VICTORIA COUNTY HISTORY

Leicestershire

VCH Leicestershire

Loughborough Since 1750: A Social and Cultural History

Introduction

Loughborough is a market and university town in north Leicestershire and is the second largest settlement in the county. Its population in 2021 was 64,641, substantially smaller than the city of Leicester (population 366,018), but nearly twice the size of the next largest town in the county, Hinckley (34,202).[1]

The town lies at the centre of a large parish that extended 3½ miles from its northernmost point on the river Soar (on the county boundary with Nottinghamshire) to the uplands of Charnwood Forest in the south, encompassing *c*.5,460 a. (2,210 ha.) in 1851.[2] It included the hamlets and townships of Knightthorpe, 1 mile north-west of the town, and Woodthorpe, 1½ miles south-east. These became separate civil parishes in 1866, Knightthorpe with *c*.419 a. and 58 residents, and Woodthorpe with *c*.411 a.[3] and a population of 61.[4] A further settlement in the east of the parish, Shelthorpe, became deserted in the Middle Ages,[5] with its name later attached to a 20th-century housing development. A fourth settlement, Nanpantan, grew around a crossroads on the south-western edge of the parish following the enclosure of Charnwood Forest in 1829. The name is first recorded in 1754, when a plan of Charnwood Forest attaches the name Nan Pantain's to a hill or group of hills near this location. The derivation is obscure, but the inclusion of an apostrophe may indicate its origin in a personal name.[6] The name was adopted by the later settlement and given to the civil parish that was created in 1894.

Loughborough occupies a favourable position for a town. It stands on a major north-south route between London and north-west England (more locally linking Leicester and Derby) and close

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[1] Census, Leicester details from https://www.leicester.gov.uk/media/inmh1feq/living-in-leicester-infographic-summary-2023.pdf 2021; Loughborough data from Nomis, total of 194 output areas (with thanks to Ciara Tee, Charnwood Borough Council); Hinkley details from Nomis https://www.nomisweb.co.uk/reports/localarea?search=hinckley.

[2] https://www.visionofbritain.org.uk/unit/10387437/cube/AREA_ACRES (accessed 30 Nov. 2024).

[3] *VCH Leics.* III, 192; Youngs, *Admin Units*, II, 229, 241; https://www.visionofbritain.org.uk/unit/10382774/cube/AREA_ACRES https://www.visionofbritain.org.uk/unit/10393528/cube/AREA_ACRES (both accessed 25 June 2024).

[4] *VCH Leics.* III, 192.

[5] W. Humphrey, *History in Shelthorpe* (Glenfield, 1981).

[6] ROLLR, QS 47/2/4; DG9/Ma/66/1; B. Cox, *The Place-Names of Leicestershire*, VII (Nottingham, 2016), 145.

to an important causeway and bridge over the Soar at Cotes, for Nottingham (Map 1).[7] The bridge was maintained by a charity that by tradition bore the name of Thomas Burton, a Merchant of the Staple at Calais, although its medieval endowment probably included lands and properties in addition to those conveyed by Burton to feoffees in 1495.[8] The town's market, granted by a charter of 1221,[9] also benefited from its proximity to three different land types: the fertile soils of the adjacent Soar valley, the upland pastures of the Leicestershire wolds to the east and the woodland resources of Charnwood Forest to the south west.

Map 1: William Lee's plan of Loughborough township from his Public Health report of 1849, showing roads, watercourses, the first railway and relief.

There is no evidence that Loughborough was a medieval borough. The place name (Lucteburne in 1086) means the fortified place of Luhhede, an Old-English name.[10] Loughborough became a municipal borough in 1888, the only modern borough in Leicestershire other than the county town. Until then governance was divided between many separate authorities. Manor courts continued to meet until at least 1828, where residents could bring claims of nuisance against their neighbours.[11] Town affairs were managed between the parish vestry and the feoffees and bridgemaster of the Burton charity, with the ratepayers able to elect a new bridgemaster every two years. The charity probably evolved as the successor to one of the town's medieval fraternal guilds. Its interests between 1750 and 1849 lay in the maintenance of bridges, the management of a school and support to the poor, with all its income devoted to education from 1849.[12] From 1850 an elected Board of Health became responsible for the sanitary condition of the town, with powers of inspection and enforcement, and introduced a formal system for the approval of building plans.[13]

