



University  
of Glasgow

Hewitt, L.E. (2012) Associational culture and the shaping of place: civic societies in Britain before 1960. *Urban History*, 39 (4). pp. 590-606. ISSN 0963-9268

Copyright © 2012 The Author

<http://eprints.gla.ac.uk/63645/>

Deposited on: 19 Aug 2013

Enlighten – Research publications by members of the University of Glasgow  
<http://eprints.gla.ac.uk>

# Associational culture and the shaping of urban space: civic societies in Britain before 1960

LUCY E. HEWITT

Urban Studies, School of Social and Political Sciences, University of Glasgow,  
25–9 Bute Gardens, Glasgow, G12 8RS, UK

**ABSTRACT:** We currently know civic societies as a widespread part of the amenity lobby, yet their history is little explored. Focusing on the emergence and growth of civic societies before 1960, this article examines some of that history. The first section provides a background context, linking civic groups to shifting ideas about architecture and space, and to reform movements of the nineteenth century. The second section explores the growth in numbers of associations and their memberships. The third section develops a discussion of the ideas and activities of societies, focusing particularly on their articulation of social and spatial interconnection, their use of a prescriptive urban aesthetic and their political influence.

It is difficult to specify precisely the objects of a Civic Society; its activities might be said to extend to everything that concerned the welfare of the citizen. But generally speaking it would be better to limit its functions to the physical side of the community's life, and to leave purely commercial and social questions to other agencies. This is a very general definition, for commerce will certainly benefit from the many improvements in the programme of the Society, and social welfare is at the bottom of its work . . . the border line is frankly vague.'

(Patrick Abercrombie, 'A civic society. An outline of its scope, formation and functions', *Town Planning Review*, 8 (1920), 82)

Abercrombie's article about civic societies was a piece of propaganda. In it, he argued for the formation of civic groups as 'a series of contiguous associations' that would cover the whole country.<sup>1</sup> In jurisdiction, they were not to match local authorities; indeed, Abercrombie argued that it would be 'the height of folly to perpetuate these cramping restrictions'.<sup>2</sup> They were, however, meant to play a significant professional and political

<sup>1</sup> P. Abercrombie, 'A civic society. An outline of its scope, formation and functions', *Town Planning Review*, 8 (1920), 81.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

role. On the one hand, Abercrombie envisaged civic societies as an important support for the planning work that local authorities were expected to conduct following the passing of the landmark Housing, Town Planning Etc. Act, 1909. On the other hand, he imagined they would bolster localism, helping to 'forward the progress of decentralization which is the foundation of local advancement ... form[ing] the necessary corrective during the reconstruction period, of the excessive centralization that has been brought about by the war'.<sup>3</sup> It was not a modest proposal, and given the admitted vagueness of civic objectives and the politicized tone, it might be surprising that anything significant followed. However, nearly one hundred years later we know civic societies as a widespread part of the amenity lobby, a locally driven, middle-class movement associated in England until 2009 with the Civic Trust and now with the charity Civic Voice, in Scotland since 1967 with the Scottish Civic Trust and in Wales with the Civic Trust for Wales. Judged by their numbers, which Larkham, drawing on Civic Trust data, estimates reached over 1,200 in the late 1970s, civic societies have been a significant presence in Britain's urban centres during the second half of the twentieth century, yet their history is little discussed.<sup>4</sup>

Focusing on the emergence and growth of civic societies before 1960, this article examines some of that history. The time frame has been chosen in order to draw in figures available from the Civic Trust's 1960 report; however, the primary purpose of the current article is to indicate and explore the development of the civic society movement prior to the formation of the Trust in 1957. The first section of the paper traces the historical background out of which civic societies emerged, pointing particularly to shifting attitudes toward architecture and the past, and to various reform movements that provided the context for the emergence of civic societies. The second section concentrates on the timing of the growth in numbers of associations up to 1960 and provides an assessment of their membership. The third section develops a discussion of the ideas and activities of civic societies. This section examines the place of sociological sensibilities, explores the work of societies in the spheres of planning and preservation and sets this work within the context of an urban aesthetic that characterized the civic agenda. Finally, this section assesses the political role that societies sought and offers some analytical remarks in order to situate civic societies within existing literature.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 80.

<sup>4</sup> P. Larkham, *Conservation and the City* (London, 1996), 65. Published work is currently limited to L.E. Hewitt, 'The London Society and the Development Plan for Greater London', *London Topographical Record*, 30 (2010), 115–31; D. Gilbert, 'London of the future: the metropolis reimagined after the Great War', *Journal of British Studies*, 43 (2004), 1; H. Beaufoy, "'Order out of chaos": the London Society and the planning of London, 1912–1920', *Planning Perspectives*, 12 (1997), 2; and P. Larkham, *Conservation and the City*, which includes a survey of civic societies in the second half of the twentieth century.

