

*A Brief History of the Civic Society
Movement*

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by Lucy E. Hewitt

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Published by Civic Voice
www.civicvoice.org.uk

Printed by Mickle Print(Canterbury) Limited. 2014
www.mickleprint.com

ISBN: 978-0-9559997-6-5

Funding for this publication was generously contributed by:

Addingham Civic Society	Peterborough Civic Society
Altrincham and Bowdon Civic Society	Saddleworth Civic Trust
Bewdley Civic Society	Sid Vale Association
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Epsom Civic Society	The Coventry Society
Formby Civic Society	The Harwich Society
Freddie Gick	The Heath and Hampstead Society
Hale Civic Society	The Portsmouth Society
Hartford Civic Society	The Royal Tunbridge Wells Civic Society
Kent Federation of Amenity Societies	The Wimbledon Society
Lancaster Civic Society	The Windsor and Eton Society
Leeds Civic Trust	Tony Burton
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Neil Sinden	Worcester Civic Society
North West Association of Civic Trusts and Societies	Yorkshire and Humber Association of Civic Societies
Peter Bembridge	

Foreword

Democracy does try to respond to our needs. It is sometimes difficult to believe, I know, but the road of local activism has been one of steady improvement. I was rather shocked recently to read a sensible commentator pointing to the dust-heaps, the blackened faces and the dirty streets in a book of early photographs of London and concluding that this proved how wrong conservationists were. Nobody, he decided, would willingly want to return to that sort of rubbish-strewn, dilapidated era – the past in fact. It proved to his satisfaction that heritage people were deluded. It proved quite a different thing to me. It proved the virtue of interference. It proved that both us and our cities may have changed in our needs, but only because some people found that dirt and pollution and darkness “wrong” and did something about it.

In this book Lucy Hewitt traces the development of “civic virtue” in England. We might note that such a thing is not new. Pompei himself built circuses. Augustus clad Rome in marble. But if the notion of a community looking at its surroundings and wanting to control or effect it may be as old as mankind itself what is not so straightforward is the motivation behind such a desire. It changes. We read here of groups fighting against disease and poverty, driven by simple Christian Charity, of others worried about security, some that simply wanted to avoid danger and promote a feeling of well-being, or to get rid of slums, or even to promote Godliness. But from the start many wanted the place they lived in to look good and reflect its historic past.

The modern Civic movement is not easily classifiable either. There are as many mansions in the house of Civic Voice as there are needs in the average modern town. Perhaps some of the more obvious or pressing demands have been sorted out. We don't have as much pollution. We are better lit. We have done away with smoke. We do clear up rubbish and look out more for dangerous crumbling buildings or slums that breed illness with greater regularity than we used to. (And we wish we did more, where we fail.) Our cities are better for it. But we should be wary of assuming that these things happened thanks to some sort of vague “modern enlightenment”. They happened because they reflected civic values embodied in the minds of concerned citizens.

We live in cleaner, more bearable towns because of amenity groups, not despite them: because people cared and lobbied and worked to make them so. Democracy at the local level has worked in most of our towns. Try visiting Port Sudan if you want to know what living on an actual rubbish heap would feel like. Proper planning has followed public involvement. Democracy has recognized that we require these things to happen and only perversity would see these rules and controls as some sort of brake on “progress”. The modern amenity movement may have been founded on the bed rock of simple civic needs and it may continue to sustain an interest in those needs, but we now recognise that the old enemies of neglect and local indifference have been replaced by new enemies of centralized indifference and self-interest.

Yes, the Civic Movement today adopts conservation as one of its special interests. Beneath that old grime and rubbish was the fabric of our cities. Today’s citizenry want to make living in towns more bearable not just by removing filth, but also by planning proper streets and by putting in trees and parks. They want to organize traffic to help the citizen and not the Road Haulier. They need to stand out against development in the name of some obscure national interest of “economic” strength.

I have met Civic Societies, local societies, that are part of Civic Voice, that manage alms houses, that own and control green belt land, that look after parks, that have produced extensive reports on the transport systems of their boroughs, and investigated and reported on living conditions and plans for growth. There is a lot more than conservation here and, yet, the preservation of heritage is at the forefront of a modern Civic Society’s concerns because it is part of the current democratic pressure for civic responsibility. In other words we are the same citizens. We are continuing the work recorded in this study. We have to do so. The commentator I quoted at the beginning, a good Conservative, with a capital C, possibly thinks of local amenity societies as “busy bodies”. Well I say lets get busy. He possibly thinks of them as Nimbys. Well I say lets look out of the window and get involved in our places. It is thanks to the involvement of Civic Societies that the best of Britain look the way it does and not like a “yard”.

This is timely history that helps us to understand why more than ever we need to stand up and be counted today.

Griff Rhys-Jones
President of Civic Voice

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Introduction

This short book traces the history of how, over the last 160 years, many thousands of people have volunteered their time and energy in improving the towns, cities and villages where they live. Pride of place has been the driving force in motivating members of hundreds of Civic Societies across the country to work tirelessly to conserve, restore and develop their local environments. Whether enhancing the appearance of the Sidmouth Esplanade in the mid-nineteenth century or restoring Victorian shelters on Ramsgate Promenade many years later, the same spirit of public service has pervaded the story of the movement.

With its origins in the Kyrle Societies whose objectives from the late 1880s were to promote the cultural and physical qualities of their towns, the movement grew slowly initially, maturing in the period after the Great War and mushrooming after the Second World War. The story told in the pages that follow demonstrates the variety of ways in which Societies were formed and grew, often at the inspiration of a small number of particularly energetic individuals. In the early days their work often involved practical projects directed towards improving local amenities, including the provision of parks, enhanced traffic management and sometimes the redesign of street furniture.

The need for better housing for the poor in London in the nineteenth century, a huge priority for Octavia Hill, a member of her local Kyrle Society and one of the founders of the National Trust, was reflected in a similar need for the much bombed city of Birmingham in the 1950s. We will read how balancing that need for housing and the regeneration of our great cities with the desirability of conserving and even restoring many of the country's finest buildings became a major issue for Civic Societies during the 1960s and 1970s. Judgements made at that time were probably well founded but, on reflection, may seem to the reader to have been less sound. Changing tastes and different perspectives on architectural style, combined with pressures for greater utility are seen in the views expressed by Societies through the decades of the last century.

If this history is the prologue for the movement today, there is much to be proud of and to stimulate its enthusiasm for the future. The scale and diversity of the activities of 500 Societies and their 150,000 members can only be marvelled at.

From promoting high quality in planning and architecture and planting thousands of trees each year to running local facilities, all sorts of youth programmes and a host of award programmes, individual Civic Societies make huge contributions to the quality of the communities they serve.

The formation of Civic Voice as a national body for the movement in 2010 was a major landmark event, marking a recognition that societies need to have their voice heard at a national level. Ensuring that government is made aware of the importance of local participation in planning and related decision making is, of course, the core objective of the organisation. However, building collective views on issues affecting communities across the country, ensuring that they are promulgated where they need to be heard, and stimulating the sharing of ideas, programmes and enthusiasm between societies are also essential components of the Civic Voice agenda.

So, the Civic Movement today is buoyant. Full of enthusiasm for taking pride in their places and keen to work to improve them, Civic Society members now more than ever perceive themselves as part of something greater than their own local organisation. Their undiluted passion for where they live is supplemented by a growing acknowledgement that by joining forces they have an unprecedented capacity to influence the context and content of national and local decisions.

