

WEEKLY
MANUFACTURING
REPORTS

**CIVIC GOSPELS:
NETWORKS FOR SOCIAL CHANGE**

Civic Gospels: Networks for Social Change

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General Sources

Written by Dr Andy Green, 2008.

www.connectinghistories.org.uk/birminghamstories.asp



Chamberlain Square. [Photo: A.Green]



Louisa Ann Ryland. [Portraits Collection]

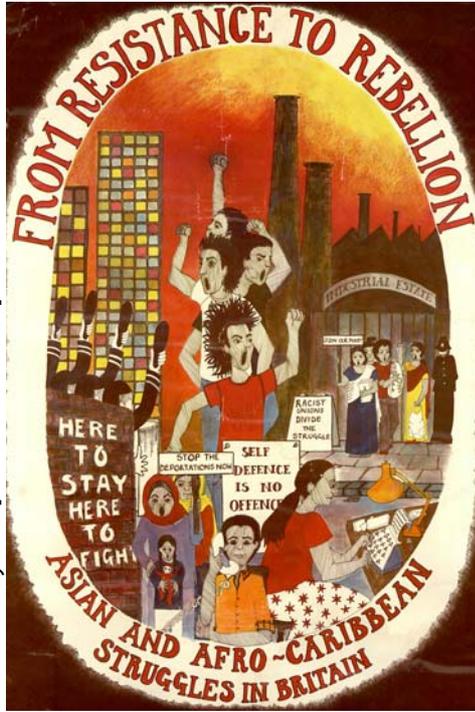


Image from Banner Archive. [MS 1611/91/134]



Joseph Chamberlain. [Highbury Collection]

Civic Gospels: Networks for Social Change

Understanding how social activity has created change in the past forms a basis for realising how change can take place in the future. History books often focus on the lives of 'great men', yet social transformations are also created by changing networks of activists and workers. In the late 19th century, work began in Birmingham to dynamically alter the landscape and provide better living conditions for inhabitants. The term 'civic gospel' became used to express the idea of a new relationship between the town and its people. This learning guide will explore the civic gospel and look at more recent 'networks of change'.

Yet behind the famous figurehead of Chamberlain, many others became involved in trying to improve Birmingham. Louisa Ann Ryland donated the grounds for Cannon Hill Park and funded hospitals; Quaker industrialists like the Tangye brothers donated funds for the Art Gallery. Soon, Birmingham was being described as 'the best governed city in the world'. Yet behind this statement lay many struggles and conflicts. In the 20th century, new social networks were needed to combat deeply rooted problems in housing, education and everyday working life.

Making Changes in Urban Life

When Joseph Chamberlain became the mayor in 1873, he immediately set out to provide new public amenities such as gas and water and to sweep away poorly housed slum areas with more cosmopolitan zones such as Corporation Street.

"Rookeries and squalid courts have given way to fine streets and open places."

Joseph Chamberlain, 1892.



Slide from Banner Archive. [MS 1611/Box 6/242]

Key Debate:
what can the term 'civic gospel' mean to us today?

Landmarks of the Civic Gospel

1865

Central Reference Library

1867

B'ham Education League

1873

Chamberlain Town Mayor

1874-6

Municipal Gas and Water

1875

Streets Improvement

1879

Council House

1885

Art Gallery

1889

'City' status granted

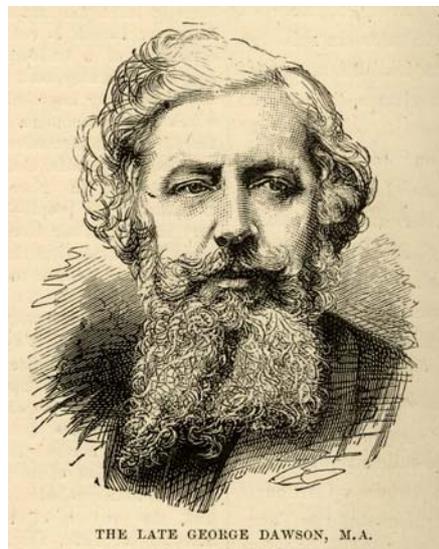
1900

Birmingham University

Religion and Reform

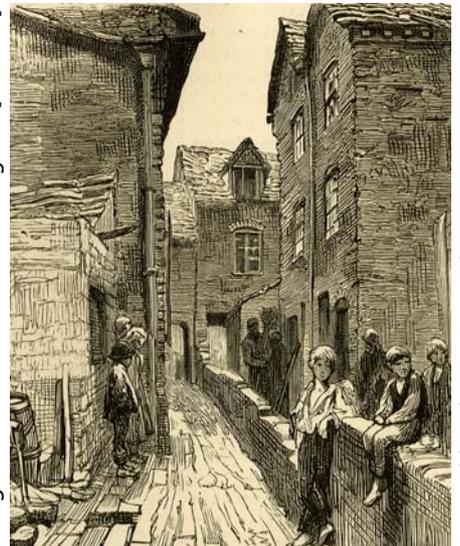
Non-conformist Churches and the Civic Gospel

