

THE SELLING OF HISTORY: CHELTENHAM IN CHANGE

by Harry Cowen

Cheltenham's contemporary history, treated as the past few decades, offers an apposite case of the local trading in history, a current concern among a number of local authorities. What is clearly of interest for the local historian is that the locality's present era of affluence may be seen as a mirror of the Spa early building boom. But Cheltenham's history is not one-dimensional; parallels between the contemporary and the Spa era are partially contrived products of local policy and a current economic climate beneficial to the Cheltenham type of town. Given the success of a strategy which much depends on looking back, the town's elaborate celebrations of George III's visit to the Spa can be more easily understood.

Contemporary Britain has not only produced a North-South divide, but other kinds of geographical divide such as that between areas with an industrial manufacturing tradition and historical middle size towns, many situated in the South but not exclusively so (e.g. York). Cheltenham's strategy has entailed a conscious creation of image identification, the virtual re-moulding of a class culture which has had more cultural significance. It is very much of *economic significance*, in the light of the current climate where the pressure is on local authorities to find novel sources of income. All types of municipalities are in search of a heritage to market—even Wigan pier, on Orwell's road a landmark of poverty, now a nostalgic industrial museum, not to mention the rediscovered equipment of naval and military towns such as Portsmouth.

An overwhelming bourgeois image of grand Spa traditions and colonies has survived in a manner dissimilar from Gloucester, which also possessed a Spa (see the article by Barbara Drake, No. 1, new series) but whose image has been influenced more by its established industrial heritage and communications network. Cheltenham's initiatives have focused mainly upon environmental qualities which have attracted in turn

social classes able to manipulate the environment in their own image. Indeed, Cheltenham's built environment is a product of the town's role in the eighteenth century as a resort for the sick and nobility, and property speculation leading to the creation of the planned classical terraces. Ample land and a flourishing property market helped draw the ex-colonials to the area, a new social class to replace the disappearing nobility after the 1840s. Anthony King's work on colonial urban development demonstrates how the colonels imported the housing styles of the colonies with their bungalow culture, Nabob-type houses and big gardens, but they also imported the servitude of the colonies by employing redundant domestics for wages at a pittance.

"Poor little tuppenny halfpenny servants who had to wear a morning uniform and an afternoon uniform and quite often weren't getting any more than five shillings a week and half-starved." (CEE Oral History Project, 1986).

This dependent domestic class, a hidden army behind mansion walls, survived into the inter-war years of the twentieth century. More than seventy women in every one thousand were working in domestic service (compared with fewer than thirty in the City of Gloucester at the 1921 Census).

The First World War spawned a substitute for Spa waters and domestic service as the economic base, in the form of aircraft and military engineering. The upsurge in the local economy after the war enabled a revival of a seriously decayed Regency housing stock (since the mid-nineteenth century) in its use for cheap working-class housing. Extensive council housing was also built as suburbs for the burgeoning skilled, engineering labour force, during the 1930s and 1950s. Clearly, throughout these years the locality's prime economic base bore little resemblance to Cheltenham Spa's more familiar social history, nor dependent upon its traditional built environment. Unsurprisingly, then, the public impression of Cheltenham remained tied to Spa waters, festivals and public schools.

The period since the late 1960s had in effect constituted a new era, one in which the policies for industrial development have shifted away from engineering manufacturing towards an emphasis upon the new producer services and the public sector, a changing emphasis rendered feasible by the Central Government's strategy in the 1960s to reduce pressure on land in the metropolitan's area by pushing office development and governmental departments (and quasi-government agencies) out of the London area. Certainly, the intention was to deliver employment opportunities to the North, but the results fell short of the Labour Government's expectations. Cheltenham, situated just beyond the office restriction boundaries, became a beneficiary. The local council's strategies were interesting. Initially, the property owning lobby gained supremacy, and modern building took precedence for enticing the new investment. Speculative office development was at its height from 1967 to 1976, without an official local plan to contain it. A surviving remnant of Cheltenham's aristocratic history was swept



The Cupola, Montpellier

away (including the Old Colonials' Club, last bastion of the colonel's social standing) to be replaced by Gulf Oil's U.K. headquarters. Office floorspace grew by 750,000 sq. ft. in response to strong financial inducements and the offer of choice locations.