What of the future? Increasingly, Societies play crucial roles in helping to determine the shapes, amenities and styles of the areas in which they work. While glancing over their shoulders at their proud history and that of the buildings that surround them, societies help to ensure that sustainable enhancement is achieved when changes are being made. They continue to emphasise the need to achieve that elusive balance between economic viability, facility and environmental quality. Whether participating in planning their physical environment, planting bulbs or trees or running programmes for schools, they demonstrate that same commitment to their communities that characterised their nineteenth century founders. Celebrating the past and building for the future might be their mantra!

Pride of place and enthusiasm for accepting personal responsibility for taking action are the hallmarks of the optimistic, energetic and forward looking movement that is the Civic Movement today.

This delightful book demonstrates authoritatively the sound foundations on which these elusive attributes are based.

Freddie Gick
Chairman, Civic Voice

A Brief History of the Civic Society Movement

For most facets of our social world precedents can be traced and practices can be mapped onto earlier patterns of organization. The civic movement is no different. Indeed, in some respects, the concerns and form of the many local societies that collectively constitute the movement are so integrated into long-standing traditions of British life that identifying a particular point of emergence is misleading. Voluntary associations began to increase significantly in number in Britain during the late seventeenth century and over the course of the eighteenth century local clubs and societies became important in the social life of most urban centres. Historian Peter Clark has argued that by the end of the eighteenth century ‘not only did voluntary associations help to design the distinctive cultural face of a town, but within the community they gave rise to the special social networks... which served as the economic, political, and cultural arteries of a particular urban world.’¹ Thus, over at least the last three centuries Britain’s towns and cities have been served by a notable number of voluntary groups concerned with the social and physical landscapes of their locale.

What was set in motion at this earlier point, however, evolved significantly in response to the transformations of the nineteenth century. During this period the growth of towns and cities, first in terms of population and then as an extension of the built landscape, was dramatic and profound. Overall rates of urban population growth remained above twenty per cent in each decade from 1811 until 1881 and this average figure concealed rises in population of up to fifty per cent for some places within a single ten year span.² Furthermore, growth represented much more than a quantitative increase. Explorations of the history of urban change during this period can pick their focus from economic or industrial shifts, changes in social and political cleavages or evolving patterns of consumption and cultural taste. Yet underpinning these, and central to understanding the historical background of the civic movement, are the profound spatial transformations that affected the landscapes, architecture and infrastructures of towns and cities across the country.

The urban geography of nineteenth-century Britain was transformed by industrial development and commercial culture. New streets were cut, opening the centres of cities to increasing volumes of traffic. Railways, 'the most important single agency in the transformation of the central area of many of Britain's major cities' according to John Kellett, displaced local residents and created new kinds of spaces, like cuttings and tunnels, as well as the stations and tracks that carved through urban landscapes.³ The increasing affluence and diversifying interests of the urban middle classes also supported the development of new kinds of spaces. Arcades and department stores created spectacles of artificial light and theatrical displays that reflected the increasing consumerism characteristic of the nineteenth-century city. Cultural sophistication was signalled by the rapid building of galleries, libraries and museums.

Urbanization and the growth of voluntary associations

Britain's associational culture was important throughout this period and consistently concerned itself with efforts to improve the landscape of towns and cities. Associations and campaigns pressed for parks and gardens, for better housing, land reform and the protection of old buildings threatened by the voraciousness of urban growth. Reformist movements placed their emphasis variously on public health, evangelism or education, but behind their contrasting emphases there was often a common focus on the built environment. Anthony Wohl has pointed, for example, to the tendency of churchmen 'to move away from a strict emphasis upon salvation and the after-life to a genuine awareness of the importance of physical environment.' Wohl has suggested that this shift towards a concern for the material conditions of life was part of the increasing prevalence of 'environmentalist theories' that directed popular attention particularly towards the importance of the quality of urban landscapes.⁴ Action undertaken on the basis of this concern included large-scale enterprises, such as City Improvement Trusts and the cutting of new streets, but it also found expression in a multitude of works undertaken on a smaller, often voluntary, scale.



Lithograph by William Spreat, showing Sidmouth from the Esplanade, c1840. Image reproduced with the kind permission of Devon Heritage Centre Exeter, ref. SC2502.

British historian Asa Briggs famously described the middle decades of the nineteenth century as ‘the age of improvement.’ A wide range of initiatives reflected this sensibility, including many aimed at improving the environment. In Sidmouth, shown above c1840, an Improvement Committee was formed in 1846 to ensure ‘the comfort and accommodation of visitors and for improvement generally.’ This group continued to function and evolve over following decades, changing its name in the early twentieth century to the ‘Sid Vale Improvement Association’, whose objectives were to make ‘the natural beauties more accessible, keep [...] footpaths and wicket gates in repair, etc.’ A few years later the group shortened its name to the ‘Sid Vale Association’ and continues to exist as a member of the civic society movement today.



The East Heath Hampstead, c1920

Image reproduced with the kind permission of the Heath and Hampstead Society Archive.

Urbanization resulted in rapid changes to the landscape of towns and cities. For many urban residents the countryside that had once been accessible was replaced by tracts of suburban housing and nearby open spaces were threatened as land values in towns and cities increased. At Hampstead the celebrated Heath was under repeated threat during the nineteenth century as attempts were made, first to capitalize on its value and then to formalize its design. High profile campaigning to preserve the Heath from development began as early as 1829 and became what the historian F. M. L. Thompson called 'one of the hottest metropolitan potatoes of the century.' Local voluntary association became crucial in safeguarding the Heath. Following in the formation of the Commons Open Preservation Society in 1865, the Hampstead Heath Protection Committee was established in 1866 to lead the local campaign for the Heath's preservation. They were successful and when further threats to the Heath emerged in the 1890s, the group was re-established with many notable supporters, including Octavia Hill, Sir Walter Besant and Norman Shaw

Among the many voluntary activities that reflected the growing desire to improve the urban landscape was the work of the Hill sisters. Octavia Hill (1838–1912) was a significant figure in the housing reform movement who worked over several decades to improve the living conditions of the poor in London. She placed an emphasis on small and gradual improvements, on the aesthetic character of urban landscapes and on the relationships she and her workers established with tenants.⁵ Her strong beliefs about the value of the qualitative aspects of an environment made her, Robert Whelan has argued, a pioneer of ‘cultural philanthropy’; she was convinced, like her friend John Ruskin, that beauty was an essential counterpart to a good life and should be a part of the daily experience of the poor, as well as the wealthy, in urban society.⁶ In a letter to her fellow housing workers in 1896, a year after she contributed to the formation of the National Trust, she explained how she had realized the importance of colour and nature in the lives of poor Londoners through direct experience of their living conditions:

‘It is from the narrow space in rooms and crowded alleys that I first learned how the small garden near the narrow court or huge block was the necessary complement of the home...it was in their colourlessness and unloveliness that I learnt how the colour and music brought by the Kyrle Society were needed.’⁷

The Kyrle Society mentioned here was an organization initiated by Octavia’s sister, Miranda Hill (1836-1910), in the mid-1870s and part of the growing number of groups concerned with making improvements to the environment of towns and cities. Miranda’s first suggestion was for a ‘Society for the Diffusion of Beauty’. She wanted such a society to work towards ‘making beautiful places for the poor...since our towns are growing so enormously...there is less and less possibility of beautiful country objects being within the reach of the poor in their daily lives.’⁸ When it was established in 1876, the London Kyrle Society sought to provide beauty through art, music and garden space. The agenda represented a clear emphasis on aesthetic and cultural needs and served as an example for similar societies that were established in towns and cities elsewhere in Britain over the following decades. In some places Kyrle societies were directly linked to later civic societies.⁹



John Kyrle, by an unknown artist, reproduced with the kind permission of the Herefordshire Archive Service

John Kyrle (1637–1724), ‘the man of Ross’, became well known for his philanthropic work in his home town of Ross-on-Wye. He was concerned with various aspects of local welfare, but remembered particularly for the improvements he made to the town, such as establishing a public garden for the benefit of residents. Kyrle was recollected for his work by Alexander Pope in a poem, ‘Of the Uses of Riches’ (1734). From the late nineteenth century voluntary groups interested in improving the environment of towns and cities used his name to indicate their sphere of interests. In some cities Kyrle Societies, like the earlier Improvement Societies, had a direct connection to the civic movement. In Bristol, for example, the Bristol Kyrle Society formed in 1905 later changed its name and became the Bristol Civic Society.