The dynamic outlook of non-conformist churches (including Quakers, Baptists and Unitarians) were a vital influence in shaping Chamberlain's view of the civic gospel. Preachers like George Dawson and R.W. Dale became figureheads who articulated the importance of culture and civic pride alongside spiritual growth. Yet this could hardly improve conditions for everyone. Large numbers still struggled in distressing poverty. As streets were rebuilt, many families were displaced from their homes and business owners often gained more than their workers. Illiteracy and poor housing remained rife. Abandoned by progress, new migrant settlers faced walls of prejudice and often bore the brunt of ongoing inequalities. The impressive achievements of the civic gospel (seen in left hand column) left an unfinished legacy.



THE LATE GEORGE DAWSON, M.A.

George Dawson. Old and New Birmingham [BCOL.73]



Dent, Old and New Birmingham [BCOL.73]

Birmingham's History and Political Reforms

The civic gospel was part of a longer tradition that placed Birmingham at the heart of wider political changes. Before the 1870's era of social improvement, Birmingham was deeply connected with national struggles concerning the right to vote. Its rapidly growing urban population wanted to shift power away from aristocratic landowners who had inherited economic wealth and political privileges by birth. In 1832, Thomas Attwood of the Birmingham Political Union had led an estimated rally of 200,000 at Newhall Hill to call for a Parliamentary act to increase political representation. By the late 1830s, local connections with the 'chartist' movement developed a more radical 'working class' edge. In 1839 the 'Bull Ring Riots' highlighted tension between those who demanded power for 'workers' and not 'owners'. The civic gospel continued these histories of political debate.

Key Debate:

what was more important to the 'civic gospel', changing ideas or changing conditions?



Political Gathering on Newhall Hill, 1832. [WK/B11/8320]

Antislavery

Chartism

Civic Gospel

Trade Unions

Changing Political Landscapes

Birmingham on Strike!

By the end of the 19th century, the local optimism that galvanised the gospel began to wane. As industries headed for decline, socialist ideas and trade unions began to grow. Formed in 1889, the 'Bedstead Workers Association' brought 3,000 local workers out on strike to call for an important pay rise. Such protests established a legacy for later 20th century industrial actions. Attempts to safeguard working class life were usually criticized by the press and attacked by the government as 'irresponsible' or 'criminal'.

Birmingham and the 'Age of Empire'

As the age of the civic gospel subsided, Birmingham was swept into the age of empire. After transforming the city, Chamberlain now began to view overseas imperialism as offering the solution to economic problems at home. As Britain's Colonial Secretary, he remarked "I believe that the British race is the greatest of the governing races that the world has ever seen... It is not enough to occupy great spaces of the world's surface unless you can make the best of them". This patriarchal attitude towards other countries led to widespread conflicts and the exploitation of British 'territories' in the early 20th century. By the 1950s, Birmingham had become a prominent destination for migrant citizens who were promised jobs and homes in the 'mother country' in exchange for fulfilling labour shortages after WWII. These hopes were torn with the harsh realities of racism and low paid work. Protests for better social conditions were renewed once more as a post-colonial struggle that affected all sections of the working class.



Bedstead making in Birmingham, 1902. [WK/B11/0535]

Key Debate:
how did Birmingham's working class
engage in social protest?

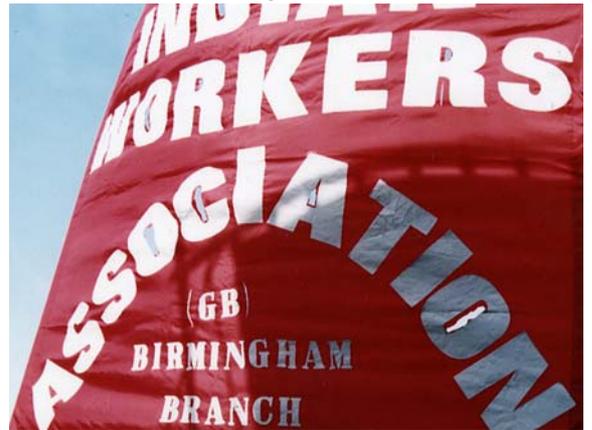
“It was not only employers who were discriminating also the attitude of the trade union was of a discriminatory practice and inside the workplaces... skilled jobs, engineers jobs, maintenance workers jobs they were for white workers, labourers, hard hot shitty jobs they were for the black workers and that was the pattern...”

