



RESEARCH ARTICLE

# The facade of power and the power of the facade: memory and meaning in Victorian cities

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## Abstract

Terraces and tenements provide the facades upon which are inscribed texts and decorative images. Embedded in the walls, these ‘plaques’ convey meanings and memories that saturate the built environment with references to the past. Evidence based on property surveys, maps and archival documents form the empirical basis from which it is concluded that images and inscriptions presented a wider geo-political and historical awareness in the everyday setting of local residents.

The demolition of a building is like a bereavement. An old familiar friend, already in decline, is taken down, dust to dust. The gap site is the void that is left, and though new vistas emerge and developmental opportunities are created with new structures, the intergenerational function of shared memories and folk stories is disrupted, and then recalibrated. Only sites of memory are left, *lieux de mémoire*, and not real communities of memory, *milieux de mémoire*.<sup>1</sup> The topography of remembrance is lost; the ties of collective memory are weakened.<sup>2</sup>

Demolition is a moment of rupture for local communities; it is the encapsulation locally of the tension between memory, as a bond tying a community to the present, and history, as a problematic reconstruction of time past. If ‘the demolition of *prominent or public* buildings can have a deep-seated effect on a community, as it effectively wipes out a significant chapter in the history of a place’,<sup>3</sup> it is local buildings, not just historic or public ones, that act as landmarks and anchor people to their neighbourhoods through a shared sense of security and familiarity. They provide ‘the mental equilibrium...due to the fact that the physical objects of our daily contact change little or not at all, providing us with an image of permanence and stability’.<sup>4</sup> The

<sup>1</sup>P. Nora, ‘Between memory and history: *Les lieux de mémoire*’, *Representations*, 26 (1989), 7. On commemoration, see E. Runia, ‘Burying the dead, creating the past’, *History and Theory*, 46 (2007), 313–25.

<sup>2</sup>An image database can be consulted at <https://apps.mappingedinburgh.org/plaques/>.

<sup>3</sup>P. Hubbard, ‘The value of conservation’, *Town Planning Review*, 64 (1993), 366, emphasis added.

<sup>4</sup>M. Halbwachs, *The Collective Memory* (Chicago, 1950), ch. 4; P. Connerton, *How Societies Remember* (Cambridge, 1994), 37.

emotional response to loss is tempered by the potential for redevelopment and the capacity both for making places anew and the conscious reconstruction of social capital.<sup>5</sup> If demolition induces a sense of loss that cannot be recaptured, belonging itself is constructed, partly at the level of the neighbourhood.<sup>6</sup>

This article is a contribution to that sense of making places. It seeks to bring the social history of urban spaces into sharper focus by exploring what memory does to places and what places do to memory.<sup>7</sup> Though Leicester and Edinburgh provide the two detailed, comparative studies, they are indicative of brick- and stone-built towns and cities throughout the United Kingdom, from which extensive evidence has also been obtained.<sup>8</sup> The analysis emphasizes ‘the little tactics of habitat’ rather than the ‘great strategies of geopolitics’ that provide a focus to urban landscape history.<sup>9</sup>

Inevitably, the nature of the mundane or ‘everyday’ is an amalgam of many things.<sup>10</sup> Lefebvre includes the recurrent actions and material practices associated with the ordinariness of everydayness – a phenomenological approach.<sup>11</sup> Footprints to school, work, the post office and job centre, pub and club each provide the daily tracks and patterns across the city, and form the basis of ‘rhythmanalysis’ and an understanding of the rules and regulations both implicit and explicit by which urban society is ordered.<sup>12</sup> Together, the spatial and temporal character of the city, its varied rhythms and imprints, forge an everyday urbanism. Others have grappled with the concept of ordinariness: Pred refers to the ‘generative grammar of everyday life’; de Certeau to ‘an overflowing (débordement) of the common’; Benjamin focuses on ‘neglected detail and the small nuance’ when exploring the transitivity of the city; Hayden explores how the ‘social history of urban space’ influences the everyday landscape; and Altman and Low employ environmental psychology to link place attachment with exposure from birth to all five senses in the city.<sup>13</sup> Each, in significant ways, owes an intellectual debt to Lynch’s ‘legibility

<sup>5</sup>D. Harvey, ‘The right to the city’, *New Left Review*, 53 (2008), 23–40; P. Hubbard and L. Fairey, ‘Contesting the modern city: reconstruction and everyday life in post-war Coventry’, *Planning Perspectives*, 18 (2003), 377–97, argue that planned spaces in capitalist societies are designed by those ‘from on high and afar’.

<sup>6</sup>D. Hayden, *The Power of Place: Urban Landscapes as Public History* (Cambridge, MA, 1995), xii, describes this as ‘the politics of place construction’.

<sup>7</sup>E. Relph, ‘An inquiry into the relations between phenomenology and geography’, *Canadian Geographer*, 14 (1970), 193–201.

<sup>8</sup>Over 60 towns and cities in both England and Scotland provide visual and textual evidence from which the Leicester and Edinburgh cases have been developed in greater detail.

<sup>9</sup>M. Foucault, ‘The eye of power’ (trans. C. Gordon), in *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972–77* (Brighton, 1980), 149.

<sup>10</sup>For an excellent overview, see W. Fischer-Nebmaier, ‘Introduction: space, narration and the everyday’, in W. Fischer-Nebmaier *et al.* (eds.), *Narrating the City* (New York, 2015), 1–55.

<sup>11</sup>The presence of the past in the everyday lives of urban dwellers constitutes a reworking of ideas strongly associated with Henri Lefebvre’s *Critique of Everyday Life* and with the Annales School’s *histoire totale* approach.

<sup>12</sup>H. Lefebvre, *The Right to the City* (Cambridge, MA, 1996), 221; A. Amin and N. Thrift, ‘The legibility of the everyday city’, in A. Amin and N. Thrift, *Cities: Reimagining the Urban* (Cambridge, 2002), 17.

<sup>13</sup>A. Pred, ‘Social reproduction and the time geography of everyday life’, *Geografiska Annaler, Series B, Human Geography*, 63 (1981), 9, quoting the Swedish publication by E. Wallin, *Vardagslivets generative Grammatik* (Lund, 1980); M. de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley, 1988), 5; H. Caygill,

of the city' with its intangible markers and matrix of mental maps associated with the physical characteristics of spaces associated with the paths, edges, districts, nodes and landmarks to be found in cities.<sup>14</sup> At a different scale of analysis, this ordinariness of everyday city life is embedded within the dynamic of Mumford's messy, long-run stages of growth and urban decay in the various transitions from the rise of village communities, Eopolis, through Polis; Metropolis; Megalopolis; Tyrannapolis; and, finally, Nekropolis when war, famine and disease wreak havoc on society.<sup>15</sup> Each stage has its everydayness. Each stage has its grass-roots dynamic between memory and place.<sup>16</sup>

The everydayness considered in this article is the decoration on the external walls of residential buildings – 'little tactics of habitat' – and relates directly to an understanding of 'how spaces are planned, designed, built, inhabited, appropriated, celebrated, despoiled and discarded'.<sup>17</sup> Too often, Lefebvre comments, 'we see urban places with the eyes of unskilled aesthetes...and all we need to do is simply to open our eyes...and we will discover the immense human wealth that the humblest acts of everyday life contain'.<sup>18</sup> If, through fieldwork, our eyes are opened to the 'little tactics' of the dates, names, places, emblems and words on plaques embedded in the walls of vernacular houses and tenements in Leicester, Edinburgh and elsewhere, then their meaning and geo-political significance can be explored.

In a rapidly urbanizing nineteenth-century world with peasant culture a receding memory and privacy within the home in the ascendant, could it be that the insertion of symbolic motifs on street facades constituted both the transmission of cultural capital and a form of symbolic capital? We have been reminded that 'the landscapes and places we live in are important. Whether we shape them or they shape us, they are expressions of what we are like'.<sup>19</sup> Our lives are impoverished precisely to the extent that we ignore them. Cultural reproduction and the reproductive power of capital may not be too far apart, therefore, in the legacy of decoration embedded in the walls of the city, and in the minds of its citizens.<sup>20</sup>

## Decorated streets

For the nobility and illiterate alike, a stone-chiselled heraldic panel above a doorway indicated a dwelling of significance. To the educated and wealthy, the heraldry provided a multitude of encoded credentials of family achievements and lineage; to the uninitiated, the placement of lines, flowers and animals on armorial shields

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Walter Benjamin: *The Colour of Experience* (London, 1998), 152; Hayden, *The Power of Place*, xi; I. Altman and S.M. Low (eds.), *Place Attachment* (New York, 1992). For a review of placement attachment, see D.L. Lawrence and S.M. Low, 'The built environment and spatial form', *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 19 (1990), 453–505.

<sup>14</sup>K. Lynch, *The Image of the City* (Cambridge, MA, 1960).

<sup>15</sup>L. Mumford, *The Culture of Cities* (London, 1958), 283–95.

<sup>16</sup>M. Castells, *The City and the Grassroots: A Cross-Cultural Theory of Urban Social Movements* (Berkeley, 1983), 67–72, 289–336.

<sup>17</sup>Hayden, *The Power of Place*, 14.

<sup>18</sup>H. Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life*, vol. I (London, 2014), esp. 150–7.

<sup>19</sup>E. Relph, *The Modern Urban Landscape* (Baltimore, 1987), preface.

<sup>20</sup>S. Zukin, *Landscapes of Power: From Detroit to Disney World* (Berkeley, 1991).

provided a colourful and recognizable delivery address in a world that pre-dated house numbers, and the symbolic heraldic details of escutcheons, tinctures and cadences were of little interest.<sup>21</sup> Some early doorway panels still survive (Figure 1). Such visual signifiers of an address were no longer as essential in some eighteenth-century European cities and so in Paris, for example, the ‘political technology’ of house numbering was introduced in 1779.<sup>22</sup> In Edinburgh, Alexander Kincaid published a map showing that New Town streets already had house numbers in 1784, a practice that also existed in Florence by the same year.<sup>23</sup> For practical reasons, and because of an aesthetic preference associated with unadorned Enlightenment architecture, decorative motifs on external walls were virtually unknown in Georgian and Regency Britain. From the mid-nineteenth century, however, when the pace of urbanization accelerated and the potential for further exploitation of existing sites to accommodate the burgeoning urban population was largely exhausted, an unprecedented mid-Victorian phase of housebuilding took place on green field sites.<sup>24</sup> It received a further fillip from the repeal of taxes on glass (1845), bricks (1850) and finally on windows (1851), a tax which *The Lancet* described as a 300 per cent ‘imposition on light’ and a ‘most oppressive and, hygienically speaking, absurd impost’ which fell ‘principally on the poorer classes of society’.<sup>25</sup> With demand rising and these imposts removed, the supply of affordable new terraced housing and tenement flats for artisans, shopkeepers and clerks and their families increased appreciably, particularly in conjunction with technological advances in mass-produced brickmaking.

