

Reconstruction and the small town

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Introduction

Although the vast outpouring of planning documents and plans in the busy period of immediate post-war reconstruction planning (from about 1941 to about 1952) has received much critical attention in the last decade and a half, many issues have not yet been addressed. By far the greatest consideration has been given to the major plans for heavily bomb-damaged cities, and the plans of the eminent and prolific consultant planners. Patrick Abercrombie is a good example (Jones, 1998; Lambert, 2000; Larkham, 2004; Essex and Brayshay, 2005), to such an extent that one might think from the standard planning histories of the period that he alone replanned post-war Britain (cf Larkham and Lilley, 2001, Table 1).

Amongst the unexplored questions are issues relating to the ‘bandwagon effect’: the reasons why, and indeed the extent to which, little-damaged and undamaged towns rapidly seized on the activity of replanning during this hectic period. It has been suggested that this might have been a result of civic boosterism: towns becoming conscious of the changes in the hierarchy of retailing, business and image, and seeking to use the production of a plan, or even the engagement of a high-profile consultant, to reposition themselves in the post-war urban economy (Larkham and Lilley, 2003). However, the cost implications of this activity were substantial, especially for smaller towns. Although not suffering the economic consequences of bomb damage, many had suffered significant indirect economic consequences of war (eg the absence of tourist income for resorts), and the rateable income for small towns was often tiny. Planning was not a cheap activity (Larkham, 2005), even when the plans were not implemented (for years, if ever).

This paper therefore explores issues of reconstruction in some of the much smaller, and less-studied, towns that did follow the fashion. Why did they become involved? How did they do so – who wrote the plans? What were the key issues covered? To what extent did their experiences match, or diverge from, those of the better-studied, larger and better-resourced towns and cities? The paper is focused around four case studies.

A range of towns could be subject to review. Selection criteria might include population size, area, rateable income, and the main function of the town. Table 1 imposes an arbitrary maximum population size of 60,000, which thus excludes well-known cities with well-studied plans, such as Exeter and Oxford (by Thomas Sharp, 1946a, 1948), Bath (Abercrombie *et al.*, 1945) and York (Adshead *et al.*, 1948). A wide range of historic towns, ports, resorts and industrial towns remains. All indulged in replanning. Although the historic towns are of particular interest in terms of the development of modern planning values and ideas, given the current importance of conservation and heritage (Pendlebury, 2003, 2005), the other categories are under-represented in the existing critical literature.

Of those tabulated, 18 engaged outside consultants. A distinct minority employed existing in-house staff, and this contrasts strongly with the national picture, where consultants produced just under half of the known plans (Larkham and Lilley, 2001, as amended by ongoing research). These included the most eminent (Abercrombie), the most prolific (Sharp), the then-eminent but now unknown (Alwyn Lloyd) and the young professional (Jeremiah). The towns’ wealth (its rateable value, ie income derived from rates in the year surveyed) ranged from Bewdley’s tiny £18,655 to Guildford’s £509,788. Their population ranged from just over 4,000 (Bewdley again) to Eastbourne’s 57,435 (although it should be noted that this is usually the 1931 Census data).

The case studies

The four towns selected for individual consideration in this paper are Bewdley, Warwick, Durham and Todmorden. Bewdley is the smallest town in Table 1, but nevertheless engaged a professional – although he was not well known as a planner he was at least available in the later war years. Warwick, also a smaller town, engaged arguably the best-known planner, albeit towards the end of his career – Sir Patrick Abercrombie – and suffered a shock when the final account was presented. Durham and Todmorden both used Thomas Sharp, who made his reputation as a planning consultant by a substantial series of ‘reconstruction’ plans.

These examples are early in this series, and it could be argued that Durham made his reputation in this field.

Bewdley

Bewdley is a small and rather isolated town, whose main feature is its location as a crossing-point on the River Severn, allowing movement from the resource of the Wyre Forest to the industrial Midlands. It was never a significant industrial town, but the river traffic was important to its income; its location also meant that it was an easy day-trip visitor destination from the Midlands. It was not bombed. However, in January 1944 – for reasons not apparent in the surviving records – the Council’s General Purposes Committee invited the architect Clough Williams-Ellis to prepare a plan (Minutes, 31/1/44). A Development Committee was constituted “to whom be delegated the consideration of all matters relating to the preparation and completion of the report and plan for the future development of the Borough” (Minutes of special Council meeting, 3/4/44). At that time the borough’s Town Planning Committee was more concerned with wider-ranging proposals for local government reform, and with the removal of numerous temporary buildings that had been constructed without permission in the early years of the war.

