

OBITUARY

## Peter Borsay: an appreciation

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The death of Peter Borsay towards the end of last year was both untimely and unexpected. In him we have lost one of the finest historians of eighteenth-century urban Britain and an exceptionally generous, constructive and collegial friend.<sup>1</sup>

Peter's academic career began at Lancaster where, as he would later recount, his ambition to study the industrial revolution was thwarted by Harold Perkin taking study leave, forcing him to study Geoffrey Holmes' special subject on Augustan England instead. An undergraduate dissertation on the rebuilding of Warwick after the fire of 1694 led to a Ph.D. on the revival of the economic and cultural fortunes of English towns in the century following the Restoration – the phenomenon for which he coined the term the English urban renaissance. In 1975, years before the Ph.D. was completed, Peter secured a post as lecturer at the University of Wales Lampeter. At Lampeter, Peter met Anne Howard, a historian of medicine: their marriage was a partnership that was both personal and academic, finding common ground in the fertile territory of Bath's medical and social history. Peter stayed at Lampeter until 2007 when he was appointed to a chair in history at Aberystwyth. Following his retirement in 2018, Peter implemented long-held plans to move to Oxford to be nearer his daughters Clare and Sarah. It is a great sadness that his time in Oxford proved to be so short.

Peter was one of the few historians who manage to transform the way in which a period or a problem is conceptualized. *The English Urban Renaissance* drew attention for the first time to the remarkable vitality of urban provincial life in both its built form and its social and cultural manifestations, ranging from the performing arts and intellectual life to assembly balls, walks and sports. In 2014, the Centre for Urban History at Leicester organized a colloquium to mark 25 years since its publication and invited contributors to reflect on how the concept has evolved and how it has been extended and applied to other contexts beyond England – not just within the British Isles but also in Europe and in Colonial America. The colloquium began with a typically self-deprecating evaluation by Peter of how the monograph had developed over a 17-year period and the influences that had shaped it. It is, in fact, a sharply perceptive commentary on the evolution of the historiography

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<sup>1</sup>We would like to thank Jonathan Barry, Penny Corfield, Paul O'Leary, Rose McCormack and Richard Rodger for sharing their memories of Peter which have informed this appreciation.

of eighteenth-century urban Britain since the 1970s and that of Peter's own historical practice.<sup>2</sup> His modesty, however, precluded him from providing a fair assessment of the impact and quality of his own work or the originality of his thought and his approach.

It is hard to recover now quite how original the argument of the *English Urban Renaissance*, particularly as first advanced in the eponymous article of 1977, was, so much have his arguments and approach become accepted orthodoxy.<sup>3</sup> Although Christopher Chalkin's study of English provincial towns had been published in 1974, in most accounts London generally stood proxy for towns and town life in general. Nor was the eighteenth century at this point a dynamic area of research: its political history still suffered from the aridity of Namierite analysis and its social history was overshadowed by the industrial revolution. Peter located the origins of the book in both the social history pioneered by new universities such as his alma mater Lancaster and urban history, as developed at Leicester by H.J. Dyos, but also – which is often forgotten – elsewhere by early modernists such as Penny Corfield, Peter Clark and Paul Slack. *The English Urban Renaissance* emerged at the same time as historians such as John Brewer, Paul Langford, John Money and Roy Porter were starting to recognize the vitality of urban life, and particularly the culture of the middling sort. It helped to drive a wholesale re-evaluation of the eighteenth century, reconfiguring the arguments and the interpretative frameworks through which it was approached, and inspiring another generation of historians. Google Scholar, with all its lacunae, lists more than 660 references – and counting.

