

City Series

City of heritage, progress and planning

City Series is a new public lecture series in Leicester that will deliver free events relating to a wide range of urban topics, such as architecture, history and geography. This has been developed on behalf of Leicester Urban Observatory, a collaboration between Leicester City Council, De Montfort University, University of Leicester, and Loughborough University, with speakers from those institutions and from the wider community.

The inaugural lecture is delivered by Sir Peter Soulsby and will focus on the planning story of Leicester and its future. Sir Peter was first elected to Leicester City Council in 1974 and has since served the city in a wide range of elected roles, including as an MP and as the first Directly Elected Mayor of the city. He was knighted in 1999 for his services to local government.

This paper has been prepared by Justin Webber, Senior Building Conservation Officer at Leicester City Council to provide further information on the historic development of Leicester as a planned urban settlement and to complement a new exhibition including a series of display panels featuring historic plans for the city.

Further details on forthcoming events can be found on:

leicesterurbanobservatory.wordpress.com/events/

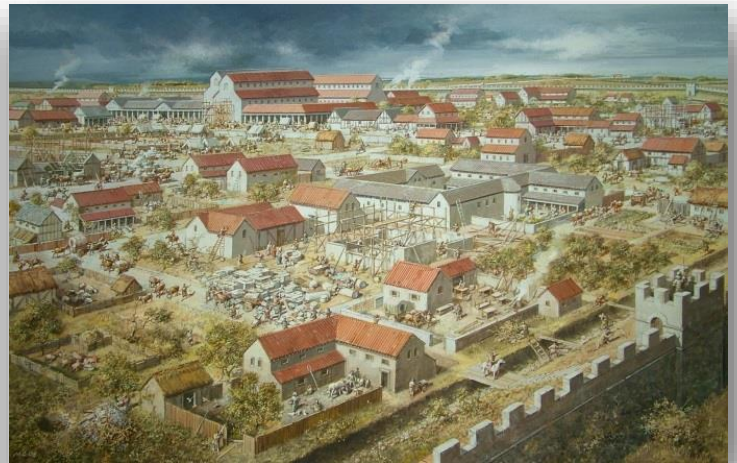
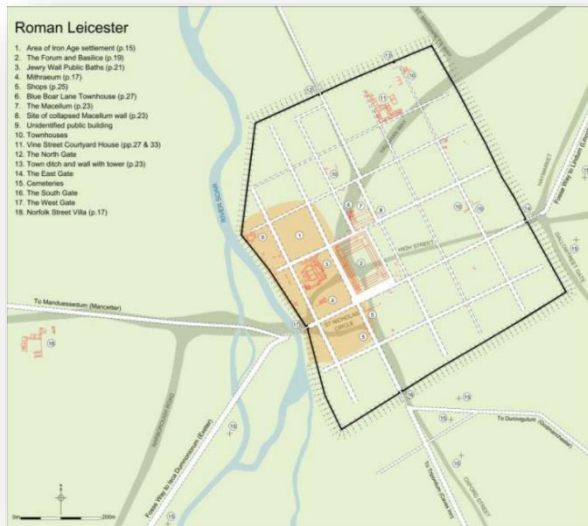


Early Planning

Leicester is the product of town planning, both in the modern sense of the term and in a more abstract historic form. However, it is not a settlement that emerged from an explosive period of development, such as with New Towns like Milton Keynes or industrial locations like Middlesbrough, instead developing in stages over centuries.

Although the professional system of contemporary town planning is a relatively recent development, settlements have been planned for millennia. For example, around 2500BC, a settlement consisting of a regular pattern of blocks intersected by a grid of streets was developed at Kahun in Egypt to house those working on the nearby pyramid at Lahun. Although clearly the product of entirely different processes, the urban form developed over 4000 years ago in Egypt was a conscious act of urban planning.

The earliest known settlement in Leicester relates to finds dating from the Iron Age. While our knowledge of the spatial arrangements of that epoch is limited, we do know that Leicester was later developed as a Roman settlement, with some extant architectural remains surviving at Jewry Wall. Archaeological research can give us the confidence to state that planned urban development took place in Leicester, with a similar arrangement to other settlements within the Roman Empire. Roman city planning often followed a systematic layout of a grid like pattern. Scholars have attributed this to early agricultural land-demarcation practices around Rome. These farming subdivisions, easily measured and controlled by their owners, influenced the laying out of Roman military camps, and eventually shaped the regular forms of Roman colonial towns, such as Leicester.



Plan of Roman Leicester (left) and Drawing of *Roman Leicester (Ratae Corieltavorum)* from the north-east, as it may have looked during the late 3rd century AD (right)

Following the end of the Roman Empire, Leicester continued to be inhabited and was subject to further phases of development. With relatively low population growth, change was less dramatic than what was to come later. By the time of the Norman Conquest, Leicester was a place of some importance with 322 houses and six churches recorded in the Domesday Book (1086). A castle was built in 1068 by order of William the Conqueror to dominate the town and ensure Leicester's loyalty to the new dynasty.

