

# History Notes, Leicester 1945-1962

Leicester History notes taken from 'Leicester in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century' edited by David Nash & David Reeder, and 'Leicester: a Modern History' edited by Richard Rodger & Rebecca Madgin.

## Leicester

At the end of WW2 Leicester was a smaller place than it is today. Although the Saffron Lane and Braunstone estates had been built, most of the large housing estates hadn't been built, much of the 'slum' housing near the city centre was still there, and for many people life revolved around their immediate neighbourhood and the city centre. In the centre, tram tracks surrounded the clock tower and the roads were full of a mix of pedestrians, bicycles, horses, carts, busses, and trams. The trams stopped in 1949.

The big national chain stores hadn't yet taken over and there were family-run department stores, such as Morgan & Squires, chains of local cafes like Winns, and many shops run by individuals. Most people remember the high quality of the shops. Likewise, the corporate takeovers of the 1960s and 1970s had yet to happen and local businesses were still likely to run by the sons or grandsons of the people who started them.

As the slum clearances started again they left large gaps in the streets, which sometimes looked like bomb sites. By the mid-1960s visitors and newcomers to Leicester thought the people were prosperous (some said complacent as well) while the city was slightly shabby and run-down - New Walk is often given as an example of this and it was later in the 1960s that it was cleaned up.

## Housing

In 1946, 10,000 houses were urgently needed. Quick solutions included 572 'prefabs' in Braunstone, New Parks, Ambassador Rd, Hughendon Drive, but there were shortages of labour and material and by 1951 only 4,000 houses had been built.

However, production increased and between 1946 – 1959 13,000 houses were built, around 3,000 in New Parks, over 1,000 in Stocking Farm & Mowmacre Hill, over 1,500 at Thurnby Lodge, and over 2,500 at Eyres Monsell. By 1957 the cost of all the building caused targets to be reduced to 600 houses



Sturdee Road, Eyres Monsell

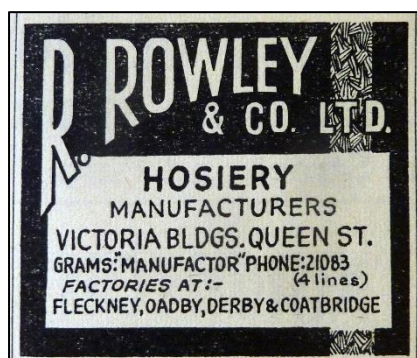
a year, and these houses were built for people displaced by slum clearance.

The pre-war slum clearance programme started up again in 1953/4 and was in full swing by 1956. Slum clearance continued into the 1970s.

In the late 1950s estates at St Matthew's, St Mark's, St Peter's, Rowlatts Hill started to be planned and built, with St Matthews starting in the late 1950s.

## Economy

After WW2 Leicester had many small, diverse companies and was seen as being 'virtually immune' from the ups and downs of trade cycles.



However, although clothing and footwear recovered after the war, neither employed as many people again as they had before the war. Despite this, the years from 1948 to 1974 'must be regarded as the most important period of growth in the city economy during the 20<sup>th</sup> century'. Although things began to slip in the 1970s – and the problems in the footwear industry can be traced back to the 1950s and 1960s – in the period we are looking at Leicester's economy was booming. By the late 1960s there were barely enough people to fill all the vacancies in the city.

## Politics

Locally, the immediate years after WW2 saw the city 'dominated by Labour'. Charles Keene and Mark Henig were two of the big Labour names in local politics then, while Ken Bowder emerged as a force for the Conservatives.

Broadly, Labour wanted to spend money to improve the city while the Conservatives wanted economy. Issues fought over included keeping the rates down, the removal of rent controls by the national Conservative government in 1957, hitting housing targets.

Between 1945 – 1962 Labour was broadly made up of trade union activists, railwaymen being prominent, and people in working class occupations. Well-known names included Sam Barston & Arthur Gratrix (who led the Thurnby Lodge Tenants Association in a campaign against a rent rebate scheme in 1965), and Lily Marriott. The Conservatives 'relied heavily on businessmen, shopkeepers and women', and included women such as Monica Trotter and Irene Pollard (who became party leader on the council).

