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Asa Briggs' Middlesbrough:

Inspiring exploration of the Victorian 'boom town'

Tosh Warwick ©

Leeds Beckett University & Middlesbrough Council

Asa Briggs (1921-2016), Lord Briggs of Lewes, passed away on Tuesday, 15 March, at the age of 94 following a distinguished career including highly-acclaimed work on the Victorian era and histories of broadcasting which included *A Social History of England* and *Victorian Cities*.

It is perhaps Briggs' seminal *Victorian Cities* which remains one of the core texts on the Victorian period for historians, students and enthusiasts of the past alike, as well as that work most familiar to those with an interest in Middlesbrough's rapid expansion. Briggs' chapter on 'Middlesbrough: The Growth of a New Community' has provided the starting point for delving into the rapid emergence of the Victorian manufacturing town on the banks of the River Tees and is oft cited in articles, books and theses on the history of the town and the notion of the 'boom town' more generally.

The chapter draws together some of the key people, places and events in the town's emergence from a small hamlet at the beginning of the nineteenth century to a bustling Ironopolis and world-renowned centre of industry by the end of the Victorian era. The chapter opens with Gladstone's famous 1862 quote describing the town as an 'infant Hercules', with the work going on to outline the origins of the town and the key role played by the Quaker businessmen and early ironmasters in all aspects of life in the 'boom town', through to the maturity of Middlesbrough in the late nineteenth century. Historic developments such as the town's first parliamentary election in 1868, the opening ceremonies of the current Railway Station and Middlesbrough Town Hall – itself currently the subject of celebration courtesy of the ongoing Heritage Lottery Fund supported restoration project which will restore the landmark to its nineteenth century glory – are explored. Some of those institutions which remain from the town's Victorian heyday are also profiled including the founding of the *Weekly Gazette* – a predecessor to today's *Teesside Gazette*, as are those that have been lost to time such as the Royal Exchange building, demolished in the 1980s.

The consequences of the rapid rise of industry are also considered, including the apparent flight to the suburbs and beyond of those founding manufacturers who moved residences from close proximity to their manufacturing plant to grand country homes such as Marton and Gunnergate Halls. The story of the advancement of the area's steel industry and its impact on employment, health and

housing in Victorian Middlesbrough is also told and provides a fascinating insight into everyday life in the manufacturing town.

In assigning Middlesbrough historic parity with world-renowned cities such as Birmingham, London and Melbourne – with Briggs arguing Middlesbrough ‘would have been called a city in many other countries, including the United States’ – *Victorian Cities* created a legacy that sees the story of the growth of that new community on the banks of the Tees accessible on the shelves of tens of thousands of libraries and bookshops across the globe.

Such was the impact of Briggs’ study that the University of Teesside awarded the ‘first historian to devote serious attention to the history of Middlesbrough’ an Honorary Doctorate in 1993. Three years later in writing the Foreword to the University and Middlesbrough Council’s collaborative collection *Middlesbrough: Town and Community 1830-1950*, in which the chapter from *Victorian Cities* was reprinted, Briggs reflected “I included Middlesbrough...not only on the grounds of its distinctiveness but also because the story of its rise and the economic and social vicissitudes that it underwent then and is subsequently interesting in itself”.

In subsequent decades Briggs’ work has informed and inspired articles which have appeared in *Cleveland History* and journals elsewhere. David Taylor’s (2003) ‘Bearbrass or Ballarat? Asa Briggs’ Middlesbrough and the pattern of nineteenth century urbanisation’ in *The Journal of Regional and Local Studies* which challenges the distinctiveness of Middlesbrough endorsed by Briggs’ description of the town as the ‘British Ballarat’. Tosh Warwick has also reassessed the extent to which Middlesbrough’s steel magnates withdrew from participation in the manufacturing town as suggested by Briggs (*Cleveland History*, 98, 2010), whilst Ben Roberts’ work on civic culture in Middlesbrough and Darlington has also revisited those ceremonies chronicled in Briggs’ work.

In October 2014 the ‘Victorian Cities Revisited’ Conference, inspired by Briggs’ exploration of Middlesbrough, was held in the town attracting world-leading academics to the ‘Ironopolis’ to explore its heritage and history. At the December 2014 launch of *The Age of Asa* book celebrating an outstanding, diverse career, Briggs confided in the author that he maintained a special interest in Middlesbrough and encouraged further study and critique of his work. Fifty years from now, Briggs’ work is sure to continue to inform and inspire future generations to explore Middlesbrough’s fascinating growth.