

New Walk in the nineteenth-century

by A. J. and J. M. Stracham

New Walk, a pedestrian way linking Leicester city centre to the race course (now Victoria Park), was established by order of the corporation in 1785. It followed the boundary between the enclosed St. Margaret's Field and the unenclosed South Fields. The 1804 enclosure award granted the land adjoining the west side of the Walk to the corporation. During the following twenty years it appears to have been policy to maintain the open character of the Walk and its environs. This was achieved by restricting the use of the land on the west side to gardens and restraining development on the privately owned land to the east. In 1824 the corporation gave permission for residential development of a type that would preserve the footway function of the Walk and its amenity. Properties had to be bounded by an "iron palisade fence", the building line had to be at least ten yards away from the Walk, and alternative non-pedestrian access provided.¹ Development took place throughout the remainder of the century. Potts² has provided a chronicle of the physical evolution of the area, during the nineteenth century highlighting the absence of any overall plan of development. He also traces the social characteristics of those living along the Walk.

One of the earliest indications of the character of the area comes from an advertisement for "several lots of building land adjoining New Walk . . . most delightfully situated for the erection of genteel residences".³ The attractiveness of the Walk was further enhanced by the provision of gas lighting,⁴ and seats under the trees.⁵ The quality of New Walk is revealed by census and directory information on the occupations of residents.⁶ Until the middle of the century about three-quarters of all heads of household had independent means, or were professional men, or owners of businesses. Thereafter there was a steady increase in the proportion of professional men and tradesmen at the expense of the more exclusive social groups. This slight social change coincided with the intrusion at the northern end of New Walk of a number of industrial premises. Potts suggests that in the last quarter of the century "an increasing number of professional men ran their businesses from New Walk . . . doctors, dentists, and teachers working from their homes".⁷ While these trends had not reached proportions detrimental to the residential character of the street they do indicate an underlying shift in social and functional emphases.

Functional Change during the Twentieth Century

By 1970 New Walk had almost completely lost its residential function and had become the city's most prestigious office area. There has also been considerable rehabilitation and redevelopment of the properties lining the Walk. Despite these changes New Walk still retains much of the ambience of the eighteenth century pedestrian promenade.

The process of change and its spatial pattern can be traced using Kelly's Directories. These were published with decreasing frequency and at irregular intervals throughout the twentieth century. Thirteen of those available have been considered adequate to present a coherent picture of New Walk's recent evolution. The limitations of this source are well known. Attention has been focused on clear indications of commercial activity rather than on occupational information in order to minimise the shortcomings.

Of the 103 properties listed in 1900 only five were used for business purposes being occupied by five industrial enterprises, one professional and one miscellaneous office; the remainder were private residences, 88 single family and three two-family units, and seven which had been sub-divided into apartments.

The total number of occupied units changed only slightly in the period until 1922, and thereafter dropped continuously and sharply until 1941; the number of single family residences declined by an even larger amount (fig. 9),