From the 1850s until World War I – rarely after 1919 – plaques were embedded in the facades of newly built terraces and tenements. These were not the ‘blue plaques’ or commemorative markers of birthplaces or temporary residences of the great and the good, but decorative terracotta and cement renderings inscribed with dates, initials, biblical and literary references, flowers, place and personal names, and historical connections. Eye-catchingly located on facades, these ‘plaques’ confronted residents everyday as they opened their shuttered windows or curtains each morning.<sup>26</sup> In Leicester, so saturated with epigraphic elements were

<sup>21</sup>I am grateful to T.C. Smout for his observations regarding early signage, and to Elizabeth Rhodes, Lyon Clerk and Keeper of the Records, for information relating to heraldic significance.

<sup>22</sup>P. Laxton, ‘Richard Horwood’s Plan of London: a guide to editions and variants, 1792–1819’, *London Topographical Record*, 26 (1990), 214–63, shows limited house numbering was undertaken in 1792; R.S. Rose-Redwood, ‘Indexing the great ledger of the community: urban house numbering, city directories, and the production of spatial legibility’, *Journal of Historical Geography*, 34 (2008), 286–9, briefly instances examples of European early house numbering practices. On house numbering, see the Special Section in *Urban History*, 39 (2012), 607–79.

<sup>23</sup>45 Geo. 3, c. xxi, An Act for Regulating the Police of the City of Edinburgh, and Adjoining Districts; and for Other Purposes relating thereto, [10 Apr. 1805], section 29; F. Cent, ‘Edinburgh house numbers’, *Book of the Old Edinburgh Club*, 27 (1949), 61–6, dates house numbering as starting in 1811 but this was really due to the 1805 Act. For Kincaid’s 1784 map and street numbering in various streets, see National Library of Scotland <http://maps.nls.uk/view/74400071>. I am grateful to Eric Grosso, Phil Dodds and Tony Lewis for information on this point.

<sup>24</sup>R. Brunskill and A. Clifton-Taylor, *English Brickwork* (London, 1977).

<sup>25</sup>*The Lancet*, 22 Feb. 1845, vol. 45, issue 1121, p. 214, cols. 1–2.

<sup>26</sup>Plaques associated with industrial, commercial and retail premises are excluded since the message associated with them is normally obvious – the promotion of the product or business. Numerous places



**Figure 1a–b.** Blackfriars Street.

(a) No. 8, stair-tower with ogee pedimented doorpiece with a shield and two unicorn supporters (b) Crowned shield with unicorn supporters, sixteenth century.

Source: Unless otherwise noted the images have been taken by Richard Rodger.

terraced houses that a systematic sample, and a classificatory system, was necessary in a street-by-street survey straddling neighbourhoods in all quarters of the city.<sup>27</sup> The results illuminate a number of themes including the spatial dimensions of memory; the invented present and its implications for the future; the power of agency through the actions of builders; the local as a durable canvas for national and international issues; and the instrumentality of plaques in relation to emotions of pride, joy, depression and celebration.

To unravel some of these issues, a street level survey of four different areas of Leicester produced 1,001 instances of surviving Victorian plaques. Just over 60 per cent of the sample were inscribed with a date. The annual pattern of plaques was closely aligned with the local housebuilding cycle, itself in keeping with national trends (Figure 2).<sup>28</sup> The late 1890s housing boom coincided with the diamond jubilee of Queen Victoria in 1897 and the emotional intensity of that event, like its forerunner in 1887, produced the phenomenon of Victoria the brand – the production of everyday items (Figure 3). These included items such as mugs, plates, cuff links, tea towels and napkins, coins and postage stamps and special cement plaques produced by Stanley Bros. of Nuneaton to adorn buildings in towns across England and Wales.<sup>29</sup>

Plaques were connected directly with the monarchy by names and locations – Albert Cottages, Osborne Houses, Beatrice Cottages, Empire Cottages – and accounted for 3 per cent of the total. But it was establishment figures and prominent individuals (12 per cent) that were displayed on one in every eight plaques surveyed (Figure 4). Terraced cottages were named after prime ministers and political leaders – Gladstone (4), Disraeli (3), Balfour (2), Burleigh (3), Salisbury (5), Cromwell (2), Kruger, Garfield; after military and naval figures – Marlborough, Wellington, Gordon (7), Nelson, Napoleon, Kitchener, Wolseley, Cadogan, Havelock (3); after imperial connections – Clive, Rhodes (2), Curzon, Baden-Powell, Lytton, Napier (2); reformers – Wilberforce, Shaftesbury (4); and religious figures – Cranmer, Tyndale, Luther and Latimer recorded on the terraced facades locally in the ‘martyrs streets’ (Luther and Cranmer Streets) as they are still known locally. In some streets, notably Wand Street with over 100 houses, almost every house championed a prominent public figure.<sup>30</sup> Newsworthy foreign figures – Dreyfus,

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other than Edinburgh and Leicester have been recorded, but not subjected to the same systematic fieldwork survey. Neither Edinburgh nor Leicester was affected seriously by wartime bombing and, despite some hostile sentiments, neither was as significantly affected by wholesale planning demolitions as was the case in many other British towns and cities.

<sup>27</sup>The survey recorded address; house type; position, dimensions and materials of the plaque; content and style of inscription or decoration; and details of housebuilder, where known. Where, as was often the case, a plaque straddled a pair of houses the lower street number has been used to provide a unique address for mapping purposes.

<sup>28</sup>Record Office for Leicester, Leicestershire and Rutland (ROLLR), Leicester Corporation Building Plans 1878–1914; G. Chinnery, ‘Nineteenth-century building plans in Leicester’, *Transactions of the Leicestershire Archaeological and Historical Society*, 49 (1973–74), 32–9. For national and regional patterns, see J.P. Lewis, *Building Cycles and Britain’s Growth* (London, 1965), Appendix 4.

<sup>29</sup>Warwickshire County Record Office, CR 2816, Stanley Bros. catalogue items. The towns included Oxford, Llandrindod Wells, Cambridge, Redcar, Nottingham, Fakenham and Leeds.

<sup>30</sup>Wand Street plaques named after Gladstone, Wolseley, Gordon, Marconi, Stanley, Nelson, Cromwell, Wellington, Marlborough, Havelock, Livingstone, Napier, Wilberforce, Napoleon and Clive.



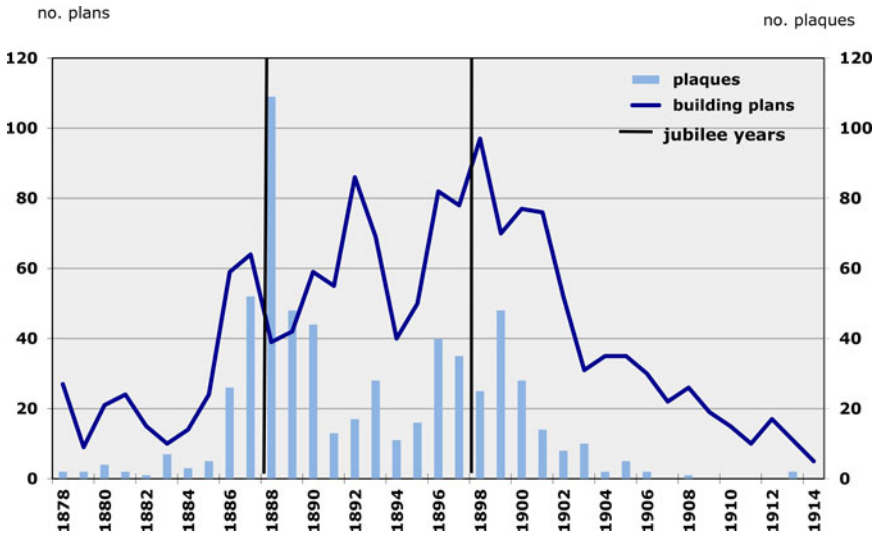


Figure 2. Leicester facades: royal jubilees, plaques and planned housebuilding, 1878–1914. Source: Fieldwork Survey; ROLLR Leicester Corporation building plans.

Garibaldi and Marconi, and Bechuanaland chiefs Bathoen and Khama (known as ‘the Good’) each acquired a permanence of their own through plaques bearing their names. Often these were memorialized on the shared facades of adjacent terraced houses: poets Byron and Burns co-existed in Rowan Street; Stanley and Livingstone were paired in each of Wand, Tyrrell and Livingstone Streets (Figure 5); and a quartet of plaques (Figure 6) – Grace, Darling, Longstone and Bamborough straddled 26–38 Tyrrell Street and commemorated the storm rescue actions of a Northumbrian heroine and so perpetuated maritime stories in landlocked Leicestershire.<sup>31</sup> With the exception of the sixteenth-century wool merchant William Wyggeston and Unitarian architect Alfred Henry Paget, local Leicester worthies were conspicuously absent in the surveyed plaques.

The historical and literary references to cultures and periods reinforced a sense of the past – plaques such as ‘Roman’, ‘Saxon’, ‘Celt’, ‘Norman’ and ‘Tudor’ were supplemented by Walter Scott’s romanticized historical novels such as *Ivanhoe* and *Waverley*. Of course, some plaques historicized contemporary political events at the point of housing construction – Khartoum, Mafeking and Ladysmith – and others, though they might be considered as a personal name, such as Horatio Cottages (228 Tudor Road) when located alongside Nelson Cottages (236 Tudor Road) are unambiguously historical references. Overall, about 20 per cent of the facades can be considered to have plaques with historical overtones. Past and present were fused epigraphically and shared by owners and occupiers through a physical form that extolled nation building and a common past that was memorialized and romanticized on the facades of physical capital (house

<sup>31</sup>Nine men on the paddle steamer *Forfarshire* were saved on 7 September 1838 by Grace Darling and her father. Note the spelling of Bamburgh.



**Figure 3a–c.** Leicester jubilee plaques. (a) St Saviour’s Road, 1897 (b) Francis Street, 1897 (c) Spa Street, 1897.

facades) that contributed to the construction of social capital (obtained through neighbourhood networks) and cultural capital (historical knowledge and current affairs).<sup>32</sup> A typology of plaques is shown in Table 1.