Interview with Avtar Jouhl, Black Oral History Group. [MS 2142/A/3/5]



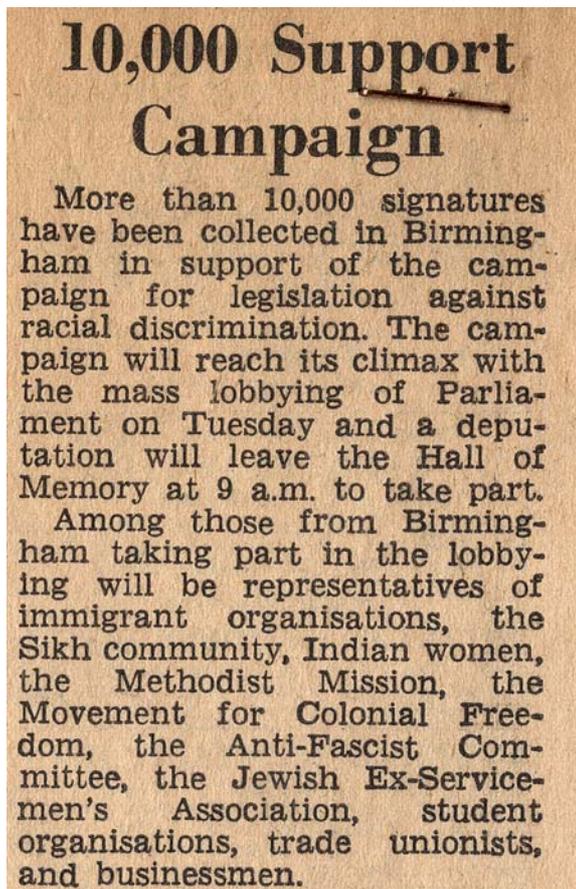
CCARD march. [MS 2141/C/7/1]

IWA banner. [MS 2141/Digital Photos]



Confronting the divided political legacies of Britain’s past, 20th century networks responded to new problems. In a society rife with institutional racism and economic inequality, black and asian workers were often given the lowest paid jobs. Experiencing segregation, some migrants were even forced to use separate toilets to those of the white workers.

A Birmingham branch of the Indian Workers Association formed in 1958. It was an important network that fought racism and workplace discrimination. The IWA and many other self-organised protest groups sought civic rights within a society where a ‘colour bar’ prevented immigrants entering certain pubs, hotels or accessing adequate housing or jobs.



Newspaper cutting from the archive of the Indian Workers Association. [MS 2141/C/7/1]

Two key figures in the work of the local and national IWA (GB) were Avtar Jouhl (1937-) and Jagmohan Joshi (1936-79). Jouhl was active as a union shop-steward in the foundries and served as General Secretary of the IWA from 1961 to 1964. Joshi was General Secretary of the IWA (GB) from 1964 to 1979.

The Co-ordinating Committee Against Racial Discrimination

A range of Birmingham antiracist groups helped to create a protest network called the Co-ordinating Committee Against Racial Discrimination. CCARD was set up in 1961 by Jagmohan Joshi (IWA) and Maurice Ludmer (Searchlight magazine). It was instigated by a meeting at Digbeth called by the West Indian Workers' Association and the Indian Youth League to protest against the suspected CIA murder of Patrice Lumumba, the leader of the Congolese revolution. CCARD was instrumental in organising the first major campaigns against the Bill that was to become the 1962 Commonwealth Immigrants Act and also strongly involved in campaigning for legislation to outlaw racial discrimination.

Twentieth Century Civic Struggles

Key Debate:
what other protest networks were active in Birmingham in the twentieth century?

People, Politics and Art

The arts can provide vital tools for asking questions about contemporary civic identities. Fostering networks of change, culture can allow alternative views of society and highlight inequalities.

Starting in 1958, Birmingham was the centre of production for a series of breakthrough audio documentaries called the Radio Ballads. Produced by Charles Parker, Ewan MacColl and Peggy Seeger, the Radio Ballads used hundreds of hours of oral histories of working class people to provide the materials for a script. In this way, the Ballads gave a voice to those who had experienced workforce discrimination and racial inequality. Broadcasts such as 'John Axon' celebrated the culture, language and experiences of anonymous individuals who made essential contributions to the nation: builders, railwaymen, boxers, travellers, coal-miners and fishermen.