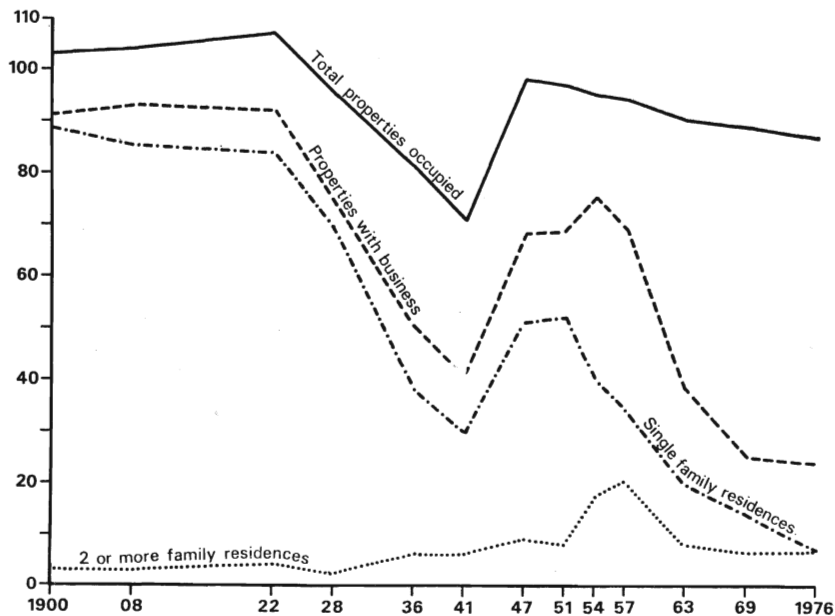


Fig. 9. New Walk

but the number of hotels, and boarding houses increased. This altered the residential balance and status of New Walk: the change had many contributory causes. Some properties were over 80 years old, and therefore requiring

considerable alteration to satisfy family needs in the second quarter of the twentieth century: at the same time transport advances were making the accessibility of New Walk less important: and finally many spacious and modern housing areas, aimed at the type of resident New Walk had attracted, were being built in the suburbs,⁸ e.g., Oadby, Evington, Knighton, Birstall. Within the overall decline residential losses were offset by an increasing number of businesses occupying premises along the Walk; the number of buildings used for these purposes doubled (10 to 20) with the greatest increases being initially in industry, but from 1928 onwards being more noticeable in the numbers of offices of manufacturing and professional concerns, and trades associations.

The building stand-still of the war years resulted in a backlog of demand which perhaps accounts for the sharp increase in the number of occupied buildings along New Walk in the immediate post war years. Residential properties increased from 46 in 1941 to 67 in 1951 while business activities increased from 21 to 30.

Throughout the 1950's the number of buildings occupied declined only slightly, but their uses altered markedly. A steady growth in the number of business premises occurred to around 40 in 1963 while residential properties declined to 30. This period marks the shift in balance from residential to commercial dominance.

At this time the physical fabric of many buildings showed signs of decay and the external environment had been allowed to deteriorate. Consequently much of New Walk's attractiveness as a residential street was lost and its overall state did little to encourage the growing commercial component to invest in property improvement. The area's long-term future was uncertain because of Development Plan⁹ proposals for an inner ring road which would cross New Walk, and have a major impact on its cohesive form. The blight which normally accompanies such proposals accelerated the decline of an already decaying area. This is evident from the sharp fall in the number of residential buildings in the late 1950's - 42 in 1957 to 22 in 1963. The continuing expansion of the office component (33 buildings in 1957 to 40 in 1963) into such an area was a reflection of the shortage of office accommodation in the city and the lack of other centrally located residential properties suitable for conversion.

The 1960's was a period of growing awareness of the importance of townscape and the valuable contribution that existing areas could make to its overall quality. The uniqueness of New Walk as the only surviving example of an urban pedestrian way in England and Wales¹⁰ made it an obvious choice for conservation. In 1964 a revised traffic plan¹¹ removed the threat of the ring-road upheaval; in the same year buildings in the northern part of New Walk were officially listed, and the city launched a programme of environmental improvements along the walkway and in the adjacent open spaces. The whole of New Walk was designated a Conservation Area in 1969. This protection ensured the continued existence of the walkway, but at a price; owners of buildings along New Walk wishing to make any alterations faced considerable costs in meeting the requirements of the conservation scheme. Appropriate

rehabilitation or sympathetic redevelopment are so expensive that few private individuals can contemplate them. In consequence the transformation from a residential to a commercial street is now almost total

In 1976 there were 67 occupied buildings facing onto New Walk. This somewhat lower figure than in earlier periods is not due to excessive vacancy (8 are empty), but to the redevelopment of several groups of terraced houses into single office blocks. Commercial enterprises now occupy fifty buildings, while residential use accounts for the remaining seventeen, but only seven of these are single family homes.