Almost half the plaques recorded on Leicester terraced houses referred to Midlands towns and villages. Most numerous, perhaps predictably, were those from Leicestershire (18 per cent); contiguous counties accounted for 16 per cent of the place names recorded (Table 2). This might be considered to chime with step migrations that stress sequential short distance moves from villages to small towns and then to cities, and this portability of place names warrants further research on Leicester and elsewhere as a means of understanding the role of

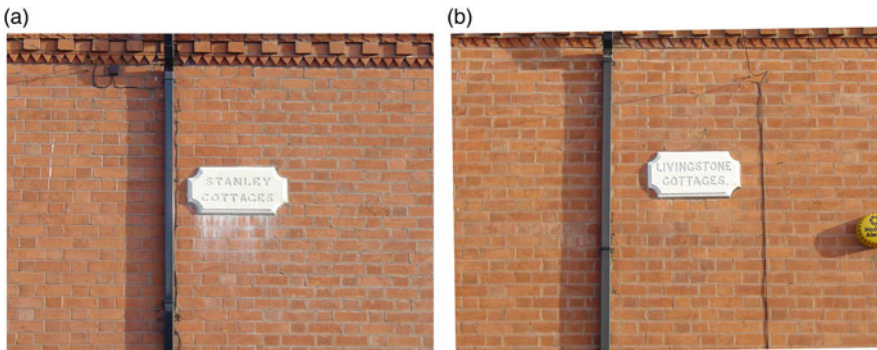
<sup>32</sup>See P. Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice* (Cambridge, 1990), 52–65.





**Figure 4a-d.** Political, military, literary and religious figures.

(a) Arthur Wellesley, 1st duke of Wellington (b) Cecil Rhodes (c) Arthur Balfour (d) William Ewart Gladstone.



**Figure 5a-b.** Historical events on house facades: explorer Sir Henry Morton Stanley.

(a) (1841–1904) encountered missionary David Livingstone (b) (1813–73) in central Africa on 10 November 1871.

nostalgia and the search for and significance of emotional connections for urban newcomers.<sup>33</sup> What is clear in terms of the geographies of meanings (see Table 1) is that, first, custom and practice together with local topographical features

<sup>33</sup>E.G. Ravenstein, 'The laws of migration', *Journal Statistical Society of London*, 48 (1885), 167–227, and Part II, 52 (1889), 241–301.



**Figure 6a-d.** Historical events recorded on house facades: shipwreck 1838. (a) Grace (b) Darling (c) Longstone (d) Bamborough; 26–38 Tyrell Street.

**Table 1.** Leicester plaques classified by type

Category	%
geographical	47
natural world	15
prominent people	13
first names	6
emotions, feelings	5
historical references	3
monarchy	3
blank	8

*Note:* Plaques drawn from four areas north, east, south and west of the town centre and 927 were classified on the basis of these categories. The remainder (74) either had illegible inscriptions or were ones that were ambiguous in meaning.

*Source:* Fieldwork Survey of Leicester Housing (2004).

initially defined street names (London Road, Mill Lane) and, secondly, that as urban expansion proceeded, builders increasingly proposed street names for council adoption. For example, the prominent builder and developer of the Leicester suburb of Evington, Arthur Wakerley (1862–1931), assigned the names of his four

**Table 2.** Geographical references of plaques: Leicester terraced housing, 1878–1914

Location	%
Lincolnshire	10.1
Derbyshire	7.6
Scotland	6.8
London	5.4
Isle of Man	5.2
Isle of Wight	4.4
Kent	4.1
Yorkshire	3.6
Nottinghamshire	3.6
Wales	3.5
Sussex	3.2
Lancashire	3.0
Devon	3.0

*Notes:*

- i. Percentages for 27 other counties are between 0 and 2.8%.
- ii. Where ambiguities or multiple occurrences of place names exist these have been excluded.

*Source:* Fieldwork Survey.

daughters (Gwendolen, Dorothy, Constance, Margaret) and his sister (Ethel) to streets in that area.<sup>34</sup>

Plaques, by contrast, were chosen by local builders, obtained from pattern books and templates, and customized by brick and terracotta makers and cement moulders, some of whom had regional agents.<sup>35</sup> Speculative housebuilders, therefore, were influenced in their choice of inscriptions by market forces – by the cachet of a royal, military or historical association that would command appeal amongst the hundreds of available new terraced houses for rent – and also by locations so specific geographically that they would appeal to those familial connections and folklore from particular parishes in nearby shires.

In stark contrast, three in five places to which the inscribed facades referred were from much further afield, with clusters linked to London, Scotland (see [Table 3](#)) and unexpected connections with the Isle of Man and, more understandably, with the royal family's connection with the Isle of Wight.<sup>36</sup> At another scale of spatial analysis, the distribution of countries to which reference is made on the Leicester plaques stressed East Africa 21 per cent and South Africa 19 per cent in a clear pointer to imperial concerns of the time, followed by Italy 12 per cent, Canada 8 per cent, India 6 per cent and Germany 6 per cent.<sup>37</sup> War and empire were never far adrift from the non-British references to decorated facades and reinforce two Halbwachsian ideas, namely that collective memory is selective, in this case concerning successful military events and national expeditions; and

<sup>34</sup>S. Harris, *The Place Names of Edinburgh* (London, 1996), 39, claims that 'about two-thirds of new [street] names in the 19th century were developer-related while the rest were related to their sites'.

<sup>35</sup>See, for example, J.E. Sears (ed.), *The Architects' Compendium and Complete Catalogue*, 13th issue (London, 1899), and other annual volumes.

<sup>36</sup>G. Truc, 'Memory of places and places of memory: for a Halbwachsian socio-ethnography of collective memory', *International Social Science Journal*, 62 (2012), issue 203–4, 147–59.

<sup>37</sup>Other locations included France 4%, with Switzerland, Rhodesia and other parts of the empire each 3%.

**Table 3.** Scottish references on Leicester street plaques

House number	Road	Plaque
3	Avenue Road	Highland Cottage
15 & 17	Bruin Street	Campbell Houses
78 & 80	Bruin Street	Earlston Houses
4 & 6	Celt Street	Harris Houses
301	Clarendon Park Road	Roseneath House
166 & 168	Clarendon Park Road	Millburn Houses
283 & 285	Clarendon Park Road	St Kilda Houses
108 & 110	Coral Street	Waverley Houses
68 & 70	Coral Street	Campbell Houses
17 & 19	Derwent Street	Hamilton Houses
168	East Park Road	Roseneath
44	Hawthorne Street	Hamilton Villa
101 & 103	Hawthorne Street	Clydesdale Houses
115 & 117	Howard Road	Elgin Houses
14 & 16	Livingstone Street	Moffat Cottages
115 & 117	Lorne Road	Lorne Cottages
33 & 35	Luther Street	Stewart Cottages
83 & 85	Luther Street	Celt Houses
4	Mantle Road	Glencoe House
28 & 30	Newport Street	Hamilton Houses
83 & 85	Oban Street	Stewart Cottages
7 & 9	Pool Road	Aberdeen Houses
23 & 25	Rowan Street	Burns Houses
26 & 28	Sylvan Street	Glencoe Houses
3 & 5	Sylvan Street	Melrose Houses
10 & 12	Tyndale Street	Melr [ose]*
16	Victoria Park Road	Glengarvie
74 & 76	Walton Street	Glencoe Cottages
35 & 37	Wand Street	Hamilton Houses

\*Final three letters eroded.

Source: Fieldwork Survey.

secondly, that key public events leave a deep imprint, not only on the minds of participants themselves, but also on successive generations through the epic stories and poetry retold at a young age.<sup>38</sup> Given the post-colonial stress placed on ‘the significance of Britain’s vast empire to its literature and the very existence of a British literary canon’,<sup>39</sup> then the evidence advanced here casts further doubt on the conclusion that English identity was dominated by ‘local xenophobia’ or ‘by a distinctive inward-looking and importantly localized sense of Englishness’, which now seems wide of the mark.<sup>40</sup>

Geographical knowledge was clearly wide-ranging. Leicester residents acquired this from their own, or their parents’, birthplace and family connections. Of the small cohort of Leicester residents (7 per cent) that in 1881 were not British

<sup>38</sup>H. Schuman and J. Scott, ‘Generations and collective memory’, *American Sociological Review*, 54 (1989), 359–81.

<sup>39</sup>T. Agathocleous, ‘Imperial, anglophone, geopolitical, worldly: evaluating the “global” in Victorian studies’, *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 43 (2015), 651–8. Taylor’s observation that there is in Britain ‘a wider amnesia about empire’ would seem to be a recent phenomenon judged by the prevalence of imperial references on facades. See M. Taylor, review of *Artist and Empire: Facing Britain’s Imperial Past* (Tate Britain, Exhibition 2015–16), *Reviews in History*, 1903, DOI: 10.14296/RiH/2014/1903, accessed 3 Mar. 2016.

<sup>40</sup>K.D.M. Snell, ‘The culture of local xenophobia’, *Social History*, 28 (2003), 1–30; P. Readman, ‘The place of the past in English culture, c. 1890–1914’, *Past & Present*, 186 (2005), 147–99, especially 149.

born, America and Canada together accounted for a quarter, and those born in the East Indies, India, Australia, France and Germany each contributed about just under a tenth.<sup>41</sup> The geographical reference framework was also influenced by the postings of the Royal Leicestershire Regiment – to India and Burma (1874–90), the Afghan War (1878–79) and the South African War 1899–1902 (including Ladysmith) – and by a rapidly expanding manufacturing presence in a variety of imperial and overseas locations. Kelly's and Wright's Directories carried numerous adverts for manufacturers throughout the Midlands and, significantly, identified overseas branches of major firms such as Faire Bros. & Co. Ltd, shoe trade and elastic web manufacturers, who had warehouses in Melbourne, Port Elizabeth and Christchurch (NZ).<sup>42</sup> Thus, as 'Made in Britain' became a global brand, so memories and myths associated with empire were confidently imported and exhibited on the home front by cementing plaques to the facades of terraced houses.<sup>43</sup>

### Plaques, terraces and reference frameworks

Terraced houses were assigned a gendered identity through the first names inscribed on the external wall. Home and domesticity carried strongly feminine connotations but perhaps surprisingly female names were no more numerous than terraced houses with male names.<sup>44</sup> Naming provided a personality to property, and families of historical, geographical or botanical plaques contributed to a sense of identity where these were shared between neighbours. Another naming device deployed popular Victorian botanical knowledge and contributed, implicitly at least, to a picturesque quality that struck a familiar chord with migrants from country districts. The Holly (4) and the Ivy (14), no doubt encouraged by mid-Victorian anthologies of Christmas carols, were favoured as botanical plaques, as were Fern (12), Oak (11), Elm (8), Woodbine (8) and Primrose (7) Cottages.<sup>45</sup> More imaginatively named, given the location and terrain of Leicester, were Beach Cottages in Bruin Street, and Alpine Houses in Beatrice Road.

The quality of a physical object is considered likely to evoke strong images for the observer, according to Lynch.<sup>46</sup> Through 'shape, colour or arrangement' of plaques, this 'imageability' induces powerful mental images that add a heightened dimension to the senses through their visual impact. The clarity of the message was achieved first, through a recognizable and standardized object – two-thirds of all plaques measured 270 square inches (0.17m<sup>2</sup>); secondly, through plain

<sup>41</sup>43 and 44 Vict., c. 37, c. 3562, Census of England 1881, City of Leicester, and Data supplied by the UK Data Archive.