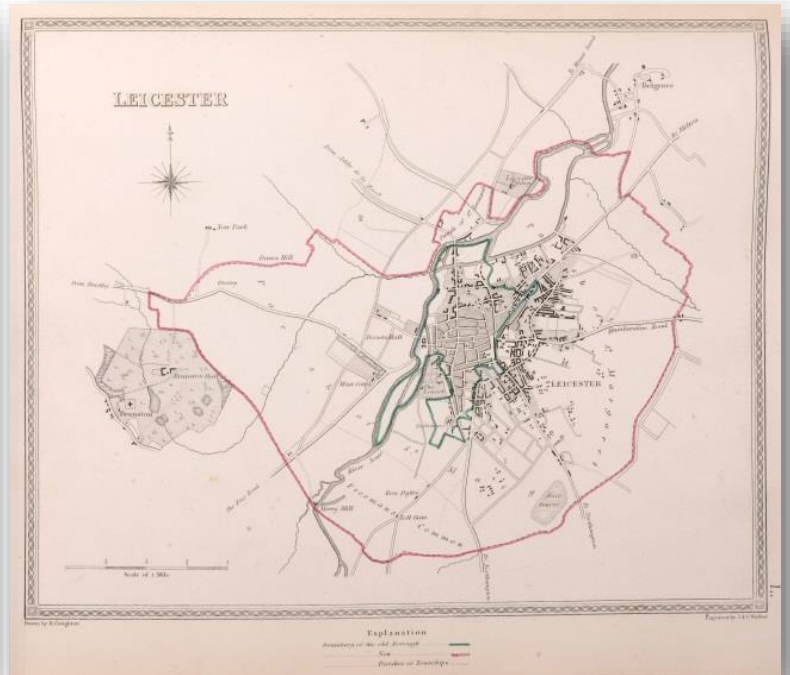
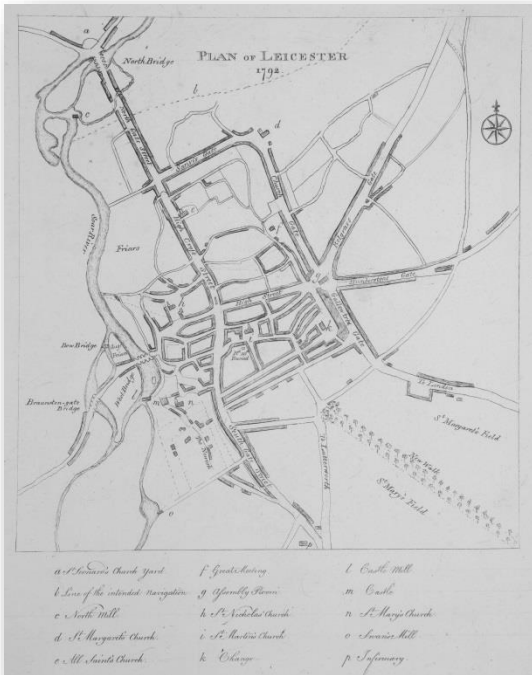
In the 1100s and 1200s, Leicester experienced, in relative terms, a development boom, primarily driven by the church. The friaries and Leicester Abbey were built; the castle and churches were enlarged or rebuilt.

Growing pains

The late eighteenth century saw a number of key developments in the infrastructure of the town, as the town started to grow more dramatically. Following earlier development of a strategic toll road through the town, Leicester was connected to the wider waterways network by canal in 1793. Two years later one of the most important routes in the town was created when a promenade was laid out linking the racecourse to the town core. New Walk, which remains a traffic free promenade to this day, was designed by the Corporation to be a new route that would encourage the expansion of development to the south-east, with small landscaped parks breaking up the new housing that came at its margins.

Such conspicuous acts of town planning were though rare at this time and the inadequate regulatory framework for managing development in general was soon apparent. In 1801 the population of Leicester was around 17,000; by 1901 it had ballooned to over 211,000. Local government was wholly unprepared for the scale of growth and gradual progress was made in reforming the administration, with the Municipal Corporations Act in 1835 marking a key development.

As economic development and population growth raced ahead, linked in no small part to the development of the railway infrastructure in the town, much of the new housing was in the form of cheaply built courts and cottages. These 'slums' were badly overcrowded and subject to appalling sanitary conditions. As the problems became impossible to ignore the Corporation appointed George Bown as Inspector of Nuisances, whose report led in 1846 to the employment of the first local authority medical officers in the country.



Plan of town from 1792 showing New Walk extending out to the south-east (left) and plan from 1835 showing expanded town boundary

Local bye-laws to better control the standard of housing started to emerge as the century progressed. Regulations were nothing new, with numerous ones enacted in the 16th and 17th centuries to better control issues like street maintenance and water supply. However, in the mid-19th century, a leap forward occurred with extensive new bye-laws on improving sanitary conditions. The worst types of 'back-to-back' housing, with inadequate ventilation, was banned, while the minimum width of streets was increased.

While such efforts helped the situation, they created new urban challenges. More generally, in the absence of more sophisticated state functions, the church continued its role in providing much of the support network to people, through schools, healthcare and social housing. Perceived moral decay within the growing urban populace resulted in the rapid development in the century of urban churches, with the church remaining a key element within the story of the growing town.

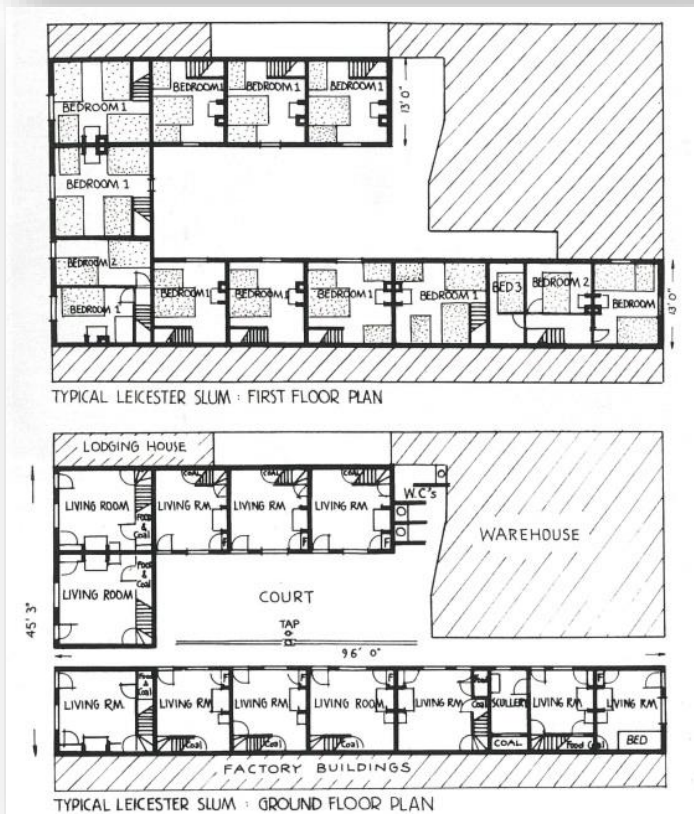


Photo of Bailey's Yard, Sandacre Street in circa 1930 (top) and Typical floor plans of slum courts (below)