Williams-Ellis was a First World War veteran and historian of the Royal Tank Corps. He was not on active service during the Second World War, and therefore might be considered to have been available at the right time. This is his first known reconstruction plan; shortly afterwards he was involved, with his partner Lionel Brett (later Lord Esher) in producing the plan for Weston super Mare, and from 1947 both were involved in designing ‘reconstruction’ housing estates in Bilston to the concepts of the architect Sir Charles Reilly (Larkham, forthcoming). Williams-Ellis is best known today as the owner, designer and developer of Portmeirion, and professionally generally worked as an architect. His autobiography hints at his erratic work practices and of the disappointments caused by government interference or inertia when working more in a planning capacity:

“once the delights of the preliminary reconnaissance and the draft proposals were behind me and one began to be impeded by the dead weight of public lethargy and official slow-motion brakemanship, I found it hard to sustain my initial enthusiasm or to persevere with whittled down schemes with the necessary patience. For some years, however, I was reasonably persistent, sometimes collaborating ... with Lionel Brett ... but the actual physical results on the ground – for all our hopeful work on paper – remain pitifully small” (Williams-Ellis, 1971, p. 255).

In Bewdley he applied his reconnaissance skills, consulted with professional officers at local and county level, and held several public meetings. A draft report was available by July 1944 (Williams-Ellis, 1944). Williams-Ellis was clearly anxious that local residents should be consulted:

“Though I can bring to the solution of the several problems that must confront the town a certain technical experience, it is the intimate practical local knowledge of Bewdley’s own citizens ... that should be drawn upon as a check to whatever I may put forward as theoretically desirable. It is in the hope of benefiting to the full by this specialised yet varied local wisdom that I ... issue this interim draft, which indeed is expressly designed to provoke discussion and evoke such alternative proposals as may seem worth consideration ...” (Williams-Ellis, 1944, Introduction).

This is unusual. Although many contemporary plans mounted elaborate exhibitions or published books and reports, and some explicitly sought local “criticism”, few issued *draft* reports in this manner.

The draft report, and papers accompanying it, highlight Williams-Ellis’s own concerns about planning as an activity. First, planning should not necessarily involve large-scale and expensive public works and rebuilding; in fact “one of the prime objects of a Planning Scheme¹ is to prevent the unnecessary expenditure of public money” (p. 8, original emphasis). But, more fundamentally, in a note attached to the draft, he said “I believe in Planning but do not believe in planning too far ahead, say fifteen or 20 years, as conditions change considerably in this time and what may see alright [*sic*] now may not be justified or necessary when this period of time has elapsed”.

The initial concerns of the draft report make interesting reading. The town is praised for its “higher proportion of architecturally pleasing buildings than almost any other that I know of in all England” (p. 2), though many are let down by inappropriate painting, advertising, alterations or neglect. In fact this mirrors the concerns of the inter-war Design and Industries Association with which Williams-Ellis was involved. There was no need for “radical internal re-planning” although some road widening and new roads could provide a “round-the-town circuit”.

Congestion was a major issue. Through traffic could only be dealt with by “radical re-planning” that would destroy the integrity and character of this small town, or by a ring road/by-pass. It was suggested that much traffic “will wish just to ‘see’ Bewdley” (p. 3, original emphasis), and this led to the suggestion for a river-front by-pass that would facilitate this. However, this would require a new road bridge – the alternative, of replacing or substantially widening Telford’s bridge of 1801, a scheduled monument, had been suggested but rejected.

Although the town had little industry, there was concern for provision of some new working-class housing, and a programme for immediate post-war construction was being developed elsewhere in the authority. Williams-Ellis sought to minimise further outward sprawl (again, hardly surprising given his inter-war activities as, for example, author of *England and the Octopus*: Williams-Ellis, 1928). The town could afford to “fill in its gaps” and perhaps extend the most recent fringe pre-war estate.

“That is, of course, provided that what is built is rightly built, for if it is not, the less the place is meddled with the better and what must be built had best be smuggled away as far as possible and out of sight – at any rate of the old Borough” (p. 4).

He certainly sought to restrict further industrial growth, suggesting instead that the town seek to retain its character as a residential centre and tourist destination. The town needed to remain distinct and distinctive, not “submerged and lost in an unpremeditated industrial mix-up scarcely distinguishable from that of Kidderminster or Stourport” (p. 11).

¹ ie under the pre-war Acts, and at the time of his writing the only existing mechanism for seeking planning control other than a private Act promoted by a particular town – which was being discussed within the authority.

At the public meetings, the main issues raised were the extent and severity of flooding in the town, and what replanning could do about it (Williams-Ellis noted that one could remove all river property and lay the whole out as garden – though “I risk sack here”), and that the proposed riverside road and bridge “will not look at all well”. Williams-Ellis was clearly advocating a contemporary design: he argued that “there is no reason why the new bridge should not be a great adornment to the landscape, and every reason why it should be, an absolutely plain stream-lined single-span structure in ferro-concrete probably being the most acceptable (memorandum dated 4/8/1944).