<sup>42</sup>See Kelly's Directories for Leicester and Leicestershire, and 'Manufacturing Pasts' project website [www2.le.ac.uk/library/manufacturingpasts](http://www2.le.ac.uk/library/manufacturingpasts).

<sup>43</sup>P. Borsary, 'New approaches to social history: myth meaning and place: Monmouth and Bath 1750–1900', *Journal of Social History*, 39 (2006), 867–89.

<sup>44</sup>Where plaques inscribed with male or female names that are juxtaposed with a surname, as with Oliver and Cromwell, Grace and Darling, then these first names are discounted from the numerical analysis.

<sup>45</sup>See D.A. Allen, *The Victorian Fern Craze* (London, 1969); and S. Whittingham, *Fern Fever: The Story of Pteridomania* (London, 2012), for the contemporary preoccupation with ferns and architectural references to them. I am grateful to an anonymous referee for this reference.

<sup>46</sup>Lynch, *The Image of the City*, 9–10.



English rather than obscure classical references; and thirdly, by employing the names of familiar flowers and trees, battles and heroes, Christian names, and contemporary events. Each strategy improved the legibility of the streets and the neighbourhood to their new residents.

Builders and developers were even more direct at times by inscribing emotions, feelings and even beliefs on external walls (Table 1). Home Again Cottages, Hope Houses, a rare Latin text *Dulce Domum* (Sweetly at Home), Excelsior, Day Dawn Villa, Eminence Cottages and even Naivete Cottages evoke a simple yet positive impression of place also captured in a variety of other 'Views', most commonly to Belle, Summer and Park Views (Figure 7). This contrasts with Bleak Houses, Perseverance Houses and Vulcan Cottages where darker tones exist, and with the martyrs Thomas Cranmer, Hugh Latimer and William Tyndale memorialized by builders' plaques in the 'martyrs streets'. Either way, emotions and feelings towards house and home were far from neutral. The use of Alpha and Omega as names for cottages in Tudor Road and Derwent Street denoted powerful biblical references to God the Almighty: 'I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the ending, saith the Lord, which is, and which was, and which is to come, the Almighty.'<sup>47</sup> The power of such scriptural references inscribed on the facade for residents and passers-by alike is difficult to evaluate fully, but the message that the church was an omnipresent feature of Victorian everyday lives is difficult to overlook.

'Gridded space', according to Sennett, 'does more than create a blank canvas for development. It subdues those who must live in the space.'<sup>48</sup> In the survey areas alone, 1,526 planning applications were approved to build 9,398 houses in 75 Leicester streets between 1873 and 1914.<sup>49</sup> To the monotony of rectilinear terraced streets, builders added a distinctive decorative element. Such a pace and scale of speculative housing development required a stock of themed names on the plaques to provide marks of distinction, and was particularly important in view of the cloned nature of terraced housing. As Lowenthal explained, familiarity and recognition are 'past-related benefits', and the shorthand meanings encoded in the plaques achieve this by reaffirming and validating previous experiences.<sup>50</sup> Nowhere was this more pronounced than in Mere Road where a major transformation took place. Over a 35-year period, 642 new houses were built by the local agent (Yearby) and his architects (Goddard and Paget).<sup>51</sup> The Goddard practice alone accounted for 287 houses in 34 projects between 1885 and 1899, spread across all but the north of the borough. To the south, G.F. Jones concentrated his efforts in Clarendon Park and built 379 houses in 35 different projects.<sup>52</sup> One of the most spectacular partnerships was between an owner/agent Wright who built 673 houses in the Fosse Road area to the west of the River Soar first with his architect/builders,

<sup>47</sup>Book of Revelation 1:8.

<sup>48</sup>R. Sennett, *The Conscience of the Eye: The Design and Social Life of Cities* (New York, 1992), 60.

<sup>49</sup>ROLLR, Leicester Corporation Building Plans.

<sup>50</sup>D. Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge, 1985), 38–52.

<sup>51</sup>See G. Brandwood and M. Cherry, *Men of Property: The Goddards and Six Generations of Architecture* (Leicester, 1990).

<sup>52</sup>G.F. Jones built houses in Adderley, Howard, Lorne, Lytham, Queen's and Victoria Park Road and, in 1909, in Fleetwood Road where his 144 houses constituted the largest single project in the city.



**Figure 7a-d.** Emotional ties.

(a) Hope Houses, 46–8 Hawthorne Street (b) Naivete Cottages, 54–6 Ridley Street (c) Perseverance Houses, 27–9 Buller Road (d) Bleak Houses, 38–40 Derwent Street.

Redfern and Sawday, and then after 1892 with B.S. Seale.<sup>53</sup> A glance at the Leicester map shows the repetitive geometry of the urban morphology, and how these ‘structures of capital’, physical and financial, were embedded locally.<sup>54</sup> Since many Victorian cities were not populated by the locally born, content based analysis of the facadism on Leicester’s terraced streets shows that references to regional places and shared cultural identifiers provided both an emotional comfort zone in the ‘foreign country’ that was the urban and a family connectedness that was intergenerational.

Though localism was important to developers, architects and builders, it did not display their own personal names on the facades of terraced housing. Ego and self-promotion were avoided. Leicester plaques also denied a place in posterity to dynastic families and municipal leaders. Residents’ everyday lives might be governed by local factors – the parish church, local school, nearby factories, credit networks and the ‘local’ pub – but the walk to work or school or to pray was peppered by passing non-local reminders of a wider world, and of Leicester’s and Britain’s place within

<sup>53</sup>ROLLR, Leicester Corporation Building Plans.

<sup>54</sup>S. Zukin and P. Dimaggio (eds.), *Structures of Capital: The Social Organisation of the Economy* (Cambridge, 1990), 1–37. On structural embeddedness, see M. Granovetter, ‘Economic action and social structure: the problem of embeddedness’, *American Journal of Sociology*, 91 (1985), 481–501.

it. Everyday patterns and practices were fulfilled amidst physical and textual references designed to forge common elements, and often framed implicitly by the construction of a national identity. From the builders' point of view, as producers, in settling Leicester's rapidly expanding late Victorian population in their newly built terraced homes it made sense as a sales technique not just to embrace localism but to display the nationally known names and current events, places and species recognizable to all irrespective of birthplace or background. Certainly, building firms contributed to the power dynamic both through the process by which green (field) space was transformed into terraced homes and by constructing histories and meanings on the facades, where pairs or series of linked subjects were imprinted not only on the walls but in the consciousness of residents.<sup>55</sup> If 'the planning of neutral space is an act of dominating and subduing others', then the use of individualized identifiers on the facades of terraced houses was a means of personalizing the product.<sup>56</sup>

By no means all terraced houses were provided with a plaque, far less a unique identifier since plaques were commonly shared between neighbours. Where they were provided, their simple decoration broke down the homogenized nature of the terraced street without the elaboration found on many middle-class suburban villas (Figure 8).

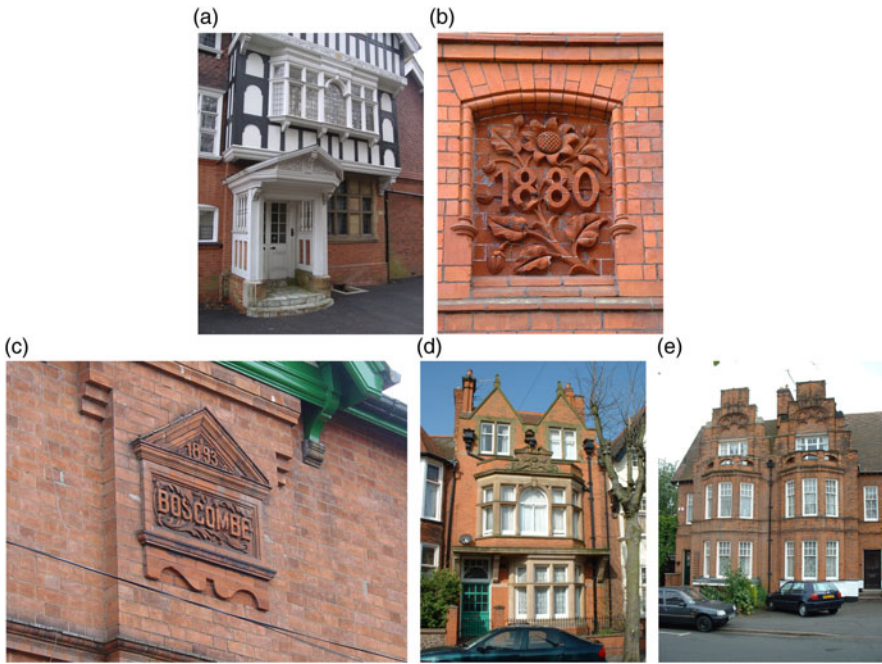
In Leicester, as elsewhere, built urban space, replete with its monuments, palaces, public spaces and official buildings, represented the material traces of the historical past in the present and was heavily associated with the perpetuation of former systems of power and authority. Plaques can be considered as part of these systems of power. The practice of adornment, a mark of distinction, which a plaque conveyed, raises the question of whether the dominant interest of builders and agents exerted and perpetuated that dominance over occupiers through the symbolism cemented to the facades of homes. Events, past and present, and even ones embellished in the folklore that surrounds their subject matter, were transmitted through family generations until the bulldozer accounted for many. The collective memories of the communities whose houses were adorned by simple cement and terracotta plaques – which themselves might be considered as latterday builders' marks – were reconstructions of the past, however recent, distorted by the prism of the present in the form of the producers' (builders') need to sell houses. In this sense, the builder-occupier relationship embodies a species of power in which the builder or developer took decisions independently, as is consistent with speculative actions generally, and whose legacy represented a form of cultural reproduction. The local shorthand for street names, for example 'poets' and 'martyrs' in Leicester and 'Welsh' and 'Cunard' streets in Liverpool, provided both a symbolic presence and an 'active presence of past experiences'.<sup>57</sup> Social meaning was derived from features in the built environment and conveyed a 'sense of one's place but also a sense of the place of others'.<sup>58</sup>

<sup>55</sup>See H. Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Oxford, 1974), 26.

<sup>56</sup>Sennett, *The Conscience of the Eye*, 60.

<sup>57</sup>Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, 54, emphasis added.

<sup>58</sup>P. Bourdieu, 'Social space and symbolic power', *Sociological Theory*, 7 (1989), 19.



**Figure 8a–e.** Middle-class decorated facades, Leicester, 1885–95.

(a) Ratcliffe Road, 1885 (b) Princes Road East (c) Springfield Road (d) St James Road (e) St John's Road.

Sources: Images by Colin Hyde.

