

Town Trails in Leicester

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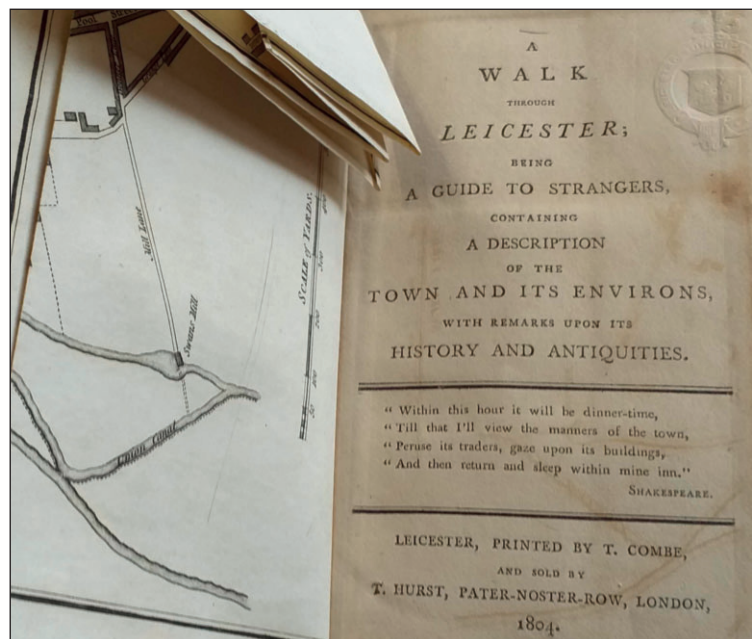
The last few years have seen the creation of a number of guides and trails to Leicester's places of interest and notable buildings. However, unless you have access to a mobile phone or tablet you won't have seen many of them as they have been designed as 'apps' (applications) for mobile devices. These apps include guides to different aspects of Leicester such as an Arts Trail, an Oral History Trail, and, of course, Richard III, but several are general guides to the city centre. By looking at the way guided walks through Leicester have changed since the first one in 1804, we can get an idea of how Leicester has changed and what has seemed important for writers to highlight at the time. This article looks at a selection of these trails where the reader is guided through the city on a walk or perambulation. General guides such as Spencer's New Guide to Leicester (1888 onwards), and the many tourist information guides produced through the years, are not considered.

It is worth noting the difference between a general guide and a walking trail. A general guide may include everything that the writer believes might be of interest or value to a visitor, while a trail suggests a theme that is explored by a route and defined places to visit on that route. The tourist is guided to particular aspects of Leicester's story depicted through the chosen sites, and through that process of selecting sites, decisions will have been made about what is included and what is omitted from the story.

In 1800 Leicester was a town with a predominantly rural feel and a population of around 17,000. *A Walk Through Leicester* (1804) by Susannah Watts was Leicester's first town trail and was aimed at '...the traveller who may wish to visit whatever is deemed most worthy of notice in the

town of Leicester'. The trail started on Gallowtree Gate - coincidentally, opposite the current tourist information centre - and, with one diversion to the west, proceeded around the old town walls in an anticlockwise direction through meadows and fields we now associate with Victorian terraced housing or modern dual carriageway roads. It finished with fine views from the high ground to the south of the town (Victoria Park) before a walk down

