mobility that made it an exemplar for the rest of the country. This was seen in the housing and general improvement created in the city which made living conditions so much better for workers and their families.

Improving the life of citizens was considered urgent by many. BBC television series, *Britain’s Biggest Dig* (BBC Two, 2021), based on archaeological evidence of 6,500 skeletons exhumed from the Park Street graveyard to make way for the HS2 which is being built, and used during the period 1810-1873, demonstrated evidence of the injuries suffered from repetitive injury caused by using a press (Balloo, 2020). Workers, we should not forget, as well as including the use of children, was not covered by the sort of regulations and law such as the Health and Safety at Work Act that’s commonplace today.

Though it's easy to sentimentalise about the way in which Birmingham developed, it must be remembered that the speed at which workers arrived meant they and their families lived in unsanitary conditions. The use of what was known as 'back-to-back' housing, often three storey, small rooms, no garden, and not connected to sewers were typical (National Trust, 2022).

To say these such accommodation was cramped would be an understatement. Frequently there would be multiple families in each house and, in order to bring in additional income, lodgers were common. All of this added to the risk of infection and disease. It's hardly surprising there were smallpox occurred in 1871-72, 1874, and 1883 epidemics of scarlet fever in in 1878 and 1882-3.

Any account of manufacturing in Birmingham would be incomplete without reference to seminal companies which have made the city synonymous with success. Perhaps the best known is Cadburys which first produced chocolate in Birmingham's Bull Street in 1824 but which moved to its historic Bournville 'factory in a garden' facility in 1878 (Wordsworth, 2018).

Though Cadburys still exists, it's now owned by American company, Kraft Foods, following a takeover in 2010. Though custard is associated with Birds, having been made in the iconic Digbeth factory, now used for new start-up and creative ventures, production there ceased when the company to Banbury in 1964 (Recipe Reminiscing, 2022).

Undoubtedly the greatest change in Birmingham has been the decline and, in all too many cases, disappearance of car production that had made the city so synonymous with this sector. Austin Cars formed by owner Herbert in 1905 when, having left Wolseley Tool & Motor Company, he purchased land in Longbridge is debatably one of the most influential this country has produced. The Longbridge plant would eventually become one of the largest production facilities for cars in Europe (Bardsley, 2016).

Unfortunately, by the 1970s, the Longbridge, by then part of nationalised British Leyland, was more associated with union militancy – led by works convenor 'Red' Derek Robinson – causing production to halt and losses to mount. Worse, cars produced at Longbridge were not regarded as being quality products.

The knock-on impact of a reduction in car production in Birmingham led to the demise of Joseph Lucas's many factories dotted around the city (Bunce, 2003). Many other suppliers of components have also been affected by the fact that fewer workers are required. Critically, international competitiveness means that components, even though made thousands of miles away, may be cheaper.

All of this led to the massive decline in employment in manufacturing in Birmingham in the 1980s that led to deprivation and joblessness for the city that are still higher than the national averages (see Centre for Cities, 2022).

Those who envisaged Birmingham as a destination for exhibitions and conferences believed it was necessary to shift the city's emphasis away from manufacturing. Creating new forms of employment would result in the city being seen differently to the less than enticing location many outsiders perceived it to be by the early 1970s.

Whether they ever would have predicted that Birmingham would eventually host a meeting of the Commonwealth Games is debatable. As a peculiar footnote Birmingham did submit a bid to hold the Olympic Games in to be held in 1992 though the winner was Barcelona, (BBC, 2014).

In the razzamatazz and excitement of the Commonwealth Games taking place later this year, emphasising what a great place Birmingham is to visit, it's to be hoped there's sufficient remembrance of the individual industrialists and political reformers who ensured the city became renowned for curiosity, inventiveness and, of course, manufacturing.

Any celebration would ideally recall the contribution of those who came from, over the last couple of centuries, almost every part of the globe in search of employment and a better future for themselves and their children. Without their contribution, Birmingham would probably be a very different city and, without doubt, a lesser place.

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