Preserving the past: heritage and local identity

The aesthetic concerns of groups like the Kyrle societies were also closely connected to the development of arguments about the importance of architectural preservation that had similarly been advancing over the previous century. John Ruskin's treatise, *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* (1849), had provided an important focus for discussions about the value of preservation, but his arguments were not new. Interest in the physical legacies of the past had strong roots in the earlier period. Historian Rosemary Sweet, for example, has shown that eighteenth-century urban improvements led to the gradual disappearance of many medieval townscapes in Britain and had an impact on the awareness of connections with the past. Indeed, Sweet has argued that the extent of the physical changes in many places caused concern among local inhabitants who viewed the material losses as damage done to their communities.¹⁰

In the nineteenth century this concern continued and deepened and the clubs and societies of Britain's voluntary culture were again central to activity. Christopher Miele has pointed out that in towns like York the 'heritage industry began to trade in the 1820s.' The specific example Miele cites is that of a local learned society which took on a museum of antiquities and the maintenance of an ancient ruin in the town.¹¹ Likewise, research by Philippa Levine has demonstrated the prevalence of interest in the past gathering pace over the nineteenth century through the growing number of antiquarian, archaeological and historical associations.¹² Many of these provincial groups placed a firm emphasis on the tangible legacies represented by buildings, monuments and distinctive landscapes, and in the final third of the nineteenth century this interest became visible in a number of significant bodies. The Society for Photographing the Relics of Old London, for example, was established in 1875 in response to the demolition of old buildings, while the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings was formed by William Morris, with John Ruskin among its members, in 1877.¹³

There is also increasing evidence of interest in locality and civic identity evolving during the nineteenth century to take a shape that remained recognizable in twentieth century concerns. Philippa Levine has shown that, alongside the rising interest in the past, it was an emphasis on local pride which motivated and shaped

historical concerns. She explicitly connects this interest in locality with the growth of civic pride in the later nineteenth century:

*'Belonging to the locality was to be in possession of an identity and of a genealogy, and to explore and uncover the past of the county was to enrich that genealogy... Nostalgia provides an insufficient explanation for the popularity of organized antiquarian pursuits. It was rather an alternative cultural force of amazing vigour, and attachment to local identity was motivated in many ways by the same sentiments as that civic pride which spurred on the town halls and sewer builders of the later nineteenth century.'*¹⁴

For Britain's rapidly expanding towns and cities, the ability to articulate a distinctive local past provided some of the social cement necessary for establishing at least a patina of cohesion and longevity in growing and diverse communities. Thus, the concern for local history and heritage, and that for the civic status and identity of cities began increasingly to coincide and shape activity as the century matured.

When civic societies emerged in the last years of the nineteenth century many of their concerns were closely connected to these earlier ideas and activities. With their focus on a particular town or city they continued and extended the emphasis on localism. Indeed, the desire to maintain the local distinctiveness, particularly that granted by an old and beautiful townscape, was often an important element in the formation of early groups. In Guildford, for example, the formation of a civic society in 1896 was a response to a series of proposed alterations to the town's High Street. In a letter to the Secretary of the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings, the founder of the Guildford Society, George C. Williamson, wrote:

*'A hideous boot shop is now being erected in the High Street...Lower down a saddlers shop is to be rebuilt, opposite to that two fine old plain brick houses are coming down and so on. The Corporation care nothing, the property owners less, save to make big shops, with plate glass fronts, build them as cheaply as possible and make money.'*¹⁵



Guildford High Street, 1895, reproduced with the kind permission of Surrey History Centre, PH/72/BOX4/140.

This photograph was taken a year before the Guildford Society was formed to oppose changes to the street. There was a growing awareness of the impact of ongoing processes of urbanization towards the end of the nineteenth century, evidenced in the formation of a range of national groups interested in preservation. The formation of local groups concerned with the way urban areas were being developed is one of the most notable features of Britain's associational culture during this and the following period.

Citizenship and planning in the early twentieth century

Urbanization in the nineteenth century was often destructive and problematic. However, the growth of cities could also be a source of fascination and optimism. In the early twentieth century urbanity was the subject of public debate and newspapers declared ‘this is the age of cities, and all the world is city-building.’¹⁶ Towns and cities were already home to around three-quarters of the British population, and now a growing desire to shape them for the benefit of future generations emerged strongly. At this point debate about the nature of the urban environment was increasingly linked to questions of citizenship and civic consciousness. The architect and designer C. R. Ashbee, for example, argued that the city of the twentieth century would finally offer the environment in which man could harness the power of industry in the service of social and aesthetic ideals:

‘The new relationship of man to life which machine industry has brought with it, finds its fullest expression in the new life of our city. This implies that through the city and its proper adjustment to mechanical conditions man will realise again those finer values which the arts bring into life. Through the city we focus civilization.’¹⁷

Ashbee was engaged in a number of voluntary initiatives concerned with the built environment, including as a founder of the Committee for the Survey of the Memorials of Greater London in 1894 (known after 1914 as the London Survey Committee). In the early twentieth century he was also among a number of well-known figures to be influenced by the ideas of the Scottish polymath Patrick Geddes (1854–1932). An enthusiast for a remarkable range of activities, Geddes’s ideas crossed professional and disciplinary boundaries. At the core of his ideas and his work, however, was the belief that a more deliberate and explicit engagement with urban life held the potential to develop stronger and more coherent urban communities.

Based in London from the turn of the century, Geddes was vocal in his advocacy of the study of cities. He called his approach ‘civics’ and emphasised the importance of understanding the links that existed between cities and their wider regional geographies as well as the centrality of history in urban life: he famously described

cities as 'a drama in time.'¹⁸ For Geddes, the purpose of studying cities was to engage citizens as fully as possible in their local community and was the preferable route to planning for a future in which all were invested. Both study and planning, therefore, had explicit social ends for Geddes and he remained deeply committed throughout his career to 'civic betterment'. Furthermore, his ideas reached a wide audience and the term 'civics' became suddenly prevalent, providing the focus for a range of activities, including lecture programmes and summer schools.¹⁹

Geddes became a 'guide and advisor' to the first generation of individuals to establish town planning as a professional activity in Britain.²⁰ Interest in the layout of cities, their architectural distinctiveness and their continued growth was inevitably deepening as town planning was named in legislation for the first time in 1909. This increasing interest in planning also provided focus and momentum for the civic movement. Indeed, early civic societies were often linked to the increasing profile and professionalization of planning. The Liverpool City Guild, for example, was formed in 1910 as part of a number of initiatives in the city. Following a bequest made by industrialist, philanthropist and founder of Port Sunlight, William Hesketh Lever, the University of Liverpool established the first Department of Civic Design in 1909. The bequest also supported a research post, occupied by Patrick Abercrombie whose later career dominated planning in Britain during the first half of the twentieth century, and the subject's first journal, the *Town Planning Review*. The Liverpool City Guild was formed at this point by figures including Stanley Adshead (who held the first Chair of Civic Design at the University of Liverpool) and Patrick Abercrombie.²¹ Early reports of the Guild's discussions and activities were also published in the *Town Planning Review*, demonstrating how closely connected with broader developments in planning early civic societies could be.

