

Making the High Street: walking tours and street views in the 1830s

Jon Stobart

Introduction

Guidebooks have long been used as a way of directing the visitor through the town. Some formed a general introduction to the social mores of street life, but most were more practical guides to the urban landscape, unfolding qualitative descriptions of key historical and cultural locations and creating a topographical picture for the visitor.¹ They directed the walker along the improved streets of the town and called at the most important locations including civic and ecclesiastical buildings, leisure facilities, charitable institutions, and increasingly shops. Along the way they provided a palatable and 'popular' history of the town and, as Peter Borsay has demonstrated in his analysis of Bath, played an important role in constructing and broadcasting the image of the town as a site of modern consumption, be it of culture, leisure or material goods.² At face value, trade directories were very different in the content, purpose and effect. Whether organised alphabetically, geographically or by trade, they offer a kind of socio-commercial quantification through lists of tradespeople and private residents.³ In offering an eminently practical guide to the commercial geography of the town, they can appear very dry and devoid of life. However, they too guided the visitor through the urban space, directing the reader as they sought out and located specific tradespeople or residents.⁴ Whether through the footsteps of the urban sightseer or in the minds of the armchair tourist, the routes traced out through both guidebooks and trade directories formed part of the 'intertwined paths [which] give their shape to spaces'. As de Certeau

¹ R. Sweet, *The Writing of Urban Histories in Eighteenth-Century England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp.107-116; P. Corfield, 'Giving directions to the town: the early town directories', *Urban History Yearbook*, xi (1984), 22-34.

² P. Borsay, *The Image of Georgian Bath* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

³ G. Shaw and A. Alexander, 'Directories and the local historian III: directories as sources in local history', *Local History*, 46 (1994), 12-17; G. Shaw and A. Tipper, *British Directories: a Bibliography and Guide* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1989).

⁴ Corfield, 'Giving directions to the town'.

argues, these footsteps served to 'weave spaces together', and create the town as a lived space.⁵

John Tallis's *London Street Views* (1838-40) and William West's *History, Topography and Directory of Warwickshire* (1830) are part of this broader tradition of topographical and commercial literature, yet neither fit comfortably within the standard genre categories. They are hybrids. Tallis's *Street Views* are well known: a unique visualisation of commercial space rather than the usual listings. However, alongside the famous street views themselves, we have advertisements and engraved illustrations of iconic public buildings and later shops whose owners paid to advertise in this way. We thus have a visual collage that combines map, topography, commercial information, promotional material and pictorial imagery. As the title suggests, West's *History, Topography and Directory* drew on both the topographical tradition and the genre of county histories. This was apparent in the style and structure of the volume. The book is arranged in a systematic manner. It starts with a survey of the county – its history, geography and economy, with particular attention paid to canals – and a series of biographical sketches of major figures. It then presents more detailed accounts of each town and village, organised by hundred and division. The genre of travel writing can be seen in the formulation of eight itineraries taking the traveller on a series of journeys across the county. Punctuated by towns, these itineraries included the 'objects worthy of observation ... with a further reference to various pages in the body of the work, which is accompanied with a modern map of the county'.⁶ The directory forms a significant element of the book; it takes up nearly half the pages, the listings for Birmingham being especially extensive and interspersed with a number of advertisements.

Somewhat perversely in a volume about Tallis, much of my paper is focused on West and how he constructed and presented the central streets of Birmingham. I explore the ways in which he drew on particular facets of the town's commerce and married this both spatially and architecturally with key cultural infrastructure to create a uniquely Birmingham high street and a particular view of the city as commercial and dynamic yet cultured. My purpose is to provide a provincial counterpoint to Tallis and thus provide a broader geographical frame for considering his *Street Views*. I therefore conclude the paper by using this perspective to reconsider Tallis: to examine the spatial context of

⁵ De Certeau, M., *The Practice of Everyday Life*, reprinted in G. Bridge and S. Watson (eds), *The City Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), p.386.