Members of Parliament who represented Leicester between 1945 – 1962 were mainly Labour, with most Conservative voters living outside of the city boundaries. From 1949 to the 1970s the city had four constituencies. Leicester North-West was held by Barnett Janner (Labour), Leicester North-East was held by Terence Donovan and Ungoed-Thomas (both Labour), Leicester South-East was held by Charles Waterhouse (Con) and then WJ Peel (Con), while Leicester South-West was held by HW Bowden (Labour).



City Hall, Charles Street

## Municipal provision

Most of the changes in the way the local council ran the city and itself came about after the period we are looking at. Until the mid-1960s there was, broadly, a general consensus about how things like housing provision and education should be done

**Education** – the move towards comprehensive education in Leicester came in the early 1960s. Before then secondary moderns schools were the norm for most while grammar schools provided education for the few who were able to access it.

**Health** – with the creation of the National Health Service (NHS) ‘health care policies... were determined at a national rather than a local level’ and ‘...preventative medicine was being eclipsed by hospital-based curative medicine’.

The City General, the Isolation Hospital, and Westcotes became part of the Sheffield Regional Health Board. The Home Help service started in 1946, while there were plans for more post-and ante-natal clinics. A new ambulance station was based on Welford Rd. in 1948 the Council took on responsibility for a new mental health service (NHS Act) and for the care of children ‘deprived of a normal home life’ (Children Act, 1948). New clinics were started for partial hearing, enuresis, minor ailments, audiology, and nutrition. In the 1950s there were innovations in the treatment of diabetes at home and in 1952 the first diabetic health visitor service started.

### Organisations & Associational Life

Throughout this period there were many groups, associations and societies that either started after the war or that had been going since before the war. These groups catered for people with interests in music, sport, natural history, radio, religion, gardening, photography and many other subjects. Groups like the Leicester Literary & Philosophical Society and the Secular Society, which are still going strong today, were founded in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

There were once many Working Men’s Clubs (WMCs) in Leicester, but even as early as the 1950s some WMCs, in the face of television and other ways of spending money, were suffering. In 1957 it became legal to use tombolas and give cash prizes, while in 1965 clubs could install fruit machines, enabling clubs to raise much needed money. Many survived into the 1970s and 1980s.

Leicester has a long history of adult education through organisations such as the Workers’ Educational Association (WEA) and many people attended WEA courses through the 1950s and 1960s. In the 1950s the University’s Department of Adult Education took on some of the WEA’s teaching.



Aylestone & District WMC, Saffron Lane

A Polish Saturday School was started in Highfields in 1954 and an ex-serviceman’s club in 1956, while a Ukrainian community hall on Westcotes Drive was used from 1958. The first African-Caribbean cricket team started in 1948 and became the West Indian Sports & Social Club in 1957. The first mosque was established in 1962, the first gurdwara in 1966, and the first Hindu temple in 1969.

## Leisure & Consumption

### Sport

The Leicester City Supporters Club re-started after the war in 1946 (although it wasn't formally recognised by the club until 1990). Leicester City FC reached the FA Cup final in 1949, 1961 and 1963 but lost on all occasions.

The war years saw Leicester Tigers Rugby Club fall into debt and during the 1950s into the 1960s the club was torn between wanting to maintain the old pre-war ethos – few amenities for spectators, facilities mainly for players – and the need to bring in more spectators. Gradually, the club modernised.

Leicestershire County Cricket Club moved to its current home at Grace Road after the war and benefitted from a post-war boom in cricket attendance. In the 1950s they experimented by taking county games to Ashby and Hinckley, and occasionally Barwell, Melton, Coalville & Loughborough, although this tailed off in the 1960s and 1970s.

More broadly, many people took part in sporting activities through village teams, work, church, scouts & guides. Until radio and TV took a hold, many people left the home for their leisure.