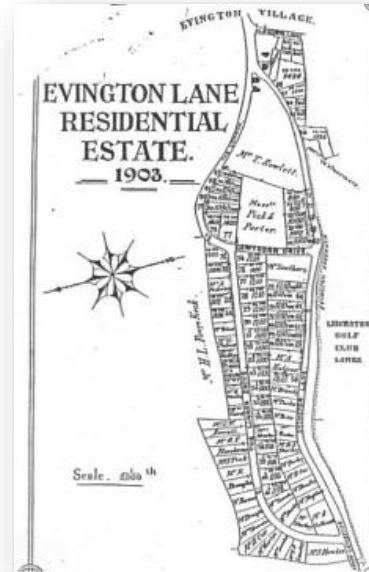
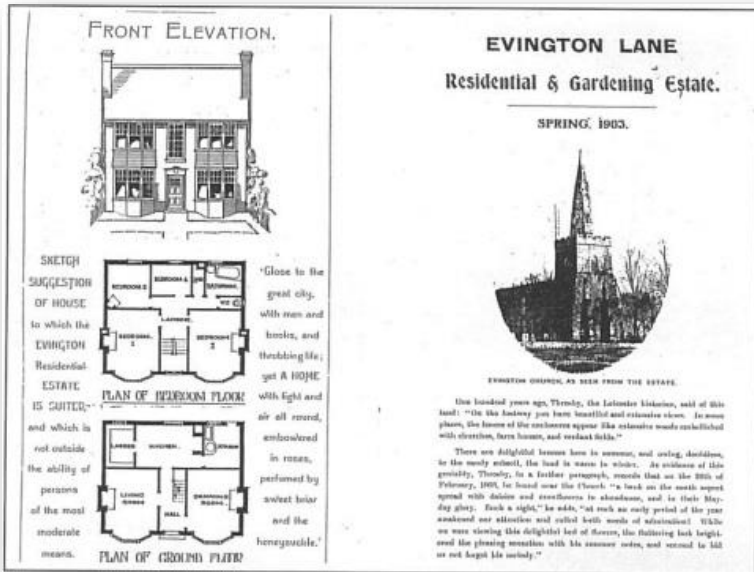
Civic Development

Following a cholera epidemic in 1847, the Public Health Act of 1848 helped set more of the foundations for town planning, not least in encouraging public open space. On a national scale its impact was not as significant as might be expected, with Leicester being one of only two places outside London to appoint a Medical Officer of Health in the years that followed.

By laws linked to the Public Health Acts helped ensure new development met minimum standards, but failed to ensure development was assessed holistically across the wider area or consider needs such as conflicting uses, or lack of amenity. Speculative development was the primary driver of new development, with rising affluence facilitating a growing housing market. Much of the new development to the south-east was for larger houses at lower densities; quite apart from regulations, this was the market responding to the demands of the wealthier demographic. In relative terms though, such development was the exception.

'Bye-law housing' met some minimum technical standards but resulted in frequently bleak townscapes of terraced houses fronting onto pavements in unrelentingly regular patterns. Worse, in areas such as Highfields, space to build new houses was running out and small avenues were tucked in behind other streets. These high density cul-de-sacs were notably lacking in both garden space and public open space.

Not all developers were content with building to minimum standards. Around the turn of the century a local architect and politician, Arthur Wakerley, developed land in Evington in a much more comprehensive way. A linked suburb, rather than a new town, development included a market square, shops, houses and factories.

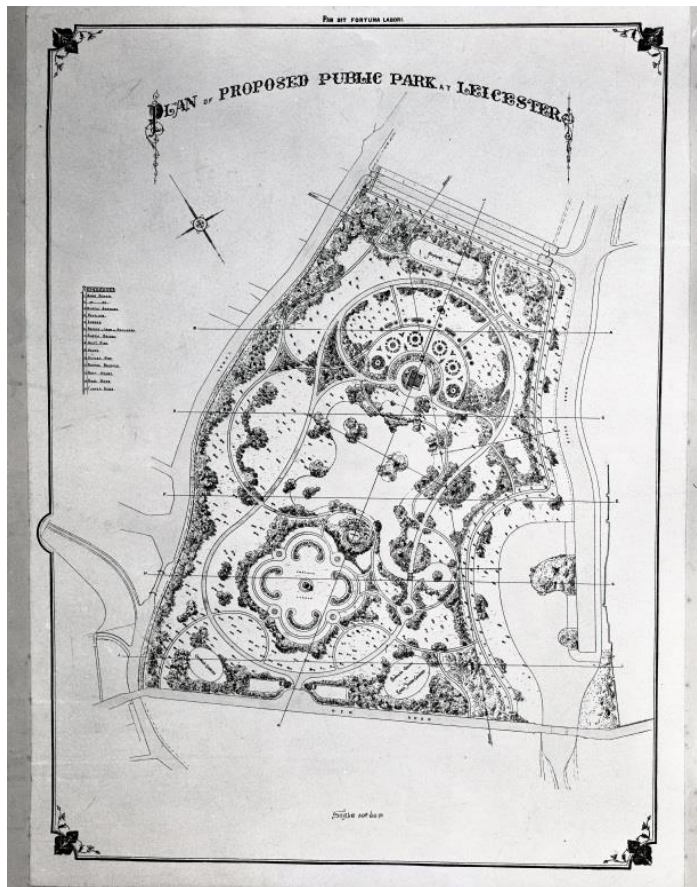


Sale plans for Evington Lane from 1903

Alongside the early development of controls on new development, the Corporation kicked on with various developments to enhance the town.