⁶ West, *History of Warwickshire*, p. iv.

high street commercial retailing (the buildings and spaces between shops) and whether these were views of London or a series of different districts within London

Defining the high street: William West and New Street, Birmingham

West's account of Birmingham is structured around a series of six circuits of the town, each centred on the Royal Hotel at the top of Colmore Row. This iconic building, housing the main concert and assembly rooms, is described as lying on 'the meridian line of Birmingham'; at the social and cultural heart of the town.⁷ From here, each circuit forms a carefully guided tour which reinforces West's central message of Birmingham as a town whose prosperity and status is built on the industry and commerce of its inhabitants. The tours steer the reader around the main streets. Along the way, he highlights all that is worth noting in a commercial town: public buildings, places of worship and leisure facilities, but also shops, banking houses and manufactories. Each description is framed by a rhetoric of modernisation which emphasises the dynamism and respectability of the town. Each of the tours takes a different route and thus has a slightly different emphasis. Here, I want to focus on the second circuit which effectively defines the commercial centre of the town. Taken literally, it follows a somewhat tortuous route along the streets bounded by New Street in the west, Colmore Row in the North, The Square in the east, and Moor Street in the south.⁸ To follow this itinerary on the ground would involve retracing steps in some instances and jumping between streets elsewhere. One might argue, therefore, that this was not so much an actual guide to walking through the centre of Birmingham, but rather a device to allow West to link together descriptions of key streets, buildings and institutions.

The streets encompassed in this itinerary contained hundreds of shops, but it would be pointless for West to name them all. For this, the reader could refer to the directory which formed part of same publication and – like other directories including Tallis's *London Street Views* – offered an approximation to comprehensive coverage, at least for the streets that were covered. As a guidebook, West's *History* could be selective and highlight the significance of this as the main shopping district in the town through the repeated assurance that these shops were 'respectable' or even 'highly respectable' – an approbation awarded to High Street, Moor Street, Ann Street and New Street. And yet none of these streets could match New Street 'which evinces from its name and modern

⁷ West, *History of Warwickshire*, p.184.

⁸ West, *History of Warwickshire*, pp.184-220.

growth, and improvement, what it evidently is, the most attractive one in the town. The consequence and elegance of the well stocked shops, in articles of taste, of luxury, and of general consumption, arrest attention'.⁹

In all, seventeen shops and two manufactories with showrooms are specifically named along the route of West's second itinerary: eleven of them are on New Street. Not only does this street dominate the descriptions of shops, it is itself dominated by these descriptions: shops making up about 60 percent of the buildings itemised along its course – a much higher proportion than is seen for other streets. Moreover, West affords the New Street shops much fuller descriptions, in some instances running to a page or more and peppering his account with superlatives. Thus, for example, we read of the 'handsome shop' of Kendall and Sons (toy dealers); the 'splendid establishments' of Mr Hancock and Mr Haines (both jewellers and silversmiths), and the cut-glass showrooms of Mrs Bedford & Co., the interior of which 'excels in architectural taste'. For West, though, the crowning glory of the street was the 'extensive showrooms of Mr Charles Jones, at the Pantecnetheca'. Such was their splendour, West argued, 'few persons pay Birmingham a visit without going through them, and of being gratified with the taste of the architect ... and of the proprietor'.¹⁰ Importantly, both the exterior and interior are important in creating this picture of splendour and plenty; unlike Tallis's facades, we get to enter the shop, climb the ornate staircases and admire the showrooms (see the paper by Hoskins in this volume).

West thus constructs New Street as a superior shopping street, but he eschews comparisons with the capital – unlike many authors of guides to provincial towns who often sought to gild their accounts of major thoroughfares with references to Regent Street, Oxford Street or more occasionally Bond Street. Typical of this was a slightly later history of Birmingham which described New Street as 'the Bond Street of Birmingham; what with its glittering array of shops, its inns; its fine Elizabethan School, its School of Arts, its Theatre, its Post-office, it gives the ton to that part of the town'.¹¹ West highlights similar features, but creates a specifically Birmingham high street. In focusing on certain shops, he was willing to overlook the other hundred or so other retailers and

⁹ West, *History of Warwickshire*, p.210

¹⁰ West, *History of Warwickshire*, pp.187-8.