### Background

There are many studies of the complex processes that contributed to nineteenth-century urbanization and the briefest survey of these provides ample explanation for scholarly interest. Population growth alone established the Victorian city as a proper object for attention, and yet growth represented much more than a quantitative increase.<sup>5</sup> Accounts of the history of urban growth can reasonably take as their focus economic or industrial factors, shifts in social and political cleavages, patterns of consumption or cultural taste, but underpinning these emphases, and central to understanding the historical background of the civic movement, are the profound spatial transformations that affected the landscapes, architecture and infrastructures of urban areas. Towns and cities in nineteenth-century Britain were transformed by, and facilitated, industrial capitalism and they registered the physical manifestations of this new mode of production. Among the primary appetites of industrial capitalism was the circulation of people, goods and vehicles. New streets were cut and railways, 'the most important single agency in the transformation of the central area of many of Britain's major cities', 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.<sup>6</sup> The increasing affluence of the urban middle classes also supported the development of new spaces. Arcades and department stores created spectacles of artificial light and theatrical displays that reflected the increasing consumerism characteristic of the nineteenth-century city.<sup>7</sup> Cultural sophistication was signalled by galleries, libraries and museums. These, built in considerable numbers over the century, were significant for their architecture and spatial organization, as well as for their collections.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, spatial differentiation was an important aspect of urban development. It occurred on the scale of building design and organization, and it was also a feature of the wider geography of urban growth, evident in the increasingly apparent distinctions between the centre and periphery of cities.

Attempts to reflect upon and engage with these spatial changes were clearly visible among the various responses to urbanization. Transformation in the urban landscape was, for example, accompanied by an increasingly specialized repertoire of spatial representations, such

<sup>5</sup> Growth rates for Britain's urban population remained above 20% per decade between 1811 and 1881; see R.J. Morris and R. Rodger, 'An introduction to British urban history, 1820–1914', in R.J. Morris and R. Rodger (eds.), *The Victorian City. A Reader in British Urban History, 1820–1914* (London, 1993), 3.

<sup>6</sup> J.R. Kellett, *The Impact of Railways on Victorian Cities* (London and Toronto, 1969), 289.

<sup>7</sup> E.D. Rappaport, "'Hall of temptation': gender, politics and the construction of the department store in late Victorian London', *Journal of British Studies*, 35 (1996), 58–83. The classic account of late nineteenth-century arcades remains Walter Benjamin's *Arcades Project* (Cambridge, MA, 1999).

<sup>8</sup> P. Joyce, *The Rule of Freedom. Liberalism and the Modern City* (London, 2003), ch. 3; N. Prior, *Museums and Modernity: Art Galleries and the Making of Modern Culture* (Oxford, 2002).

as surveys, maps, plans and directories that enabled residents and visitors to negotiate the geographically and socially complex terrain of cities.<sup>9</sup> The desire to gaze upon urban complexity was a popular fascination fed by panoramas and dioramas, elevated viewing points and aerial photography.<sup>10</sup> These ways of seeing were in important respects a continuation of earlier preoccupations with expanding the field of vision, but they proliferated and changed form during the nineteenth century. Thus, in London there was an acceleration of attempts to render the vast capital available to the eye. Journalistic investigations, like those of Henry Mayhew, produced textural representations of the city's social life. However, it was Charles Booth's remarkable project that yielded the most influential early graphic engagement with urban space. Showing the socio-economic, and implying also the moral, landscape of London through a detailed colour-coding of the city, Booth's map created a public sensation at the end of the century.<sup>11</sup>

The observations that resulted from such early investigative and mapping projects suggested that health and community were degraded by a poor environment and, despite the spatial separation of the middle classes from the worst urban problems, Britain's associational culture consistently concerned itself with efforts to improve the landscape of towns and cities. Associations and campaigns pressed for parks and gardens, better housing, land reform and the protection of old buildings that were 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 shared focus on the built environment. 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'.<sup>12</sup> He has argued that such a move was indicative of the increasing prevalence of 'environmentalist theories' which directed attention towards the importance of the quality of urban landscapes.<sup>13</sup> Action undertaken on the basis of this concern included large-scale enterprises, such as City Improvement Trusts, but it also found expression in a multitude of works undertaken on a smaller scale.

Notable among these more discrete activities were those of the Hill sisters. A significant figure in the housing reform movement, Octavia

<sup>9</sup> R. Dennis, *Cities in Modernity. Representation and Productions of Metropolitan Space, 1840–1930* (Cambridge, 2008), 54–5.

<sup>10</sup> J. Crary, *Techniques of the Observer. On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, MA, and London, 1990); S. Oettermann, *The Panorama. History of a Mass Medium* (New York, 1997).

<sup>11</sup> K. Bales, 'Charles Booth's survey of *Life and Labour of the People in London 1889–1903*', in M. Bulmer, K. Bales and K.K. Sklar (eds.), *The Social Survey in Historical Perspective, 1880–1940* (Cambridge, 1991).

<sup>12</sup> A.S. Wohl, 'Introduction', in A.S. Wohl (ed.), *The Bitter Cry of Outcast London, with Leading Articles from the Pall Mall Gazette of October 1883* (Leicester, 1970), 25.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

Hill's work was intended to improve the living conditions of the poor in London. She placed an emphasis on small and gradual improvements, and on the personal relationships she and her workers established with tenants.<sup>14</sup> Hill's strong beliefs about the value of the qualitative aspects of an environment made her a pioneer, Whelan has argued, of 'cultural philanthropy', convinced, following the lead of 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.<sup>15</sup> Hill emphasized the importance of colour and of nature, recalling in a letter to fellow workers written in 1896, the year after she contributed to the formation of the National Trust, how she realized the importance of these 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.'<sup>16</sup> The Kyrle Society mentioned here by Octavia was an organization initiated by her sister, Miranda, in the mid-1870s. Miranda's first suggestion was for a 'Society for the Diffusion of Beauty' that would 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'.<sup>17</sup> Thus, when her ideas took organizational shape in the Kyrle Society, the chief aim was to provide beauty through art, music and access to garden space; in this, the group exemplified the spread of a 'missionary aestheticism' during the later nineteenth century.<sup>18</sup> The agenda represented a development of interests beyond the concern with physical health and adequate sanitation, towards an emphasis on aesthetic and cultural needs.