Leicester began to build a network of sewers from the middle of the nineteenth century and in 1885 the Corporation bought land at Beaumont Leys to construct a treatment works for the Borough's sewage. Nationally, the Elementary Education Act of 1870 set the framework for schooling of all children between the ages of five and 13 in England and Wales, including local education boards. In the first ten years of its existence in Leicester the board built nine new schools and a further sixteen were built between 1880 and 1903.

Alongside the development of the railways, local public transport rapidly developed. The first tramways in Leicester were horse-pulled operations in 1874, by the Leicester Tramways Company. Leicester Corporation took over the tramways in 1901, under the Leicester Corporation Act, and a conversion to electric trams took place in 1904. Expanded routes helped facilitate the growth of the town outwards as an increasingly affluent populace were less constrained by the need to live in close proximity to work. Early conservation efforts can also be seen at this time with original plans for the Great Central Railway, which would have seen it go straight through the Jewry Wall and Castle sites, changed after a public outcry.



Plan from circa 1877 for Abbey Park (top) and photo of laying of tramlines around the Clock Tower in 1903 (below)

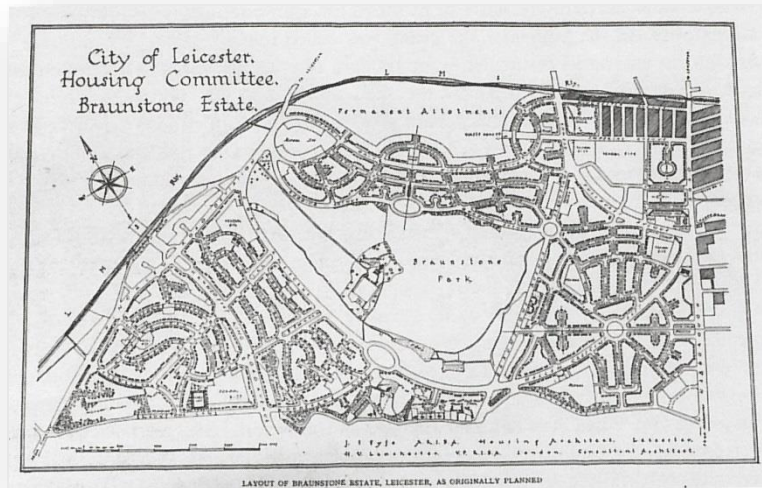
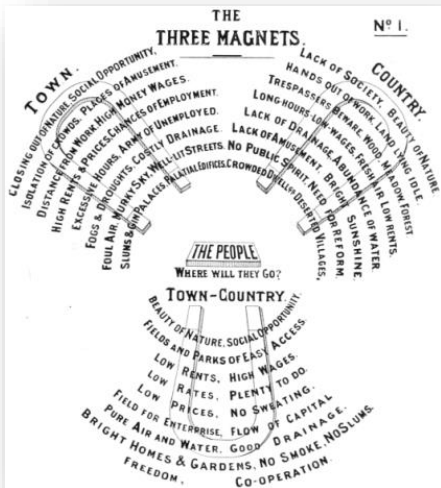
Town Planning Established

At the start of the twentieth century there was still no meaningful apparatus for town planning in Leicester or nationally. High volumes of development were taking place, but it was largely uncoordinated. The need for better planning had become apparent in the previous century as concerns grew about issues, particularly relating to health, the urban environment and urban society - all generated by a rapidly urbanising country.

Following in the footsteps of the Victorian philanthropist industrialists, such as Joseph Rowntree, Ebenezer Howard founded the Garden Cities Association in 1899. This was the first pressure group dedicated to codifying the role of town planning at national level, with Howard's highly influential book *Garden Cities of To-morrow* published in 1902. The ideas expounded were about marrying the best aspects of the town and the village in new freestanding towns. Strategically planned, garden cities would be self-contained communities that used urban design to provide beautiful and healthy settlements.

Influenced by the concept, but clearly at odds with the central tenant of being a self-contained freestanding settlement, a number of schemes were developed by both the Leicester Corporation and others. A cooperative housing venture from Anchor Tenants Ltd developed land to the east of the old village of Humberstone between 1907-1915. As well as 95 houses, there were three shops, meeting rooms, tennis courts and a bowling green. Branded as a 'garden suburb', it certainly had some of the characteristics set out by Howard.

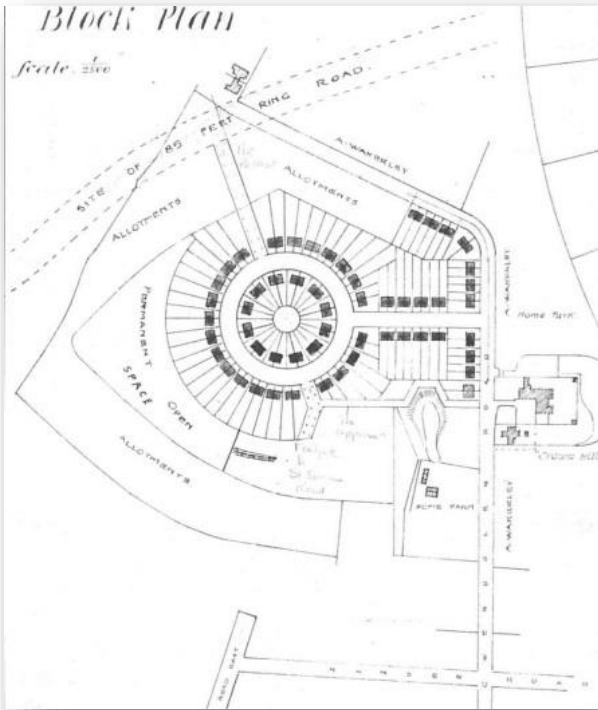
The Corporation bought land in Braunstone to cope with the demand for new housing. The ideas of the Garden City movement are apparent, with a strong landscape structure containing lower density housing with individual gardens, street trees and open spaces. The Corporation started to build in South Braunstone in 1927 and supplemented the housing with new shops, schools, churches and public transport.