¹¹ J. Cornish, *Cornish's Stranger's Guide Through Birmingham* (Birmingham, 1851). See also Sweet, *Urban Histories*, pp.238-41, 252-5; J. Ellis, "For the honour of the town": comparison, competition and civic identity in eighteenth-century England', *Urban History*, 30, 2003, pp.329-32.

professionals with premises on New Street. It is no surprise that the offices of attorneys and accountants, and the shops of grocers, shoemakers and coopers are missed out – these are hardly the stuff of premier retailing streets.¹² However, the criteria for inclusion were not simply those of status, taste and respectability; nor were they shaped by the willingness of the retailer to advertise, as they were with Tallis (see the introduction to this collection). Indeed, it is striking that even substantial businesses, such as James Lillington’s ‘emporium for London hats’ which placed a large illustrated advertisement in the directory were not mentioned by West in his guidebook tours. As the author himself explained: ‘We could enumerate various other establishments equally handsome, and of the greatest respectability, but have selected those possessing any peculiar architectural feature or where the proprietor is the manufacturer of the articles exposed for sale’.¹³ In other words, what West sought to emphasise was architectural merit and local trade which together built a positive but locally-rooted image of New Street and Birmingham as a whole.

This takes us back to West’s more general portrayal of Birmingham as a town built on dynamic yet refined commerce and industry. He thus highlights toy dealers, jewellers and silversmiths, china and glass dealers, and furniture warehouses (see Table 1). A numerical bias towards such businesses is reinforced by the amount of detail afforded to a small number of key businesses, most notably the china and glass warehouses of Mrs Bedford and Messrs Rollason and Sons, and Charles Jones’ Pantecnetheca. In each of these cases, considerable attention is given to the wares being offered for sale. There is a detailed description of the three large rooms that made up the Pantecnetheca: one for ‘papier-mâché articles of every description, beautifully finished and ornamented’, a second ‘well supplied with silver and superior plated articles of every description’, and a third incorporating a ‘valuable collection of articles of vertu’ and bronzes.¹⁴ Rollasons’ shop on The Square comprised ‘a suite of rooms extensively supplied and devoted to the display of a rich and useful variety of the fragile portion of the manufactories of this town, and the neighbouring county of Stafford’.¹⁵

[Table 1 about here]

¹² Similar tours in other guidebooks also overlook these more mundane trades. See, for example, T. Hughes, *The Stranger’s Handbook to Chester and its Environs* (Chester, 1869).

¹³ West, *History of Warwickshire*, p.188.

¹⁴ West, *History of Warwickshire*, pp.188-9.

¹⁵ West, *History of Warwickshire*, p.220.

Making the modern high street: taste and improvement

It would be easy to dismiss these accounts as elaborate ‘puffs’ for local traders, which Tallis includes in some of his descriptive accounts (see the paper by O-Byrne in this volume); but they are better seen as an attempt to broadcast and celebrate the variety, taste and importance of Birmingham trades as a whole. If they were a puff, it was for the town as much as the trader. Selecting and celebrating certain shops allows West to showcase the manufactures of Birmingham and its region. However, he goes further by linking the architectural merit of New Street’s shops with the more general portrayal of the town as modern and dynamic. Indeed, Birmingham’s principal shops are presented as an integral part of the modern infrastructure of the town. Just like Tallis’s views, the itinerary that West traces does not seek to treat shops as a distinct category of public building to be conceived and described in isolation from neighbouring infrastructure. Rather, it includes them as they would be encountered by the walking visitor: set amongst churches, libraries, banks, theatres and inns.