The draft plans were circulated, indeed copies were intended to be sold through local newsagents and there was a small display at the Town Hall in October 1944. Copies were sent to the County Council and the Ministry’s Regional Planning Officer. However, the County Surveyor took exception to the consultant’s proposals in terms of practicability and cost, and especially to his unwise description of an alternative by-pass as “an engineer’s by-pass” (letter dated 18/8/44). A range of responses received had been sent to Williams-Ellis, who had replied to the Committee. The Council was even discussing publishing the final report in book form (General Purposes Committee Minutes, 29/1/45).

Although Williams-Ellis was also engaged as architect for various post-war housing schemes in Bewdley, by late 1945 the Council was expressing irritation that he was not responding as they desired, and considered his appointment terminated (Minutes of special Council meeting, 29/10/45). Final revisions to the plan were also greatly delayed, and indeed were overtaken by proposals by the County Council (Council Minutes, 28/1/46). In fact no final report was ever produced or published. There were, clearly, disagreements with the County Council particularly about traffic planning and major road proposals, and this disagreement, and Williams-Ellis’s own delays, finally killed the plan. The Town Planning and Development Committees merged in November 1945. No more is heard of the plan after January 1946, although the plan is mentioned in Hussey’s chapter on Bewdley in 1952. Like Warwick, the Borough lost its planning functions after the 1947 Act, although it did consider planning issues such as the local implications of the West Midlands Plan (Abercrombie and Jackson, 1948) (Planning Committee Minutes, 25/4/49).

Warwick

Warwick is a county town, significantly larger than Bewdley, but still very small considering its historic administrative and market functions. It was virtually undamaged during the war, but nevertheless felt by January 1945 that a plan was necessary. This may have been a reaction to the replanning exercises of its neighbouring towns. The Town Clerk received a list of suitable names from the Town Planning Institute, and Professor Sir Patrick Abercrombie had been engaged by June, to begin work in September. The fee was about £500, although Abercrombie wrote to Sharp that this was low (letter 3/9/45). At the time, Abercrombie was probably the country’s best-known planner, reaching the end of his career but still seeking commissions (he said he could not afford to retire). This is not one of his more important plans, but has nevertheless attracted some critical interest (Slater, 1984; Larkham, 2004; Pendlebury, 2004).

Even while survey work was being carried out by his assistants, the Council requested details of the costs of publishing the report in book form. Their reasons are unclear, although their professional officers cannot have been unaware of Sharp’s well-reviewed published report on Durham nor press reports of his Exeter study, about to be published.

The focus of the report was explicitly on the “preservation of character”, although the full title of the published book is *Warwick: its preservation and redevelopment* (Abercrombie and Nickson, 1949). Abercrombie and his team focused on Warwick’s function as a regional tourist centre, and an architectural and photographic survey of the town centre’s buildings was carried out to support the analysis.

To retain this function and character, the town’s growth was to be restricted. Efforts were made to ensure that Warwick did not sprawl outwards to coalesce with its neighbours, Leamington Spa and Kenilworth. What was sought was explicitly a “compact development” form (Abercrombie and Nickson, 1949, p. 65). In fact, the maps show, and the text discusses, an “urban fence”, the clear physical limit of development (a Ministry of Agriculture term: Abercrombie and Nickson, 1949, pp. 112-3).

It was strongly suggested that long-term population increase should not exceed 20 per cent. There was to be no major development of the retail centre, nor of the administrative functions beyond the ‘county administrative headquarters’. Nevertheless, there were proposals for some redevelopment even within the originally-walled town core. These included the creation of small ‘precincts’ and some land-use redistribution to achieve functional quarters. The modest residential expansion was to the north, but was not to exceed one mile from the centre. One part of this extension was planned in detail, as a demonstration (Abercrombie and Nickson, 1949, p. 69).

Road development was a high priority. Changes were proposed to ‘internal’ roads in the area between Warwick and Leamington Spa. However, “unless radical changes are made ... congestion in the town will become intolerable” (Abercrombie and Nickson, 1949, p. 74). An outer bypass, first proposed in the 1930s, was designed to the west and north, and was to be extensively landscaped. Abercrombie was aware of the need that new roads “must be planned so as not to encroach unduly on valuable buildings, agricultural land, or to mar amenities by cutting through areas of natural or artificial beauty” (Abercrombie and Nickson, 1949, p. 61). An inner bypass would run around the town centre, more or less following the line of the original walls.

Implementation of the proposals was carefully organised in three phases. The first, over about ten years, would include the outer bypass and some housing. The second, “of the greatest significance”, would take about 15 years and would include the inner bypass, other major road improvements, and the remainder of the housing and commercial expansion. The final phase would consolidate improvements to the town centre, and its timing was more vague.

