

THE TRANSFORMATION OF BIRMINGHAM

Chris Upton

At the time Joseph Chamberlain first arrived in the West Midlands in 1854, the municipal administration in Birmingham was less than twenty years old. The Corporation could not be said to have over-achieved during that period. Hamstrung by arguments over the validity of its charter, and initially unable even to police itself, Birmingham had, as yet, no baths, no libraries, no public parks, nor even a municipal property in which to hold council meetings. And the two elements which kept the town alive – its gas and water – were in the hands of private companies.

The transformation over the following two decades is striking. By 1876, when Chamberlain left for Westminster, the town had five public libraries, six parks and three sets of municipal baths. And in what would shortly be called Victoria Square, an immense council headquarters was close to completion.

The words of George Dawson, delivered at the opening of the Reference Library in 1860, that ‘a great town is a solemn organism, through which flow... all the highest, loftiest and truest ends of man’s intellectual and moral nature’, seemed to be manifested in bricks and mortar.

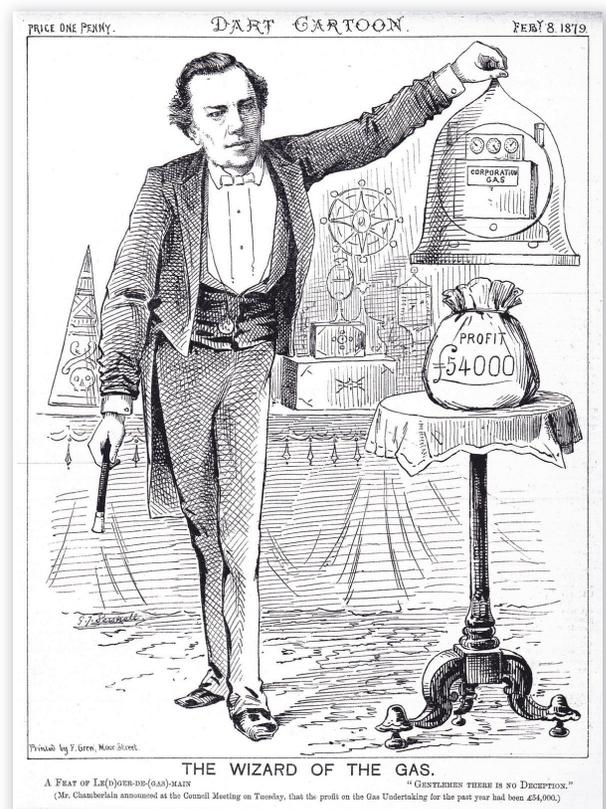
Not all of those changes could be placed at the foot of a notional statue of Joseph Chamberlain. Nevertheless, Chamberlain’s boundless ambition and business acumen were undoubtedly a driving force in the process. The claim that he left the town ‘parked, paved, assized, marketed, gas-and-watered, and improved’ was not easy to challenge.

‘Gas-and-water Socialism’

Yet, if anything, it was the transformation of Birmingham’s municipal finances that marked the Chamberlain years as exceptional, and a model for local government that would last for more than a century. Although that process could not be said to have been completed until Elan Valley water gushed through Corporation pipes into Corporation reservoirs in 1904, it was decidedly begun in Joseph Chamberlain’s mayoralty in 1874.

The name they gave it was ‘gas-and-water socialism’. At a meeting of the town council in January 1874 Chamberlain first proposed that ‘the manufacture, sale and supply of gas in the Borough should be under the control of the Corporation’. If there were monopolies to be had, he went on, then they should, at least, be in the hands of representatives of the people. That move, Chamberlain was perfectly happy to concede, would raise the Borough debt from half a million pounds to more than five times that sum. Yet only two councillors out of fifty-seven voted against the proposal.

In the following year a towns meeting unanimously approved similar measures – via a Parliamentary Bill – to buy out the water companies. Joseph, it seemed, carried all before him.



The Dart depicted Chamberlain’s swift transformation of Birmingham’s finances and resources as almost magical, 1875.

Only when Chamberlain’s brand of municipal socialism was rolled out to engineer improvements to the town, and to its housing stock, was that unanimity fractured. And by then Chamberlain was on his way to Westminster to create waves elsewhere. ●

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