The ‘three magnets’ diagram drawn by Ebenezer Howard (left) and plan from 1926 for the Braunstone Estate (right)

Following the development of Abbey Park and Victoria Park in the previous century, and Western Park at the turn of the century, the inter-war period saw extensive additional developments in open space, such as new parks at Humberstone, Knighton, Evington, Rushey Fields and Aylestone, as well as the opening of the Saffron Hill Cemetery.

More generally, the period was marked by extensive development and early efforts to develop a proper town planning scheme for what had become a city by 1919. The first dedicated act concerning town planning was passed in 1909 and the Corporation were one of the first local authorities to try and deliver a plan for managing development in Leicester. Although it was not realised and an ambitious Traffic Plan was rejected on cost grounds in 1924, the period did see the establishment of Housing and Town Planning Committee in 1919 and the successful submission in 1923 of a Planning Scheme for the town and its environs that helped control the growth of the city in the decades that followed.



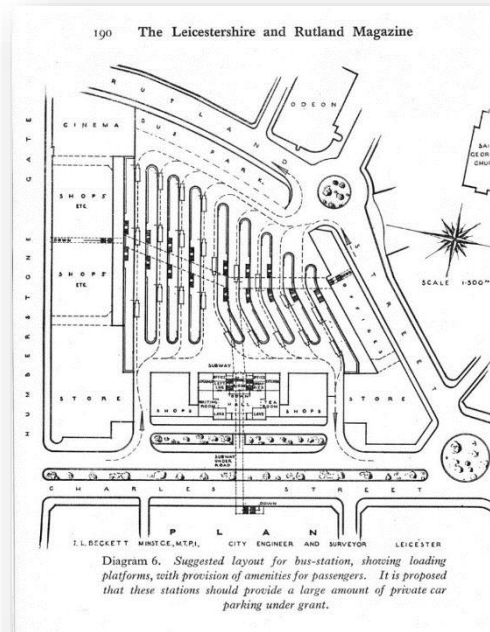
Plan from 1931 showing The Circle (top) and photo of Crown Hills Estate under construction in early 1930s (below)

Post-War Planning

Although World War II significantly curtailed development activity in the city, the success of strategic planning during the conflict and a commitment for domestic renewal post-war had significant impacts on planning in Leicester. Various influential books and government reports led to the passing of a series of Town & Country Planning Acts, including the most significant one in 1947. The following year saw a new national development control regime that required developers to acquire planning permission for an extensive range of works (in addition to the building control consent regime, which dated back to the late nineteenth century).

After WWII, growth in population and the need to replace slum housing led to a revival of the pre-war house building programme by the Corporation with the development of estates in areas such as New Parks, Thurnby Lodge and Stocking Farm. Private developers, both local and national firms, were also building semi-detached and detached houses in volume in the suburbs.

The Corporation bought the Evington House Estate in 1947 and Evington Park was opened in the following year. The housing development around Cordery Road and Aldgate Avenue, built in the early 1950s, kept a number of the fine parkland trees which still give this area its special character. The estate echoes developments of the same time in the New Towns in protecting established trees and building mixed housing types around greens and play areas connected to continuous streets.



Plan from 1952 showing proposed clearance of 'slums' (left) and plan from 1949 for new bus station off Charles Street (right)

Alongside development further out, slum clearance programmes, which had been pursued in the inter-war period, began again in earnest from 1953. Proposals for new roads, slum clearance and wider new development were set out in the first comprehensive City Development Plan for Leicester, which was published in 1952. Based in powers set out in the 1947 Town & Country Planning Act, the detailed document included a wide range of analysis on subjects such as demographics and economic development. In a sign of the infancy of planning as a distinct discipline, the chief author of the plan was John Becket, who was known primarily as the City Engineer. Unsurprisingly, expansive road buildings schemes were a key element of the work.

Although Leicester suffered modest losses of building stock during WWII, there was great demand for new housing in the period. As a reactive measure several hundred prefabricated houses were built on free land from 1946. Despite the intention of only lasting for less than 10 years, many houses were still being lived in as late as the 1970s. More generally, material shortages limited development and reduced the build

standard, but new industrial methods for house building came to prominence. Around one third of houses built in the first five years after the end of WWII were either factory assembly or steel framed houses.