Indeed, the involvement of professional planners and architects was a notable feature of early civic societies formed in Britain's major cities. In some cases early professionals sought to extend the use of new planning methods through voluntary activity. For example, the London Society was founded in January 1912 in response to the new planning powers granted to local authorities under the 1909 Act and, particularly, to the reluctance of the London County Council to utilize them. Crucially, while the 1909 Act enabled local authorities to prepare planning schemes

within their administrative boundaries, no mechanism for organized planning across Britain's conurbations existed posing the potential for chaos resulting out of many discrete and unco-ordinated attempts at orderly development. The planners, architects and politicians involved in the London Society sought to further the cause of planning for urban regions as a whole through persuasion, but also through their own activity. They were involved in discussions with various urban and rural district authorities in the Greater London region and during the First World War they went on to produce a plan showing the potential routes for arterial roads which could serve as a network for the whole of Greater London.²²

The London Society's initiative was significant for its scope and scale, but not unique. While the war caused a near cessation of building activity and led to the loss of employment for architects, engineers and surveyors in the short-term, the period also saw planning debated widely at conferences, in the pages of journals and newspapers, and through the meetings of voluntary groups. With the power to prepare planning schemes and the pressing need for new housing following the war, the issues that concerned civic societies were increasingly commanding public and political attention and further groups were formed. However, the increase in voluntary group formation at this point also partly reflected a concern among professionals and local residents about the quality of the planning and housing building activity being undertaken by the newly empowered local authorities. As the planning historian Stephen Ward has pointed out, following the 1909 Town Planning Act, the focus for activity moved away from the voluntary sector where early professionals, reformist movements and philanthropists had dominated, and into the sphere of local government where borough engineers and surveyors instead took charge of activities.²³ In this changed organizational context, the architectural sensibilities, ambitious scale and socially informed progressivism of planners, architects and reformers found fewer possibilities for direct involvement in shaping towns and cities: well-connected voluntary associations seemed to provide a valuable vehicle to exert influence and to act independently.



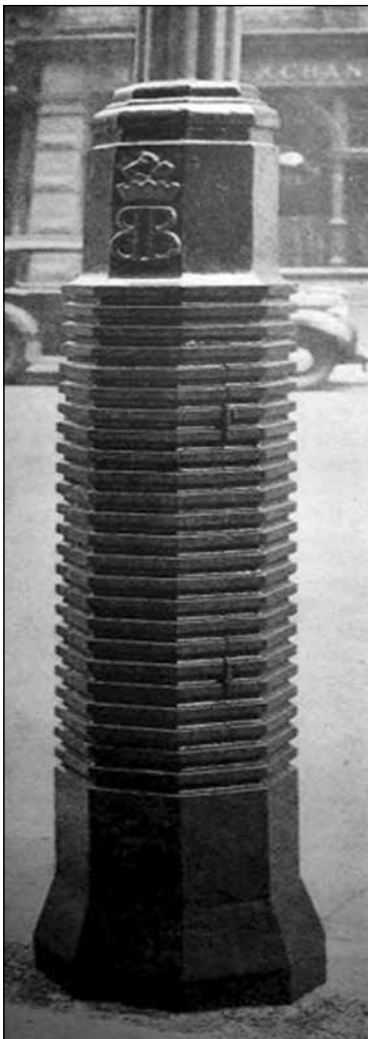
Key Map for the Development Plan for Greater London (1919),
reproduced by kind permission of The London Society.

The London Society's Development Plan for Greater London was produced during the First World War by the architects and planners who were members of the Society, including notable figures in the early planning movement like Raymond Unwin and well-known architects such as Aston Webb. The map shown here was a key to the complete scheme, which was presented on sixteen sheets that measured in total 8 x 6ft. This key shows the full area that the proposals addressed. Roads already in existence are shown in black, while agreed routes for future arterial roads appear in red. The plan also indicates the location of existing open spaces in the Greater London area in light green, and additions proposed by the Society in darker green. This project, and other similar initiatives by civic societies in other cities, indicated the role played by civic societies in the advocacy and professionalization of planning in the early twentieth century. Societies frequently had planning and related professionals among their most active members and the meetings of societies offered a forum for lectures and discussion of planning ideas.

The growth of civic societies during the interwar period

A number of new civic societies formed in major British cities immediately following the cessation of the First World War were particularly engaged in the new planning agenda. In Leeds, for example, the Civic Society arranged a public exhibition, held at the city's art gallery, to promote town planning in 1919.²⁴ In Birmingham the Civic Society was formed at the same moment that the first and largest planning schemes in Britain were being set in motion. The Birmingham group used funding, made available through a Trust from the Cadbury family, to purchase land within the areas of the planning schemes and thereby safeguard open spaces from development. They also offered professionally designed schemes for the redevelopment of the central parts of small towns where the planning schemes seemed to threaten historic buildings. While the activities of civic societies during this period often focused on contributing to planning practice, their interests always remained always wider. Thus, the Birmingham Civic Society was also engaged in initiatives for the design of street furniture and park improvements, the redesign of the city's telephone directory and kiosks, and even a pamphlet articulating design standards for tombstones. The emphasis routinely stepped beyond an easy classification as part of the preservation or planning agenda, and continued earlier concerns for the aesthetics and quality of the urban environment. In its first annual report the Birmingham Civic Society made a clear argument about the role that a beautiful urban landscape could play in the social life of a community:

*'Nothing in our modern civilization has been more mischievously underestimated than the influence of the physical aspects of a town upon the spiritual and moral life of its community. People who resent the dirt and ugliness in which a commercialised society has environed its common life, are at present forced to make their own private refuges where they can indulge their instinct for decent and beautiful surroundings...The aim of the Birmingham Society will always be to keep in mind th[e] ideal of a regenerate city.'*²⁵



The Birmingham Civic Society was formed in 1918 with a number of notable local political and professional figures among its members, including Neville Chamberlain, Sir Gilbert Barling and George Cadbury Jr. It had wide interests in improving the quality of the urban environment though planning, preservation and design. Over the early years of its existence it initiated or was invited to take part in numerous projects.

In 1922 the Society decided to produce a revised design for the city's telephone directory in an attempt to limit the placement of advertisements and improve ease of reference. On this occasion, their redesign was not adopted. The front cover of the telephone directory as it was in 1923 (above, right) alongside the Society's proposed alternative (above, left).

In September 1935 the City Engineer asked the Technical Committee of the Civic Society to design new lamp standards. Left: an example of the Society's design in Broad Street, Birmingham, c1935 (photograph attributed to the Public Works Department).

