

Childhood

If you enter the current Gas Hall exhibition in Birmingham and turn the wrong way (as I invariably do in exhibitions) you'll find yourself in a teenager's bedroom. Health & Safety rules demand that it's tidier and cleaner than the one I can personally remember, and considerably less tacky than Tracey Emin's. Even the stuff under the bed is tidied away in boxes.

This space was curated by children from two Birmingham secondary schools - Four Dwellings High School in Quinton and Waverley School in Small Heath - and is the perfect conclusion - or in my case introduction - to a major new exhibition on Children's Lives in the city. It's a reminder that we were all there once, and that being young is ever changing and always the same.

What has characterised a number of the more striking Gas Hall shows in recent years - memorably the Matthew Boulton bicentenary and the "Picturing Birmingham" exhibition - has been the combination and intersecting of art and archives.

The new show follows in that tradition, combining fine art, photography, artefacts, oral history, manuscripts and printed books to throw light on the life of children in Birmingham over the last two centuries.

Indeed, more than anything, Children's Lives serves to showcase the extraordinary wealth of material in the city's archives and museums, and to combine it in unexpected ways. The Parker Collection of children's books in the Central Library is, for one, an archive of international importance, and worthy of a show on its own.

Birmingham has long been entitled to such an exhibition. One of the distinguishing features of the town in the early 19th Century was that it was full of children, and, as one of the youngest cities in Europe today, that characteristic has not changed. The place, then, has long had a vested interest in its young people, commercially, as well as socially.

Back in the 1850s the Birmingham Education League was the first body to campaign for free education for all, leading to the (somewhat less ambitious) Education Act of 1870. And as the home of Chad Valley - some of whose toys are on display - and birthplace of the inventor of Cluedo, Birmingham and children's games have long been synonymous.

The young people, then, who have brought their bedroom to life in the final display of the exhibition, stand on the shoulders of their young predecessors, seven or eight generations of them. Spilling out from the archives are the tales of fortune and misfortune, of the boys and girls able to explore their world through play, and others destined for a children's home, reformatory or workhouse.

But if children have always been with us, and we with them, the presence of archival material serves to demonstrate that the life experience of the child, and his or her expectations - even how we define the child - are historically determined.

Given this fact, it would be easy to let such an exhibition follow a predominantly historical narrative. The challenge for the curators - Professor Ian Grosvenor of Birmingham University and Dr Sian Roberts of Birmingham Archives and Heritage - is to find a more interesting course than this.

The section of the show entitled "On the Move" is good example of how to go about it. At the end of August 1939 some 25,000 children were evacuated out of the Birmingham. Their lives, and the lives of those who stayed behind or returned to pick up shrapnel souvenirs from bomb craters, would never be quite the same again. We would expect to find here, and do so, the photos of evacuation, and the Mickey Mouse gas mask, to illustrate that world turned upside down.

But by combining the Blitz with material from the Edgbaston-based Middlemore Homes the exhibition demonstrates that relocating children "for their own good" did not begin in 1939. It has a long and problematic back history.

Much of Children's Lives is, of course, organised around the familiar themes of home and street, work and play. What struck me in the first two of these sections is that whenever Birmingham has debated and discussed its future - what it should look like, how it should grow - children have been central to that conversation.

Since the child stands to inherit the result of those planning policies it could hardly be otherwise.

Bill Brandt's famous images, commissioned by Bournville Village Trust in 1939 for its ground-breaking book and film "When We Build Again" are the most vivid example of this. Children are central to these photographs, and the promise of green suburbs - gardens and semi-detached housing to replace the yard and the back-to-back - are predicated on their futures.

Not far away from here the designers have mocked up a Victorian chimney to give us some impression - considerably less sooty than an original, it has to be said - of a time when the Birmingham boy might find a living by sweeping the inside of one. It was John Cadbury - the first generation of the chocolate family - who set in motion the campaign to outlaw the practice.

It's another neat connection across time and space in this reflective and engaging show.

Children's Lives runs from 24 March to 10 June in Gas Hall. Admission charge is £4 for adults, £2 for children.