Hotels and Boarding-houses

The change in New Walk's status can also be traced through statistics on apartments, boarding houses and hotels. Apartments were part of the late nineteenth century residential pattern, but are of less significance in the twentieth century, and had all but disappeared by the mid 1920's. The emergence about this time of more commercial forms of accommodation – boarding-houses and hotels – tended to detract from the residential desirability of the street. These establishments increased in number from one in 1908 to a peak of 18 in 1936, but continued to be important in the 1940's and 1950's. The changeover to an office area in the 1960's resulted in the almost complete demise of these forms of accommodation with only one hotel (occupying three buildings) surviving after 1963.

Commercial Offices

Within the overall pattern of change from residential to commercial function which has been a feature of the twentieth century, there has been a significant change in the composition of the latter group. Initially, industry was the dominant non-residential use, encroaching on the northern end of the Walk adjacent to the town centre. This continued to be important until the late 1920's and declined thereafter.

A continuation of the presence of the professional office identified by Potts¹² can be seen throughout the twentieth century (fig. 10), modestly represented to begin with (an average of three until 1922), and then growing steadily to the 1950's (10 in 1954). Thereafter growth accelerated to reach 15 in 1963 and 37 by 1976. This is very much the pattern of growth in all forms of office activity along New Walk. The offices of financial concerns first appear in the 1920's and are nominally represented over the following forty years; the 1960's and 1970's was a period of very rapid increase in numbers from three in 1963 to seven in 1969 to 24 in 1976. Manufacturer's offices also appeared in New Walk in the early 1920's; these grew fairly steadily in numbers and were the main office group from the 1940's to the peak year of 1963 when there were 28. Thereafter their numbers contracted very sharply to fourteen in 1969 and have remained constant since then. From the late 1920's the Area Offices of various trades and political organisations have been conspicuous components of the office scene with an average of six to nine being present at any one time.

Although there has been a continuous growth in the number of all office types, the composition of the group and its size changed markedly during the

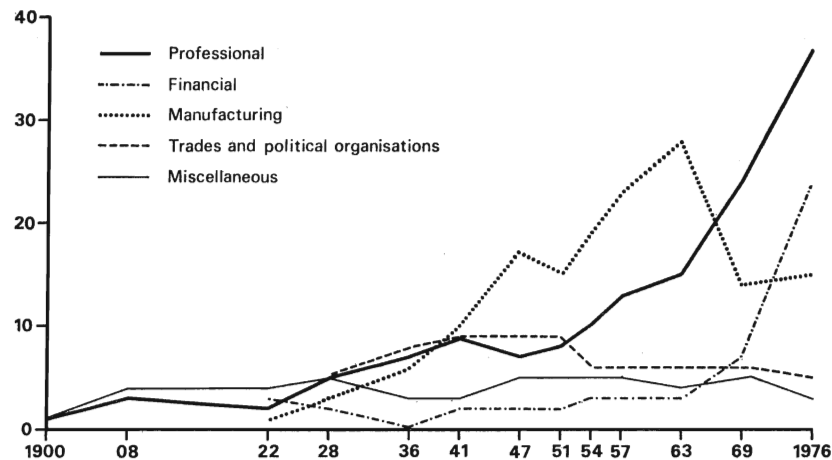


Fig. 10. New Walk

time that conservation has been operated. 1963 marks the point at which professional office growth “took-off” while manufacturers’ offices fell in numbers. By 1976 the area had been transformed into a dominantly professional and financial quarter.

The potential of conservation was quickly appreciated by professional concerns – architects, surveyors, solicitors, accountants – who were among the first to undertake modest and then increasingly more ambitious adaptations and renovations. Shortly afterwards conservation of the redevelopment type was started and it is at this stage that financial concerns first came into the area in any numbers. The introduction of environmental constraints and standards has given New Walk a second life – it is now as prestigious a street for offices as it once was for residences.