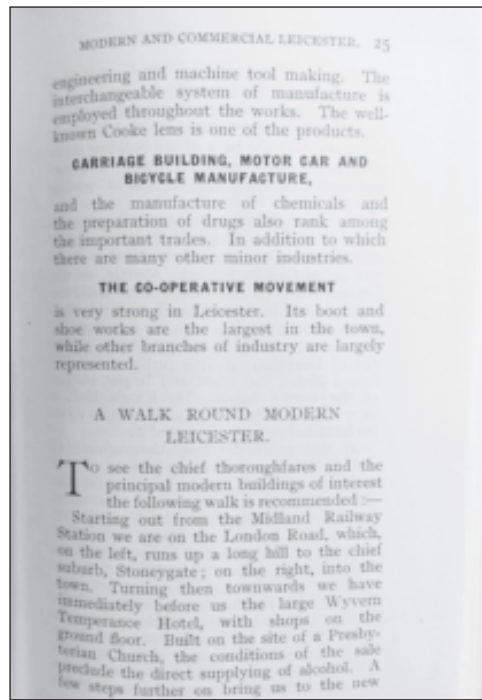
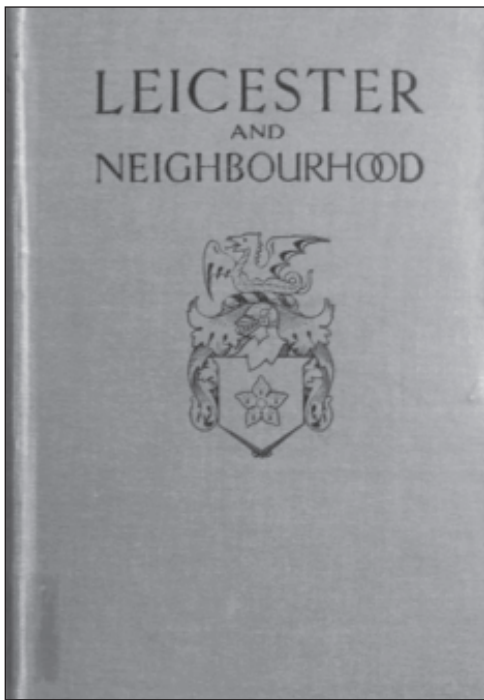
London Road back into the town centre to finish at the Market Place. As well as buildings, places, and objects of curiosity that are no longer with us, Watts drew attention to sites that are still mentioned in modern trails and guides: Spa Place on Humberstone Road, St Margaret's Church, the Great Meeting House, East Gates and the High Street, Highcross Street (here mentioning the County Gaol, the Free Grammar School, the Blue Boar Inn and Richard III, All Saints Church), North Bridge,



A Walk Through Leicester by Susannah Watts, published anonymously in 1804. (Reproduced by permission of the Record Office for Leicestershire, Leicester and Rutland.)

Bishop Penny's wall and the ruins of the Abbey, the North lock, Bow Bridge with more Richard III connections, the (Grand) Union Canal, St Nicholas Church, the Jewry Wall, St Mary (de Castro) Church, the various buildings in the Castle and Newarke areas, the (Leicester Royal) Infirmary, the Raw Dykes, New Walk, London Road, Granby Street, Joseph Johnson's Hotel (the City Rooms), St Martin's Church (the Cathedral), the Guildhall, and the Market Place. The Clock Tower hadn't been built at this point but if we add this and the Town Hall to the list we have the main points of interest in almost every general guide to central Leicester since.

In 1907 the book *Leicester and Neighbourhood* was written for the British Association for the Advancement of Science meeting in Leicester. The walking trails in this book were based on the *Guide to Leicester and Neighbourhood* that



Leicester and Neighbourhood, prepared for the 1907 meeting of the British Association for the Advancement of Science, contained a number of walking trails written by G. Clarke Nuttall. (Reproduced by permission of the Record Office for Leicestershire, Leicester and Rutland.)

was written by G. Clarke Nuttall in 1905. The two editions were very similar but the 1907 edition had a fold-out map that the first edition lacked. The book contained walks around ‘modern’ Leicester, ‘ancient’ Leicester, and excursions to Leicester’s neighbourhoods (none of which would have been thought of as suburbs of Leicester one hundred years before). The guided walk of modern Leicester started at the Midland Railway Station and included recent buildings on Granby Street and Town Hall Square before drawing attention to the new Municipal Library on Bishop Street. Further notable buildings (some still here, some gone) are mentioned on the route to the Clock Tower, which, 40 years after its construction, was ‘now the centre of modern Leicester’. Unlike Watts’ walk, which took a route along Humberstone Gate and Belgrave Gate, the trail only commented on buildings in these streets and then guided the visitor to the Market Place. Moving along Market Street (‘largely given up to Drapers and Milliners’) it then headed up New Walk to the Museum, finishing at Victoria Park and the top of London Road. The second walk, of ‘Ancient Leicester and Some Modern Buildings’, started in the Market Place and highlighted Alderman Newton’s School and the Wyggeston Boys’ School, as well as the medieval buildings and sites covered by Watts, although at the Newarke the new Technical and Arts Schools were featured (now De Montfort University’s Hawthorn Building). As befitted a book compiled for the British Association for the Advancement of Science, buildings of education and progress were highlighted throughout. While the Town Hall and New Walk Museum still feature in modern guides, the only building mentioned on the walk that doesn’t regularly