The aesthetic agenda was closely allied with the cause of architectural preservation. John Ruskin's treatise, *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* (1849), provided an important statement in favour of age in the built environment, but his arguments were not new.<sup>19</sup> Interest in the physical legacies of the past had strong roots in the previous century. Sweet has shown that eighteenth-century urban improvements that led to the gradual disappearance of many medieval townscapes in Britain had an impact

<sup>14</sup> A. Anderson and E. Darling, 'The Hill sisters: cultural philanthropy and the embellishment of lives in late nineteenth century England', in E. Darling and L. Whitworth (eds.), *Women and the Making of Built Space in England, 1870–1950* (Aldershot, 2007), 41.

<sup>15</sup> R. Whelan, 'Editor's introduction', *Octavia Hill's Letters to Fellow-Workers, 1872–1911* (London, 2005), xxvii.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 385.

<sup>17</sup> Quoted in I. Fletcher, 'Some aspects of aestheticism', in O.M. Brack (ed.), *Twilight of Dawn. Studies of English Literature in Transition* (Tuscon, 1987), 24.

<sup>18</sup> Ian Fletcher has suggested that the Kyrle Society was the best example of 'missionary aestheticism', *ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> J. Ruskin, *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* (London, 1910), 339–40.

on the awareness of connections with the past; she has argued that the extent of the physical change caused concern among local inhabitants who viewed the material losses as damage done to their communities.<sup>20</sup> In the nineteenth century, these shifting sensibilities found organized expression in the clubs and societies of urban voluntary culture. Thus, Miele points to York where the 'heritage industry began to trade in the 1820s' in the form of local learned societies which took on a museum of antiquities and the maintenance of an ancient ruin in the town.<sup>21</sup> Likewise, Levine's research 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.<sup>22</sup> 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 Ruskin among its members, in 1877.<sup>23</sup>

One final thread to pick out here concerns the active interest in locality evident in nineteenth-century towns and cities. Levine has shown that, alongside the rising interest in the past, there 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.<sup>24</sup>

For the growing towns and cities of Britain claiming a distinctive local past provided some of the social cement necessary for establishing at least a patina of cohesion and longevity in rapidly growing and sometimes diverse communities. Thus, the concern for local history and heritage and

<sup>20</sup> R. Sweet, *Antiquaries. The Discovery of the Past in Eighteenth Century Britain* (London, 2004), 294.

<sup>21</sup> C. Miele, 'Conservation and the enemies of progress?', in C. Miele (ed.), *From William Morris: Building Conversation and the Arts and Crafts Cult of Authenticity 1877–1939* (New Haven and London, 2005), 15–17.

<sup>22</sup> P. Levine, *The Amateur and the Professional. Antiquarians, Historians and Archaeologists in Victorian England, 1838–1886* (Cambridge, 1986).

<sup>23</sup> H. Hobhouse, *London Survey'd. The work of the Survey of London 1894–1994* (Swindon, 1994).

<sup>24</sup> Levine, *The Amateur and the Professional*, 61.

that for the civic status and identity of cities began increasingly to coincide as the century matured.

### **The emergence, growth and membership of civic societies**

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 the emphasis on localism. Indeed, the desire to maintain the local distinctiveness 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 society in 1896 was a response to a series of proposed alterations to the town's High Street that were felt to be insensitive to local architecture and motivated by commercial interest

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.<sup>25</sup>

This extract gives an indication of the direct connections that existed between the first civic groups and earlier initiatives in the field of architectural preservation: the letter was part of a dialogue between the founders of the Guildford Society and the established Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings. Such points of continuity also existed in other places. In both Liverpool and Bristol, for example, local Kyrle societies either became civic societies or were partly merged with the civic society when it was formed.<sup>26</sup>

The names of civic groups varied. Sometimes they were called Preservation Trusts (as in St Andrews or Cambridge), sometimes they were named after their city (the London Society or the Warwick Society), and often they were called civic societies.<sup>27</sup> They can be grouped by their focus on a specific urban centre and by their shared aims. The wording of objectives varied over the first half of the twentieth century,

<sup>25</sup> Letter from George C. Williamson, founder of the Guildford Society, to Thackeray Turner, secretary of the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings, 3 Oct. 1896. SPAB archives.

<sup>26</sup> Liverpool City Guild, formed in 1909, represented an amalgamation of three associations – the City Beautiful Society, the Trees Preservation and Open Spaces Association and the Open Spaces Branch of the Liverpool Kyrle Society; see 'The Liverpool City Guild', *Town Planning Review*, 1 (1910), 84; the Bristol Kyrle Society became the Bristol Civic Society in 1943, see 'Report of the sub-committee on the future of the society', 23 Feb. 1943, papers relating to the Bristol Kyrle Society, Bristol Record Office, 30632/1.