Banner Theatre: "Entertainment for a change"

After the Radio Ballads, Charles Parker would become integral in forming the Banner Theatre company. Linking industrial struggles in the 19th century to the problems facing asylum seekers and migrant workers today, Birmingham-based 'Banner' has created over forty plays about race, class, gender politics and history. Currently organised by Dave Rogers, Banner holds an ongoing relationship with many political activists, groups and artists who want to change social attitudes. Just as importantly, Banner has shown the importance of opening a closer network between performers and audiences.

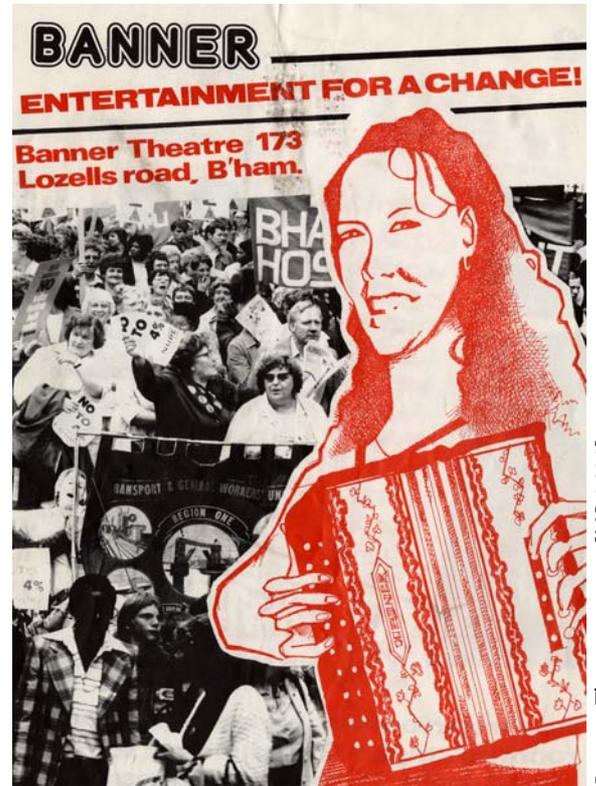
"A typical Banner play such as *Sweat Shop* (1995) involved the recording of over 60 people including: home workers, unemployed people, academics and factory workers."

The songs, music, oral histories, video art and community approaches of political artists such as Banner could be interpreted as contemporary 'civic gospels'. In a constantly changing cultural and physical landscape, there is a continual need for to counter fears of change, social stereotypes. Art, politics and heritage can encourage a sense of equality by illustrating how historical struggles are linked.

Banner's "Strangers in Paradise Circus" (2007)

"The focus of the play is about challenging the media myths about asylum seekers and refugees... myths like 'they're stealing our jobs', like 'all the decent housing goes to asylum seekers and that's why ordinary people can't get access to council houses'... 'they only come over here because Britain's a soft touch'. We handle those one by one and kind of deconstruct them... to challenge racist stereotypes." *Dave Rogers*