feature in modern guides is the Bishop Street Library. From 1934 the City Council Publicity and Development Committee produced a series of guides to the city. In 1935, *Leicester Seen in a Day*, a booklet containing specially drawn pen and ink sketches of principal buildings and beauty spots in Leicester was issued in order to meet the demands of prospective conferences and visitors to the city. With this in mind, the route started with directions from the Midland Railway Station and guided visitors out on to London Road where they could ‘take any electric car alighting in Horsefair Street for the Municipal Buildings’. The tourist was guided from Town Hall Square to the Market Place to see the Corn Exchange and the Duke of Rutland statue before going through Victoria Parade to reach the Clock Tower. From there the tourist was invited to take the electric car to Abbey Park where, entering at the gate by Canal Bridge, they were guided around the various features of the park before taking the electric car to St Nicholas Street for the second section of the route. This took visitors to the ruins of Jewry Wall and gave detailed instructions on how to gain access to see both the Roman Pavement in St Nicholas Street and the one under the Great Central Railway Station. From there, detailed directions were given to the Town Library and Mayor’s Parlour at the Guildhall, which was ‘noted for its quaint ornaments, fine carved wood fireplace and glass lights’, and St Martin’s Church (now the Cathedral) and on to the Magazine. The usual features of the Newarke area were highlighted, including the now demolished ‘crocketed spire’ of St Mary de Castro. After passing the Technical and Arts Schools, the guide moved the tourist along Newarke Street past the statue of John Biggs in

order to have lunch in town. The tourist was then guided to the Museum and Art Gallery and on up New Walk, passing the statue of Robert Hall and St. Stephen's Presbyterian Church to reach De Montfort Hall and Victoria Park. Finally, the tourist was encouraged to walk to London Road and take the electric car to Stoneygate Terminus – 'one of the finest car rides in the country'. Amongst the churches it pointed out on the route was the 'new Baptist Church' (Stoneygate Baptist Church). This tour was very precise in its directions and is notable in that it pointed out statues and incorporated the tram system as a tourism feature.

The next guide to suggest specific routes was *The City of Leicester - a Guide to Places of Interest in the City* (1951) by the historian Jack Simmons, published by the City of Leicester Publicity Department Information Bureau. This was a thorough guide to 1950s Leicester with over 80 points of interest in the centre and suburbs, including a map. The walks all started at the Clock Tower and took in most of the features of the earlier trails. New additions included mention of Everards Brewery on Southgate Street, the eighteenth century Friars Lane area, the 1937 offices of Leicestershire County Council, the likelihood of Richard III being buried near the bank at St Martins, William Carey's cottage on Thornton Lane, and the 1933 Police Headquarters on the 'best modern street in Leicester', Charles Street, which had been widened in 1932. Simmons also took the visitor along Northgate Street to North Bridge and mentioned the factory of Frisby, Jarvis & Co with its 'early Victorian brickwork of the best kind'. This was an important observation as it was the first time the architecture of Leicester's industrial heritage was noted in a public guide. The booklet treated the suburbs of Belgrave, Humberstone etc. separately, as it did London Road and Stoneygate, where there was mention of modern buildings such as De Montfort Hall, the Lutyens War Memorial, and the University College building on Victoria Park. By taking the modern and ancient buildings of the city in different sections (The 'Old Town' and 'The Modern City and its Suburbs'), Simmons followed the format of the 1907 book. Subsequent editions of the guide included new buildings such as the Haymarket