Spatial and Temporal Change

Functional change has been clearly established from the directory information; this source also provides evidence of spatial and temporal change. The first buildings to become non-residential were located adjacent to major transport crossings – King Street, the railway, De Montfort Street, and University Road – and change of use spread out from these points (fig. 11). The King Street junction, which is closest to the town centre, was the first to change with the conversion of the first three properties on either side into printing works, offices, and retailing establishments. The area which includes the De Montfort junction and is bounded by the railway and University Road first contained commercial activities in 1908. Within this major street block these uses gradually advanced during the next four decades to include almost every property. This area is characterised by substantial properties which are suitable for conversion to non-residential use and are of a type which elsewhere in New Walk have formed foci for commercial encroachment without the added stimulus of crossroads location. The main group of this type – 19 in 29 –

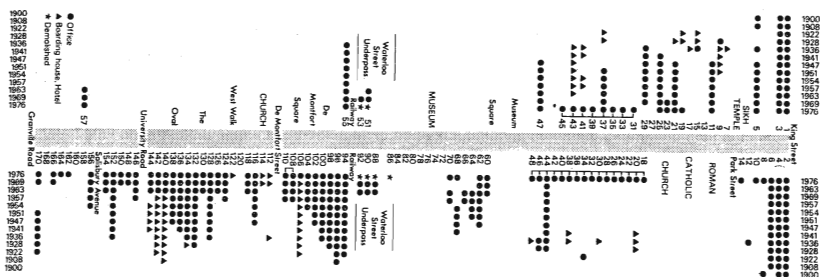


Fig. 11. New Walk

was converted to office uses in the immediate pre and post second world war period.

The only area of substantial properties to retain its residential character till the 1960's is at the northern end of New Walk between University Road and Victoria Park. The buildings here are amongst the newest of the original development and are also furthest from the town centre; together these factors may account for the late date at which the invasion of commercial activities occurred.

Smaller terrace type houses typical of the city end of the Walk seldom proved attractive to commercial concerns. These were amongst the oldest buildings along New Walk and had decayed considerably by the time Area Conservation was mooted. The only course of action possible in such instances was redevelopment. Sympathetic treatment has created substantial office units between numbers 18 and 50, and 29 and 43, which do not detract from the visual cohesion of the walkway.

Conclusion

New Walk has come full circle; attitudes concerning the desirability of an urban walkway are as strong now as they were in the late eighteenth century. In between there was a longish period (1930-1960) when physical decay coupled with public and official apathy threatened its continued existence.

The possibility of New Walk having a future as a non-residential street was indicated by the growing number of commercial concerns locating along it in the post-war years. This, coupled with a realization of its historical uniqueness, provided the necessary stimulus for its regeneration using a conservation approach.

There has been total commitment to the ideals of conservation. Rehabilitation and redevelopment have occurred throughout New Walk's length and considerable attention has been paid to detailed landscape features. Perhaps most indicative of the value placed on the scheme is the fact that in order not to disturb the continuity of the walkway the southern section of the central relief road has been constructed under it.

The commercial potential of New Walk has been fully realised as evidenced by the considerable demand for office suites, and by office concerns' acceptance of the continuous financial commitment that location in a Conservation Area

involves. The success of conservation can be clearly seen by the part that New Walk plays in the life of the city. It forms the heart of the city's major office quarter and is also an attractive and well-used pedestrian way.

Notes

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2. Potts, G. "New Walk in the Nineteenth Century", *Transactions of the Leicester Archaeological and Historical Society*, Vol. XLIV, 1968-69, 72-87
3. Leicester Journal, 1 June 1838
4. Hall Book 27 August 1832 Chinnery, Records, V, 1600
5. Holy Trinity and its Surroundings 1838-1966, (Leicester, 1966), 7
6. Potts, op. cit., 80
7. Potts, op. cit., 86
8. Evans, R., Leicester and Leicestershire 1835-1971, in Pye, N. (Ed.) *Leicester and its region* (Leicester, 1972), 288-304, 293
9. Leicester City Council, *City of Leicester Development Plan* (Leicester 1952), Town Map and Programme Map
10. Simmons, J. *Leicester past and present* (1974), 2
11. Leicester City Planning Department, Leicester Traffic Plan: report on traffic and urban policy. Leicester 1964, Fig. 145, 74
12. Potts, op. cit., 86