It was decided to publish extracts of the draft report in the local newspaper, and to hold a public exhibition. However, there was no formal consideration of the report’s suggestions: this was deferred until such time as the report could be circulated (Public Health and Housing Committee Minutes, 13/1/47). The exhibition took place in July 1947, and was visited by 665 adults and 295 children (Public Health and Housing Committee Minutes, 11/6/47), representing about 6 per cent of the borough’s population. Comments reported in the *Warwick and Warwickshire Advertiser* were largely positive, although there were some doubts about when the work would be completed, and one correspondent suggested that “it’s a waste of public money to draw it up ... It’s too vast for Warwick: the reconstruction has got

to come some time or another, but not on the lines of the Abercrombie Plan” (*Warwick and Warwickshire Advertiser* 4/7/47).

By 7/2/47 Abercrombie’s final account was presented. The costs had risen to a startling £3,200; although the Council had approved various additional surveys and expenses in the meantime. In the late 1940s the costs of publishing were rising fast, and Abercrombie’s final advice was that 3,000 copies in book form would cost about £3,000. This was agreed, not without acrimonious debate, and the report was finally published on 7 November 1949.

On publication the Council finally had sufficient copies of the report to circulate, and its contents were debated and adopted on 17/3/50. However, by this time the 1947 Town and Country Planning Act was in operation; Warwick Borough Council was no longer responsible for town planning, and the County Council was in the advanced stages of preparing an Outline Development Plan. This was adopted by Warwick Borough Council on 16 March 1951.

Durham

Durham, like Warwick, was a small county town retaining administrative functions and with a historic built environment generating significant tourism. Some of the issues which were to dominate the Durham reconstruction plan had been live planning issues for some time, such as the need for new roads and the inadequacy of significant parts of the housing stock. For example, the County Council’s planned relief road line had been approved in 1931; the convergence of a series of major roads on the three narrow streets leading into the peninsula at the heart of the city meant that traffic congestion was already a major problem by this time. By 1940 work on an East Durham Planning Scheme by a Joint Planning Committee including Durham City was being discussed (Durham City Council Works and Town Planning Committee Minutes) and subsequently a resolution was passed to prepare a planning scheme following section 6 of the 1932 Town and Country Planning Act (DCWTPC Minutes 19/3/41). In December it was reported that Ministerial approval for proceeding with such a scheme be deferred, anticipating revised post-war legislation (DCWTPC Minutes 29/12/41).

In April 1943 the Town Clerk of Durham City Council presented a report about the desirability of appointing a planning consultant (DCWTPC Minutes 27/4/43). Surviving correspondence with Sharp shows that the Town Clerk was in communication with him that May (letter 15/5/43), although it is not known who else (if anyone) was considered. In June the Town Clerk recommended Sharp’s appointment (DCWTPC Minutes 28/6/43). However, this was not uncontested. Opposition in the City was led by Councillor Smith, Chairman of the Works and Town Planning Committee, who was later one of the critics of Sharp’s proposals. Attempts were made to block the appointment and to consult the East Durham Joint Planning Committee (Durham City Council Minutes 7/7/43). The County Surveyor was reported as being strongly opposed to the appointment of any consultant ‘and to the appointment of Mr. Sharp in particular’ (DCWTPC Minutes 6/7/43).

It is not clear from local government minutes why Durham City chose to go it alone. The report of the discussion of the Council meeting in the *Durham Advertiser* (9/7/43) suggests one stimulus for the City proceeding in this fashion; a councillor suggests that the Ministry of Town and Country Planning was keen to see someone consider the planning of the City itself,

rather than through the constraints of East Durham as a whole.² Whatever the underlying reason for the appointment, the City wished to present this to the County Council as complementary to the sub-regional process in East Durham (County Council Minutes 28/7/43).

The County Surveyor's antagonism towards Sharp in person may be explained by Sharp's pronouncements over issues in Durham in the preceding years. He wrote on Durham in his contribution to the polemic *Britain and the Beast* (Sharp, 1937). It was estimated that nearly a third of the city would have to be rebuilt due to slum clearance including 'picturesque (and hygienically foul) quarters' (p. 150). He had no quarrel with this, but 'one-third of the entire city! That is surely a job of such enormous scope that it should only be undertaken to a most carefully worked out plan. And, characteristically, there is no plan at all' (p. 150). But his key target was the County Council's relief road proposals, sections of which would have been elevated on a high embankment. Sharp used this opportunity to publicize his ground-level alternative (first prepared in 1934, Sharp c. 1973 and Stansfield, 1974) to the officially-approved elevated road. Here and elsewhere in the chapter he attacked the responsible authorities, including local authorities and the cathedral and university, for their apparent lack of engagement in the city beyond their own interests.

Sharp's appointment was, however, duly approved by an agreement of 10/12/43 (GB186 THS). Amongst the key provisions were that the consultant would prepare

'an outline redevelopment plan and report for the City of Durham which plan and report shall have particular reference to the historical and architectural character of the City and to the appropriate treatment of areas which have been or are likely to be cleared of buildings under the provisions of the Housing Acts....'.