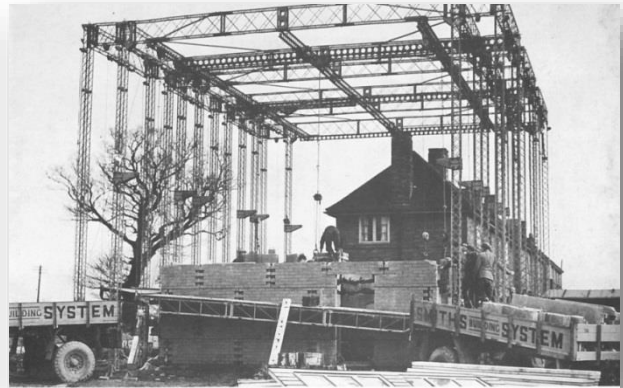


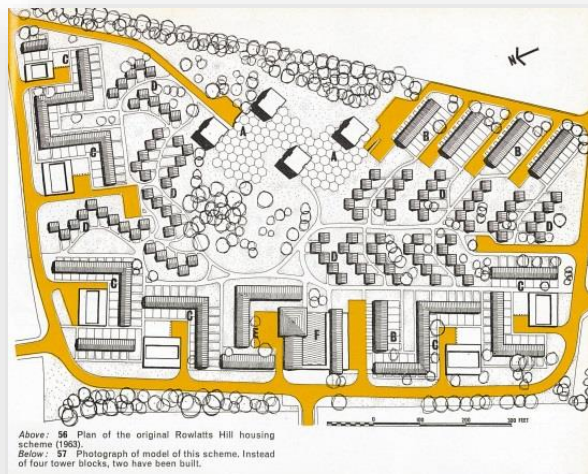
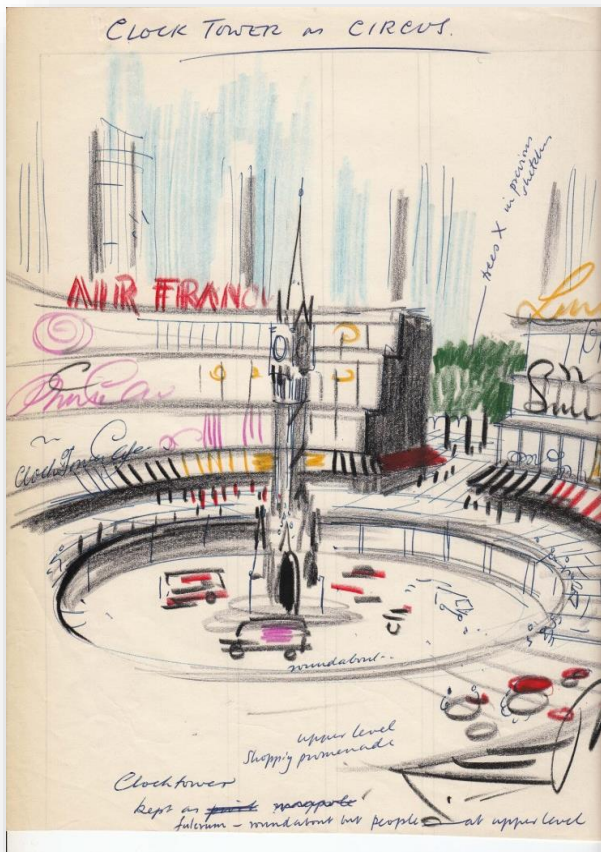
Photo of prefabs built in late 1940s (left) and photo of Mowmacre Hill Estate under construction (right)

Visions of Modernist Planning

The 1960s has been characterised by some historians as the 'golden age of planning'. This reflects the confidence of the age where bold town planning schemes were seen as the solution to wider challenges in society. In 1962 the city set up its first dedicated planning department and created the post of its first Chief Planning Officer. Konrad Smigielski was a Polish émigré who was a pioneer of integrated town planning that utilised new technology, such as computer modelling, alongside elaborate visual presentations.

Smigielski assembled a multi-disciplinary team to develop a wide range of plans from the Leicester Traffic Plan, which covered the whole city, to public realm enhancement plans for New Walk. The Traffic Plan was a ground breaking publication and was the first integrated transport plan to be adopted in the country. It was a response to a paradigm shift in urban mobility, with exponential growth in car use threatening the viability of traditional street patterns.

One of the most ambitious proposals was for a new monorail network, which would have linked a new town at Beaumont Leys with the city. Radical and ultimately unaffordable, the monorail was a bold attempt to try and compete with the car to reduce congestion. Alongside this, many of the other plans were focussed on accommodating traffic growth through the development of a new network of distributor roads. Many of the plans were never realised, but some were – including the highly controversial development of the ring road in the historic western side of the city centre.

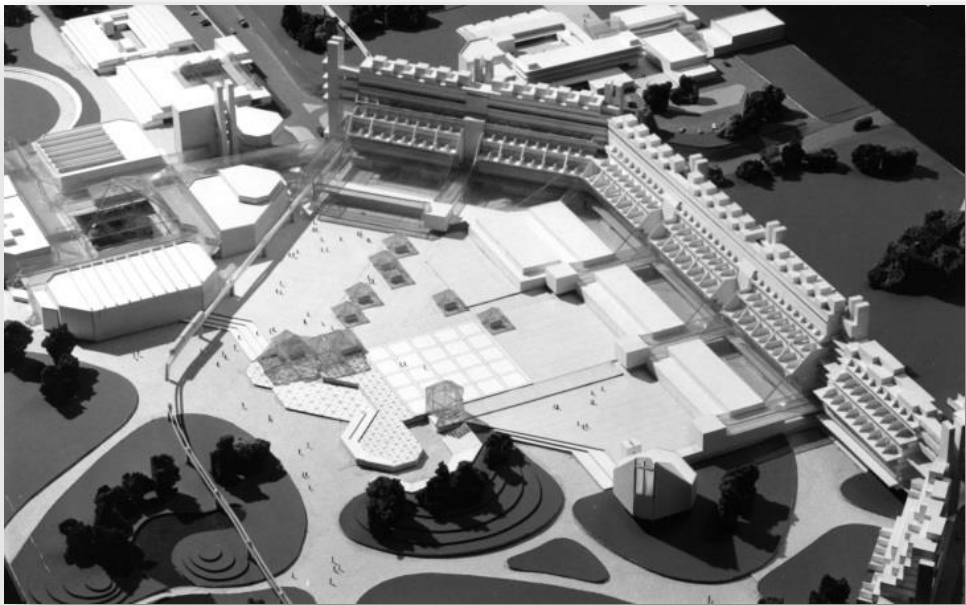


1960s conceptual sketch of potential new development around the Clock Tower (left) and Rowlatts Hill Estate plan and model (right)

In addition to some elaborately engineered road schemes, further work took place to demolish 'slums' and outdated industrial premises. The St Matthews and St Marks Estates were the first areas within the city core to be developed comprehensively on modernist design principles.