On Tallis’s elevations, the commercial frontages are frequently interspersed with churches and other public buildings as well as private dwellings. On West’s trip down New Street, the visitor first encounters the Athenaeum, then a cluster of seven shops, a hotel, a bank, another hotel, the Free Grammar School, a wire drawing manufactory and a second bank. They are then guided along Canon Street where they can view the Baptists’ meeting house, the premises of the Philosophical Society, another factory, the assay office, and a third factory. On returning to New Street, there are two further shops, an architect’s office, and the theatre. Branching off onto Bennett’s Hill, there is the General Post Office, the News and Commercial Rooms, two shops, and an office. Finally, the visitor arrives at the west end of New Street and comes to the Society for the Encouragement of Fine Arts and Christ Church. In this version of the topography of New Street, shops are conceived as part of Birmingham’s cultural and economic identity – as worthy of the visitor’s attention as theatres or libraries.

In some respects, this might be seen as the implicit message of Tallis’s street views, where shops and cultural infrastructure follow one after the other as the reader scans across the page, linking the two visually and aesthetically. By including every building along the street, all of these connections and juxta-positionings are laid out. West is more explicit and more selective, drawing our attention only to those buildings that he sees as important in his construction of the street and the town. Proximity on the ground and on the page of the guidebook is reinforced by a similarity in the language

used to describe public buildings and shops. For both, there is an emphasis on their overall appearance, the elegance and tastefulness of their design, and their significance as symbols of the modernity of the town.

These points are best illustrated through detailed analysis of the descriptions of two buildings: the Society for the Encouragement of Fine Arts and the Pantecnetheca. In terms of their overall appearance, both buildings are seen as significant elements of the streetscape, with some attention paid to their sheer size. The home of Society of Fine Arts is described as 'handsome and imposing', the circular dome of which 'is on a very extensive scale'. The Pantecnetheca, meanwhile, is 'of considerable extent in length, and of sufficient height (sic.), to be seen in several directions'.¹⁶ More important, though, is the taste and elegance of their design. Both are broadly classical and thus formed part of what was very much the preferred style for civic architecture in Birmingham through the eighteenth and much of the nineteenth century.¹⁷ The Society of Fine Arts was the more conventional, its frontage marked by 'four handsome Corinthian columns, that support a portico, overhanging the footway' and being commended for its neatness and chasteness of design'.¹⁸ West describes the exterior of the Pantecnetheca more ambiguously as being 'somewhat novel', perhaps because it seems to have comprised something of a collage of different styles. The lower storeys are conventional enough, with a double tier of Doric and Ionic columns, the latter interspersed with balustrades that create a 'striking effect'. Above these, the façade seems to have been fairly plain except for a series of 'allegorical figures, illustrative of the fine arts'. Such decoration was to become a common feature of museums and art schools in the later nineteenth century,¹⁹ but was unusual in such a commercial building and perhaps reflected the pretensions of the shop within, which was laid out as a series of three themed showrooms. The detailed account of each room gives the impression of the shop almost as an exhibition space, displaying the best of (local) craftsmanship.

In many ways, the Pantecnetheca was a portent of things to come, with New Street becoming increasingly characterised by spacious and elegant shops through the middle decades of the nineteenth century. Indeed, the famous Warwick House – built in 1839

¹⁶ West, *History of Warwickshire*, pp. 213, 188.

¹⁷ A. Foster, *Birmingham: Architectural Guides* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005).

¹⁸ Corinthian was the approved order for public buildings.

¹⁹ See, for example, J. Stobart, 'Identity, competition and place promotion in the Five Towns', *Urban History*, 30 (2003), pp.174-81.

for the draper W. Holliday – shares many of the same architectural features and certainly the same grandiose conception. However, both of the buildings highlighted in West’s itinerary were integral to his construction of Birmingham as modern and progressive. In material terms, they formed part of the remodelling and improvement of the street: the building for the Society of Fine Arts being described as ‘undergoing a considerable enlargement and improvement’. Moreover, they are seen as uplifting for the local population: improving in morally and culturally as well as physically. West writes in disparaging terms about the low-brow entertainments previously occupying the site – panoramas, exhibitions of ‘paintings of an inferior class, and sales by auction’ – and celebrates the fact that ‘a better taste ... prevailed’.²⁰