Completion was expected by 31/3/45.

What was to become *Cathedral City* (Sharp, 1945) was commissioned at a time of great interest in planning issues in Durham. In July to September 1943 the *Durham Advertiser* published a series of articles on planning issues in the city by the Bishop of Durham (23/7/43), the Dean of Durham (also President of the Durham Preservation Society) (3/9/43), Patrick Shiel (30/7/43) and Bertram Colgrave (13/8/43). The *Durham Advertiser* also published various reports of planning publications prepared by various local bodies (3/3/43, 21/4/44), and Rushford (1944) produced a book, *City Beautiful: A Vision Of Durham*, with miscellaneous interventionist proposals.

It was clear that *Cathedral City* was no ordinary commission for Sharp. It was his first significant commission as a consultant-planner (as opposed to as a writer), and he had a personal passion for Durham that led him to invest far more effort in the commission than was commercially sensible. Towards the completion of the report Sharp, in correspondence with the new Town Clerk, estimated that a true account would be 1500 guineas for his time and effort (letter 9/1/45 GB186 THS). Furthermore, he commissioned the perspectives from A.C. Webb for 75 guineas from his commission fee, and unsuccessfully sought to sell these on to the Council.

² Interestingly Durham County Council's minutes (28/7/43) record that the Minister of Town and Country Planning (Morrison) was in Durham on 10/7/43 and held an informal discussion about town and country planning with members of the Council.

Cathedral City, one of the best known of the reconstruction or advisory plans, was a handsomely-produced plan, heavily focused on the master-planning of physical form. It was published in January 1945.³ The City Council viewed it as a consultation document as the proposals had not been approved before publication (*Durham Advertiser*, 12/1/45). Sharp's appreciation of Durham was largely based upon its visual qualities. Not surprisingly the Cathedral, and to some degree the castle, were central to this, although there was an appreciation of the roofscape and of the foil that domestic scaled building gave to the major monuments. Sharp also emphasised the historic and visual importance of the cathedral as part of emphasising the significance of Durham. His proposals for preservation were focused on the peninsula containing the Cathedral, Castle and heart of the University and commercial centre, although a map of buildings of historic interest included buildings across the City such as a concentration on the north side of Old Elvet, an historic street to the north-east of the peninsula. The setting of the Cathedral and Castle were given extensive discussion. Beyond the peninsula he saw the need for extensive rebuilding, whilst acknowledging that some of the buildings to be cleared had architectural merit.

A key element of the plan was his alternative to the County Council inner relief road. Sharp produced an extensive critique of this elevated proposal in terms of its impact on the character of Durham, saying of his alternative that "it will *belong*" (Sharp, 1945, p. 41, original emphasis). Also important was the suggested limit to the population growth of Durham of 4,500, from 18,500 to 23,000. He saw the appropriate function of Durham as being an administrative, shopping, educational, residential and tourist centre.

An exhibition was held in the Art Gallery in February (opened by the then Chairman of the Royal Fine Art Commission) (*Durham Advertiser*, 23/2/45), and 8000 copies of the plan printed (Durham City Council Minutes, 19/3/45). Although the report was to receive many plaudits, it was not always so warmly received locally. Councillor Smith, who had led the objections to Sharp's appointment, complained that they had paid Sharp to be their own critic (*Durham Advertiser*, 12/1/45). The editorial content in the *Durham Advertiser* was generally quite critical. The major problem was considered to be impracticality of its timespan of implementation. There were also criticisms of specific proposals, such as the intention to remove fairly new housing at Milburngate for his road line at a time of housing shortage. Sharp responded in his normal robust manner, asserting that his critics could not 'see beyond their nose ends' and defending the plan's practicality (*Durham Advertiser*, 23/2/45). The Council generally approved the plan, although not unanimously on all issues.

The planning issue which came to the fore on the back of *Cathedral City* and which was to rumble on through a convoluted series of proposals and inquiries was the relief road scheme. On this occasion the City and County Councils were in opposition, with the City accepting Sharp's proposals and the County sticking to their original preferred scheme. Sharp was employed as consultant for the City for a public inquiry in 1946. This issue dragged on until the relief road was eventually constructed in the 1960s, broadly on Sharp's line although to a detailed design about which he was highly critical (Gazzard, 1969). Sharp's relationship as a planning advisor with Durham continued from 1948 until the end of 1962.

Todmorden

³ It was published by Architectural Press but this seems to have been arranged very late in the day with all the financial risk on the Council (and Sharp claimed have effectively put it together); the preceding August Sharp was anticipating that it would be published by Penguin (letter to Webb 1/8/44 GB186 THS). It sold for 5 shillings (*City Beautiful* was 7s 6d).