There was a substantial manorial landholding until 1809,[14] but there was no resident lord to stimulate the development of a range of cultural entertainments. Occasional race meetings, concerts and assemblies were held in the late 18th century, but these appear infrequent. The opening of the Loughborough and Erewash canals in 1778 and 1779 delivered cheap Derbyshire coal that enabled

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[7] Map from W. Lee, *Report* (1849). [include in abbreviations - full title is *Report to the General Board of Health of a Preliminary Inquiry into the Sewerage, Drainage and Supply of Water, and the Sanitary Condition of the Inhabitants of the Parish of Loughborough*].

[8] P. Davenport, 'Ralph Lemyngton', *Loughburian*, 110 (1933), 28–35; 'LGS origins', *Loughburian*, 115 (1935), 39–48 and 117 (1935), 41–52; *Rpt of Charity Commissioners* (Parl. Papers 1839 [163], xv), 388–95; Below, Social History; Education.

[9] T.D. Hardy (ed.), *Rotuli Litterarum Clausarum in Turri Londinensi,* I (1833), 446.

[10] Cox, *Place-Names*, 125–6.

[11] Huntington Libr., HAM Boxes 31–9; ROLLR, DE40/33/34; DE1834/132.

[12] Below, Social History: Social Character; Charities for the Poor; Education.

[13] ROLLR, DE1834/142–59.

[14] ROLLR, DE4614; Ma/207/1–3; DE2857/121/1, 3.

factories and warehouses to open and jobs to be created. The prosperity this generated coupled with the sale in small lots of all the manorial land and properties in the town in 1809 and 1810 helped to establish a new elite and released land for development, but the town still struggled to support a theatre.

The many small land holdings from 1809 and the growth of an occupationally diverse middle-class with firm roots in the town enabled Loughborough to adapt to a changing national economy from the mid 19th century onwards. Small-scale industry gave way to large factories and heavy engineering, followed by the rise of the chemical and pharmaceutical industries. Service businesses blossomed from the late 20th century, providing employment as traditional manufacturing industry faded.[15] These changes were not unique to the town, but Loughborough's response to the prevailing winds was fashioned by its own distinctive circumstances.

Economic change creates winners and losers. Until the early 19th century the parish authorities and the Burton charity were able to work together to ensure the poor were supported, and voluntary giving underpinned a dispensary that opened in 1819 to meet the medical needs of the town and wider locality. The early grammar school provided by the Burton charity expanded in the late 18th century to deliver a basic education for many of the town's children before the endowment was mostly redirected towards secondary education from the 1860s, becoming in time the independent Loughborough Schools Foundation. The diversion of the Hickling charity for girls' education towards technical education for boys met the needs of more parents and employers and helped to create what became Loughborough College School. In 1915 Herbert Schofield became Principal of the town's small technical college and began its transformation into an important college of technology that attracted students from around the world, and in due course became a university. All these developments are brought together within this volume.

Other topics covered include the changing face of leisure, as libraries and museums opened and flourished through volunteer involvement, theatre-goers turned to the cinema and public walks were created and later replaced by sports and recreation grounds. The annual street fair has remained a constant, with an ever-increasing range of stalls and rides (Figure 1).

Figure 1: The November Pleasure Fair, c.1910.

The number of Christian denominations worshipping in the town grew substantially from the mid 18th century, with people of other faiths adding their own places of worship from the 20th century. Social gatherings grew alongside, encouraged by the Christian churches in the early 20th century, but perhaps of greater importance to those of other faiths and from other parts of the world

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[15] These changes will be documented in a forthcoming volume.

as a place to relax with those who shared their first language and culture (Figure 14: Geeta Bhawan).[16] Their heritage has added colour to the town's cultural offerings through, for example, the Diwali lights and an annual Mela (festival of music and dance) that includes performances celebrating a wide range of nationalities and cultures.

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[16] Below, Social History, Social Character; Religious History.