*The Image of Georgian Bath, 1700–2000*, published in 2000, examined a second 'urban renaissance' in which the twentieth-century city built a thriving heritage and tourist industry upon the image of its Georgian past.<sup>4</sup> The line of descent from *The English Urban Renaissance* to *The Image of Georgian Bath* is self-evident: Bath being one of the fashionable, residential spa towns that drove the forms of cultural display and architectural renewal that characterized the urban renaissance. Peter's extraordinary depth of knowledge about the eighteenth-century city and its inhabitants underpins the book at every stage. But as the title indicates, the principal concern was with how images of eighteenth-century Bath were created, remodelled, repackaged and redeployed in successive generations. If *The English Urban Renaissance* was a product of the social and urban history of the 1970s, *The Image of Georgian Bath* was a clear response to the controversies over heritage of the 1980s and the epistemological challenges of postmodernism to traditional historical praxis: Peter, tongue in cheek, referred to his own frustrated pursuit of the 'real' Georgian Bath in the record office and questioned whether an objective reality of Bath could be found in the archives at all. This proved too much for some reviewers who were frustrated by his refusal to offer a 'factual' account of the 'real' Georgian Bath which the images purported to represent; but as another

<sup>2</sup>P. Borsay, 'The English urban renaissance revisited', in J. Hinks and C. Armstrong (eds.), *The English Urban Renaissance Revisited* (Newcastle, 2018), 6–27.

<sup>3</sup>P. Borsay, 'The English urban renaissance: the development of provincial urban culture, c. 1680–1760', *Social History*, 2 (1977), 581–603; *idem*, *The English Urban Renaissance: Culture and Society in the Provincial Town, 1660–1770* (Oxford, 1989).

<sup>4</sup>P. Borsay, *The Image of Georgian Bath 1700–2000: Towns, Heritage and History* (Oxford, 2000).

shrewdly noted, the real strength and originality of the book lay in the subtle analysis of the interplay between ‘popular, public, and academic history, history and heritage, myth and reality’.<sup>5</sup>

From the history of leisure towns to the history of (urban) leisure may seem a small step. Yet, in *A History of Leisure. The British Experience since 1500* (2006) Peter fundamentally expanded his horizons from the early modern period to twentieth-century popular culture, skillfully integrating new insights in contemporary sport, media and tourism with decades of his own research.<sup>6</sup> The textbook offers an intriguing key to his particular strategies in charting new historical territories – and how he tried to teach students to master the discipline. By structuring the potentially overwhelming subject of five centuries of British leisure according to key themes and factors – economy, state, class, identity, place, space and time – he expressed his life-long effort to focus on continuities rather than discontinuities between the early modern and modern age, and made his readers concentrate on similarities rather than on differences between distinct forms of leisure. Just as in his other work, his thematic approach emphasized his strong conviction that leisure history should not be studied as a ‘fun’ topic separate from ‘serious’ topics of political, economic and social history, but rather in an integrated, mutually reinforcing way. Drawing on concepts from cultural theory, Peter defined leisure positively in terms of ‘play’, ‘symbol’ and ‘other’. Yet by placing economy first and by privileging class above other axes of difference (such as gender, age or ethnicity), he tried also to counter what he saw as a deplorable legacy of the cultural turn: the disregard for economic and socio-economic structures. Nevertheless, he strongly disputed the traditional argument that saw the industrial revolution as a watershed in the transformation of British leisure culture and ironically questioned the ‘commercialization of leisure’ thesis (associated, as he noted, with at least four periods since the eighteenth century). He also cleverly contested the assumption of low level of state interference in British leisure by reconceptualizing the idea of the state altogether. Indeed, in *A History of Leisure*, Peter presented himself as a curious, independent and wise arbiter, always questioning and evaluating basic definitions, categories and assumptions, very much respecting the work of other scholars and earlier generations, but in the end never shy to come up with fresh, revisionist and thought-provoking interpretations.

Despite his breath-taking expertise on the long-term history of leisure in all its manifestations and contexts, Peter was always keenly aware of the limitations of his English/British outlook and his acculturated island mentality. Slightly to his own embarrassment (as a fervent anti-Brexiteer), he often equated ‘Europe’ with ‘the continent’. On one of his visits to Amsterdam, he confessed he had never realized that as early as 1650, well before ‘his’ English urban renaissance, burghers in the Dutch Golden Age had already initiated and completed such a colossal City Hall. Collaborating with colleagues from across the Channel always made him eager and enthusiastic to expand his horizon. Since the late 1990s, he and Anne almost never missed the biannual conferences of the European Association for

<sup>5</sup>S. Whyman review for H-Albion <https://networks.h-net.org/node/16749/reviews/17556/whyman-borsay-image-georgian-bath-1700-2000>; J. Ellis, review in *Albion*, 34 (2001), 109–10.