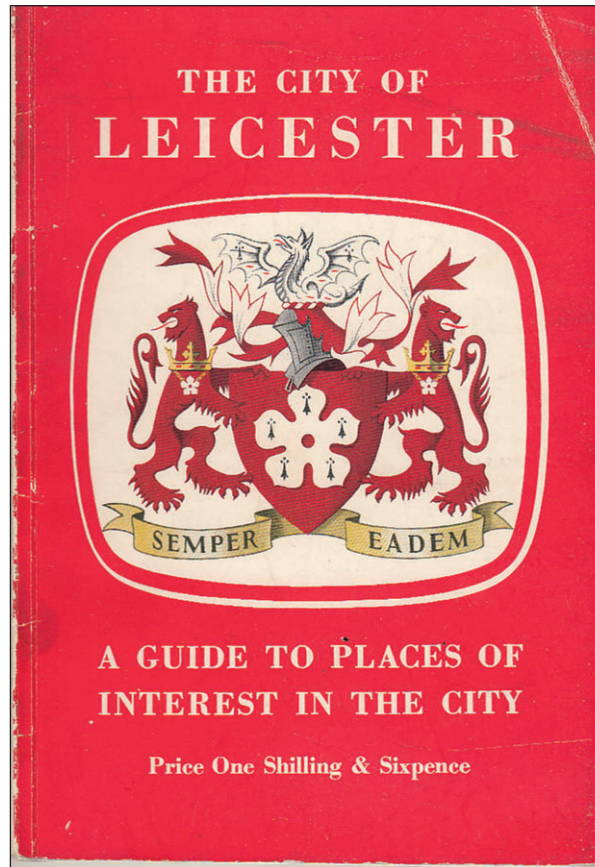
shopping centre but became progressively thinner with more photos and less text. However, the first edition was a definitive guide that would have served as a useful model for the Pevsner perambulations of 1960, and would still be of use to a modern visitor.

In 1960 Nikolaus Pevsner's *Buildings of England* series published a volume on Leicestershire and Rutland. For the

first time a nationally published book proclaimed that the buildings of ancient Leicester were, '...something the patriotic citizen of Leicester might proudly take any visitor to, British or foreign'. However, Pevsner's views on much of Leicester lacked enthusiasm. The 'perambulations' in central Leicester all started at the Clock Tower and then headed off in different directions. The trails drew attention to what remained of Georgian Leicester, as well as mentioning industrial buildings, but on the High Street there was, 'Nothing of note... except perhaps Lloyds Bank', and on Gallowtree Gate, 'Nothing of interest'. In 1984 the second edition included many more buildings of note: Wakerley's Singer Building (High Street) and Turkey Café (Granby Street) were only two of several interesting buildings Pevsner failed to appreciate

enough to include. Indeed, comparison of the two editions gives a good idea of how the recognition of Leicester's Victorian architecture has changed over time.

The next trail saw a change in emphasis. *Leicester Town Trail* (1972) by Bryan Waites, Keith Wheeler and Gerald Mitchell, published in the August 1972 edition of the Town and Country Planning Association's Bulletin of Environmental Education (BEE), was not intended as a guide to places of interest; the places chosen were selected because they would demonstrate aspects of 'townscape' and would prompt the walker to critically appraise the urban environment. Throughout the trail the students (it was aimed at schoolchildren) were asked to assess what they were looking at and to form opinions about the environment they were experiencing. The start and end of the trail were chosen because the authors wanted good views, which in a flat city like Leicester meant going to the top of the Polytechnic's



The City of Leicester - a Guide to Places of Interest in the City by Jack Simmons, 1951, published by the City of Leicester Publicity Department Information Bureau.