New technology and confidence in an ever growing economy were coupled with a rejection of traditional approaches to urban design. Tight street patterns of low rise houses fronting onto streets were considered outdated, with larger structures, such as residential tower blocks in generous parkland, seen as cleaner and more efficient 'machines for living'. As with radical plans for new roads, many of the plans for commercial and residential development were either undelivered or significantly altered when built latterly.

Alongside some of the more futuristic design styles, the period also saw the development of national legislation to better protect heritage. In 1969 the first three conservation areas were designated in the city (New Walk, Castle Gardens and Greyfriars). As well as the more futuristic plans for the city under Smigielski, plans were developed for sensitively enhancing these areas, with public works at New Walk notably successful.



3D mock-up of Charles Street transport interchange (top) and 1960s model of Beaumont Leys Town Centre (below)

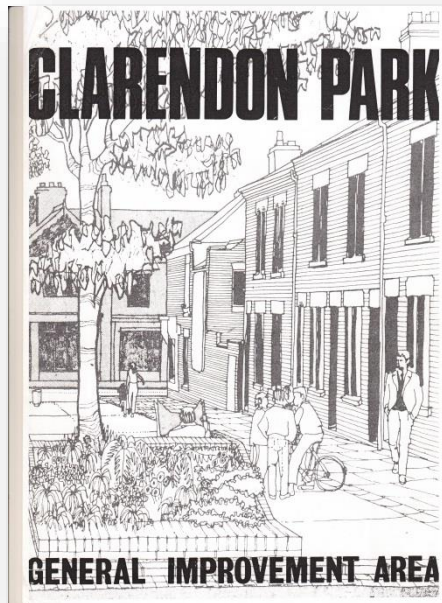
Sustainable developments

Some ambitious plans from the 1960s, such as new roads and a vast new Civic Centre near New Walk had not been delivered. The resulting 'planning blight' meant that investment was needed to help regenerate the areas in question.

Following the passing of the Housing Act in 1969, the Leicester Housing Committee created a plan for a series of General Improvement Areas, such as Clarendon Park. At this time nearly half of houses here lacked a bathroom, mains water or an inside toilet. As well as grants for enhancing buildings, work was undertaken to enhance the public realm with new paving, street furniture and trees.

Operation Clean Up was introduced in 1978 to help restore buildings on key transport corridors in the city. Grant based, the project was subsequently incorporated into Leicester's Urban Programme and had improved nearly 1000 buildings by the early 1990s. In the 1980s separate grant schemes were introduced for enhancing historic buildings and shopfronts. Relatively uncommon nationally these impactful programmes continue to this day.

Land continued to be allocated for development further out of the city centre, alongside strategic plans for infrastructure in the county, with the county Structure Plan adopted in 1976. While volume house building and new industrial estates continued to be developed on the city periphery, a concerted effort was made from the late 1970s to prevent a retail development comparable to Brent Cross by Junction 21 of the M1. 'Centre 21' was eventually refused by a Planning Inspector in 1987, with the later Fosse Park Retail Park development a much smaller scheme. To combat the threat of 'Centre 21', a range of plans were developed to enhance the city centre. From the mid-1970s pedestrianisation of key streets started to take place alongside a series of major retail developments from the Haymarket Shopping Centre to the High Cross.



Clarendon Park General Improvement Area document cover from 1971 (left) and model of proposed 'woonerf/home-zone' for Worthington Street in 1984 (right)

Alongside other regeneration schemes, one of the most significant plans was for deprived and under occupied land around Bede Island. City Challenge was launched in April 1993 after the Council successfully bid for £37.5 million of Government funding, and then raising a further £150 million additional investment of public and private funding. The five year project in the area south-west of the city centre represented a more holistic approach to planning, with a wide range of stakeholders and a less environmentally deterministic rationale. Focussing on deprivation indexes as much as new building needs it included mixed use development with heritage restoration, environmental and transport improvements and community projects. De Montfort University has subsequently redeveloped much of the remaining land in the area. From 2001 the Leicester Regeneration Company was put in place to proactively drive economic development; in 2009 this was replaced by Prospect Leicestershire, which was replaced in 2011 by the Leicester and Leicestershire Enterprise Partnership.

In this period, Leicester came to the forefront for developing protection and proactive enhancement plans for the natural environment. One of the first Council's to employ

a full time ecologist, the Ecology Advisory Group was set up in 1983, producing the Leicester Habitat Survey over four years. This ground-breaking piece of work assessed every parcel of Open Space in Leicester (262 km²) and produced a Site Alert Map of those sites of high nature conservation value. In 1989 the multi-award winning Leicester Ecology Strategy was published. As well as helping to embed sophisticated site assessment into the planning process, including the innovative use of 'green wedges' to protect key wildlife corridors, a wide range of proactive projects took place.

One aspect of this was the creation of the Riverside Park, which won the highly prestigious Europa Nostra Award in 1989. The award recognised the long term vision and phased delivery of multi-agency land reclamation alongside: new footpaths, cycleways, signage, interpretation, pond construction, bridge restoration, tree planting and extensive habitat creation. One of the most notable outputs from this period was the creation of the Great Central Way footpath and cyclepath. Strong partnership working led to the creation of the Leicester Ecology Trust, which was the only UK voluntary body to be invited to attend the UNCED Conference in Rio (1992). Much of this work helped contribute to the city being designated Britain's first Environment City in 1990.

In 1988 the Council's landscape master brief for land at Hamilton featured a ground breaking approach to creating a multi-purpose water retaining body. Since then the Council has continued to be a leading authority for managing flood risk.