Both images appear in *The Work of the Birmingham Civic Society*, compiled by William Haywood for the Birmingham Civic Society, Birmingham, 1934. Reproduced with kind permission from the Birmingham Civic Society.

During the interwar period there was growing support for civic societies. For many of those who were engaged in related spheres of activity, civic societies represented the strongest potential for expanding involvement in the planning and house building work of local authorities. They also offered a means to promote a wider agenda that prioritized locality and beauty. In 1920 Patrick Abercrombie, already a Professor of Civic Design at the University of Liverpool and editor of the *Town Planning Review*, wrote an article in which he praised civic societies for their ability to act as vehicles for public opinion and 'local advancement'.²⁶ He called for the formation of civic societies throughout the country, suggesting ambitious projects of study, and pointing to their importance in the context of further urban growth. His view was far from isolated and other advocates of civic groups were making similar arguments. For example, the professional journal, *The Builder*, reported on the progress of societies, arguing like Abercrombie that 'it would appear only right that every town should have its civic society, and that small towns, and even villages, should set up some sort of consultative body to safeguard their beauty and amenity...'.²⁷

The emphasis on locality has been a consistent feature of the civic movement: most groups concentrated their activities within a specific town and immediately surrounding area. Gradually, however, links between local societies began to emerge. The first attempt at organization among associations concerned with the quality of the built environment was a conference, convened in 1898 by the Society for Controlling Abuses of Public Advertising. This conference brought together groups including the Commons Preservation Society, the Metropolitan Public Gardens Association, the London Kyrle Society, the National Trust and the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings. The outcome, according to Patrick Abercrombie, was 'a combine of Societies' and 'a "House of Commons Amenities Committee" [that] was intended to work through a regular network of local bodies covering the country.'²⁸ It was this framework that Abercrombie advocated as the model for voluntary organization in the 1920s yet, while rural groups established national organization in the form of Council for the Protection of Rural England, between the various groups concerned with urban space formal association took time to develop. Informal and irregular contact, however, did occur.



Sir (Leslie) Patrick Abercrombie by Elliott and Fry, 1942
© National Portrait Gallery, London

Patrick Abercrombie's career in planning mirrored the development of the profession itself. He was appointed as a researcher in the newly founded Department of Civic Design at Liverpool University in 1909, beginning his involvement in Town Planning Review at the same time. In 1910 he was among the founders of the Liverpool City Guild and a decade later he wrote an article calling for the formation of civic societies. He argued that 'the whole country should be covered by a series of contiguous associations each focusing at some natural centre of local interest.' He saw local voluntary association as an important counterbalance to governmental centralization and a route to ensuring public opinion was heard by planning authorities

In 1923 a conference of civic societies was hosted by the Le Play House in London. The Le Play House took its name from a French sociologist whose work emphasized the connections between people and place. It was a venue that had been established by Sybella and Victor Branford, long-standing collaborators of Patrick Geddes, at 65 Belgrave Road, Westminster, in April 1920. As well as hosting meetings, running lectures and providing a centre of gravity for discussions, it also provided premises for a number of organizations that had been connected to and influenced by Patrick Geddes, including the Sociological Society, the Civic Education League and the Regional Association. It was Sybella Branford (1870–1926) who took a particularly strong interest in civic groups. She was instrumental in organizing the first conference of civic societies, which was held on 10 March 1923 and attended by representatives from a number of local societies and by professionals such as Patrick Abercrombie. The adopted aim of the conference was to promote the formation of further local societies in Britain.

Branford gave the inaugural lecture to the gathering on the subject of ‘Civic Societies and their Aims’. In that address she argued that the aim of civic groups should be ‘to make each city a culture centre for its region or district, carrying on and developing the best of its own tradition in a material environment worthy of the best.’ Reflecting the concerns prevalent in the earlier debates, particularly those influenced by Geddes, she warned of the dangers of apathy towards modern urban life, the threat of monotony and the loss of local traditions, centralization and the loss of local liberties, and the movement of local artistic talent away from smaller centres. In Branford’s characterization, civic societies were situated at the centre of a movement that sought to encourage and sustain the development of civic consciousness and pride. Indeed, she argued that

*‘The Civic Society exists to discover, maintain and develop what we may call the Soul of the City...The most obvious expression is in the buildings...Here desires and aspirations are crystallized in stone and brick, embodied in the use of art and nature...Here is recorded the history and tradition of each place, and here also we look for its possibilities.’*²⁹



Sybella Branford, c1917, reproduced with the kind permission of the Foundations of British Sociology Archive, Keele University.

Sybella Branford, together with her husband Victor and a number of collaborators, was involved in the early development of sociology in Britain. She also wrote and published on subjects such as co-operative housing and urban development. She and her husband were both influenced by the ideas and work of Patrick Geddes, who argued for a form of sociology, called 'civics', that would pioneer the study of towns and cities in order to improve urban communities and provide the basis for planning the future. Sybella was a member of the Richmond Civic Association and convened the first conference of civic societies in 1923. She advocated the formation of societies throughout Britain.

The advocacy of civic societies by figures like Patrick Abercrombie and Sybella Branford, combined with support from professional journals and the formation of high-profile societies in major cities, contributed to the continued development of the movement. In addition, the interwar period saw the built landscape occupy an increasingly central position in practical activity as the housing problem captured the political agenda and demanded building on a substantial scale. Indeed, the expansion of urban space during the interwar period was as radical in geographic terms as the demographic shift from rural to urban populations had been in a similar period of the nineteenth century. In Bristol, for example, between 1918 and 1939 36,000 houses were built within the city boundaries and several thousand more just beyond. This amounted to an increase of around 50% in the total number of dwellings in the city and a considerable extension of the urban area.³⁰

Such growth was often problematic because of the lack of regulation surrounding house building by private developers. Much of the house building that took place during the 1920s and 1930s was either 'blots' or ribbon development. Blots created large peri-urban areas often reliant on existing urban infrastructure and amenities, increasingly straining provision, and radiating out from established settlements separating towns and cities from their rural surroundings. Ribbon development, in contrast, crept along the edges of existing roads. This type of building kept down costs for developers, who were saved the expense of laying new roads, but impacted strongly on the ability of existing communities to access and appreciate the surrounding rural landscape. Early professionals were outspoken about such approaches to urban growth:

*'miles of road frontage are being built up, one house deep. They are no longer villages or even suburbs, but literally ribbons fringing the bus routes. These strips of the countryside are thus being colonised with no more rationale of social grouping, or economies of estate development or aesthetics of rural design than existed during the industrial revolution of last century. Socially, there can be no focusing of civic life; economically, there is a future heritage of administrative expenses, the ribbon development being clearly the most extravagant type of lay-out to sewer, water, light and police; aesthetically, it inflicts the maximum damage to the country landscape...'*³¹

As a result of such controversy, by the mid and late 1920s there were a number of local initiatives that aimed to protect towns and cities by opposing unregulated development in the countryside immediately surrounding them. For example, the founding objectives of the Cambridge Preservation Society included the protection of the amenities of the town and the surrounding area. In particular, the group sought to safeguard 'from disfigurement or injurious affection the views of and from Cambridge and its neighbourhood.'³² The Cambridge Society explained its formation with reference to the rapidity of building that had occurred since the end of World War One: 'Since the War, destruction of rural England has gone on apace. Building is inevitable, and no one wishes to stop it. But uncontrolled and unplanned development means inappropriate and unsightly structures and the spoliation of areas.'³³ The group therefore took a particular interest in safeguarding the approaches to the town and was able to intervene directly through the purchase of land. Individual Society members, including the historian G.M. Trevelyan, provided funds for the group's purchases and by the early 1930s the Cambridge Society owned approximately 590 acres of land, including 5,000 yards directly lining roads and designed to prevent further ribbon development.³⁴