<sup>6</sup>P. Borsay, *A History of Leisure: The British Experience since 1500* (Basingstoke, 2006).

Urban History, actively co-organizing sessions on European spa towns, seaside resorts, walks and gardens, which in their turn resulted in edited volumes.<sup>7</sup> He contributed to several international research projects, such as on concert culture in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europe,<sup>8</sup> and consolidated his international network of French, German, Spanish and Dutch colleagues and friends. Funded by the European Science Foundation, in 2010 he assembled many of them in the splendid and secluded ambiance of Gregynog Hall (Wales), with the particular aim of moving the understanding of European leisure in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries from a comparative towards a transnational perspective. In his own contribution to the resulting edited volume, he skillfully demonstrated that the leisure culture of Georgian Bath was far from exclusively English. On the contrary, public and private theatrical performances, music making, libraries, dancing, dinners, social conversations, consumption and fashion all drew heavily on French, Italian, German and other continental models; they were provided and encouraged directly by international artists, teachers and entrepreneurs and indirectly by tourists and London examples, and mediated by prints, newspapers and magazines. Rather than passively absorbing foreign models, however, elites in Bath also actively remodelled them to fit their local customs and even re-exported abroad what they created.<sup>9</sup> Increasingly enjoying these kinds of entangled histories, Peter became an entangled historian himself, absorbing and energizing the intellectual exchange between international colleagues and historiographies.

Cultural history is about being sensitive to the way that categories and meanings, often of the same phenomena, change – sometimes radically – across time. We cannot assume that twenty-first century notions of leisure were ones shared in the eighteenth century. Indeed, we should not assume that people in the period practices or conceives of something that they would call directly ‘leisure’.

In 2022, Bloomsbury will publish a six-volume series *A Cultural History of Leisure*, with Peter as chief editor, principal instigator and editor of volume 4, *The Age of Enlightenment*: another major project, stretching from Antiquity to the twenty-first century. Peter’s untimely illness did not allow him the joy of reading all the manuscripts and seeing the project in print, yet he fortunately managed to complete his own volume and once again set himself to the daunting task of how to define and approach leisure as a subject of historical enquiry. The opening sentences of his introductory essay, quoted above, bring to mind who he was as a scholar and as a person: sensitive, lucid, careful, and – as his essay will demonstrate – sharp.

<sup>7</sup>P. Borsay, R.E. Mohrman and G. Hirschfelder (eds.), *New Directions in Urban History. Aspects of European Art, Health, Tourism and Leisure since the Enlightenment* (Münster, 2000); P. Borsay and J.K. Walton, *Resorts and Ports. European Seaside Resorts since 1700* (Bristol, 2011).

<sup>8</sup>See e.g. H.E. Bödeker (ed.), *Le concert et son public. Mutations de la vie musicale en Europe de 1780 à 1914 (France, Angleterre, Allemagne)* (Paris, 2002).

<sup>9</sup>P. Borsay, ‘Georgian Bath: a transnational culture’, in P. Borsay and J.H. Furnée (eds.), *Leisure Cultures in Urban Europe, c. 1700–1870: A Transnational Perspective* (Manchester, 2016), 93–116.

Peter's final book *The Discovery of England 1840–1949* was completed in draft before his death and it is hoped that the publishers will find some way of bringing it to publication posthumously. Some of the arguments were anticipated in the Centre for Urban History Annual Lecture which he delivered in 2015, later published in this journal.<sup>10</sup> In this project, Peter moved forward decisively into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but the themes of leisure, heritage and tourism continued to drive his analysis of the cultural consequences of urbanization, focusing particularly upon the 'discovery' of the English landscape by town-dwelling devotees of 'nature'.

