



# Oxford Dictionary of National Biography

## **Oxford DNB: February 2019**

From February 2019, the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (*Oxford DNB*) offers biographies of 63,261 men and women who have shaped the British past, contained in 60,994 articles. 11,681 biographies include a portrait image of the subject – researched in partnership with the National Portrait Gallery, London.

The February 2019 update adds 10 articles, containing 10 biographies, accompanied by 2 portrait likenesses. The particular focus is on planners responsible for the redevelopment of Britain's cities in the years after 1945. These newly-added lives have been curated by Professor Otto Saumarez Smith of the University of Warwick.

## **Introduction to the lives of urban planners, by Professor Otto Saumarez Smith**

There are few professions in Britain as widely denigrated as the subject of this new release of *Oxford DNB* entries. Britain's post-war urban planners are regularly held up as bogeymen, responsible for a variety of calamities, from the despoliation of historic buildings, to the break-up of traditional communities, and the imposition of gimcrack, over-scaled, ugly, concrete monstrosities on comfortably traditional townscapes.

As part of my PhD I wrote a chapter on the architect planner Graeme Shankland. In many ways he seemed to fit the bill of the megalomaniacal 1960s planner, and his car-centric plan for central Liverpool was notorious. But in other ways, I discovered a much more humane character; someone who cared deeply for the specific character of urban places, was reflective rather than belligerent, and was pioneering in his approach to historic preservation. What was true for Shankland largely turned out to be true of his entire profession. My book on the subject, *Boom Cities, Architect Planners and the Politics of Radical Urban Renewal in 1960s Britain* is being published by Oxford University Press in April this year.

These *Oxford DNB* entries are a contribution to the ongoing reassessment of these controversial figures. They attempt to understand, rather than merely castigate, the profession at the heart of

the unparalleled physical transformation of urban Britain in these years. The cumulative effect won't necessarily be to exonerate post-war planning, and they may not convince readers to re-evaluate the aesthetic and urbanistic qualities of divisive buildings covered in these entries, like Cumbernauld Town Centre, 'Pooley's Folly' in Aylesbury, or Bradford city centre. Nevertheless, a more sympathetic approach is important, because it can help us to understand how the ideas of radical planners achieved such complete transformative ascendancy in the post-war period. The subject is hugely significant because of the profound effect it had, and continues to have, on everyday lives and places across the country.

Otto Saumarez Smith

### February 2019: summary of newly-added lives

In early 1946, the London-born and educated civil engineer **Stanley Gordon Wardley (1901-1965)** became city engineer and surveyor of Bradford, West Yorkshire, where, in 1953, he set out his vision for a reconstructed city centre, with ring roads, expressways, and pedestrian subways. His new city centre and motorway system was achieved at great speed, and on a massive scale, embodying what seemed a futuristic vision, though by the end of the twentieth century much of it began to be dismantled. The traffic plan for Leicester, published in 1964, which was the work of the city's Polish-born town planner (**Wladyslaw**) **Konrad Smigielski (1908-1999)**, rejected concentric ring roads in favour of a single inner motorway encircling a central area to which private motor traffic would be severely limited. His ambitious plans for a monorail were rejected by central government, and his plan was never implemented. He turned to other, smaller-scale projects in the city, among them the preservation of the Georgian New Walk. The first chief city architect for Birmingham, **Alwyn Gwilym Sheppard Fidler (1909-1990)**, who had trained at the Liverpool school of architecture, was appointed in 1952, and made high-quality design a priority, winning civic trust awards for new housing estates, but came into conflict with councillors who wanted quicker results. Later, in 1976, his practice produced the master plan for the new town of Telford, and designed the Bourne Hall library in Epsom. Another graduate of the Liverpool School of Architecture, **Percy Edwin Alan Johnson-Marshall (1915-1993)** taught at the University of Edinburgh department of architecture which he combined with private practice. His ideas were set out in his book *Rebuilding Cities* (1966). Born in Hampstead Garden Suburb into a family with Bloomsbury group connections, **Dame Elizabeth Ursula Chesterton (1915-2002)** graduated from the Architectural Association School of Architecture and became a freelance planning consultant. Her 1964 report on King's Lynn helped to spare the town from a projected ring road, which would have demolished historic riverside warehouses. Her largest completed scheme was for the National Motor Museum at Beaulieu, which opened in 1972. Born in Vienna and a refugee from Nazism whose parents died in the holocaust, **Walter George Bor (1916-1999)** became Liverpool's first planning officer in 1962 and proved a pioneering city planner, preserving pedestrian precincts protecting the dominance of landmark buildings, revitalizing public transport, and building two new river tunnels. In private practice, he produced a plan for the new city of Milton Keynes (1970) and undertook consultancy, including a new city

centre for the Iranian capital, Tehran, though the scheme was halted by the Islamic revolution of 1979. His book *The Making of Cities* (1972) explained planning to a general audience. Needing to respond to London overspill, Buckinghamshire's chief architect from 1954, **Frederick [Fred] Bernard Pooley (1916-1998)** preferred to work within the county's vernacular building styles, though ironically he came to be associated with the twelve-storey concrete tower in Aylesbury, built in 1966 to house the county council's offices. His plans for the North Bucks New City, incorporating monorail public transport, were announced in 1964, but were opposed by central government, and replaced by Milton Keynes, based on the car, though the idea of a well-sited new city in the north of the county remained his legacy. After drawing an unrealised plan for a new town at Hook, Hampshire, **Colin Graham Lindsay [Graeme] Shankland (1917-1984)** became a planning consultant for Liverpool's city centre, working with Walter Bor, and produced in 1965 an ambitious plan including an elevated six-lane inner ring road, which was abandoned in 1973 having in the meantime resulted in planning blight. Trained at the University of Liverpool as a civil engineer, **Sir Wilfred Burns (1923-1984)** became a planner at Coventry which was seen as being at the forefront of post-war planning thought in Britain, through traffic management and pedestrianization. In 1960 he became head of planning at Newcastle upon Tyne, where he applied a radical philosophy, ripping through the centre with an urban motorway, and sacrificing important aspects of its Georgian townscape for a new shopping centre and roundabout. From 1968 he was a civil servant, during a period when the system of planning which he had implemented, was dismantled. In 1958 **Geoffrey Copcutt (1928-1997)** joined the development corporation of the third of Scotland's post-war new towns, Cumbernauld, to the north-west of Glasgow, and was group leader for the planned town centre, which included a futuristic vision for a decked concrete structure, eight storeys high, with indoor shopping malls. It received an architectural award in 1967 but by 2005, when parts had already been demolished, it was voted Britain's 'most hated building'.

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