Todmorden was the largest of the small towns studied; and provides a further contrast in its industrial nature. The decision to engage a consultant was taken by the Development Sub-Committee, a newly-created sub-committee of the Finance Committee (Todmorden Development Sub-Committee (TDSC), 22/2/44). The same Committee resolved a few weeks later to approach Thomas Sharp (TDSC, 16/3/44). Planning was very much in the air at Todmorden at the time, with, for example, the creation of an Upper Calder Joint Planning Committee.

A later newspaper report suggested that Sharp was approached because of his outstanding reputation as a consultant and that he had accepted the commission, whilst turning other requests down at the time, because he viewed the very difficult topography of the town as a challenge (*Todmorden News and Advertiser*, 27/9/46, p. 10). Indeed topography was a key feature of the town, lying at the junction of three narrow valleys which quickly rise to high moorlands. Sharp was initially engaged to write a short preliminary report (TDSC, 30/5/44), which led to an invitation to consider preparing a full report, accepted by Sharp (TDSC, 28/6/44), leading the Committee to resolve to appoint him to prepare a full plan (TDSC 4/7/44).

The outline plan was received by the Council at its Development Sub-Committee meeting of 6 September 1945 (TDSC, 6/9/45). Sharp then attended a special meeting of the full Finance Committee (Todmorden Finance Committee (TFC), 3/10/45). Although there was not the build-up of planning issues evident in Durham, there were clear challenges to be faced in the post-war period. Sharp's preface identifies housing conditions as the main physical problem, but an equally profound issue he identified was the decline in the local economy. Todmorden was very much a cotton town and, at this time, in some decline. In the report Sharp discussed whether, with this steady loss of *raison d'être* it might be sensible to evacuate the town. He concluded otherwise, given the well-settled community with all its spiritual and emotional attachments. Whilst industrial relocation was outside the scope of the plan, Sharp sought to identify sites where new medium to medium-heavy industry could be housed. The sites for new industry were largely seen as being produced by house clearance. Sharp was pleasantly surprised how well cared-for the housing was, but nevertheless considered that between a third and a half of it, much of which was back-to-back, would need redeveloping. He considered, and dismissed, the rehabilitation of this stock. Finding sites for new housing was considered problematic given the topographical constraints. Sharp's goal, as with industrial sites, was to achieve reasonably large groupings of housing in order to create neighbourhoods. He recommended a density of 24 houses/ acre. He earmarked sites to the north of the town to accommodate some of this new housing but was forced to look beyond the valley floor to meet all the need he identified. His recommendations on some of his usual preoccupations of roads and the central area were limited. Given the topography, he saw no scope for a bypass and thus proposed a phased improvement of roads where they met in the centre which, in his view, gave scope also for a better public space along with the rebuilding of some public facilities.

Sharp's report seems to have been fairly well received, with the Finance Committee approving the report in principle and authorising both the publication of the report in book form and a public exhibition of the proposals with models (TFC, 3/10/45). Within a few days the Housing Committee had resolved that two sites be submitted for Ministry approval (Todmorden Housing Committee, 17/10/45). It was a while longer before the town centre proposals were considered but, in November 1946, the Highways Committee recommended

that the Council approve Sharp's proposals for the town centre with a view to submission to the Ministry of Transport and the County Council for inclusion in their programmes (Todmorden Highways Committee (THiC), 9/11/46).

Arrangements were made for the publication of the report and the exhibition. After some debate over publication costs and cover price it was eventually decided to print 2000 copies⁴. By the end of November 1946, 1115 copies were reported as being sold (TDSC, 27/11/46). The exhibition was arranged for September 1946 and was opened by the Minister of Works. It included a model of the proposed town centre made by local volunteers. The exhibition seems to have been much wider than Sharp's proposals, however, including showings of various relevant films and exhibitions by electricity and gas departments of Halifax Corporation (*Todmorden News and Advertiser*, 27/9/46, p. 10).

In *Chronicles of Failure* (Sharp, c.1973 p235), Sharp briefly referred to his Todmorden proposals and commented 'Whether any part of them was ever carried out I do not know – an experience that is common to planning consultants in relation to most of the plans they make'. Despite the general welcome Sharp's proposals seem to have received, with none of the controversy evident in Durham, in the speeches at the exhibition opening it is clear that full implementation was anticipated as being the work of many years (*Todmorden News and Advertiser*, 27/9/46). Visiting Todmorden today it is difficult to see evidence in the town today of any proposals having been implemented; indeed there is limited building from the twentieth century generally. For whatever reason, the town centre proposals were not proceeded with, nor was housing constructed at his preferred sites. Some housing was located in sites suggested by Sharp but, given the scarcity of sites in the town this is hardly a matter of great surprise. Similarly, some clearance of older housing took place but less than Sharp advocated, and substantial numbers of back-to-backs remain.