There was, of course, far more to Peter's oeuvre and the catholicity of his interests than a summary of his monographs would suggest. Although his books focused primarily on the English experience, Peter's commitment to Welsh history – and particularly the under-conceptualized and under-researched history of Welsh towns – was highly significant. Rather than engaging with the major industrial and commercial settlements that have dominated the narratives of Welsh urbanization since the eighteenth century, Peter sought out types of town that are understudied in a Welsh context: the smaller residential and resort towns such as Monmouth, Tenby and Aberystwyth.<sup>11</sup> With Louise Miskell and Owen Roberts, he guest-edited a special issue of this journal in 2005 on Welsh urban history.<sup>12</sup> With Miskell and Roberts again, he co-directed a project funded by the Board of Celtic Studies 'Resorts and Ports: Swansea, Tenby and Aberystwyth, 1750–1914'. This led to a number of significant publications, including his contributions to the volume he co-edited with John Walton *Resorts and Ports: European Seaside Towns since 1700* (2011).<sup>13</sup> Small though these Welsh resorts were, Peter transcended the particularity of local history, using them as exemplars through which to ask much broader questions about sense of place, social history and historical methodology. He had, as Penny Corfield has observed, a synoptic mind that sought always to fit the detail into the bigger picture. His legacy lies as much in the originality of his approach as in the case-studies themselves.

Peter's career and contribution to historical scholarship went far beyond the monographs and the peer reviewed articles. He was an inspirational and supportive supervisor to many postgraduate students: one remembers him in the following words:

Peter...was such a kind and generous supervisor, as well as a wonderful academic. His interest in my research, and the way he discussed and debated it with me, really helped me develop academic, as well as personal, confidence, and it is something for which I will always be grateful. He met with me very

<sup>10</sup>P. Borsay, 'Nature, the past and the English town: a counter-cultural history', *Urban History*, 44 (2017), 27–43.

<sup>11</sup>P. Borsay, 'New approaches to social history. Myth, memory and place: Monmouth and Bath, 1750–1900', *Journal of Social History*, 39 (2006), 867–89.

<sup>12</sup>P. Borsay, L. Miskell and O. Roberts, 'Introduction: Wales, a new agenda for urban history', *Urban History*, 32 (2005), 5–16.

<sup>13</sup>P. Borsay, 'Welsh seaside resorts: historiography, sources and themes', *Welsh History Review*, 24 (2008), 92–119; and *idem*, 'A room with a view: visualising the seaside, c. 1750–1914', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 23 (2013), 175–201.

regularly, and those supervision meetings, talking about life in eighteenth-century Bath, are very special memories. He became a friend as well as a supervisor, and I am aware of just how lucky I was to have his support.

From 1984, he was on the organizing committee of the Pre-Modern Towns Group, where he will be particularly remembered for his invariably constructive and positive contributions and his ability to formulate an interesting question about even the most recondite paper. He was a particularly loyal and stalwart friend to this journal, serving successively as periodical reviews editor, book reviews editor and as a member of the International Advisory Board from 1987 until his death. Richard Rodger recalls that

Peter Borsay was the first person I appointed to the Editorial Board in 1987 when I assumed the Editorship of the *Urban History Yearbook*. Calm, highly organized, and an insightful scholar of the highest order, Peter assumed the responsibility to produce a yearly review of periodical literature covering the period 1500–1800. For the next three years, he continued with this role, combining crisp prose with his perceptive evaluation of a rich seam of publications on the early modern era. Ever willing, Peter then assumed another of the *UHY* portfolios, the assembly and publication of book reviews in 1991. This flourished under his stewardship, and while it was a shared role, Peter was a fixture through the transition from *Yearbook* to *Journal* in 1992 and indeed until 2005. No editor or editorial board could have asked more. Always on time with copy, always attentive to detail and always the most congenial and co-operative of colleagues, Peter brought human qualities to academic life in an era of rapid change and uncertainty. An outstanding scholar, an utterly dependable colleague, I'm also proud to call him a 'friend' and I mourn his passing. Thank you, Peter, for enriching my life and that of many colleagues and students.

Peter's kindness, keen intelligence and gently subversive sense of humour will be greatly missed by all who knew him.