James Went building at the start and the University's Charles Wilson building at the end (the views Susannah Watts commended from Victoria Park had by now been severely curtailed by 200 years of development). Having decided on this, the route followed a predictable path clockwise through 'old' Leicester to the Clock Tower, south through the Market and Town Hall Square, and up New Walk to the University. Unlike previous trails there were no detours along Highcross Street or the canal, but these were not necessary for the purpose of the trail and were covered by the authors in later publications. Along the route were 'Vistas', 'Outlook Points', and 'Visual Corridors'. An 'Environmental Appraisal' form was included in the issue as were practical hints for teachers.

Leicester Town Trail was published in the BEE as part of a manual explaining how to create a town trail that could be used for 'teaching the art of seeing the urban environment'. Towns and cities were being encouraged to produce town trails as a way of 'awakening interest in architectural heritage' as part of the European Architectural Heritage Year of 1975. The manual pointed out that in towns of 'quaint streets and mature Georgian facades' people easily equate a beautiful townscape with an historic one, but cultivating a critical awareness of urban places is more difficult in 'backwaters of the environment' like the 'industrial Midlands'. Hundreds of town trails were subsequently produced and the British Tourist Authority published a book of town trails in 1975. Although the 1972 trail was only ever published in the BEE it is likely to have influenced many other trails around the country. It also became the template for several trails by the same authors over the next 15 years.

Leicester's own contribution to the town trails produced for European Year of Architectural Heritage was *A Town Trail, In Search of An Architect* (1975), which was prepared by Keith Wheeler, assisted by Bernard Besbrode and Jane Peet, and designed by Robert Williams. Published by Leicester City Council, this trail covered the suburb of North Evington that was developed by Arthur Wakerley in the late nineteenth century and was the first time a Leicester guide had looked in detail at a suburban area. This was a beautifully designed foldable paper trail in the same style as the 1972 Town Trail but more practical to use as it was a single sheet. It also followed the same pedagogical style as the 1972 trail and was divided into sections such as 'Investigation', 'Evidence', 'Linking Trails', and 'Outlook' points.

Following the trend for guided trails, the City Council's Planning Department published their first trail, *Guildhall Town Hall, A Town Trail*, in 1975. Keith Wheeler continued his work as part of the Leicester Urban Studies Centre and, using the Wheeler and Waites template, the Centre produced

A Town and Country Trail - Leicestershire's High Crosses (1978), *A Suburban Trail. Braunstone Garden Suburb or Council Estate?* (1980), *A Newtown Trail* (1982), *Highcross Street Rediscovered* (1985), as well as fact sheets about both Beaumont Leys and New Parks.

Explore Historic and Industrial Leicester - Castle Gardens to Frog Island (1981) was a trail prepared by Leicester City Planning Department with the Leicester and Rutland Society of Architects. This circular walk started at the Magazine, moved through the castle area and up Highcross Street to North Bridge, and then returned along the canal. This was an important trail as it was the first since Simmons in 1951 to draw attention to the factories, wharfs etc. in the Frog Island area and specifically highlight aspects of Leicester's industrial history. It covered all the usual locations in the castle area, but, for the first time, buildings such as the Great Central Railway Station, Slater Street School, the canal and the site of Stephenson's Lifting Bridge, the Mermaid Mural, and the Pex Factory were thought important enough to be included.

The City Trail - Explore the Corners of Leicester (1984), was designed in a similar style to the *Explore Historic and Industrial Leicester* trail and was produced by the Environmental Committee of the Leicester and Rutland Society of Architects and the City Engineers Department, Leicester City Council, in association with the Fosse Camera Club. This used both wall and pavement plaques - that can still be seen - to guide the walker through the city. The wall plaques marked the 1984 Festival of Architecture and the pavement plaques commemorated British Heritage Year, also 1984. As with *Explore Historic and Industrial Leicester* this had high production values, was a large foldable paper trail, and featured photographs as well as a map. The theme of the trail was street corners and the text highlighted the different ways in which they contributed to the townscape of Leicester.



The plaques made for The City Trail of 1984 can still be seen in Leicester.