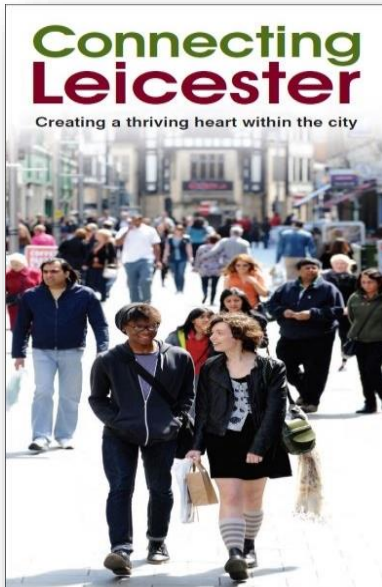
Another innovative area of work in this period was the development of the city council's Places of Worship Policy in 1987. This provided a policy basis for assessing planning applications and for assisting groups with their search for sites and premises. As well as allocating land for the development of religious buildings, advice notes were produced for religious groups. The Policy helped with a number of conversions of existing properties and the development of new facilities in the city for diverse communities.

Into the Future

In the new millennium town planning remains fundamental to both driving and managing sustainable development in the city. There is a significant amount of continuity between planning now and the activities that have taken place in the previous century, with continuing efforts to regenerate areas of the city that have seen their former uses change and new urban extensions planned.

One area where a more dramatic difference in approach can be seen is in the 'Connecting Leicester' programme. Following the election of a City Mayor in 2011, the project has been a strategic priority for investments in the core of the city and forms a key element of the Leicester Economic Action Plan. Predicated on the idea of stitching together disparate elements of the city centre through enhanced streets and spaces, it has a primary focus on enhancing both the pedestrian experience and cycle linkages. Planning in the mid-twentieth century had something of a blind spot to the potential of cycling as a mode of urban transport and the road networks that were developed in this era are notably poor for cycling. Helping tackle air pollution, such a plan does though sit well within the planning heritage of 19th century urban reform, which was focussed in large part on environmental challenges.

Leicester was one of the first authorities in the country to produce a Biodiversity Action Plan in partnership with neighbouring local authorities. It produced its first independent document in 2006, with a rolling process of review every five years. The city continues to innovate in this area and uses planning to embed consideration of the natural environment into the development cycle. Interlinked with this is notable work on flood prevention through a range of projects that includes nationally recognised work on sustainable urban drainage systems. Investments with key partners, such as the Environment Agency, continue on environmentally friendly flood management schemes along river corridors, as well as designing in flood reducing features in new developments.



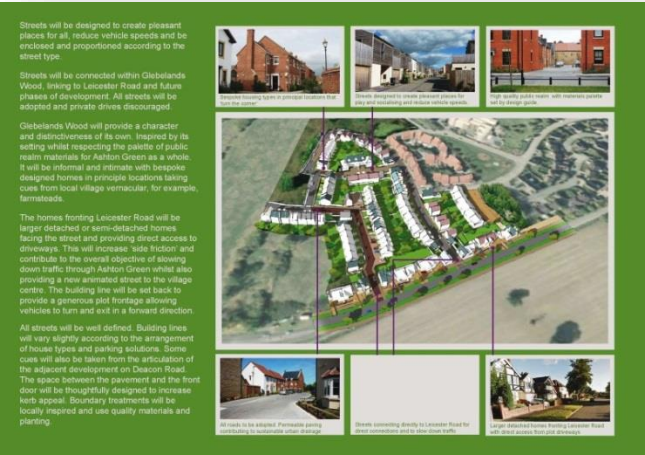
Connecting Leicester cover (left) and 3D mock-up of public realm enhancements on Belvoir Street (right)

Planned over several decades, a major urban extension at Ashton Green continues to be progressed. The site offers 130 hectares of greenfield land for up 3,000 new homes, with 10 ha of employment land, a commercial village centre and 50 ha of green space. Opportunities for investment in education, health, community facilities and a commercial village centre will follow later in the development process. Subject to extensive technical research, the site will benefit from masterplanning that puts sustainability at its core, with innovative use of planning tools such as design codes and planning gain.

The most recent strategic planning document covering the whole city was the Leicester Core Strategy, adopted in 2014. This is currently being built on and will be replaced by a new Leicester Local Plan. In the spirit of the National Planning Policy Framework (2012) the revised plan is streamlined to make it as user friendly as possible. Content builds on the decades of best practice in a wide range of areas, from inclusive design to archaeology.

Fittingly for a display on planning history, heritage is a key component of current planning orthodoxy and wider city branding in Leicester. Benefiting from the

international exposure relating to the reinternment of Richard III, the historic core of Leicester around the Cathedral has seen the development of a new Visitor Centre and other public realm enhancements. The Greyfriars Townscape Heritage Initiative is a five year investment programme for the area that the City Planning Department is using to enhance the Conservation Area. A holistic project that focusses as much on improving local skills as on capital works, the project represents proactive planning at its best. Sensitive development is proposed to enhance the setting of the historic fabric and ensure its long term sustainable use well into the future.



Plan for landscape enhancements along River Soar (left) and design guidance for Ashton Green (right)

LEICESTER URBAN OBSERVATORY

About

Leicester Urban Observatory is a collaboration between urban practitioners at Leicester City Council and academics at three local universities: De Montfort University, University of Leicester, and Loughborough University. It aims to establish and develop a combined centre of excellence in urban studies and planning for Leicester. It will do this by:

providing a shared platform for discussing urban issues from practical, theoretical, cultural and historical perspectives;

facilitating joint events and projects in the urban environment;

collaborating on joint research/study opportunities;

sharing expertise and resources that add value to component partner programmes and activities;

linking with other professional networks and academic institutes and associations relevant to the urban agenda.



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