

Peter Malpass, *Housing the People in Victorian Bristol*. (Redcliffe Press/University of West of England, Bristol, 2021). 207 pp, numerous b/w ill. Paperback £20.00. [ISBN 978-1-911408-79-6].

This is an important new book that engages with the very substantial literature on Victorian housing but also refers to new material and asks different questions. Its emphasis on housing production provides a different perspective and enables Peter Malpass to say something new and add significantly to that literature.

Rather than having a focus on slum housing and households that were victims of housing shortages during industrialisation and urbanisation, or on legislative developments, this book examines the new housing built in nineteenth century Bristol. It draws on archival material to present an original, city wide account of Victorian housing that complements what is available elsewhere, questions some widely held premises and enriches what we know of differences between cities.

This is a book about housing but it emphasises that the nineteenth century built environment of urban Britain was shaped by social and economic developments. The initial chapters set out the context for what follows – outlining Bristol's economy and population change. Bristol is not the archetypal product of nineteenth century industrialisation and one of the strengths of this book is that it adds a robust account of a major city that has been largely neglected in research on Victorian housing, preoccupied with London and the more rapidly growing cities of the Midlands and North of Britain. Bristol had been the second largest port (after London) and as a pre-industrial city started from a different base and experienced a different pattern of development in the nineteenth century. It experienced sluggish growth in the 20 years to 1860 and was overtaken in population size by new industrial cities. Nevertheless Bristol also grew and was affected by economic and transportation changes – as the port declined other industries (clothing, cocoa and tobacco) and the railways developed. Rapid population growth overwhelmed the existing physical infrastructure for water, waste disposal and housing and Bristol was not sheltered from unhealthy living conditions.

Against this background Peter Malpass adopts (in Chapter 2) a framework that explicitly puts housing production at the centre of understanding the housing problem. This does not deny the importance of processes that affected housing consumption – who lived where and what they paid for different types of housing. But it challenges a perspective, reflected in the academic literature, that presents the core of the nineteenth century housing problem as the slums, poverty, low incomes and inequality and focuses on working class housing rather than the market as a whole. Peter Malpass argues, instead, that problems arose because housing was treated as a commodity and decisions about what to build and where were driven by opportunities for landowners to profit from selling land and the capacity of builders to buy it, build on it and sell dwellings at a profit. This perspective means that activities to build, subdivide and maintain (or fail to maintain) working class housing are only part of the story. The movement of the middle classes to the suburbs and the resources used to facilitate this are also critical – 'the suburbs and slums need to be seen as two ends of the same process' (p.27).

This starting point prefaces an overview of Bristol's nineteenth century growth, followed by chapters that detail its suburban expansion – they refer to key factors in housing production, the housebuilding process, houses and their settings, consumers and the politics of housing. Housebuilding was left entirely to private enterprise. Landowners, developers and builders were the decision makers –constrained only by legal title and market forces. What emerges is that Bristol had distinctive patterns of both landownership and effective demand: for example, from significant

landowners including the Society of Merchant Venturers, the Church and absentee owners who had inherited land. And, because of its pre-existing size and wealth, Bristol had a large middle class at a much earlier stage than newer industrialising cities. Consequently there was a market for 'expensive' newly built suburban housing that commanded labour, materials and finance.

Housebuilding in Bristol's suburban market was still highly risky and business failures were common. Landowners had the most comfortable role and easiest route to profit but preferred to sell large plots of land and avoid the more detailed leasehold estate development evident elsewhere. New suburban housing was generally built on freehold plots that were often sold in small numbers. In contrast contemporary development elsewhere proceeded by selling leases, often with covenants that limited what could be built and prevented undesirable later development. This provided long term, predictable, sustained revenues rather than the immediate financial reward from selling freeholds (David Cannadine, *Lords and Landlords: the Aristocracy and the Towns*, Leicester, 1980). The discussion of suburban building refers to the role of building societies, the numbers of detached houses and distinctive specifications; improvements in what was built are attributed to rising incomes rather than bye-laws. The account of consumer experience refers to the servant-keeping middle class, the respectable working class and the squalid houses of Bristol's 'poor'. Finally, the discussion of the politics of housing refers to the town council and philanthropy and provides an interesting picture of a Medical Officer of Health who preferred to do as little as possible to tackle the appalling housing conditions in parts of the city.

Overall this book will be of enormous interest to historians and anyone interested in housing and planning history. It is particularly valuable to have such an original and perceptive picture of Bristol to add to work on other cities and, through sustained reference to housing production, to rebalance and extend perspectives and explanations. There is a bonus for anyone interested in Bristol itself – the detailed reference to streets and locations and the very large number of photographs of properties discussed in the text, which bring the history to life in a well referenced and indexed book that achieves very high standards of presentation and publication.

ALAN MURIE

Birmingham

Alan Murie

Urban and Regional Studies

University of Birmingham