National organization of local association

Examples like the Cambridge Preservation Society testify to the vitality of the movement in its core form, that is as active local societies. However, by the close of the interwar period there was also a recognition and desire for a national body that could represent the concerns shared among the growing number of local groups. The first national civic organization was formed in 1938. The Central Council of Civic Societies (CCCS) was intended to act as a source of information for local groups, convening periodic meetings and encouraging the formation of societies in cities where none existed. Indeed, it was a central body intended to act specifically as a counterbalance to, rather than a reinforcement of, the centralization of government that characterised the period. Viscount Esher, the first chairman of the CCCS, argued that

'civic problems in these days are indissolubly entwined with national. The great trunk roads run through the cities; housing and town-planning are nation-wide in

*their application. The central government, intent upon its national scheme, ignores local objection and rides rough-shod over local sentiment.*³⁵

Paradoxically, therefore, 'unity [wa]s required' among civic societies to oppose the erosion of localism. The civic society movement was firmly based, he wrote, 'upon local patriotism.'³⁶

Reflecting the wide interests of already existing civic groups, invitations to the first meeting of the CCCS were issued to voluntary societies who took 'a broad view of the problems of cities, as distinct from those that consider only one aspect of their future.'³⁷ The initial meeting included representatives from societies in Bath, Cambridge, Cardiff, Coventry, Guildford, Leicester, Manchester, Merseyside and Oxford. Societies based in Birmingham, Colchester, Norwich, Nottingham, Newcastle and Southampton had also been invited but were unable to attend. Despite the escalation of the war, the number of societies affiliated to the Council continued to grow. In early 1942 the annual report recorded that twenty societies were represented on the Council and that two new associations, the Durham Preservation Trust and the Wisbech Society, had been formed.³⁸ Six further groups were established over the following year, and by the Central Council's annual meeting in 1943 the number of affiliated societies had reached thirty-three.³⁹ By the end of the decade there were between seventy and eighty associations affiliated to the Central Council of Civic Societies and the number continued to rise still further.⁴⁰

During this period local activity also increased and diversified. Local groups also became increasingly active in establishing regional networks of societies. Early activities of the Warwick Society, for example, included not only engagement with planning and conservation agendas, but also organizing a conference of civic societies from throughout the Midlands region. The meeting was opened by the Mayor of Warwick, an original member of the Society, and was addressed by Paul Reilly, deputy director of the Council for Industrial Design. The conference was attended by over fifty members of sixteen local civic societies indicating something of the vitality of the local movement and the density of local networks that existed between different groups working in close proximity.⁴¹

It was at the same point that the movement reached one of the markers in

its history. Although the Central Council of Civic Societies continued to operate, circulating annual updates of activity from affiliated local societies until 1959, in 1957 an alternative national body was formed which would shape the movement over the following fifty years. The inaugural conference of the Civic Trust was held on 20 July 1957. Some 300 hundred delegates attended the event. Duncan Sandys, the founder of the Trust and its first president, argued that voluntary associations were an essential partner to official action and the high-profile formation of the Trust drew wide interest and support, placing the movement in the forefront of contemporary debate about urban development. Sandys had spent the previous three years as Minister for Housing and Local Government, and had a strong interest in the development of urban areas. However, he had left the ministerial post convinced that Britain's tradition of voluntary association must play an increasing role in shaping towns and cities and his view was shared by his political colleagues. In his opening lecture to the conference, Sandys read a statement from his successor to the Ministry of Housing and Local Government, Henry Brooke:

*'I send my best wishes to the Trust at its first conference. Our island is precious, and high standards of architecture and civic design, the preservation of beauty and the prevention of ugliness in our towns and villages cannot come from control regulation alone. They require an alert and informed public opinion, and there is valuable work for the Trust to do in awakening and educating public opinion. I am glad that your policy will be to seek to co-operate with bodies already working to this same end...'*⁴²

This emphasis on co-operation broke no new ground; local civic societies had been seeking and in many cases achieving collaborative relationships with other voluntary associations and with local authorities over a long period of time. However, the increasing profile of the movement resulted in greater discussion of the relationship between civic societies and local authorities. It also foreshadowed some of the most important debates to occur in twentieth-century Britain about planning and conservation, namely the question of public participation.

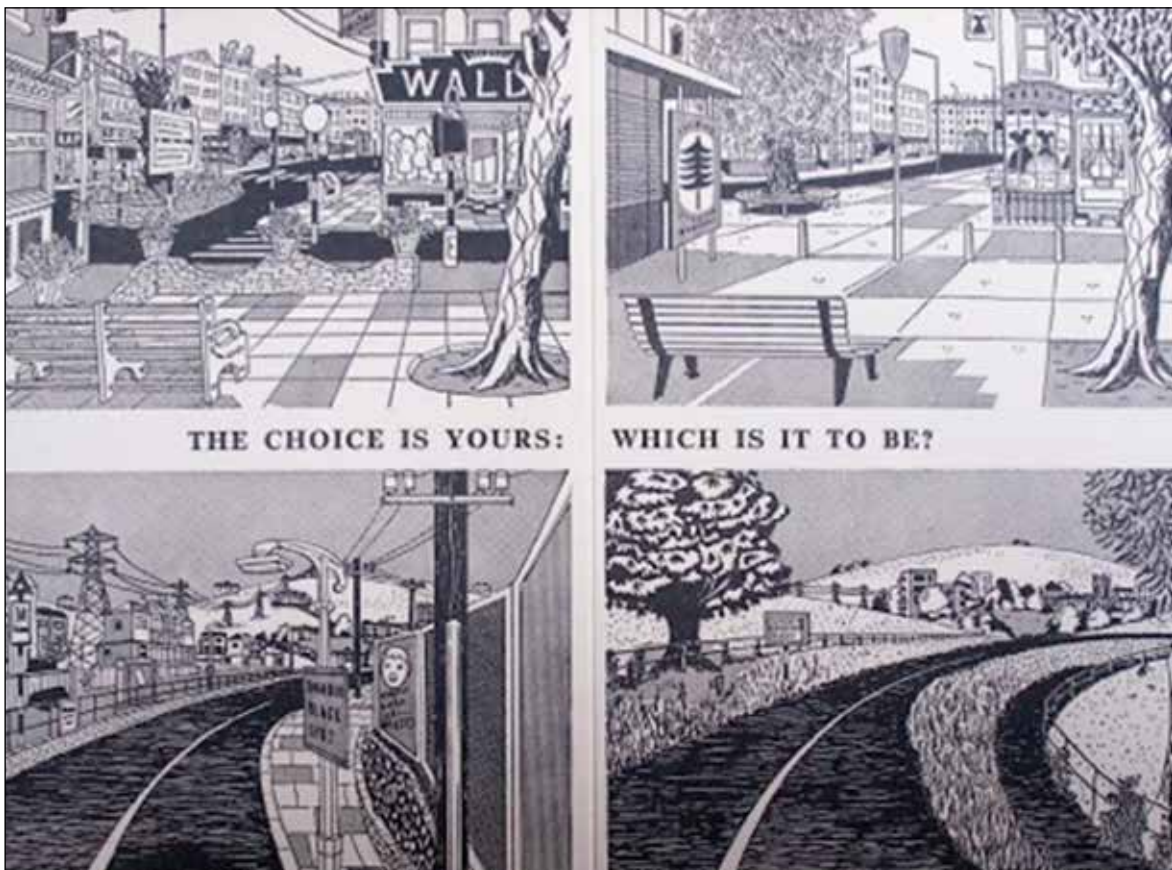


Duncan Sandys addressing the inaugural conference of the Civic Trust held at Lambeth Palace on 20 July 1957. Civic Trust Archives, reproduced with the kind permission of the Alan Baxter Archive.

