In 1875, Richard Cross, Home Secretary in Disraeli’s Conservative government, piloted the Artisans’ Dwellings Act through Parliament, which gave local authorities the power to purchase and rebuild slum areas. The intention was to improve homes for the poor, but in Birmingham, the result was the displacement of thousands of people and the creation of a commercial district centred on Corporation Street.

Over the course of ten years, Birmingham turned its back on the kind of piecemeal and organic growth that had served it well (or badly, depending on your point of view) for centuries. Instead, the town was to plan strategically and ambitiously. The Corporation was to become a landowner and a social engineer, as influential as its landowner neighbours the Calthorpes and Goochs.

The Importance of the 1875 Artisans’ Dwellings Act

The Cross Act gave local councils the right to demolish any designated area under its control, if the houses in it were considered unfit for human habitation, or the average death rate rose above a designated level. Here lay the origins of the huge slum clearance schemes and compulsory purchase orders that swept through the nation in the twentieth century. Initially, however, take-up was slow and only 32 such schemes had been completed by the First World War.

It was not difficult to see why. Implementation of the 1875 Act cost money; local authorities had to buy the land and property at the market price and to pay for demolition. In addition, the Cross Act stipulated that an improvement scheme should ‘provide for the accommodation of at least as many members of the working class as may be displaced...’ The way local councils delayed and ducked such responsibility is an object lesson in the relationship between local and national government, and the clause they objected to was removed in 1882.

Street Demolition and the Building of Corporation Street

It was, therefore, only the most ambitious and confident of corporations that sent in the bulldozers under the Act, and one such was Birmingham. Under the leadership of Joseph Chamberlain and wedded to the message of the Civic Gospel, Birmingham was beginning to flex its political muscles by the 1870s.
In 1874 alone the Corporation municipalised the gas industry and effected a hostile take-over of the Birmingham Waterworks Co. In the following year Chamberlain launched his Improvement Scheme to clear 93 acres of the town centre, and to rebuild the area for commercial use.

In total the Birmingham Improvement Scheme cost around £1.75 million, somewhat offset by profits from the gas industry and the sale of leases on Corporation Street. The latter was planned to be almost a mile long, but the economic slump of the early 1880s prevented its completion. Instead of a mile of shops and offices, the bottom half of the street was filled instead with public buildings: law courts, a Methodist hall and eventually a fire station.

The whole scheme owed much, if not everything, to Joseph Chamberlain’s municipal vision and financial adroitness. Chamberlain’s Improvement Scheme was audacious and long-sighted, and undoubtedly it allowed central Birmingham to do business, but it was hardly in the spirit of the Act. True, a number of unsavoury streets – the Minories, Oxygen Street, the Gullet and Lower Priory among them – were removed, but so were cherry orchards, bowling greens and the grand if decaying houses of Old Square. Chamberlain had in truth engineered a commercial quarter under the umbrella of a housing act.

The Displacement of People

As for those displaced by the scheme – 3,500 of them at a rough estimate – there was to be no alternative accommodation. The new town centre contained law courts and five-storey offices, new shops and winter gardens, but it most assuredly did not include working-class housing. As Alderman Cook told a local enquiry on the workings of the Act in 1884: ‘When it was accepted no one dreamed that we were going to destroy 855 dwellings without putting any artisans’ houses in their place.’ You could call it Birmingham’s version of the Highland Clearances, or perhaps an urban form of Enclosure.

The Dart, a Liberal weekly not in the Chamberlain camp, had a more witty way of putting it:

New Birmingham recipe for lowering the death rate of an insanitary area. Pull down nearly all the houses and make the inhabitants move somewhere else.

‘Tis an excellent plan and I’ll tell you for why. Where there’s no person living, no person can die.

Only in 1889, and with some reluctance, did the Corporation erect 102 artisans’ cottages on the far northern edge of the area – land that had attracted no commercial interest – in Lawrence Street and Ryder Street. But such dwellings, let at between 5s 6d (27.5p) and 7s (35p) a week, were well beyond the pocket of most of those who had formerly lived in the area. In 1884 there were still some 27,000 families in Birmingham paying weekly rent of less than 3s 6d (17.5p).

Private Enterprise and Public Improvement

The experience of Birmingham is worth noting. Here was a local authority at the height of its powers, with a supreme confidence in its mission to improve and elevate the lives of its citizens, and where libraries, baths, parks and schools came as standard. Yet it, and many others, were highly reluctant to usurp the rights of private enterprise when it came to building homes.

And even if Birmingham and others had been willing to cross that sacred line, there were still serious doubts whether local government could provide houses cheap enough for that impoverished lower tier. ‘A local authority can build at less cost than any in the private sector,’ Alderman Cook had also told the enquiry, ‘and yet it cannot provide houses at less than 4s a week.’ The age of slum clearance had arrived, but the age of the council house was still some way into the future.

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Controversially, civic and commercial buildings, rather than domestic dwellings, lined Corporation Street and some – such as the Law Courts – still serve their original purpose today.