Discussion

This paper is an exploration of reconstruction plans for a particular type of settlement; all the case study towns and cities being small with (at the time) populations of around 25,000 or less. There is a particular intrigue with these places. It is easily understandable why a city such as Plymouth, devastated by bombing, should commission a plan or, without that context, why a little-damaged but messy industrial town such as Wolverhampton would see it as a useful activity. However, it is less immediately apparent why small settlements not directly troubled by the war would do so.

Perhaps the first point to make is that there was a 'planning fervour' in this period probably unparalleled before or since. Council minutes inspected for this paper were full of reports of councillors and officers attending national and regional planning conferences; this was an issue of immediate and great importance.

The case study plans considered here were all commissioned by lower-tier authorities. At least some of them had been engaged in plan-making activities, but this was usually as part of sub-regional groupings to prepare a statutory scheme under the 1932 Town and Country Planning Act. It seems to have been widely understood by the early 1940s that this legislation would soon be redundant and be replaced by something more comprehensive,

⁴ A substantial loss on this publication was built into the calculations, even if all copies were sold.

even if the form that this would take was unclear. The Ministry of Town and Country Planning was urging local authorities to embrace planning and seems to have been prepared to intervene directly in some small cities considered important, such as Durham. It is also clear that in some places, such as Durham again, the issues to be addressed in plans had been fermenting for a number of years. Local politics may also have had an influence, with small local authorities seeking to gain influence in the planning process.

Local government records tend to be frustratingly opaque in explaining more precisely why plans were undertaken. However, these were small authorities and the lack of internal capacity to undertake such a job must have been a factor. Nor is it clear why particular consultants were selected; but generally it seems to have been a case of invitation on the basis of reputation – there is no suggestion with any of these case studies of a competitive process or even a selection short-list. There was certainly a considerable expense to bear by employing an outside consultant to prosecute these plans. Warwick's plan and its publication cost approaching £6,500; Williams-Ellis's fee for Bewdley is unknown, but in the year of his activities, the town's rates increased from 14/10- to 17/10-(producing £13,261 in 1944-5 and £15,836 in 1945-6) when there are no records of other major expenditure changes. In comparison Durham had a bargain at £472 10s, plus probably some loss on *Cathedral City*.

In terms of the principal themes of the plans, a number were shared. Above all, there was the issue of traffic. All but Todmorden (where topography made major road proposals impractical) proposed major new roads as the principal means of removing existing or anticipated high traffic loads from the centres of small medieval towns. Bewdley's led to substantial disagreement. Warwick's outer bypass was – much later – built more or less to Abercrombie's principles, though Slater (1984, p. 333) noted that “the proposals for the [outer] by-pass are carefully related to, and use, the fine grain of the countryside – existing hedgerows, woods, paths and lanes, yet his proposals for the historic town ignore the fine grain of streets, lanes, plots and buildings, particularly where road plans are concerned”. In Durham, Sharp's substitute road was ultimately built along generally the lines he proposed, but only after many years of County Council opposition.

A secondary theme with three of these plans was the importance of their heritage, and the need to balance this with necessary modernisations. Warwick was explicit in considering the protection of the town's historic character as a fundamental part of the proposals. In Durham, the historical and architectural character was at the heart of the agreement. Despite Williams-Ellis's earlier involvement with the Design and Industries Association (eg Williams-Ellis, 1930), in Bewdley there was much less explicit concern for character or heritage; in fact demolition and replacement of Telford's bridge had been considered. Heritage was not considered a significant issue in Todmorden.

Other common themes included the need to address housing conditions; nationally this emerged as perhaps the most significant planning issue given the need for slum clearance and replacing wartime losses. Indeed, a significant start had been made upon slum clearance in the 1930s as a key element of housing policy and following the 1935 Housing Act (Cherry, 1996). Housing was at the heart of the Todmorden plan but significant in Durham and Warwick also. Although Bewdley was actively considering new post-war housing development, it was on a very small scale (50-100 houses). Otherwise there was a focus upon general tidying up and amenity improvements, such as the improvements proposed for Todmorden town centre.

It is notable that three of the plans considered here were published and, had the fourth been completed, it too would have been published. Given the expense of this, and the risk of not covering costs, this is perhaps surprising. A significant number of plans for much larger towns were never published: some are only known as typescripts marked “confidential”. In part the desire for publication in these small towns may be explained by a desire to inform people in the locality as widely as possible in response to the interest that was clearly there. In part, too, it may represent an act of civic boosterism (Larkham and Lilley, 2003); having employed an expensive national local consultant it made sense to advertise the fact. *Cathedral City* is perhaps an unusual case in that Sharp’s devotion to the publication (and project) must have been partly for self-promotion as he launched himself as a consultant.