Baron (Edwin) Duncan Sandys began his political career in 1935 when he was elected as Conservative MP for Norwood. He married Diana Bailey later the same year, becoming the son-in-law of Sir Winston Churchill. Injury while in active service in 1941 took him back into politics full-time and he moved to the Ministry of Works in 1944, taking on a leading role in the house building effort. He went on to serve as Minister for Housing and Local Government during the 1950s and became increasingly involved in issues connected to the built environment. Immediately on leaving the Ministry in 1957, he was instrumental in founding the Civic Trust, in which he continued to play a significant role over the following decades.

Conservation, amenity and public participation

Early in its life, the Civic Trust was highly active and ambitious. Drawing on its broad base of support, it quickly began to raise the profile of its core concerns, championing the importance and value of civic design and preservation. It also worked to increase numbers of local societies, issuing guidance to support their formation and organizing conferences that attracted a large attendance and enabled members of local societies to meet and debate issues with representatives of professional associations and planning officers. The quarterly Civic Trust Bulletin, which began to circulate in spring of 1959, carried information about local societies and activities, as well as wide-ranging discussion of matters relating to the character and amenity of town and country.



'The Choice is Yours' Christmas card, designed and circulated by the Civic Trust in 1958, to illustrate what the Trust saw as the dangers of failing to exercise greater care over the design and maintenance of the landscape. Civic Trust Archives, reproduced with the kind permission of the Alan Baxter Archive.

In practical terms, it was an early street improvement project in Norwich that did much to generate interest in the Trust's agenda and in the potentials of the civic society movement. Magdalen Street was typical of many shopping streets in towns across Britain. Its shop fronts, street furniture and road signs had been added sporadically, with little attempt at co-ordination and by the 1950s it seemed to exemplify the problems associated with twentieth-century urban growth and change. Professor Misha Black, the architect who co-ordinated the improvement scheme, later said that 'careless and haphazard development had shrouded [Magdalen Street's] charm and character and was depreciating its property values.'⁴³ However, the purpose of the scheme was not simply to improve the character and amenity of Magdalen Street, but also to show that the solution for other similar urban areas lay in organized co-operation between civic societies, local authorities and property owners.

In Norwich the Civic Trust worked with the City Council, the City Engineer and with a variety of local groups, as well as through consultation with individual shop owners and residents. The shop owners gave their agreement to a common design and contributed small amounts of financial support to the programme. The result was that houses and shops were decorated according to a scheme of colours, signage was minimized and improved, and elements of the street furniture were repositioned. The successful completion of the Magdalen Street project in May 1959 seemed to many to suggest the potential for a wave of further improvements in other towns and cities. Indeed, Misha Black went on to argue that the scheme was a 'tale of success'. 'All that is necessary,' he said, 'is to look at our towns with an intensely critical eye and the wish to remove the repulsive and replace the mediocre by the acceptable.' The project had, in fact, involved much more than a critical eye, and the Civic Trust adopted the collaborative Madalen Street project as a case study in successful improvement, encouraging other areas to follow the model. In the early 1960s the Trust published 'Notes of the Implementation of Street Improvement Schemes' that listed thirty completed examples and nearly one hundred further schemes underway.⁴⁴



Magdalen Street, Norwich, before (above) and after (below) the Civic Trust's first Street Improvement Scheme, Civic Trust Archive, reproduced with kind permission of the Alan Baxter Archive.

The Magdalen Street Improvement Scheme became a well-known project, featuring in the Trust's promotional films *Magdalen Street* and *New Face for Britain*, which were shown at Rank cinemas in many towns across Britain.



The early career of the Civic Trust coincided with a period of radical change in the British planning system. Immediately post-war, the legislative framework of planning was transformed by the landmark Town and Country Planning Act, 1947. This Act enabled local authorities to extend their planning activity, both in terms of laying out new areas and the redevelopment of existing parts of towns and cities. It also released significant funding to local authorities, supporting the ability to plan with increased means and resulting in a substantial rise in the number of planning professionals employed by local government. The post-war period therefore saw a wave of planning activity, including comprehensive redevelopment plans that were intended to radically change central areas of many towns and cities. While the increased attention to deliberately shaping urban landscapes was welcomed, the form of planning activity during this period often provoked controversy. It also brought two topics, which had always concerned civic societies, to the forefront of public debate and to the centre of the agenda of the Civic Trust and the wider movement: questions of conservation and of public participation.

Care for the historic environment had been at the core of many of the activities of the civic movement throughout its existence. However, the Civic Trust significantly extended the contribution of the movement to this cause by playing an instrumental role in the development of the Civic Amenities Act, 1967. The measure, raised by Duncan Sandys as a private members Bill, provided for the designation of areas of special architectural or historic interest, the preservation and planting of trees, and improvements in the removal and disposal of abandoned vehicles. It became law in the summer of 1967 with full support from both the Government and the Opposition and in the following October the Civic Trust's conference took the measure as the focus for discussions. Before an audience that included ministers, representatives of business, professional bodies, local authorities and civic society members, Sandys pointed to the importance of the Act at a time when building materials and techniques enabled potentially radical innovation:

'In this age of steel and glass construction, new buildings are so incomparably larger than those they replace, and so markedly different in character...This does not imply that modern buildings are out of place alongside those of earlier periods.

But it means that architects and planners today have a greater responsibility to show respect and understanding for the work of their predecessors... Th[is] Act requires local authorities to give notice before approving new development in a Conservation Area which could detrimentally affect its character. This will give the public, and in particular the amenity societies, the chance to express their opinion and to make their influence felt.⁴⁵

His remarks underlined the Trust's growing commitment to extending the potential for public participation in the planning activities undertaken by local authorities. Though the movement had long viewed itself as an important conduit for public opinion, it was at this point that the issue of participation was publicly articulated and debated. In the following year the Trust's conference, held at York, tackled the matter directly. Sandys argued that there had been recent and significant change in the interactions between local authorities and civic societies: 'the character and status of civic societies, and their relationship to local councils, have changed completely...we have now reached the point where Government and Parliament are positively inviting independent amenity organizations to participate actively in the planning process.'⁴⁶ In some respects this argument glossed over the relationships that had been established between civic groups and local authorities in towns and cities over several previous decades, yet his remarks were also indicative of a broad and growing pressure to see participation established as a right and enshrined as a part of the democratic process. The Civic Trust was well placed to argue the case and their conference immediately preceded official recognition of its importance as Arthur Skeffington was given a mandate to examine the best means of securing participation. A large number of local civic societies, as well as the Civic Trust, gave evidence before the Skeffington Committee and the Trust was involved in a prestigious Ditchley Foundation conference dealing with the subject in June 1969. At this important point in the history of public participation, civic societies were active and experienced parties to the debate.