### Going Out

Leicester's theatres became victims of the television age after the war. The Theatre Royal on Horsefair Street closed for the last time in 1956, the Palace Theatre on Belgrave Gate closed in 1958, and the Opera House in Silver Street closed in 1960. Only the Little Theatre on Dover Street remained until an experimental 'Living Theatre', a forerunner of the Phoenix (1963), opened in 1960.

The dozens of cinemas dotted around Leicester gradually began to close, although most were still going in 1962.

Dancing might be at the Palais on Humberstone Gate, De Montfort Hall, in the Working Men's Clubs or wherever there was a good dance floor e.g. the fire station on Lancaster Rd or the Oriental Café by the market (which closed in 1955 and became Woolworths).



However, pubs were often said to be dead on a Saturday night in Leicester. Through the 1950s into the 1960s the Watch Committee – set up to monitor policing in the city – frowned on music in pubs and you would need to go to a Working Man's Club or a dance hall for music and a drink.



This used to be the Palais de Dance, Humberstone Gate

## Staying In

**Radio** - after the war there were three BBC radio channels, the Home Service (news, features, drama, local radio), the Light Programme (popular music, variety shows), and the Third Programme (more highbrow – classical music, literature, talks, drama). There were other channels in Europe that could be listened to, Radio Luxembourg being one for popular music. Sitting around the radio could be a family event, and if it was by the fire you could all stay warm too! Dick Barton, special agent, was one of my dad's favourites shows, Prince Charles was a big fan of The Goons, but there were many more. This is a list of popular radio programmes of the 1940s & 1950s that has front covers of the Radio Times - <http://www.turnipnet.com/whirligig/radio/> . You can see all the radio and TV listings from 1923 – 2009 on this BBC website - <http://genome.ch.bbc.co.uk/>

**TV** – the BBC started transmitting television programmes after the war in 1946 and a £2 television licence was introduced. At the end of 1949 the Sutton Coldfield television transmitter opened in the Midlands, making it the first part of the UK outside London to receive the BBC Television Service. The Queen's Coronation in 1953 boosted sales of television sets but there wasn't much to see compared with today. More choice arrived with the start of ITV in 1955. BBC 2 started in 1964. This is a list of programmes and background information about TV in the 1950s - <http://www.turnipnet.com/whirligig/>

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## Where can I find out more?

The following general history books cover Leicester in the period 1945-1962:

Ben Beazley, *Postwar Leicester* (2006), Sutton pbk.

David Bell, *Those Were the Days: Leicestershire in the Forties, Fifties and Sixties* (2001).

David Nash & David Reeder (Eds), *Leicester in the Twentieth Century* (1993), Sutton pbk.

Jack Simmons, *Leicester Past and Present, vol. 2* (1974)

Richard Rodger & Rebecca Madgin (Eds.), *Leicester: A Modern History* (2016), Carnegie Press: Lancaster.

Stephen Butt, *Leicester in the 1950s* (2014), Amberley.

Stephen Butt, *Leicester in the 1960s* (2015), Amberley.

These websites all have photos or videos of Leicester:

Videos of Leicester. Pathe footage of the 1940s and '50s starts at video number 30 -

<https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL3Rnsga7PXcsUPoh9LNfWwwPOaZvqp7f>

Memories of Leicester on Facebook - <https://www.facebook.com/Leicestermemories/>

Leicester Past & Present - A Walk Down Memory Lane on Facebook (includes images of the county) -

<https://www.facebook.com/LeicesterAWalkDownMemoryLane/>

The Story of Leicester on Facebook - <https://www.facebook.com/storyofleicester/>

Mr Leicester on Facebook - <https://www.facebook.com/misterleicester/>

Leicester Memories on Flickr - <https://www.flickr.com/photos/leicestermemories/>

Leicester pubs lost since the 1980s. Chris Pyrah on Flickr -

<https://www.flickr.com/photos/chrispyrah/sets/72157629355978785/>