<sup>27</sup> On occasion, there was debate within societies about the name chosen for the organization. The Cambridge Preservation Society, for example, was named to associate it with the Oxford Preservation Trust formed two years previously; however, in Cambridge early activities concerned a planning scheme and a number of members argued that the name of the society should refer to planning, see A.J. Cooper, *Planners and Preservationists. The Cambridge Preservation Society and the City's Green Belt, 1928–1985* (Cambridge, 2000), 26.



but they typically refer to a concern for ensuring high standards in planning and architecture, the preservation of historically or aesthetically significant buildings and sites and the education of the public in the history, geography and architecture of the locality. Estimating the number of societies operating at any given point is not a straightforward calculation and, therefore, the cases and numbers given here cannot be exhaustive or definitive, but, by the time Abercrombie called for the formation of civic societies across the whole country, groups had been established in Glasgow (1896) Guildford (1896), Bangor (1902), Liverpool (1909), Farnham, (1911), London (1912), Birmingham and Leeds (both 1918).<sup>28</sup> In the inter-war period, there was consistent growth in numbers: societies appeared in Norwich, Nottingham, Cheltenham, Chipping Campden, Brighton, Oxford, Stratford-on-Avon, Cambridge and Southampton during the 1920s; others followed in Hove, Coventry, Rugby, Leicester, Bath, Manchester, St Andrews, Bournemouth, Colchester, Cardiff and Newport in the 1930s.

There was contact between early civic groups. The first conference was held in 1923 at the Le Play House in Westminster.<sup>29</sup> However, it was not until the late 1930s that a more sustained network was established. In 1938, the Merseyside Civic Society wrote to other groups suggesting that contact be formalized between associations.<sup>30</sup> The body that was established as a result was the Central Council of Civic Societies. It declared its aim as the support of local autonomy, a counter to what was perceived as the increasing centralization of policy, but reaction to this first national organization was mixed. The Birmingham Civic Society, for example, chose not to affiliate, believing that the council would 'not serve any useful purpose'.<sup>31</sup> Yet, regardless of concerns, and despite the escalation of World War II, the number of societies affiliated to the council began to grow. In early 1942, the annual report recorded 20 societies represented on the council.<sup>32</sup> By the end of the decade, there were between 70 and 80 affiliated associations and the number continued to rise further.<sup>33</sup> In 1960,

<sup>28</sup> The information given in this article is based on evidence from the records of local and national civic organizations and from the archives of the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings. The most comprehensive early list of societies was published by the Civic Trust in their 1960 report, *The First Three Years*, Report by the Trustees. However, this list includes a substantial number of rural preservation societies among the 298 groups listed. While there are close connections, at least in terms of early propagandists, between civic associations concerned with urban space and the rural preservation movement, the concern here is with urban bodies and the figures given provide an estimate of societies that took an urban centre as their focus.

<sup>29</sup> The text of a lecture given by Sybella Branford to the Conference on the topic of 'Civic societies and their aims' appeared in *Journal of the London Society*, 67 (Sep. 1923), 8–9.

<sup>30</sup> Suggestion reported in the *Journal of the London Society*, 256 (Jun. 1939).

<sup>31</sup> Minutes of council meeting, 25 Apr. 1939. The Birmingham Society maintained this stance after the war, noting again in March 1945 that it considered affiliation undesirable.

<sup>32</sup> Numbers for 1942 given in the annual report of the London Society, 1942, *Journal of the London Society*, Mar. 1943.

<sup>33</sup> Reported in the minutes of a committee meeting, Bristol Civic Society, Nov. 1948, Bristol Record Office, 33199/1.

approximately 130 local urban organizations shared similar concerns and undertook similar activities.<sup>34</sup>

Although Abercrombie's comments about the sphere of work to be undertaken by civic societies were ambiguous, he left no such question mark over their ideal membership. He suggested that councillors and aldermen should serve alongside 'Engineers, Architects, Surveyors and Town Planners, Doctors and Sociologists'. 'For the remainder', he counselled, 'it would be advisable to have business men.'<sup>35</sup> There are difficulties in researching the memberships of civic societies at this early period in their history. Where biographical information is available, it does not shed light on the whole, or even a large sample, of the full membership, and information is skewed in favour of those that held other notable positions. It is, however, accurate to observe that those serving on the councils and executive committees of civic societies, and those leading significant programmes of activity, have tended to be among the local and professional elite and that Abercrombie's suggested cast of politicians and professionals can indeed be readily found. In Glasgow, for example, among the founding members in 1896, there were elected lord provosts and councillors, prominent local businessmen, medical officers and university professors.<sup>36</sup> Similarly, the London Society's membership lists yield the names of well-known planners and architects, members of both houses of parliament, businessmen and artists.<sup>37</sup> This pattern is repeated for other civic societies during the period. Where societies were formed in smaller towns, the pattern remained, though the scale differed. Thus, the Warwick Society, formed in 1950, listed six councillors and aldermen, a former and

<sup>34</sup> Civic Trust, *The First Three Years*, see n. 28.

<sup>35</sup> Abercrombie, 'A civic society', 90.

<sup>36</sup> To illustrate, the members of Glasgow Civic Society included: James Bell, councillor, lord provost, and one of Bell brothers; James Brand, parish councillor and public works contractor; Samuel Chisholm, councillor, lord provost, and wholesale grocer; Thomas Mason, town councillor; John Ure Primrose, councillor and lord provost; David Macauley Stevenson, councillor, provost, ship broker and coal exporter; John Stirling Maxwell, Conservative MP for the College Division; John Inglis of A. & J. Inglis, shipbuilders; William Lorimer, chairman of North British Locomotive Company and the Steel Company of Scotland; Thomas Mason of Morrison and Mason, builders and engineers; R.M. Burrows, professor of Greek; A.K. Chalmers, physician and medical officer of health; James Devon, prison medical officer; Samson Gemmel, professor of practice medicine and physician at Glasgow Royal Hospital; Henry Jones, professor of moral philosophy; Richard Lodge, professor of modern history; John Christie McVail, medical officer of health; William Smart, professor of political economy.