Much emphasis has been placed on the observed and experiential aspects of the urban fabric with reference to Leicester. This relies on an understanding of how the townscape is read through the visual signals and artistic clues embedded in the built environment, and draws on studies concerned with social psychology and autobiographical memory. It also draws on the importance of visual learning at a young age when individual memories are at a particularly formative stage, and when collective memory is constructed, shared and reinforced by individual memories.<sup>59</sup> It is these repetitive everyday actions associated with familiar places, then, that are considered particularly influential and many have followed Jacobs and Lynch in stressing how the lived and visual experience of the city contributed to the ways by which citizens know their city, and construct their own identity.<sup>60</sup> Memory, according to Halbwachs, unfolded in space; recollection was based on spatial reconstruction and a person's memory was driven by their relationship with the built environment

<sup>59</sup>D. Howes and C. Classen, *Ways of Sensing: Understanding the Senses in Society* (London, 2014), 17–28; A. Huyssen, *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory* (Stanford, 2003); M. Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, trans. L.A. Coser (Chicago, 1992); M.J. Miller, *The Representation of Place: Urban Planning and Protest in France and Great Britain, 1950–1980* (Aldershot, 2003), 17; Schuman and Scott, 'Generations and collective memory'. See also W.H. Whyte, *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces* (New York, 1980), and his film [www.youtube.com/watch?v=hZ2o4RclJGM](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hZ2o4RclJGM).

<sup>60</sup>J. Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (New York, 1961), 372–90; Lynch, *The Image of the City*.

so that every recollection had a spatial and temporal framework. Jacobs claimed that ‘A city cannot be a work of art’ but recognized that ‘it is possible for the creation of art not to be so individualistic a process as it usually is in our society’. She continued: ‘Under certain circumstances, the creation of art can apparently be done by general, and in effect anonymous, consensus.’<sup>61</sup> Cloned Leicester plaques were the result, with two-thirds of them exactly the same size, and using almost identical materials – either cement or terracotta brick. Place-making was by means of the name, not the form, of the plaques.

### Another part of the island

When Best used the phrase ‘another part of the island’ in his contribution to the pathbreaking volume *Shapes on the Ground* edited by Dyos and Wolff, he had in mind the lived experience of multistorey residential dwellings – tenements – a product of the legal and institutional codes in Scotland enshrined in the Act of Union, 1707.<sup>62</sup> Though not actually shapes on the ground themselves, Scottish plaques as visual signifiers on the tenement facades were fundamentally different to those in England, as revealed in a fieldwork survey of plaques in Edinburgh that covered all streets within the 1914 boundaries of the city.<sup>63</sup>

Over 1,300 plaques were identified and categorized according to year, initials, number of storeys and type of decoration. What is immediately striking is the surge in those plaques inscribed with 1887 and 1897, the golden and diamond jubilee years that marked Queen Victoria’s accession to the throne in 1837 (Figure 9). In 1897, Edinburgh and Leicester, like London and the towns of South Wales and the Manchester conurbation, were on the upswing of a major housebuilding boom (Figure 3).<sup>64</sup> So the frequency of houses bearing the date ‘1897’ was to be expected. Exceptionally, Leicester and Edinburgh also enjoyed better than average housebuilding activity in 1887 yet it is difficult to evade the conclusion that in both years commemorative plaques were part of a national mood of celebratory and opportunistic manufacture of plates, medallions, ceramics and pottery, silverware, postage stamps in addition to processions and public events (Figure 10).<sup>65</sup>

More straightforward an explanation of the frequency of plaques in Edinburgh in jubilee years is the affection held by the queen for Scotland itself, and Scots for her. She spent 80 months of her reign in Scotland compared to a ‘paltry’ 5 weeks in

<sup>61</sup>Jacobs, *The Death and Life*, 372–3.

<sup>62</sup>G.F.A. Best, ‘Another part of the island’, in H.J. Dyos and M. Wolff (eds.), *The Victorian City: Images and Realities*, vol. II: *Shapes on the Ground/A Change of Accent* (London, 1978), 389–412.

<sup>63</sup>Leith was a separate burgh between 1833 and 1920 and is excluded from the survey area for this reason and also because so much demolition has taken place that it is difficult to draw conclusions from the remaining plaques.

<sup>64</sup>Lewis, *Building Cycles*, Appendices 4, 5, 8 and 9.

<sup>65</sup>On the jubilee year, see M. Hölscher, ‘Performances, souvenirs and music: the Diamond Jubilee of Queen Victoria 1897’, in A. Erl and A. Rigney (eds.), *Mediation, Remediation, and the Dynamics of Cultural Memory* (Berlin, 2009), 173–86; A.J. Kidd, ‘The industrial city and its pre-industrial past: the Manchester Royal Jubilee Exhibition of 1887’, *Transactions of the Lancashire and Cheshire Antiquarian Society*, 89 (1995), 54–73. More generally, see D.N. Cannadine, ‘The context, performance and meaning of ritual: the British monarchy and the “invention of tradition”, c. 1820–1977’, in E.J. Hobsbawm and T.O. Ranger (eds.), *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge, 1983), 101–64.





**Figure 9.** Edinburgh: jubilee plaque.

212 Morningside Road, 1897.

An image database can be consulted at <https://apps.mappingedinburgh.org/plaques/>

Ireland.<sup>66</sup> Her frequent visits to Scotland, and Edinburgh particularly, promoted interests of a ceremonial, military and judicial nature, and though politicians might bemoan the lack of parliamentary time for Scottish business, the presence of the monarch compensated for this and encouraged a strong Unionist element at a time when Scottish identity was undergoing change.<sup>67</sup> Queen Victoria's

<sup>66</sup>R.J. Finlay, 'Queen Victoria and the cult of the Scottish monarchy', in E.J. Cowan and R.J. Finlay (eds.), *Scottish History: The Power of the Past* (Edinburgh, 2002), 216. Prince Albert purchased the Balmoral estate for the queen in 1852, and summer visits to the highlands and stopovers en route greatly increased the exposure of the royal family in Scotland.

<sup>67</sup>C. Kidd, *Union and Unionisms: Political Thought in Scotland, 1500–2000* (Cambridge, 2008), 257–99; N. Lloyd-Jones, 'Liberalism, Scottish nationalism and the Home Rule crisis, c. 1886–93', *English Historical*

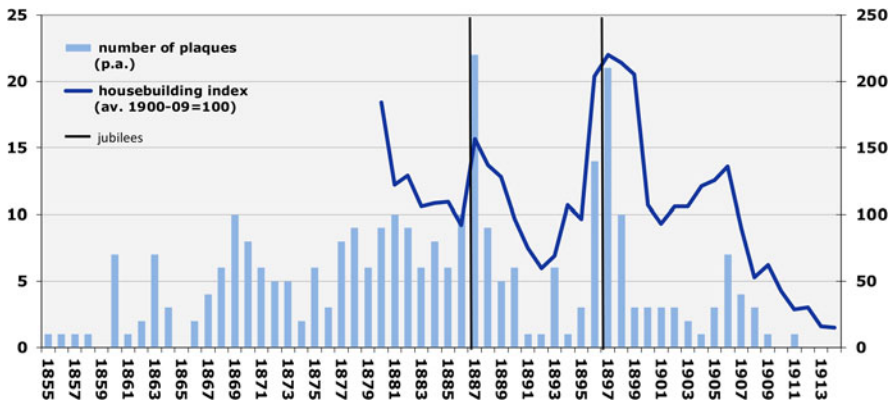


Figure 10. Building synchronicity: tenements and plaques in Edinburgh, 1855–1914.

Sources: R. Rodger, *The Transformation of Edinburgh: Land, Property and Trust in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, 2001; pbk 2004), 183, fig. 5.4; Fieldwork Survey; Edinburgh City Archives, Dean of Guild Court processes.

affection for Edinburgh itself was particularly evident, founded as it was on Prince Albert's opinion:

The impression Edinburgh has made upon us is very great; it is quite beautiful, totally unlike anything else I have seen; and what is even more, Albert, who has seen so much, says it is unlike anything he ever saw; it is so regular, everything built of massive stone, there is not a brick to be seen anywhere.<sup>68</sup>

The 'massive stone' structures to which the queen referred in 1842 – as many as 11 storeys in the Old Town – were moderated by new building conventions from the 1860s as the building authority, the Dean of Guild Court, began to extend its control beyond the jurisdictions of the Ancient and Extended Royalties of the burgh. Four-storey tenements became the norm and averaged 46 feet or 14 metres from ground to gutter. This contrasted with a single additional storey in most English terraced houses where facades decorated with a plaque at a height of approximately 12 feet (3.6 metres) from the ground were easily visible. In Edinburgh, 45 per cent of plaques were at or above the third storey (Table 4 col. a) – that is, at a height four times greater than on English Victorian terraced houses.<sup>69</sup> As a consequence, dates, initials and inscriptions (cols. b and c), which together constituted 14.2 per cent of all plaques at or above the third floor, were only legible with great difficulty and keen eyesight from street level. Indeed, the elaborate and entwined lettering is often discernible only through a telephoto lens or binoculars and raises the question: for whom were these inscriptions intended?

*Review*, 129 (2014), 862–87; G. Morton, 'Identity within the Union state, 1800–1900', in T.M. Devine and J. Wormald (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Modern Scottish History* (Oxford, 2012), 486–90.

<sup>68</sup>Queen Victoria, *Leaves from the Journal of Our Life in the Highlands from 1848 to 1861* (London, 1868), Earlier Visits to Scotland, entry for 1 Sep. 1842.

<sup>69</sup>If mews and villa properties are excluded since they rarely possessed more than one upstairs level, then 47% of all tenement plaques were at the third floor or higher.

**Table 4.** The type and distribution of Edinburgh tenement plaques, 1855–1914

	Number of plaques	Floor (a) %	Year (b) %	Initials (c) %	Blanks (d) %	Ornamentation (e) %
ground	84	7.6	1.8	0.8	2.6	2.6
1	225	20.3	4.1	2.5	11.7	2.4
2	299	27.0	7.5	4.2	14.1	2.5
3	348	31.4	4.8	4.3	15.0	7.2
4	113	10.2	2.1	1.9	3.6	0.6
5+	40	3.6	0.6	0.5	1.8	0.7
	1,109	100.0	20.8	14.2	48.9	16.1

*Notes:*

i. A fifth of the surveyed Edinburgh plaques were mews and villa dwellings. Though they too had decorated plaques, they are essentially one- and two-storey dwellings and have been excluded from Table 3 to enable the focus to be based on tenement dwellings.

ii. Where a plaque was between two storeys on the facade, it was assigned the level at which the majority of it was located.

iii. Where a feature was considered an integral part of the structure of the building, i.e. an architectural feature, and not one that was added for decorative purposes, then such plaques were discounted.

iv. In 91 cases, there are two elements on a plaque, commonly date and initials (in 17 cases this is AD).

v. A high proportion of the built up area remained intact until relatively recently. Some plaques have disappeared with recent demolition.

Source: Fieldwork Survey 2008–16.