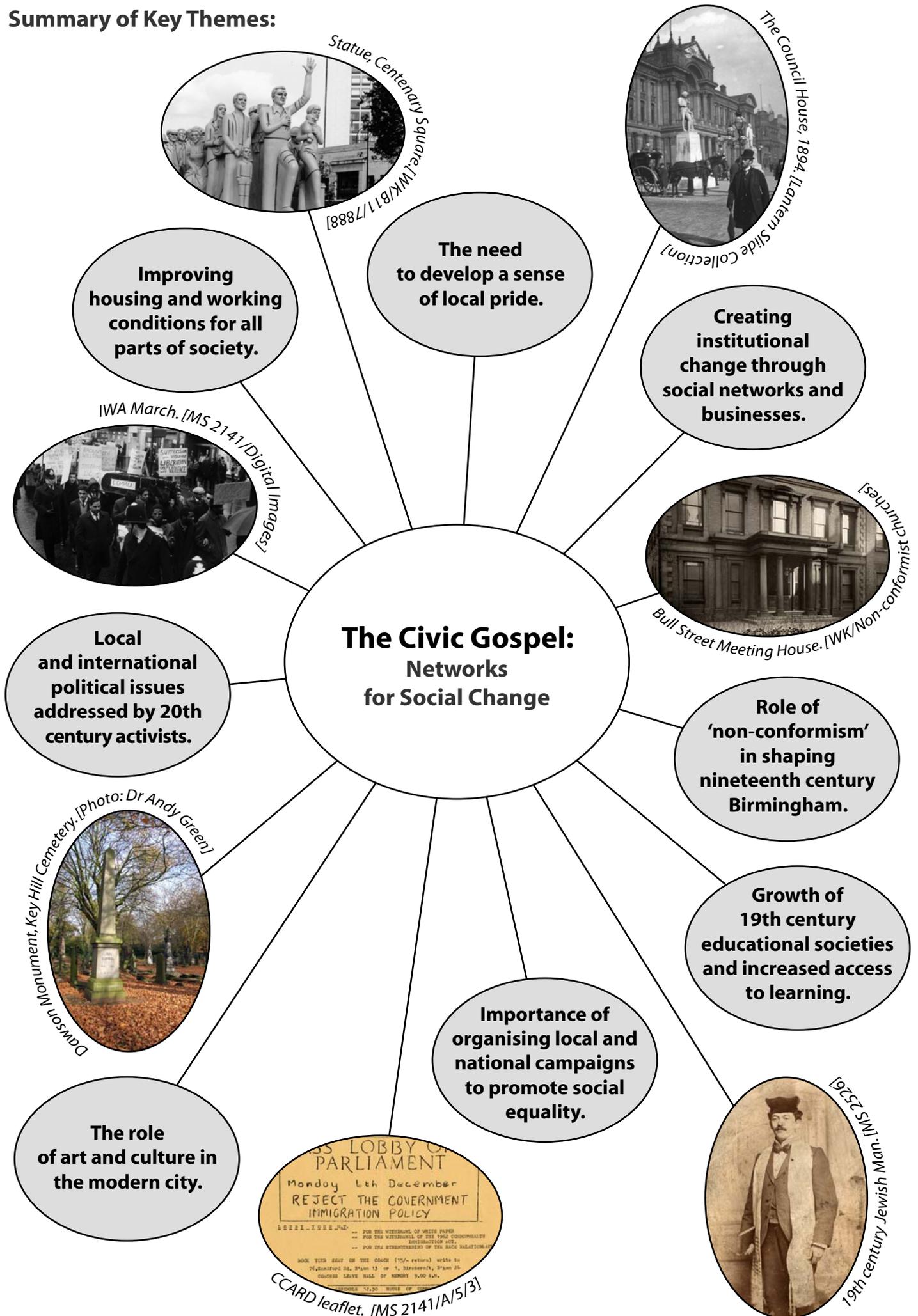
Strangers in Paradise, [Photo: Dr Andy Green]



Banner Theatre poster. [MS 1611]

Key Debate:
why is art, culture and performance important to current debates about civic freedom?

Summary of Key Themes:



Civic Gospels: Networks for Social Change

Sources from Birmingham Archives and Heritage Collections

Archives:

The George Dawson Newspaper Collections by Wright Wilson Vols. 1-12 [Archives: IIQ]
Papers of the Banner Theatre Company [MS 1611]
The Charles Parker Archive [MS 4000]
Papers of the Indian Workers' Association deposited by Shirley Joshi [MS 2141]
Papers of the Indian Workers' Association deposited by Avtar Jouhl [MS 2142]
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Female Society for the Relief of British Negro Slaves Cash Book [IIR 3]
Birmingham Ladies Negro's Friend Society Reports and Minutes Books, 1845-89, 1890-1915 [IIR 62]
The Birmingham Black Oral History Project Publication [MS 2478/B/3/7]
The Derek Bishton Collection [MS 2478]
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The Birmingham Hebrew Congregation Archive [JA]
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Other Useful Archives and Historical Collections Held Elsewhere

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Civic Gospels: Networks for Social Change

General Sources

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Tristram Hunt, *Building Jerusalem* (2002)
Roger Ward, *City-State and Nation. Birmingham's Political History 1830-1940* (2005)
A.N.Wilson, *The Victorians* (2002)

Websites - Museums - Libraries - Institutions:

- www.wcml.org.uk
Working Class Movement Library
- www.movinghere.org.uk
Sources relating to 200 years of migration to Britain including material from archives across the West Midlands
- www.bannertheatre.co.uk
The Banner Theatre Company
- www.bbc.co.uk/radio2/radioballads
Access the 'Radio Ballads' on the BBC website
- www.birminghamcivicsociety.org.uk
Birmingham's Civic Society
- www.virtualbrum.co.uk/history/hwlinks.htm
Virtual Brum Portal
- www.learningcurve.gov.uk/victorianbritain
National Archives 'Learning Curve - Victorian Britain'
- www.socialistparty.org.uk
The Socialist Party
- www.connectinghistories.org.uk
Connecting Histories and Birmingham Stories website

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