<sup>37</sup> Planners and architects included Stanley Adshead, W.R. Davidge, Patrick Geddes, H. Lanchester, Edwin Lutyens, David Barclay Niven, George L. Pepler, A. Beresford Pit, W.E. Riley, Leonard Stokes, Raymond Unwin and Aston Webb. In 1913, 23 society members were MPs, 14 were peers, and 9 were elected to the London County Council. By 1920, the number of MPs and peers had increased to 33 and 32 respectively, while the society's Parliamentary Committee had grown to include 40. Among the businessmen were Viscount Hambleden of W.H. Smith; Gordon Selfridge, the owner of Selfridges; and Sir Richard Burbidge, the managing director of Harrods. The artist members of the society included: Sir Edward Poynter, Frank Brangwyn, Sir Thomas Brock, Sir George James Frampton and, by 1919, the sculptor Feodora Gleichen.

a current mayor, the borough surveyor, county archivist, the curator of the local museum, the principal of the local School of Art, an academic from Birmingham University and, as vice-presidents, the earl of Warwick and Anthony Eden.<sup>38</sup>

### Ideas and activities

The appearance of sociologists on Abercrombie's list of suitable professional members was interesting and significant for two reasons. First, it pointed to Abercrombie's acceptance and encouragement of the methods and approach of sociology in town planning work. Secondly, it reflected the emergence and spread of a sociological sensitivity that had modified ideas about the relationship between space and society, making explicit the environmentalism of the earlier period, and combining it with an argument about the constitutive role of the built environment in the social life of a community. Thus, the objective of the Glasgow Civic Society at its formation in 1896 was to 'promote . . . the better understanding of social subjects', and Edward Caird, who gave the inaugural lecture to the society, expressed his hope that the body 'may do a great deal to help the development of sound and comprehensive ideas on social subjects'.<sup>39</sup> In Glasgow, the ideas underpinning the society's sphere of interests were most clearly articulated and developed by its academic members, notably by Henry Jones, a professor of moral philosopher at the university. Jones spoke out about the 'Science of Social Life' arguing that 'it would not be difficult to show that great as ha[s] been the progress in natural science in the century just closed, the progress in ethical and social thought and practice ha[s] been not less great'.<sup>40</sup> In his public lectures, he pressed for the engagement of Glasgow's citizens in the life of their city, basing his argument on the interdependence he perceived between individuals and their social environment:

It has been assumed . . . that human relations are like relations between physical things. This is entertained by men who are not conscious of possessing any theory of society . . . Man and society, like a plant and its environment, enter too intimately into one another to permit us to represent their functions as altogether distinct. Each needs the other in order to act at all. The dependence is mutual and absolute, and they prosper together; for in truth, they have but one life.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>38</sup> The Warwick Society, annual report and membership list, Sep. 1952, Warwick Record Office, CR674/3/2 and CR674/21.

<sup>39</sup> Minute book, constitution approved 14 Dec. 1896, Glasgow University SpColl, MS Gen. 1342; Edward Caird was by then Master of Bailiol College, but had been professor of philosophy at Glasgow University, 'Individualism and socialism: being the inaugural address to the Civic Society of Glasgow', 1897, Glasgow University, SpColl, MacLehose 770.

<sup>40</sup> Reported in the *Glasgow Herald*, 4 Nov. 1904.

<sup>41</sup> H. Jones, 'Society depend on man', in *Social Responsibilities: Lectures to Businessmen* (Glasgow, 1905), 29.

The influence of social science on ideas about urban space came also through the work of Patrick Geddes. He had presented his formulation of sociology as 'civics' over three lectures to the British Sociological Society between 1904 and 1906. He was highly active in the networks of Britain's associational culture and enmeshed in the ferment of ideas circulating in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. He was also centrally involved with early attempts to spread and systematize town planning. Indeed, Meller has suggested that he became the 'guide and advisor' to the individuals who established town planning as a professional activity in Britain.<sup>42</sup> Furthermore, though he left Britain for India in 1914, a year earlier he appeared among the first members of the London Society and for a while, as the notion of civics began to structure activity, the distinction between civics and the interests of civic societies became blurred. Thus, from 1916 the Civic Education League ran a Summer School for Civics, advertised through the publications of civic groups, and emphasized the importance of direct social study through surveying techniques;<sup>43</sup> the *Journal of the London Society* advocated civics, 'the science of city making and management, compris[ing] every detail from street lighting and drainage to communal kitchens';<sup>44</sup> the Civic Arts Association was formed to 'promote the utilization of Arts and Crafts for Civic purposes' and to 'support all efforts to embellish our cities, towns and villages'.<sup>45</sup>

Geddes' proposed methods of study, the civic and regional survey, also featured in the work of civic societies and those associated with them. Early civic surveying work was conducted between 1915 and 1918 by a group of architects and planners, some London Society members, working at the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA), with secondary centres of collection in Lancashire and Yorkshire.<sup>46</sup> In 1920, the RIBA held an exhibition of this work, defining the method as the 'collecting and recording in an easily accessible manner, such data ... as are required in order to attain a complete knowledge of the whole of those interests upon the preservation or enhancement of which depends the welfare of the inhabitants'.<sup>47</sup> The Lancashire part of the wartime civic survey project was directed by Abercrombie, and the method was the first listed among the suggested activities of civic societies in his 1920 article. As was noted in the *Town Planning Review*, probably by Abercrombie himself as editor at the time, 'civic survey [wa]s in the air' and there followed other examples of civic societies undertaking such work.<sup>48</sup> In Ireland, the civic survey of

<sup>42</sup> H. Meller, 'Patrick Geddes: an analysis of his theory of civics', *Victorian Studies*, 16 (1973), 157.

