

Diamond Jubilees

In June 1897 Queen Victoria celebrated her Diamond Jubilee, the first English sovereign ever to reach that milestone. (George III missed it by a matter of months, and no other monarch came close.) A little more than a century later a second Queen has repeated the feat.

As a nation we have not yet agreed exactly what characterises this second Elizabethan Age, or, indeed, if there is anything in common between the people we were in 1952 and who we are today. So rapid and profound has been the transformation in these sixty years that it's not easy to find continuities, other than the occupant of Buckingham Palace herself.

Yet the Victorian Age is not so easy to sum up either. We have, I suppose, an accepted impression of the Victorians - something to do with Dickens, Empire and railways - but much of that evolved over the course of her reign. Had the Birmingham-born gunman - Edward Oxford - succeeded in his attempt to assassinate the Queen in June 1840, it's doubtful whether any of these words would have appeared in her obituary.

So what happened to Birmingham over those two Jubilees ? Are there any commonalities or contrasts to conjure up here in the Midlands ?

In 1837 the Age of the Train was just about to arrive in Birmingham Eastside. The Grand Junction line to Liverpool opened in that year, and a few hundred yards down the road preparations were underway at Curzon Street to welcome the first carriages up from Euston. They would be here in time for the Coronation, delayed, not by the usual signalling fault, but the collapse of a tunnel in the Rugby area.

Here, at least, we can reach out and shake hands with the Victorians, for Curzon Street and the area around it is equally expectant for a new kind of rail line to Birmingham, shortly to be burrowing under the Chilterns. Who knows if it might coincide with another coronation ?

The town into which the carriages rolled in 1837 numbered some 175,000 souls, already huge in comparison with her neighbours, but continuing to grow at breakneck speed. By the end of Victoria's reign it would exceed half a million, and that without significant expansion of her boundaries. Edgbaston and Saltley came in in 1838, and Balsall Heath and Harborne were added in 1891, but little else. The inward momentum of migration - from country to town - transformed all of the UK, but few places grew so fast as Birmingham.

All those incomers - drawn in by hopes of employment and improvement - made Birmingham a strikingly young city in 1837, full of children and young families, much as it is today, and exerting similar pressures in terms of education and housing and jobs. It was, in fact, not the best time to arrive. The recession of the late 1830s threw vast numbers on the dole, wishing perhaps they had stayed at home.

There could hardly be a greater contrast with the first few years of Elizabeth's reign.

In those halcyon days the shackles of post-war austerity were off, and Birmingham's industrial base was in rude health, expanding rapidly to meet the demands of global trade, and greedy for workers.

GEC built a new heavy engineering plant at Electric Avenue, Witton, in November 1951, and was employing a total of 14,000 people in the city. Likewise the Austin Motor Co. opened a new £2 million car assembly plant at Longbridge in July 1951. By then the company was producing almost 160,000 vehicles a year, three-quarters of them for export.

Fisher & Ludlow, Dunlop and ICI were in similarly expansionist mood, and even Ansells Brewery was investing in new plant in its brewery at Aston Cross in 1957.

As it had throughout its history, Birmingham drew on outsiders to top up its ever-increasing workforce. From the Indian sub-continent they came, and from the Caribbean, and (as they always had) from Ireland too.

But where to house them? The solutions the Victorians had provided no longer met the demands of the 20th Century. The city already had, by the early 50s, more than 100,000 houses - most of them back-to-backs - deemed sub-standard, and more than half the families who lived in the inner city had no bathrooms or WCs.

Birmingham's solution was as brave in the 1950s as back-to-backs had been in the 1830s; she turned to high-rise. The first multi-storeys appeared at Tile Cross in 1953 and on the Great Francis Street / Bloomsbury Street site in 1954. At their official opening, Harold Macmillan, Minister of Housing and Local Government, bounced the ball firmly into the city's court. "I look to Birmingham," he said, "to be the leader in the two housing enterprises - building new houses and slum reclamation - in the future as she has been in the past."

While Victorian Birmingham had expanded largely by in-fill, Elizabethan Birmingham swept outwards across its suburbs like a tsunami, swallowing up the Kingshurst estate and Castle Bromwich airfield. What had once been obscure geographical features on old maps - Kent's Moat, Shard End, Castle Vale - became housing estates instead.

And so the Midland metropolis became Britain's Second City, its beating heart, an irresistible force, not of nature, but of industry. It was thirteen miles of people, three continents condensed into a single location.

Yet that helter-skelter world of the the 1950s today feels almost as remote as Queen Victoria herself. Every one of those mighty companies has gone, or shrunk to a fraction of its size. The high-rise apartments too have come toppling down, as new solutions to housing have taken their place. Government ministers, in a new age of austerity, now encourage us to be modest in our ambitions.

Yet the thirteen miles of people still remain, strung out across the Birmingham Plateau, and the heart still beats. Doubtless they will be still be there when the next diamond jubilee arrives.