The problem of visibility, and thus of intent, is apparent from Figure 11. Calculating the hypotenuse using average heights and street widths, a pedestrian on an Edinburgh pavement opposite a plaque would have to look upwards over 60 feet (almost 20 metres) to decipher its cast cement or soot encrusted chiselled characters. That 45 per cent of the plaques were at or above the third storey makes it difficult to claim that they were for passers-by.

Hardly could the content of the Edinburgh plaques have been at greater variance with those in Leicester, and English terraced housing generally. Inscriptions were conspicuously lacking: no personal names, no prominent people, no private emotions and no place names are to be found on the facades of tenements. Instead, almost half the plaques (48.9 per cent) were blank (Table 4 col. d), many in the geometric form of a square or circle; almost a sixth (16.1 per cent) (col. e) have decorative features, mostly a floral motif. The epigraphy of Edinburgh plaques is confined to dates (20.8 per cent), personal initials (14.2 per cent) and a few Latin and biblical inscriptions mostly in working-class districts (Table 5). For example, at first floor level is the inscription ‘The lord reigneth, let the earth rejoice’ (Psalm 97:1); ‘love God above all and your neighbour as yourself’ (Matthew 22:36–40).<sup>70</sup> Elsewhere, moralizing motifs were embedded in facades, as by builders W. and D. McGregor’s Clan McGregor motto, ‘E’EN DO AND SPARE NOCHT’ (In what you do, spare nothing) at both the first floor level of 17 Glengyle Terrace, and the stratospheric fourth floor of 1 Warrender Park Crescent (Figure 12).

Scottish icons are represented in the form of a thistle and the saltire, the distinctive St Andrew’s ‘X’ shape of the national flag on a blue background. These emblems

<sup>70</sup>Respectively at 24 Ardmillan Terrace, Dalry; 66 West Port, Grassmarket.

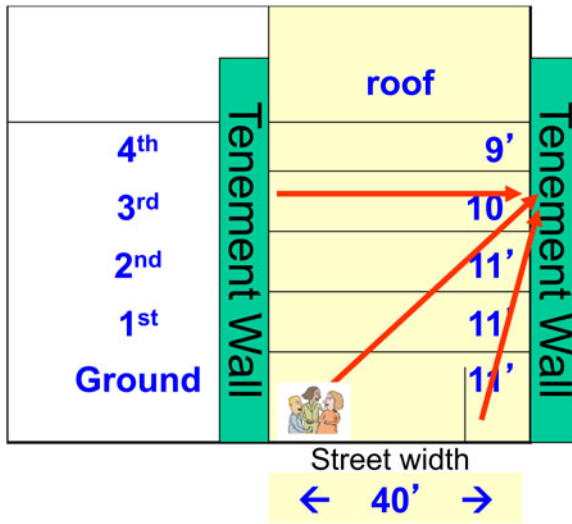


Figure 11. Visibility and verticality: deciphering the facades.

Table 5. Selected Latin and biblical inscriptions on Edinburgh plaques

ero spero (I shall be what I hope to be)	15 Cornwall Street
superna sequor (I follow heavenly things)	4 Wheatfield Road
*nisi dominus frustra (life without the Lord is in vain)	15 James' Court
Pos[t] nubila phoebus (after clouds, sunshine)	2 Dalgety Street
sola virtus nobilitat (virtue alone is noble)	160 Fountainbridge
±vale vincique (vanquished; completed)	23 Maryfield

\*This is also the motto of the City of Edinburgh and is a shortened version of Psalm 107:1: 'Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labour in vain.' See also M. Beard, 'Why ditch a motto?', *Times Literary Supplement*, 16 Sep. 2011.

±This is the family motto of the Murray family, and the initials on the plaque 'aam' refer most probably to Alfred Alexander Arbuthnot Murray, to whom reference is also made at 33 Marionville Road on what was Lord Moray's estate. The much eroded inscription there reads 'HIC DOMUS AEDIFIC[AT]US ALUREDO A MURRAY DOMINO IOH HOGG ADIUVANTE 1898' (this house was built by Alfred A. Murray, master, with the assistance of John Hogg in 1898).

are not numerous, though those with thistles at Ashley Terrace, Downfield Place and Willowbrae Road are prominent (Figure 13). Others are more subtle, as at Spottiswoode Street and Viewforth, where the thistle is linked to the crown through the commemoration of Queen Victoria's accession, and elsewhere on villas where the thistle is cleverly entwined in a union with the English rose, as, for example, at Mortonhall Road. It might be thought that middle-class villas would present more highly distinctive and elaborate plaques, but this was not the case. Indeed, the proportion of blank plaques on villas was even higher than on tenements – 61 per cent compared to 47 per cent – and though there were some fine artistic villa plaques it is important to bear in mind that tenement dwelling was far from an exclusively working-class form of accommodation in Scotland.

If nationalist icons were relatively scarce, it is partly because of the increasing visibility of a distinctively Scots baronial architecture (Figure 14). The newly created



**Figure 12a–b.** Moralizing motifs.

(a) Glengyle Terrace: ‘E’EN DO AND SPARE NOCHT’ (b) Bristo Place: ‘vigilantibus non dormientibus’ – ‘vigilant not negligent’ – usually taken as the law of equity aids the vigilant, not the ones who sleep over their rights.

Cockburn Street (1856–64), designed to forge an accessible S-shaped commercial link between the revamped Waverley station (1854) and the ridge of the Old Town, introduced an architectural language that dominated the built environment for 40 years. With their castellated roof-lines and turrets, visually plagiarized from medieval tower houses and more specifically from Sir Walter Scott’s Abbotsford home and the queen’s Balmoral Castle, this invented Scots neo-gothic style was widely adopted in the 1870s by the city council as the basis for new housing constructed under the Edinburgh Improvement Act, 1867. It was then replicated subsequently by private builders of tenements and suburban villas particularly in the streets of the Warrender and Marchmont estates.<sup>71</sup>

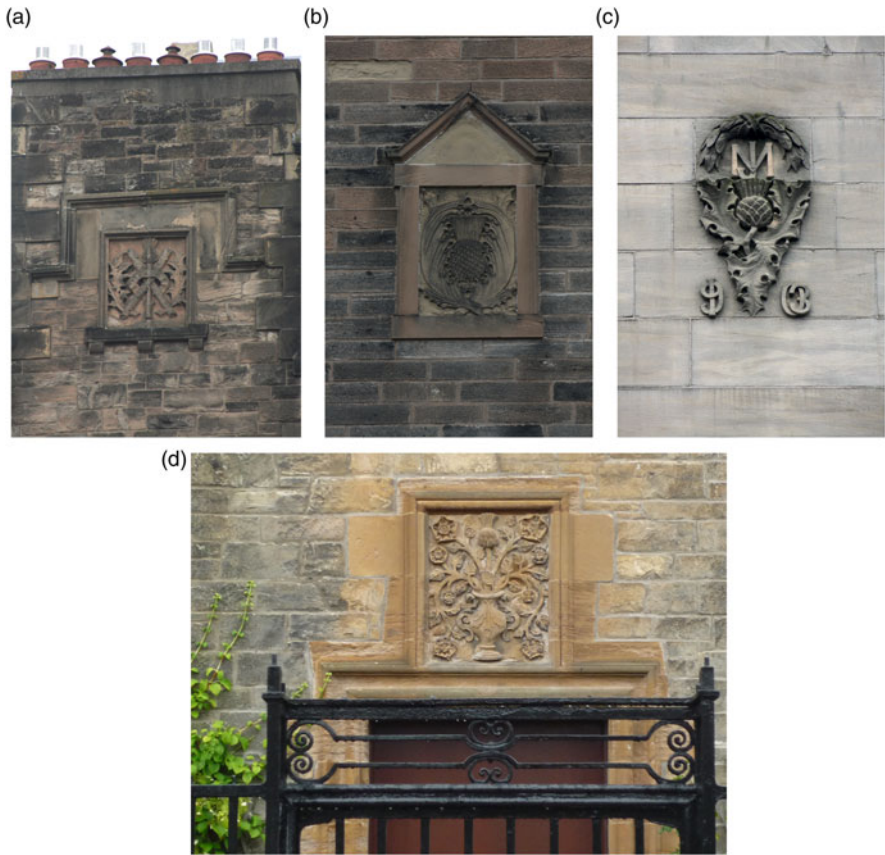
There was little need for modest plaques with inferential motifs when an entire street facade screamed Scottishness. Indeed, like Wales and Ireland, late Victorian Scotland, and Edinburgh, developed what Borsay described as ‘robust versions of national culture’.<sup>72</sup> The restored Mercat Cross, reinvented High Kirk of St Giles, reconstructed medieval castle, renewed pride in Gaelic culture and the cult of William Wallace – a much larger than life sculpture in the Grand Hall of the Edinburgh International Exhibition of Industry, Science and Art in 1886 – each leeches symbolic meaning from Edinburgh’s imagined past.<sup>73</sup> Firmly rooted in

<sup>71</sup>For further information on Peddie and Kinnear, the architects of Cockburn Street, and Cousin and Lessels, architects of the City Improvements, 1867, see the *Dictionary of Scottish Architects*, [www.scot-tisharchitects.org.uk/](http://www.scot-tisharchitects.org.uk/).

<sup>72</sup>Borsay, ‘New approaches to social history’, 879.

<sup>73</sup>R.J. Morris, ‘The capitalist, the professor and the soldier: the re-making of Edinburgh Castle’, *Planning Perspectives*, 22 (2007), 55–78; G. Morton, ‘“The most efficacious patriot”: the heritage of William Wallace





**Figure 13a–d.** Nationalist iconography: thistles.  
 (a) Willowbrae Road (b) Ashley Terrace (c) Downfield Place (d) Mortonhall Road.

Edinburgh, this investment in a robust nationalist culture was reinforced by an interest in the heritage of the built environment through the foundation of the Cockburn Association (1875) – Britain’s first civic society – and the commissioning of tableaux in the enlarged City Chambers that unashamedly, and with considerable licence, depicted local historical events.<sup>74</sup> While ‘the continuing and enthusiastic integration of the Scottish nation into the structures of the British state and by its whole-hearted participation in the wider imperial experience’<sup>75</sup> were powerful ‘teutonizing’ elements before 1880, there then followed a greater interest in devolved power and

in the nineteenth century’, *Scottish Historical Review*, 77 (1998), 224–51; J.S. Gibson, *The Thistle and the Crown: A History of the Scottish Office* (Edinburgh, 1985), 1–27.

<sup>74</sup>W. Smith, ‘Old London, old Edinburgh: constructing historic cities’, in M. Filipová (ed.), *Cultures of International Exhibitions 1840–1940: Great Exhibitions at the Margins* (Farnham, 2015), especially 212–19.

<sup>75</sup>C. Kidd, ‘Teutonist ethnology and Scottish nationalist inhibition, 1780–1880’, *Scottish Historical Review*, 74 (1995), 46.