<sup>43</sup> *Journal of the London Society*, 31 (Sep. 1920).

<sup>44</sup> *Journal of the London Society*, 17 (Jun. 1918), 1.

<sup>45</sup> Details of purposes taken from G.F. Hill, *On Medals*, published by the Civic Arts Association (1917), 16.

<sup>46</sup> Civic Survey Joint Committee Minutes, 29 Jul. 1915 – 21 Jan. 1921, RIBA archive, ref. no. RIBA/Env.

<sup>47</sup> Given in the *Journal of the London Society*, 33 (Nov. 1920).

<sup>48</sup> 'The social survey', book reviews, *Town Planning Review*, 7 (Oct. 1916), 51.

Dublin was conducted by a Civic Survey Committee appointed by the Civics Institute of Ireland, while the civic survey of Southampton was conducted by the local civic society.<sup>49</sup>

The civic surveys conducted in the early twentieth century must be set against the background of earlier developments in cartography. They drew on and extended the techniques of urban cartographers who had sought to provide thematic representations of the social landscape, topography and infrastructure of towns.<sup>50</sup> An important point of separation, however, was the motivation for conducting surveys: they were intended as a preliminary step in town planning work. Planning was a recurring topic at societies' meetings and an important aspect of their work. The formation of the London Society, for example, was motivated by a concern among planners, architects and politicians about traffic routes across the city. While the statutory planning powers granted in 1909 improved the status of planning, they also resulted in problems since they created no framework for planning across large urban areas. Thus, early planning schemes were often conceived by urban district councils without any mechanism for, or obligation to, consider the larger urban geography beyond district boundaries. George L. Pepler, a key figure in early planning history, had called for the formation of a voluntary body to address this problem in 1910 and he was among the founders of the London Society in 1912.<sup>51</sup> During World War I, under the direction of the architect Aston Webb and planner Raymond Unwin, the London Society produced a *Development Plan for Greater London*, which represented their consultations with local authorities across the region and an attempt to tackle the problem of planning a road infrastructure across Greater London.<sup>52</sup>

Similar attempts to shape planning can be seen in the work of other societies. In Birmingham, for example, the civic society had strong concerns about the form of the planning schemes being developed in the city. Despite having two potentially influential figures among their members – George Cadbury Jr was chairman of the city's Town Planning Committee when the civic society was established in 1918 and Neville Chamberlain was a former chairman of that committee and recently elected to parliament – the society chose to intervene directly, buying land to secure its use as

<sup>49</sup> *The Dublin Civic Survey. Report Prepared by H.T. O'Rourke and the Dublin Civic Survey Committee for the Civics Institute of Ireland* (Liverpool and London, 1925); *Southampton. A Civic Survey. Being the Report of the Civic Survey Committee of the Southampton Civic Society*, ed. P. Ford (Oxford, 1931), xi.

<sup>50</sup> One of the best discussions of this genre is Picon's article on Parisian cartography: A. Picon, 'Nineteenth-century urban cartography and the scientific ideal: the case of Paris', *Osiris*, 18 (2003), 135–49.

<sup>51</sup> G.L. Pepler, 'Greater London', in *Town Planning Conference, London, 10–15 October, 1909. Transactions*, RIBA (London, 1911), esp. 612.

<sup>52</sup> Hewitt, 'The London Society'; L.E. Hewitt, 'Towards a greater urban geography: regional planning and associational networks in London, c. 1900–1920', *Planning Perspectives*, 26 (2011), 549–66.

open space and seeking a consultative role in future decision-making.<sup>53</sup> Likewise, in the late 1920s, the Cambridge Preservation Society was formed as a response to house building that was, they argued, having a deleterious effect on the character of the area surrounding the town. Their opposition to ribbon development along road frontages led to similarly direct intervention: individual members contributed funds to support land purchases that totalled 590 acres by the early 1930s.<sup>54</sup> In addition, from its formation in 1928, the group pressed the borough council to join a Joint Regional Planning Committee and when the project was slow to move, the Preservation Society engaged W.R. Davidge, architect-planner and member of the London Society, to begin work in earnest. The resulting publication, the *Cambridge Regional Planning Report* (1934), was funded by the society.<sup>55</sup>

Civic societies exhibited little sense of an opposition between the agenda of planners and that of preservationists. Indeed, interest in planning was often combined with a concern for preservation, as in Cambridge where the rationale for the regional plan was the desire to preserve the character of the town and its surroundings. Like planning, preservation, both of specific buildings and of the more general urban landscape, was a primary concern among civic groups. In their language, they characterized the cause as the protection of a valuable inheritance, or vigilance against vandalism, and they were early in pressing for practical and organizational measures to secure preservationist objectives. Early exercises in compiling lists of scheduled buildings were undertaken by local groups in Bristol, while in a lecture to the Civic Society of Glasgow in 1905, Sir John Stirling Maxwell, society member, Conservative MP for the city and later chairman of the Ancient Monuments Board and founder of the National Trust for Scotland, suggested that a body formed to consider architectural preservation would be a useful addition to the city's institutions. What he termed a 'building censorship'

might be an extension of the branch of the Dean of Guild Court, with power (a) to schedule every monument or building which they considered should be preserved in the public interest, such building not to be altered inside or outside without their sanction: (b) to examine and sanction designs for all such alterations or additions to existing buildings as were visible from the public streets and for all new buildings.<sup>56</sup>

Thus, the civic agenda was indeed, despite the apparent vagueness, accurately identified by Abercrombie as an interest in 'the physical

<sup>53</sup> The society's land purchases were summarized by William Haywood in *The Work of the Birmingham Civic Society* (Birmingham, 1946); the attempt to establish a consultative role for the society's Technical Committee is documented in the records of the society, particularly minutes of the council meeting, 10 Feb. 1919.