Organising a public exhibition was also a common practice. It was common for national politicians, including Ministers, to accept invitations to open such exhibitions – as at Warwick and Todmorden. However, in many cases these attracted relatively low numbers of visitors. Local press coverage probably took the message more directly to more people. However, it was relatively rare for *draft* proposals to be circulated: Bewdley was unusual in this respect. The later planning ethos of public participation was not well developed at this time. Even so, the Warwick and Durham plans as publicised had not been discussed and adopted as policy by their respective councils.

The final issue for exploration concerns the plans’ reception and influence. Todmorden seems to have been essentially well received; each of the others seems to have been more controversial for one reason or another. In the case of Bewdley and Durham, hostility from the County Councils on highway proposals in particular was evident. None of the plans can be said to have been implemented as such. Both Bewdley and Warwick were delayed; in one case apparently by the consultant; in the other because of a reluctance to discuss the draft proposals until they had been published in expensive book form, by which time they had been superseded by new legislative arrangements for town planning. Indeed, in the wake of the particular requirements of the 1947 Town and Country Planning Act, all of these reconstruction plans soon appeared anachronistic, as well as unrealistic in the austerity of post-war Britain. Even the well-received Todmorden plan seems to have had little or no impact in practice as a result of these changes, and perhaps also for the lack of any driving force to carry proposals through; as most planning powers rested with a combination of the Ministry, County Council and Upper Calderdale Joint Planning Committee. Perhaps the one exception is Durham where, although *Cathedral City* cannot be said to have been implemented in any meaningful sense, it certainly had an influence. Here the City Council were prepared to back Sharp’s recommendations and fight the County Council over the road line and indeed the City Council continued to employ Sharp as a consultant, in an often uneasy relationship, until 1962, with Sharp winning some battles and losing others. It also had a national influence, being widely and favourably reviewed, and essentially launched Sharp’s career as a replanning “expert”. Abercrombie’s reputation was insufficient to reassure some sarcastic reviewers, however: “no doubt the people of Warwick are proud of their plan – they have now been planned, actually been planned (they don’t know what that means but it sounds good) by one of the greatest names in planning” (Anon., 1950, p. 298).

Table 1: Small towns and their characteristics

| Town | Type | Population | Area (acres) | Rates | Rateable value (£) |
|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|--------------|-----------|--------------------|
| Bewdley | Historic | 4,279 | 3,757 | 14/10 | 18,655 |
| Sudbury | Historic (?) | 7,007 | 1,925 | 15/- | 33,449 |
| Abergavenny | Historic | 8,608 | 2,398 | 19/11 | 50,716 |
| Bideford | Historic | 9,442 | 4,068 | 10/6 | 64,286 |
| Warwick | Historic | 13,459 | 5,057 | 11/4 | 106,060 |
| Chichester | Historic | 14,912 | 2,869 | 10/- | 159,102 |
| Durham | Historic | 18,147 | 4,029 | Not given | 121,234 |
| Todmorden | Industrial | 22,222 | 12,790 | 14/3 | 113,834 |
| Deal | Port/Historic | 23,500 (1938 est) | 2,919 | 13/10 | 152,575 |
| King's Lynn | Historic | 23,528 | 6,687 | 16/- | 126,194 |
| Canterbury | Historic | 24,450 | 4,703 | 10/9 | 216,332 |
| Salisbury | Historic | 26,456 | 2,845 | 11/- | 262,754 |
| Chelmsford | Industrial(?) | 26,537 | 4,755 | 12/6 | 338,520 |
| Leamington Spa | "resort"/historic | 29,669 | 2,833 | 11/2 | 313,293 |
| Guildford | (?) | 30,754 | 7,184 | 11/- | 509,788 |
| Bilston | Industrial | 31,248 | 1,871 | 17/- | 133,407 |
| Taunton | Historic | 31,640 | 2,434 | 11/6 | 236,973 |
| Stourbridge | Industrial | 33,150 | 4,214 | 14/6 | 181,656 |
| Macclesfield | Industrial | 34,902 | 4,641 | 14/9 | 203,546 |
| Tunbridge Wells | Historic | 35,365 | 6,634 | 11/5 | 475,523 |
| Weston super Mare | Resort | 41,000 (1939 est) | 7,006 | 11/- | 416,592 |
| Lowestoft | Port/historic(?) | 41,768 | 5,640 | 15/6 | Not given |
| Nuneaton | Industrial | 46,305 | 11,767 | 16/6 | 247,529 |
| Chester | Historic | 47,863 | 4,142 | 14/5 | 404,600 |
| Worcester | Historic | 50,497 | 5,394 | 12/- | 407,278 |
| Great Yarmouth | Port/historic | 54,220 | 4,534 | 18/- | 330,381 |
| Eastbourne | resort | 57,435 | Not given | 9/- | 886,514 |

Taken from *Municipal Year Book* 1945. Population refers to 1931 Census. Rates refer to general rates (excludes special levies)

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