**Figure 14a–d.** Symbolic nationalism: Scots baronial and Victorian gothic.

(a) Sir Walter Scott's Abbotsford House (b) Cockburn Street, newly formed 1856 (c) Marchmont Crescent (private development, late 1870s) with turrets, battlements and a shield (d) West Port, part of the City Council Improvement Scheme, 1887.

Source: (a) Historic Environment Scotland, Canmore database DP00065720.

what has been termed 'primordial unionism'.<sup>76</sup> Under the auspices of the Convention of Royal Burghs in 1884, a meeting in Edinburgh of Scottish MPs, aristocracy and members of town councils, parishes and institutions advanced the case for a degree of Home Rule. This resulted in the formation of the Scottish Home Rule Association in 1886 after the MP for Edinburghshire, Prime Minister Gladstone, explained that he was 'glad whenever she [Edinburgh] is able judiciously to assert her position as the capital of the country' yet gave only lukewarm support for Scottish Home Rule despite introducing a similar measure for Ireland the same year.<sup>77</sup>

Whereas in Leicester symbolic meaning was created and conveyed through the historical and contemporary content of the plaques, in late Victorian Edinburgh collective historical memory was undergoing careful reconstructive surgery; it was not just a legacy of an invented highland tradition and a tartanizing of Scotland, often associated with Sir Walter Scott's choreography for the visit of

<sup>76</sup>I. McLean and A. McMillan, *State of the Union: Unionism and the Alternatives in the United Kingdom since 1707* (Oxford, 2005), 122–34.

<sup>77</sup>*The Scotsman*, 24 Nov. 1885, p. 5 col. e, quoted in G.W. Smith, 'Displaying Edinburgh in 1886: the International Exhibition of Industry, Science and Art', University of Edinburgh Ph.D. thesis, 2015, 129.

George IV to Edinburgh in 1822.<sup>78</sup> The religious, legal, administrative and financial institutions headquartered in the city reinforced national narratives on an everyday basis. The knowledge economy as reflected in the city's reputation for science, technology and medicine attracted British conferences and international delegations of eminent men and their professional organizations.<sup>79</sup> Enlightenment Edinburgh possessed an international reputation, and the sense of rationality was conveyed through the strict geometry of New Town Georgian streets, severe and shorn of all plaques. Elsewhere in the city, the prevalence of blank plaques – 51 per cent compared to 7 per cent in Leicester – indicated little need to manufacture a historic past for the present. Plaques were, exceptionally, left blank in Leicester but deliberately so in Edinburgh.

In addition to the relative absence of thistles and saltires on the facades, and the lack of imperial and biographical references, three further considerations confirm the redundancy of Edinburgh plaques in relation to a national narrative. First, the distribution of inscribed and blank plaques differed hardly at all spatially (Figure 15). Secondly, in a vertically organized, multistorey built environment with 49 per cent of Edinburgh blank plaques at or above the third storey, there could be no intention to install and then subsequently chisel out lettering on blanks in situ as this was logistically impossible.<sup>80</sup> Thirdly, where plaques exhibited highly skilled artistic work, then they were displayed openly at ground or first floor level, as at Bruntsfield Gardens with a plaque designed by Sir George Washington Browne, Wester Coates Avenue, and the 'Ruskinian' details of West Fountainbridge (Figure 16).<sup>81</sup>

How, then, should the vertically aligned trio of blank plaques at 2 Mayfield Road be interpreted? Indeed, in nine other locations three blanks were visible on the tenement frontage; in 68 instances two blank plaques were fixed to the facade of a tenement (Figure 17). Scattered across Edinburgh, 20 per cent of all blanks were either clustered in groups of twos or threes at the same address. The explanation for the blank Edinburgh plaques is that they added interest, but little meaning, to tenements by breaking up the surface of what would otherwise have been monotonous four-storey tenement facades. It was 'the architecture of the well-tempered environment', and contrasted with the facades of terraced housing where no such opportunities existed.<sup>82</sup>

<sup>78</sup>H. Trevor-Roper, 'The invention of tradition: the highland tradition of Scotland', in Hobsbawm and Ranger (eds.), *The Invention of Tradition*, 15–42; P. Cadell, '1822 and all that', *Scottish Archives*, 16 (2010), 41–50; D. McCrone, A. Morris and R. Keily, *Scotland – the Brand: The Making of Scottish Heritage* (Edinburgh, 1995), 50–61. See also M. Noble, 'Common good and the reform of local government: Edinburgh 1820–56', University of Edinburgh Ph.D. thesis, 2017, ch. 5.

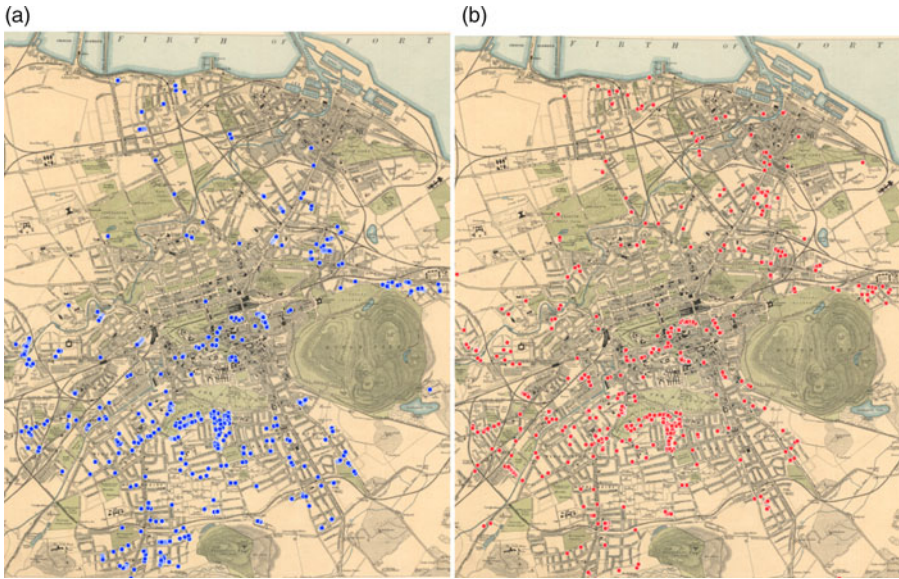
<sup>79</sup>R. Rodger, 'The common good and civic promotion: Edinburgh 1860–1914', in R. Colls and R. Rodger (eds.), *Cities of Ideas: Civil Society and Urban Governance in Britain 1800–2000* (Aldershot, 2004), 144–77; R. Madgin and R. Rodger, 'Inspiring capital? Deconstructing myths and reconstructing urban environments, Edinburgh 1860–2010', *Urban History*, 40 (2013), 507–29.

<sup>80</sup>Mews and villa accommodation has been excluded to render the data consistent. The relevant percentage drops to 31% for tenement inscriptions at the third floor or above.

<sup>81</sup>See Royal Commission on Ancient and Historical Monuments, Canmore ID 612832 and 143373 for 2 Bruntsfield Gardens and 158–64 West Fountainbridge. The intertwined initials at 2 Wester Coates Avenue, WKA, refer to W. Kinloch Allan and MMT to his wife. See *Edinburgh Post Office Directory, 1901–02*, and J. Gifford, C. McWilliam and D. Walker, *The Buildings of Scotland: Edinburgh* (Harmondsworth, 1988), 265.

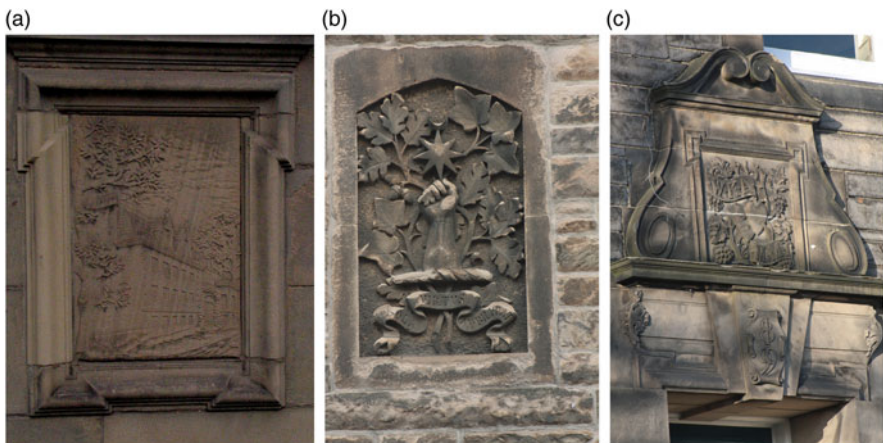
<sup>82</sup>R. Banham, *The Architecture of the Well-Tempered Environment* (Chicago, 1984), 126.





**Figure 15a–b.** Geographical distribution of blank and decorated plaques, Edinburgh, 1850–1914. (a) blank (b) decorated.

Source: Based on fieldwork surveys; maps reproduced with permission of the National Library of Scotland and OpenStreetMap as part of MappingEdinburgh, AHRC funded project AH/K002457/1.



**Figure 16a–c.** Elaboration in Edinburgh plaques. (a) 2 Bruntsfield Gardens (b) 160 West Fountainbridge (c) 2 Wester Coates Avenue.

The Dean of Guild Court, the city’s ancient body that considered petitions to authorize building, was occasionally presented with plans and sections in which blank shields and decorative plaques were already sketched. This was the case with planning applications from builders Peter Whyte for tenements at Edina Place; J. McDonald Cruikshank in Ashley Terrace; and Galloway and Mackintosh



**Figure 17a–f.** Blank plaques and tenement facades.

(a) Brunton Terrace (b) and (c) Warrender Park Road (d) Admiral Terrace (e) Video Abbeyhill (f) Video Roseburn Terrace.

in Warrender Park Road (Figure 18).<sup>83</sup> The production of the plaques, both blanks and lettered stonework, was undertaken either at the builder's yard, or obtained from a builder's merchant. Unlike Leicester builders, their Edinburgh brethren often displayed their initials on a tenement facade, thereby leaving their logo and establishing a measure of territoriality over a particular area of the city. The initials AH, JP, DM, DO and W&DMc were the durable business cards in cement or stone for the building firms of Andrew Hood, John Pyper, David Mekie, David Oliver (Figure 19) and W. and D. McGregor (Figure 12). Architect/builder Edward

<sup>83</sup>Edinburgh City Archives, Dean of Guild Court planning registers, and plans.





Figure 17a-f. Continued.

Videos can be consulted at <https://apps.mappingedinburgh.org/plaques/>.