Civic societies in the later twentieth century

The earlier history of the civic movement demonstrates consistent growth in numbers of local societies over the decades before the formation of the Civic Trust, but with public debate increasingly animated by issues of planning, conservation and participation, and the Civic Trust providing a key focus for discussion and action, the numbers of local groups rose to their highest levels. Around 200 individual societies existed in the late 1950s. This number more than trebled during the first decade of the Trust's existence to over 650 and continued to rise still further. In the late 1970s, the number of local societies affiliated to the Civic Trust reached a peak of approximately 1,300.⁴⁷

In addition, during the 1960s and 1970s, the movement also began to diversify. Just as the role for a UK-wide organization had evolved between the 1930s and the 1950s, in the 1960s and 1970s further civic group formations began to focus attention on the differences between regional landscapes, industrial development and identity. This shift in geographic focus was motivated by a recognition that, though many challenges and experiences were shared across the British Isles, there were also important distinctions in building traditions and environment, and that the challenges faced by different areas could also be distinct, influenced, for example, by regional experiences of industrial growth and decline. The foundation of regional civic groups pointed to a growing sensitivity to this diversity and to the need to co-ordinate action in relation to the quality of the built and natural environment at a level above the local, but below the national. The Civic Trust for the North West of England, for example, was formed in 1963 in an effort to improve the industrial conurbation between the Lake District and the Potteries.⁴⁸ Furthermore, alongside regional civic organizations, distinct civic trusts for Wales and Scotland were established in 1964 and 1967, respectively, in recognition of the growing numbers of local associations in their areas. It was in the 1970s, therefore, that the ambitions of early advocates of the movement, like Patrick Abercrombie and Sybella Branford, to see civic societies formed and active across a majority of the country, came closest to realization.



The inaugural tree planting event held in front of multi-storey flats in Glasgow, marking the formation of the Scottish Civic Trust in 1967, Civic Trust Archives, reproduced with permission of the Alan Baxter Archive.

For the first decade of its existence the Civic Trust's affiliated members were drawn from across Britain. However, the National Trust for Scotland had consistently advocated the formation of a specifically Scottish Civic Trust. By the mid-1960s there was a strong movement in favour of the development, with support coming from the Scottish Office, the Carnegie Trust, the Scottish Tourist Board and the Cockburn Association in Edinburgh. The formation of different Trusts for Wales, Scotland and a number of the English regions represented a continuation of the interest in maintaining the distinctiveness of the built environment which has been a consistent feature of the civic movement.

Discussions about public participation in planning during the 1960s and 1970s took place against a background of wider political debate and social change. Survey evidence gathered during the 1970s suggested there was a growing willingness to question the decision-making and policy choices of the state and to take direct political action in order to secure the right to participate more fully.⁴⁹ Indicative of this wider shift in attitudes and behaviour, civic societies sometimes undertook substantial projects during this period. In Worcester, for example, a group that had been formed in late 1959 took up the cause of a small nonconformist chapel from the early 1970s, developing a campaign that gained national coverage and support, notably from John Betjeman. Built in the early nineteenth century, the chapel, which stood adjacent to the city's central shopping precinct, had fallen into a state of disrepair. The City's Mayor proposed its demolition so that the site could be used for car parking and the City's architect argued that restoration was not economically viable. The Worcester Civic Society, however, campaigned to save the building and eventually succeeded in persuading the Council to sell the site. They formed a Buildings Preservation Trust to facilitate fund-raising and redevelopment, reopening the chapel a decade later as a music school and concert hall which continues to serve the city today.

Despite the significant achievements of the movement at both national and local levels, in the final decades of the twentieth century the numbers of local civic societies and the profile of campaigns began to decline. In research conducted during the 1970s, civic associations were seen as forming the core of the 'local environmental movement'.⁵⁰ Indeed, Barker and Keating argued that civic groups were 'a notable element of the entire "citizen participation" movement in Britain.'⁵¹ Yet, more recent trends in local activism, particularly those linked to the growing concern for environmentalism and sustainability, have meant that civic associations are now among a more crowded field of voluntary activity concerned with cities, landscape and the environment. They have, nevertheless, been a significant force over the full period of their existence and the movement continues to evolve. Recently Civic Forums, representing federations of local groups and aiming to extend civic participation, have been established in certain major cities, notably London, Edinburgh and Glasgow.⁵² And while the English Civic Trust ceased to

exist in 2009, it has since been superseded since by Civic Voice. With around 320 local societies affiliated, Civic Voice represents the organizational continuation of a long-standing commitment to support the contribution of voluntary groups in the development of urban centres throughout the country.

Over the course of its history, the civic society movement has demonstrated the enduring centrality of certain themes and ideas. In particular, the commitment to improving the character of towns and cities has been accompanied by a long-standing recognition of the importance of local distinctiveness and community involvement. These concerns, articulated over many decades by advocates and members of the movement, remain highly relevant to contemporary debates. The endurance of these concerns throughout the history of civic activities also demonstrates the extent to which recent emphases on localism, neighbourhood planning, community asset ownership and decentralization are extensions of long established themes in British life, rather than departures or innovations. Throughout its history, the civic society movement has drawn together a diverse mix of local residents and property owners, professionals and members of local authorities. As such, civic societies, both individually and collectively, have constituted the hubs of networks capable of making valuable contributions to the development of particular places as well as the development policies more generally. The extent to which voluntary organizations are able to play this role in the future will depend partly on the continued willingness of individuals to participate, but also on the evolving political context that frames the ability of voluntary organizations to contribute.



The Elgar School of Music and Countess of Huntingdon's Hall, Worcester
Photograph, author's own.

Now a concert hall and music school, but a source of considerable local controversy in the city during 1970s and early 1980s. The Worcester Civic Society led a campaign to save the building, successfully forming a Building Preservation Trust to convert the site. Local controversy of this kind has been common, particularly during the later twentieth century, and the campaigning work of local civic societies is a consistent feature of their history.



Numbers 10-13 Preston Street, Faversham, reproduced with the kind permission of The Faversham Society.

Acquired and restored gradually by the Faversham Society since the late 1970s, these buildings in the centre of Faversham continue to be owned and run by the Society today. Collectively they accommodate a gallery, museum, library, book and gift shop, and meeting room. They also illustrate the continued presence of committed and active local civic societies in towns and cities throughout the country.

Acknowledgements

A great deal of help, from a large number of individuals and organizations, contributed to this research. I would particularly like to acknowledge the kindness of those archivists who guided me through their holdings at Keele Special Collections, Alan Baxter Archives and the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings. Illustrations for the article have been sourced through the Devon Heritage Centre, the Herefordshire Archive Service, Surrey History Centre and Bristol Record Office, and in each case the archivists there have helped with sourcing and copyright matters. I must also mention the archivists at Birmingham Central Library, who did their best to identify an illustration with very little information to go on! Many civic societies have maintained their own archives over an extended period, and it is access to this privately held material that must form the foundation of any research on the topic. I have, therefore, had much assistance from current members of the movement. I would particularly like to acknowledge the generous access to archival material granted to me by the London Society, the Birmingham Civic Society and the Worcester Civic Society. In addition, individuals from the Faversham Society, the Sid Vale Association and the Bristol Civic Society have given me resources on which this article has drawn. Many thanks also to Gilliam Wain, of the Fleet and Church Crookham Society, for very thorough and useful proofreading.

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Published by Civic Voice - www.civicvoice.org.uk

ISBN: 978-0-9559997-6-5