Other trails in this period included *William Lee's Legacy, The Leicester Knitting Trail* (1989). Created to mark the 400th anniversary of the invention of the first knitting machine, this marked a growing interest in Leicester's

industrial legacy and built on the industrial heritage mentioned in previous trails. A growing appreciation of environmental issues was evidenced by the *Leicester Environment Trail* (1991). This highlighted the canal and river area, and included the Eco House at Western Park, which pointed the way towards modern buildings being included in guides to Leicester. *A Town Trail in the Steps of Edward Burgess, Civic Architect of Victorian Leicester* (1991), by Malcolm Elliott with illustrations by Olwen Hughes was the first time since the Wakerley trail of 1975 that a trail looked at the work of one person. *Walks Through Victorian Leicester* (1994), by Richard Gill, illustrations by Jim Fox, covered almost every Victorian building of note in Leicester and featured a city centre walk, a walk along the area around New Walk, and a walk around the Clarendon Park/Stoneygate suburb. Both Malcolm Elliott and Richard Gill were associated with Leicester's Victorian Society and these trails illustrated the influence of groups such as the Victorian Society and the Civic Society. *Out and About in Leicester: a series of armchair tours* (1994) by John Banner, divided the city into a number of 'armchair' tours that the more active citizen could also walk.

There was then a gap of ten years until a burst of activity produced the *Building Stones of Leicester, a guided walk* (2006), *Ernest Gimson Historical Walking Trail in Leicester* (2007), *Leicester's Riverside* (2008), and *An Archaeological Trail of the City of Leicester 4th edition* (2009). *Leicester Faith Trail* (two editions, 2011 and 2012) was notable for looking at places of worship, both past and present. This illustrated the impact of Leicester's many different faith groups on the built environment. Other recent trails include *The Richard III Walking Trail* (2013), *Look at Leicester: Children's Activity Trail* (2016), *Thomas Cook's Walking Trail* (2016), and *Radical Leicester* (2017).

So far, all the trails mentioned have been produced as booklets or individual sheets of paper. Since the advent of the Internet it has also been possible to create websites and apps. While apps often follow the format of the paper trails, they are able to incorporate sound and video and, potentially, track the location of the user. Trails such as the *Cultural Quarter Audio Trail* (2008), and the *Leicester Oral History Trail* (2011), suggested a route, while others are more general guides. *Discovering Britain - Leicester Walk* (2015) was an online trail produced by the Royal Geographic Society and created by students from the Geography Department at the University of Leicester working with students from Moat Community College and Soar Valley College. This trail concentrated on the City's international connections, and, while taking in some of the usual historical sites, had a different flavour from the 'usual' trails as it also took a route through South Highfields, an area not usually associated with historic sites or tourism. This, along with the Faith trails and the Radical Leicester

trail, points the way towards a more diverse range of subjects that future walking trails or guides to the City might illustrate.

The story that these trails tell is one of a city learning to understand and appreciate its built environment and the people who have shaped it. Leicester's long history has meant that there are some ancient buildings and sites that appear in almost every guide since Susannah Watts' first trail in 1804. In 1907 the trails show a pride in the late Victorian civic buildings and then, after the Second World War, they demonstrate a growing awareness of the value of both the historic built environment and the people who helped to create it. The trails of the 1970s and 1980s reflect concerns for the environment and the desire to educate the general public in issues around planning and conservation, while later trails start to emphasise the change of use of buildings, often for religious reasons, and newer architecture in the city.

The Royal Geographical Society trail is an exception in that almost all these trails have been produced by local authorities, teachers, or groups or individuals with an interest in the built environment. Trails produced by the 'ordinary' citizen may well emphasise completely different places and people. This is an important reminder that the story of Leicester is not just told through the celebrated buildings repeatedly included in the guides, but also in a multitude of more everyday sites that help to tell how the people of Leicester and the places they have created have shaped the city that surrounds both the tourist and the resident.

Selected References:

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2. *Explore Historic and Industrial Leicester - Castle Gardens to Frog Island*, (1981) was a trail prepared by Leicester City Planning Dept with the Leicester & Rutland Society of Architects. The trail can be seen online at - http://prezi.com/dvn9srrzfq0/?utm_campaign=share&utm
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