The Eagle Star Insurance 'skyscraper,' well out of keeping with all existing buildings, manifested the dramatic and rapid influx of an unprecedented financial services sector, whilst Amery and Cruikshank's national investigation into the nation's City redevelopments included Cheltenham (and Gloucester) under their listings of the architectural *Rape of Britain*. But whilst demolition, land speculation and insensitive new rectangular buildings were the hallmarks of the late 1960s and early 1970s, the local authority took increasing advantage of the national housing policy re-orientation towards rehabilitation and improvement of properties and neighbourhoods after 1974. Matched by expenditure from the Department of the Environment and government heritage grants, Cheltenham advanced funds for the revitalisation of its historical quarters, and designated special conservation areas such as Montpellier. The rediscovery of architectural heritage and Cheltenham's Regency history was converted into economic currency with 'prestige-conscious' finance companies and State administration agencies attracted by the availability of rehabilitated Regency and Georgian mansions (such as the current John Dower House, accommodating the Countryside Commission). The local council's strengthened conservation policy, meeting pressure from the Cheltenham Society and anti-speculation groups on the right and left, put a halt to new office development. Cheltenham's long-awaited Plan was firmly aimed at preserving the inner town's built fabric, and projecting a local image which would symbolise the atmosphere of a nineteenth century bourgeois society.



Shopping — Montpellier style

But Cheltenham's history has embraced a significant artisan class, and later a substantial engineering working class. Yet the 1970s and the drive for the office-oriented administrative sector has meant not only a phasing out of the landed gentry, but the nurturing of a predominantly middle class social structure. The massive expansion of the central government's surveillance headquarters (G.C.H.Q.) and the immigration of white-collar and managerial insurance and banking staff reflected a nation-wide phenomenon of the 1980s — a wave of professional and managerial personnel moving to the semi-rural areas — increasingly

known as green-field sites. Population Census information reveals that the number of owners and executives increased by thirty-five per cent., and professionals by twenty-four per cent. in the official Cheltenham travel-to-work area in the 1970s. Their presence has expanded the demand for quality housing and facilitated a transformation in the standards of a historical Regency housing stock which, without the clients and the finance, had crumbled in the 1950s. By the mid-1980s almost £10 million had been distributed in grants for the rehabilitation of spacious Georgian and Regency houses for conversion into prestigious head offices, 'up-market' apartments for single professionals in the Lansdown area, and prestige specialist shops in the Montpellier district. A former local ruling class history has in effect been sold to the business and finance companies, occupying the series of mansions and surrounding land skirting the immediate neighbourhoods of Cheltenham Boys' College and the Ladies College. Indeed, the brochures of property developers sell the total locale and its social exclusiveness to their prospective clientele, a suitable place for hosting the international business executive. Local planners, confronted with the task of maintaining the tourist industry in competition with a variety of localities selling their own special inducement (for instance, theme parks, castles, or the history of kings and queens) but without the asset of a castle, cathedral or docks, has opted for the marketing of the place itself as architectural exhibit, historical recollections and exclusive shopping in the modernised Regency idiom of arcades.

Of course, this whole local strategy of impressing a specific historical image is an unequivocally middle class project. Government grants and the heritage industry have been securely harnessed to owner-occupied housing, private apartments and expensive retailing establishments for people with money. The council's public sector housing stock has further dwindled; run-down housing estates have remained unmaintained, spawning in their wake a range of social problems. Moreover, the increase of consumer services attending the tastes of the new professionals and the tourist visitors has also meant the swift growth of a low-income, insecure part-time labour force.

The re-creation of a ruling class history and heritage, expressed through the refurbishment of the town's built environment, has been actively manipulated for the development of Cheltenham Spa's economic base. In this respect, the case study provides an interesting example of the strategic use of history in local economic development. Such a strategy has reaped dividends within a national climate which has favoured the South over the North and historical towns over industrial conurbations, not least because of the gravitation of capital and the professional middle classes to these areas, but also because of a historical accident whereby Cheltenham's economic growth has coincided with an ideological search for national heritage (confined not only to the rural Cotswolds), and to the commercialisation of urban architecture.

Principal sources:—

1981 Census of Employment, Small Area Statistics.

1981 Census of Population, Small Area Statistics.

Interviews in connection with the GLOSCAT School of Environmental Studies' *Cheltenham Locality Study*, a part of a seven-locality national research programme "Changing Urban and Regional System in the U.K." funded by the Economic and Social Research Council. Centre for Environmental Education (CEE) Oral History Project, GLOSCAT.

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Local Press.

Note: A fuller analysis of Cheltenham policies will be appearing in (eds.) J. Urry, M. Harloe and C. Pickvance, "Policies and Politics", Hutchinson, 1989.