Calvert (Figure 18) unashamedly publicized his work in Marchmont and Meadowbank inscribing his initials ‘EC’ and profession, ‘archt.’, as did the self-styled James Gowans, and the distinguished architectural practice of Peddie and Kinnear (PK). Companies also left their calling cards as with ‘SBC’ and ‘ABc’ – the Strathearn Building Company and the Argyle Building Company – and, most conspicuously, the Edinburgh Co-operative Building Company Ltd, whose stoneworked plaques of building tradesmen’s tools decorated some of their distinctive housing developments.<sup>84</sup> This intertwining of cultural symbols and entrepreneurial capital, the ‘symbolic economy’, was, and always has been, just good business, and successful builders – Zukin’s ‘place entrepreneurs’ – were quite capable of reading and responding to shifting market opportunities.<sup>85</sup>

The decision to use decorated or blank plaques, or none at all, rested with the builder. In the terraced houses of Leicester, these were mainly poured concrete tablets; in the case of middle-class villas, terracotta and brick materials were not uncommon. Mostly, these were obtained from building trades merchants, firms like Reginald and Jacob Stanley’s Haunchwood Brick and Tile Co. Ltd in Nuneaton, founded in 1866.<sup>86</sup> (Figure 20). Tucker and Son of Loughborough, Heather Bricks and Terracotta, Gibbs & Canning Ltd, Tamworth, and, more locally, the Whitwick Colliery Company Ltd, Coalville, and Ellis, Partridge and Co., Leicester, were amongst a strong Midlands contingent of clay-based firms supplying local markets.<sup>87</sup> In Edinburgh, materials were of cement or stone, with various

<sup>84</sup>R. Rodger, *Edinburgh’s Colonies: Housing the Workers* (Argyll, 2011), 25.

<sup>85</sup>S. Zukin, *The Culture of Cities* (Oxford, 1995), 3–7.

<sup>86</sup>Warwickshire County Record Office, Haunchwood Brick and Tile Co. Ltd, Sales, and Catalogue, CR 2816, CR 2293/9, CR 3123/2.

<sup>87</sup>Sears (ed.), *The Architects’ Compendium*.



**Figure 18a–h.** Designing plaques: architects' plans.

(a–b) Warrender Park plan and plaque (c–d) Ashley Terrace plan and initials (e–f) Edina Place plan and date (g–h) Cowgatehead plan and initials.

Source: Edinburgh City Archives, Dean of Guild Court registers and plans, petitions (a–b) 25 July 1885 (c–d) 8 April 1899 (e–f) 4 August 1888 (g–h) 9 February 1872.

firms such as J.A. Dobbie and Co. and A. Dougal and Sons supplying the trade with plaques, that is, if skilled masons employed by building firms did not themselves undertake the work at the yard. The Edinburgh and Leith Post Office Directory, 1910, carried adverts from 20 suppliers of brick, fireclay and tile products, and there were almost as many cement and artificial stone merchants.



Figure 18a–h. Continued.



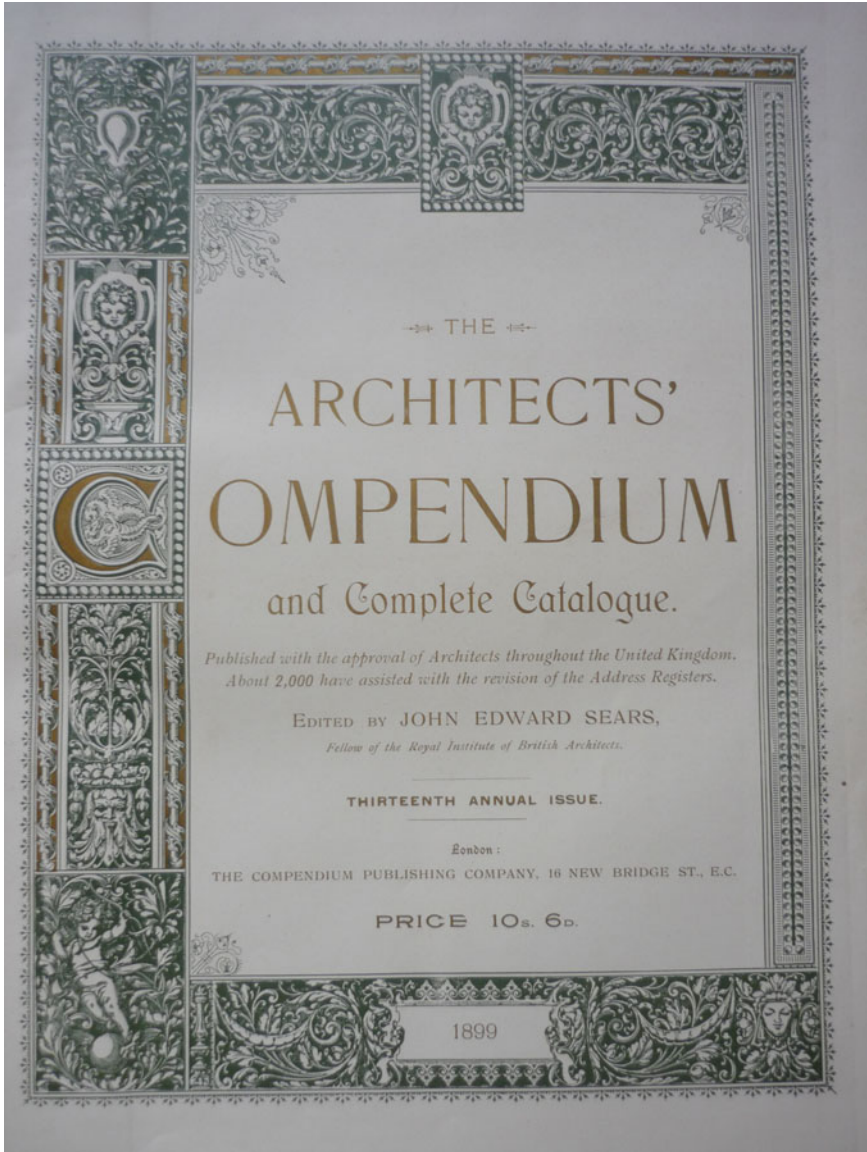
Figure 19a–d. Signatures in stone: builder’s initials.

(a) Andrew Hood, Brunton Terrace (1900) (b) David Mekie, Waverley Park (1900) (c) David Oliver, Gorgie Road (d) John Pyper, Marchmont Crescent (1886).

### Present futures: choosing a past<sup>88</sup>

Embedded in the facades of terraced housing, a story of the nation was constructed. The glories of conquest, the embrace of world events, the recognition

<sup>88</sup>The phrase is a corruption of K. Lynch, ‘The presence of the past’, in K. Lynch, *What Time Is This Place?* (Cambridge, MA, 1972), 29–64.



**Figure 20a–c.** Merchandizing plaques: buildings trades stocklist.  
(a) *Architects' Compendium* annually carried adverts and stocklists of thousands of building trades suppliers throughout the UK (b) G. Tucker and Sons, Loughborough – note the block for 1905 (c) Haunchwood Brick and Tile Co. Ltd, Nuneaton.  
Sources: Record Office for Leicester, Leicestershire and Rutland, Records of G. Tucker and Sons, DE2290/23/1/7; *Builders Compendium and Complete Catalogue* (London, 1899).

of religious influences, the achievements of great men, the species of the natural world, all were part of encoded inscriptions in the everyday life of working people whether in Leicester, or other gridded English





Figure 20a–c. Continued.

cities.<sup>89</sup> This was ‘print capitalism’<sup>90</sup> in hard copy – cement and stone. These tablets or plaques were the ‘little tactics of habitat’ that contributed to

<sup>89</sup>Though not systematically sampled, casual empiricism elsewhere in England and Wales confirms similar topics and coverage on plaques to those in Leicester.

<sup>90</sup>B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London, 1991).





Figure 20a–c. Continued.

place-making. They demonstrated that there is ‘for virtually everyone a deep association with and consciousness of the places where we were born and grew up, where we live now, or where we have had particularly moving experiences’.<sup>91</sup> Ironically, in that historically most literate of English-speaking nations, Scotland, the need to

<sup>91</sup>E. Relph, *Place and Placelessness* (London, 1976), 43.

inscribe walls with words was inessential, as the preponderance of blank plaques confirmed, precisely because a political identity was forged by a creative imagination of a different complexion, both literary and artistic.<sup>92</sup>

In an era of rapid and extensive construction between 1860 and 1910, when building bylaws began to have some force, the reproduction of physical capital in the form of homogeneous terraced housing coincided with a national narrative that was implanted in the local imagination by means of terracotta and cast cement plaques. As a result, the nature of housebuilding production and the culture of consumption combine both as a reflection of the past and a durable legacy for the future. It was precisely this durability that facilitated the street level survey and explains why in 2000 almost 30 per cent of the Leicester housing stock had been built before 1914.<sup>93</sup> Collective memories for the community were, however, selective memories of the builders. Their choices were conditioned in part by the saleability of the property they had built, and so were not made entirely independently;<sup>94</sup> their choices contributed to the folklore and historical narratives with which children acquired knowledge, triggered as they were by adult explanations of the Relief of Mafeking, or Stanley's meeting with Livingstone, Grace Darling's heroism at sea, countless battles and a familiarization with the names of prime ministers. Commercial purpose was turned to educative purpose through the medium of decorated terraced properties, and contrasted with the more instrumental initials and occasional moralizing inscribed on Scottish facades.

To demolish a single prominent building is to lose an old friend and a navigational aid, but to demolish entire neighbourhoods is to forfeit the mental and physical landmarks that are deeply embedded in the cumulative and iterative memory of generations. Such losses adversely affect the ability of one generation to communicate with another; common ground actually is lost. This is not just confined to the decorated facades of buildings. As a recent exhibition explained with reference to often forgotten or overlooked artefacts: 'the act of highlighting them [the artefacts] celebrates their history and encourages debate on the relevance of such shared functional objects in past, present and future communities'.<sup>95</sup> Clearly, collective memories are essentially reconstructions of the past distorted by the prism of the present. Or put more elegantly, 'those sleeping images which spring to life unbidden, and serve as ghostly sentinels of our thought...provide us with our stock of figures, our subliminal points of reference, our unspoken point of address'.<sup>96</sup> The sleeping images on the facades and the urban milieu in which they were created have meaning for the present, and the future.

**Supplementary Material.** The supplementary material for this article can be found at <https://apps.mappingedinburgh.org/plaques/>.

<sup>92</sup>M. Lynch (ed.), *The Oxford Companion to Scottish History* (Oxford, 2001), 563. See also Old Statistical Account of Scotland.

<sup>93</sup>R. Rodger, 'The built environment', in D. Nash *et al.*, *Leicester in the Twentieth Century* (Stroud, 1993), 3.

<sup>94</sup>Granovetter, 'The problem of embeddedness', 495.

<sup>95</sup>The Transient Gallery Exhibition, Leith Customs House, Sep. 2015. See also [www.grastudio.co.uk/](http://www.grastudio.co.uk/).

<sup>96</sup>R. Samuel, *Theatres of Memory*, vol. I: *Past and Present in Contemporary Culture* (London, 1994), 27.

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