<sup>54</sup> Cooper, *Planners and Preservationists*, 37.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.

<sup>56</sup> 'Architectural censorship of streets in cities', reported in the *Glasgow Herald*, 17 Feb. 1905.

side of the community's life'. The material and built environment of towns and cities formed the focus for civic concerns and activities regardless of whether the particular case demanded support for planning or preservation. In Birmingham, the projects of the civic society were wide-ranging, routinely stepping beyond an easy classification as part of either agenda, and might be better investigated as part of an attempt to secure a particular vision of orderliness and beauty in the city's material culture and built landscape. Their work included initiatives like designs for street furniture and park improvements, but they also put forward designs for the city's telephone directory, made numerous detailed specifications about the spatial distribution of elements of the urban landscape (lamp standards should be 'spaced if possible at equal distance apart'),<sup>57</sup> and even articulated design standards for tombstones.<sup>58</sup> The Birmingham Society expressed its 'sensitiv[ity] to the need for a more orderly arrangement' in their city, while a speaker at the London Society criticized the 'lack of discipline' in the embellishment and ornamentation of streets.<sup>59</sup> Recommendations such as these could easily be viewed as later manifestations of the micro-processes of socio-spatial management identified by Patrick Joyce in the techniques of nineteenth-century liberalism, but here they appear as elements in a more generalized, though nevertheless prescriptive, patterning of urban space with strongly aesthetic overtones.<sup>60</sup> Indeed, the work of civic groups was firmly rooted in an argument about the role that the aesthetic quality of urban space 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 commercialized 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. This is evil; a citizen's home should be beautiful, but it

<sup>57</sup> Birmingham Civic Society, annual report, 1936–37.

<sup>58</sup> The Civic Society published a pamphlet on the subject of tombstones in 1931: 'The object of a graveyard memorial is to perpetuate memory. To do this effectively the first essentials are a suitable and enduring material, and lettering of good character that will always be readable. The dignity and beauty of the simple graveyard monuments to be found in our old churchyards result for the most part from the use of local material and workmanship. The general ugliness of modern cemeteries is due very largely to the use of foreign materials and workmanship . . . English stones are best suited to the subdued tones of English landscapes and sky. White marble is an ostentatious and foreign material which does not harmonise with our conditions. There are many stones quarried in this country that are more enduring than white marble, such as Hopton Wood, Bolton Wood, Darley Dale (Stancliffe White), Scout Brown York, Robin Hood Blue York, Cornish, Aberdeen, and Penmaenmawr granites', quoted in Haywood, *The Work of the Birmingham Civic Society*, 117.

<sup>59</sup> Birmingham Civic Society, annual report, 1934–35, 16; F. Pick, 'The art of the street', paper given before the London Society, reported in the *Journal of the London Society*, 64 (Jun. 1923), 10.

<sup>60</sup> Joyce, *The Rule of Freedom*.

should be so as a happy contribution of the individual to a beautiful city. Instead of making a tolerable seclusion for himself with what taste he can, the citizen ought to look upon it as an honourable obligation to make his home worthy of the city that sets a clean and noble standard of comeliness. At present it is impossible for him to do this, since his city is mean and unlovely. The aim of the Birmingham Society will always be to keep in mind this ideal of a regenerate city.<sup>61</sup>

In this assessment, the Birmingham Civic Society articulated an agenda that was widely shared by similar bodies. It was, for example, repeated almost verbatim in the *Report of the Dublin Civic Survey*.<sup>62</sup>

This kind of rhetoric argued that aesthetic judgment should find a privileged place in the decision-making processes of local planning authorities. Abercrombie, arguing that a civic society should function as 'an arbiter of taste', suggested that groups in Britain follow the lead set by American city institutions and press for the formation of art juries, 'department[s] charged by law with the duty of passing judgment upon the design and location of all buildings, bridges, arches, fountains, sculptures, tablets, paintings, lamp-posts, electric and other fixtures, whether erected by the City or private persons or companies'.<sup>63</sup> In Birmingham, the civic society made concerted attempts to establish such an organization. It first made the suggestion in late 1919, proposing that the body would bring together members of the civic society with the lord mayor, the principal of the university, the president of the Birmingham Architectural Association and the director of the School of Art. The society argued it was seeking no more than an advisory role for the jury, but it took 'persistent advocacy' to persuade the city council to accept the proposal.<sup>64</sup> In 1922, an Advisory Art Committee was formed and reportedly made recommendations on over 360 items submitted to them over the following 15 years.<sup>65</sup>

It is clear from these examples that civic societies sought, and sometimes achieved, influence in the political processes that were evolving to govern urban development over the first half of the twentieth century. As the opening comments of this article indicated, Abercrombie began his 1920 article by arguing that the planning work of local authorities should be supported by the professional expertise of civic societies. Civic societies, therefore, were intended by one of their most high-profile advocates to

<sup>61</sup> Annual report of the Birmingham Civic Society, 1918–20, 3.

<sup>62</sup> 'Nothing in our modern civilization has been more mischievously underestimated than the influence of the physical aspect of a town upon the spiritual and moral life of its community. People, therefore, who resent the chaos and squalor inseparable from everyday life in a neglected city, tolerate these conditions only while they must, but leave them when they can . . . Every citizen possessing civic consciousness should look upon it as an honourable obligation to see that his city presents a noble standard of order and comeliness . . . It cannot be too strongly emphasized that the state of a city indicates the character of its citizens', *The Dublin Civic Survey, Report Prepared by H.T. O'Rourke and the Dublin Civic Survey Committee for the Civics Institute of Ireland* (Liverpool and London, 1925), xvii.