A rhetoric of modernity and improvement pervades much of West’s account of Birmingham’s streets. In itself, this is not unusual since many town histories and guides made much of the modern credentials and improving nature of their subjects, as well as their ancient origins and historic legacy.²¹ What is more striking is the central position afforded to shops within this construction of the modern town. As we saw earlier, they are not portrayed as secondary to a morally uplifting and celebratory civic and cultural infrastructure of theatres, libraries and museums. Indeed, they are central to West’s conception of New Street and its surroundings. The major shops are linked to art, craftsmanship and taste, in terms of the goods that they contained, through their architectural merits, and by association with the neighbouring buildings. On the one hand this served to make these shops respectable, even fashionable sites of consumption; on the other it defined the culture of New Street (and, by association, Birmingham as a whole) in commercial as well as aesthetic terms.

Reflecting on Tallis and the metropolitan street

How does West impact on our reading of Tallis? The different format and purpose of the two publications might appear to make comparative readings problematic, but both offer visions of the urban street that structure imaginative and perhaps actual movement through the city in the 1830s. They produce urban space in virtual form.

²⁰ West, *History of Warwickshire*, p.213.

²¹ See, for example, P. Borsay, ‘Politeness and elegance: the cultural re-fashioning of eighteenth-century York’, in M. Hallet and J. Rendall (eds), *Eighteenth-Century York: Culture, Space and Society* (York: Borthwick Institute, 2003),.

West's version of New Street is modern and dynamic, yet rooted in the local; it is a mixed commercial and cultural space that encapsulates the spirit and character of Birmingham as a whole. To do this, West is selective in his portrayal, highlighting some shops and buildings whilst ignoring others. Even along a single street, Tallis is far more comprehensive: every building is present and more or less faithfully portrayed. There are emphases, of course: the name and trade of paying advertisers appear on or above their shop fronts, but the logic is commercial rather than being driven by a desire to create a particular vision of the street or city. Moreover, whilst Tallis's views are far from uniform (building styles and sizes ensure diversity of appearance), there are not one or two that overshadow all the others. Even if we look across to the accompanying engravings and descriptive text, rather than focusing entirely on the elevations, it is rare for particular shops to stand out. Occasionally a detailed 'puff' makes much of a certain business as Alison O'Byrne discusses in this volume, but this does not dominate our reading of the street as a whole. It does, however, remind us of the importance of looking carefully at Tallis as a whole and the insights to be gained by reading them as itineraries as well as illustrations. As we pass along the street we encounter different shops, residences and public buildings – a mixed urban space in which the context of each building and function is apparent and important. We have new and old, commerce and culture, architectural harmony and dissonance.

New Street is portrayed by West as qualitatively and quantitatively different from other streets in Birmingham, at once part of a variegated street scene and emblematic of the town as a whole. We are guided along its pavements, up side streets and into shops and other buildings; it is an animated space. Tallis's *Street Views* are largely empty of people and, at first glance, do little to draw out local differences. There is something mesmerizing about turning the page and seeing street after street as a series of carefully penned frontages. However, just as each street varies along its length, so too do different streets in different parts of London. There is no apparent agenda on Tallis's part to create local identities or, indeed, a broader London identity. However, comparing Borough High Street, with its narrow plots and shop fronts, to St James Street or Soho Square, with their four and five bay mansions and double fronted shops, underlines just how varied London was at this time, even when looking at the principal streets, emptied of people. The business mix and buildings are very different, and each view offers a subtly and sometimes strikingly different perspective on London streets just before the spatial and

imaginative overhaul of the city as an imperial capital.²² Picking up on West's use of New Street as a symbol of Birmingham's changing character and identity, we might usefully read Tallis as a portrayal of London's many and varied faces. At the very least, it offers a unique starting point through which to explore this plurality and diversity.

²² See L. Neade, *Victorian Babylon: People, Streets and Images in Nineteenth-Century London* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000); J. White, *London in the Nineteenth Century: 'A Human Awful Wonder of God'* (London: Vintage, 2008). For discussion of the construction of London as an imperial city, see M.H. Port, *Imperial London: Civil Government Building, 1851-1915* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995); F. Driver and D. Gilbert (eds), *Imperial Cities: Landscape, Display and Identity* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003).