<sup>63</sup> Abercrombie, 'A civic society', 87.

<sup>64</sup> Reports of the Birmingham Civic Society, Jun. 1918 – Jun. 1920, 15, and 1921–22, 6–7.

<sup>65</sup> Number of submissions given by Haywood, *The Work of the Birmingham Civic Society*, 39.



function as parties to the statutory planning process. Yet, their existence and role has been little accommodated by existing planning histories that depict Britain's associational culture withering to anachronism as the welfare state extended its powers. Indeed, in some instances, the narrative developed presents the apparently smooth shift of planning activities away from the voluntary sector and into the sphere of local government, emphasizing the separation of reformist and voluntary work on the one hand, and the professionalizing expertise of local authorities on the other.<sup>66</sup> However, the timing of the emergence of civic societies is indicative of both political context and their intent. Civic associations began to emerge in numbers as the statutory responsibilities of local authorities evolved to encompass more fully the spatial elements of urban life. Their early history suggests a high degree of interconnection between reformist agendas, voluntary organizations, professional development and local authority planning in the first half of the twentieth century, interconnection that was cemented by overlapping memberships among local elites and secured by the advocacy of some high-profile figures.<sup>67</sup>

Civic societies did call for greater control over urban development and were keen for planning and preservation to achieve a firmer legal and institutional footing; however, they were also often insistent that both local and professional interests be represented, accommodated and perhaps even prioritized in the development of planning and urban design. The frequent conflation of the local and the professional raises a difficulty that existed within the civic movement. The local and professional did not necessarily coincide. Indeed, on the contrary, the significant role played by civic societies in the advancement of professional approaches to planning, architecture and preservation inevitably led to a movement whose core membership, if local, was also elite, highly integrated into existing structures of power and authority, and thus separate in their interests and milieu from many local residents. Furthermore, there are clear residual traces of the paternalism that fostered and shaped earlier urban experiments, such as Port Sunlight or Bournville, in the confidence with which civic bodies felt able to determine the best standards of design or embodiments of beauty.<sup>68</sup> Indeed, there are direct lines of connection

<sup>66</sup> This historical narrative is implied quite widely in accounts of the development of planning. Ward, for example, suggests repeatedly that the impact of the 1909 Act is to remove planning activities from the voluntary sector and into the sphere of local government, and contrasts the 'reformers' and 'professionals' working in urban development, S.V. Ward, *Planning and Urban Change* (London, 2004), esp. 9, 32.

<sup>67</sup> Patrick Abercrombie is clearly one such figure, but there were others. For example, John Burns, president of the Local Government Board, was a consistent and open supporter of the London Society and, at the other end of the political spectrum, Neville Chamberlain joined both the Birmingham Civic Society and the London Society and can be shown to have pursued their agendas through his political life.

<sup>68</sup> I note, though, that Dellheim found different degrees of paternalism in the approaches of Cadbury and Lever at Port Sunlight and Bournville, C. Dellheim, 'Utopia Ltd: Bournville and Port Sunlight', in D. Fraser (ed.), *Cities, Class and Communication* (London, 1990).

to be traced between civic groups and these earlier models: the funding used by the Birmingham Society to purchase land came from the Cadbury family, while Lord Leverhulme was a member of the London Society.<sup>69</sup>

However, there are also points of connection between civic societies and more radical and egalitarian ideals from the earlier period. Links can be found, for example, between William Morris and many of the artists who were members of civic groups; Henrietta and Samuel Barnett, associated early in their careers with Octavia Hill and deeply motivated by a commitment to improving urban conditions, were members of the Bristol Kyrle Society (which became the Bristol Civic Society); the demonstrable influence of Geddes implies a commitment to ambitious civic ideals explicitly intended to enable local residents to take their place in the 'drama' of city development.<sup>70</sup> Thus, the commitment to aesthetics and the development of civic consciousness, here as earlier most often pursued by a core of professional and elite figures, nevertheless represented a commitment to humanitarian ideals regarding the future of urban space and society. Nascent sociological sensitivities grounded these ideals in the early twentieth century in a narrative built on the dialogic relationship between landscape and community; the built environment was seen as formative of both individual and social character and, in its turn, reflected the vitality of urban citizenship in the quality and beauty of its architecture and design. The rallying call for the promotion and development of civic consciousness was, of course, sounded with most deliberate force by Patrick Geddes, but civic societies should be seen as a part of a movement for civic consciousness in the first half of the twentieth century. At a point when the political climate of Britain was changing substantially and rapidly, their notion of localism and participation was seen as the way to secure a stronger foundation for citizenship.

<sup>69</sup> Details of Birmingham Civic Society's Trust appear in 'The Birmingham Civic Society', *Town Planning Review*, 10 (Sep. 1923), 174; William Lever appears in the membership of the London Society in 1913 and 1920. I think it also likely that he was a member of the Liverpool City Guild, formed in 1909 by the members of the Liverpool School of Architecture, given his close involvement with the school and its members at the time.

<sup>70</sup> For a particularly good discussion of the ethics of Geddesian ideas, see T. Osborne and N. Rose, 'Spatial phenomenotechnics: making space with Booth and Geddes', *Environment and Planning D*, 22 (2004), 209–28.