

'Exeter Phoenix': Politics and the Rebuilding of a Blitzed City*

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I Introduction

When Exeter was bombed in the first of the so-called 'Baedeker' raids of 1942, in retaliation for the Allied raid on Lübeck, much of the centre of the city was destroyed. The rebuilding efforts, however, proceeded slowly. Not only did the city centre feel like a gaping hole for ten years or more, but many comments have been made regarding the result of the rebuilding in both the local and national press. Fairly consistently the blame has been assigned to 'the planners'. Yet a wider view reveals that responsibility for the post-war reconstruction of the city lies in a number of places and was due to a series of factors. From the world economy to national policy to local political figures, a fuller picture can be found in an examination of a broader scope of post-war events and intentions. This makes clear just how far choices in both local and national politics, and the skills and priorities brought to bear by those involved, have far-reaching effects on the built environment.

Nationally all blitzed cities had tremendous difficulty in securing permission for the necessary funding and materials to rebuild. Cities with industry were prioritized while shopping and business centres received less attention. The two post-war governments did not address the blitzed cities issue substantially until the early 1950s, and even then only under pressure. Exeter was not the only city to have both suffered and then received criticism for the results of the 1950s reconstruction, but it provides an excellent example of the multiple hurdles faced. And beyond the political situation and the economic situation, the planners and citizens were to be subject to many decisions made by the property

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developers on whose shoulders fell the bulk of responsibility for rebuilding.

Published accounts of reconstruction mainly focus on particular cities, and many concentrate on planning or on architecture. But while a few discuss political issues, none has examined the logistics of funding and materials allocation, or national politics, in order to analyze post-war reconstruction. Fewer still acknowledge the inevitable influence of both developers and public employees.¹ This paper attempts – in a brief look – to examine Exeter in the context of the immediate post-war situation, through a different lens than most.

II The Destruction

The once Roman city of Exeter was attacked by air on three occasions in 1942. The first raids in April were relatively minor, but the third raid was devastating to this small city. When compared to the bombing of Würzburg or Dresden by the Allies, Exeter seems to have come through fairly intact, yet compared with other such cities in Britain it suffered severe damage. Most bombed, or blitzed, cities in Britain were targeted as centres of industry, shipping or military installations. Yet a city such as Exeter was simply a local shopping area, a cathedral city, and a tourist destination. It is likely Hitler himself ordered what became known as the 'Baedeker' raids, named for the German tour book series, the *Baedeker* guides. The term described the raids on beautiful and historic British

- 1 The best recent study is on Plymouth, S. Essex and M. Brayshaw 'Vision, Vested Interest and Pragmatism: Who Re-Made Britain's Blitzed Cities?', *Planning Perspectives* 4 (2007), 417–41. See also N. Tiratsoo, *Reconstruction, Affluence and Labour Politics: Coventry 1945–1960* (London, 1990); J. Hasegawa, *Replanning the Blitzed City Centre: A comparative study of Bristol, Coventry & Southampton 1941–50* (Buckingham, 1992); J. Hasegawa 'The reconstruction of Portsmouth in the 1940s' *Contemporary British History* 14 (2000), 45–62; P. Larkham, 'Planning For Reconstruction After the Disaster of War: Lessons From England In The 1940s', *Urban Perspectives* 6 (2004), 3–14; Larkham, 'Rebuilding the industrial town: wartime Wolverhampton', *Urban History* 29 (2002), 388–409; P. Larkham and J. Nasr, *The Rebuilding of British Cities: Exploring the Post-Second World War Reconstruction*, Working Paper Series, No. 90 UCE (Birmingham, 2004).

For general architectural discussion see N. Bullock, *Building the Post-War World* (London, 2002) and J. Gold, *The Experience of Modernism: Modern Architects and the Future City 1928–53* (London, 1997). For planning/urban history see J.M. Diefendorf (ed.), *Rebuilding Europe's Bombed Cities* (Basingstoke, 1990); P. Mandler, 'New Towns for Old: The Fate of the Town Centre' in B. Conekin, M. Frank and C. Waters (eds), *Moments of Modernity: Reconstructing Britain 1945–1964* (London, 1999); D. W. Ellwood, *Rebuilding Europe: Western Europe, America and Postwar Reconstruction* (London, 1992).



Figure 1: Looking across High Street toward the cathedral, 1945.
(*Express & Echo*)

cities such as Bath, Canterbury, Norwich and Exeter.² As Thomas Sharp, Exeter's planner, noted: 'Exeter had paid a heavy price for being classified as one of the most beautiful places in England'.³

Though in the early and more minor raids German aeroplanes were said to have missed their targets, the major raid on 3–4 May 1942 dropped 75 tons of bombs and destroyed 37 acres of central Exeter. This comprised of 400 shops, 150 office buildings, 50 warehouses, 26 public houses and clubs, 4 churches (and a further 2 were severely damaged), 3 cinemas as well as several city institutions, such as the public library. In addition 1,500 houses were totally destroyed, 2,700 badly damaged and a further 16,000 houses partially damaged. The loss of life totalled 81 in April 1942 and 161 in May 1942, in addition to 582 injuries reported.⁴

2 The term was applied by Baron Gustav von Stumm, speaking after destruction of the historic city of Lübeck in March 1942. While British government claimed that Lübeck was a military target, news reports at the time made it clear that the targets were either false or widely missed. Historians since have tended to ascribe the bombing of cities like Lübeck, Rostock and Cologne as having been targeted to hit at the morale of the German civilian population. Therefore the subsequent raids were considered reprisal raids, and Exeter was the first hit. See N. Rothnie, *The Baedeker Blitz* (Shepperton, 1992), p. 131; A.C. Grayling, *Among the Dead Cities* (London, 2006), pp. 50, 51.

3 T. Sharp, *Exeter Phoenix* (London, 1946), p. 42.

4 These are approximate figures, all confirmed by several sources. See: Cmd 8204 *Town and Country Planning 1943–1951* (London, 1951), p. 60; H. Gayton, 'City

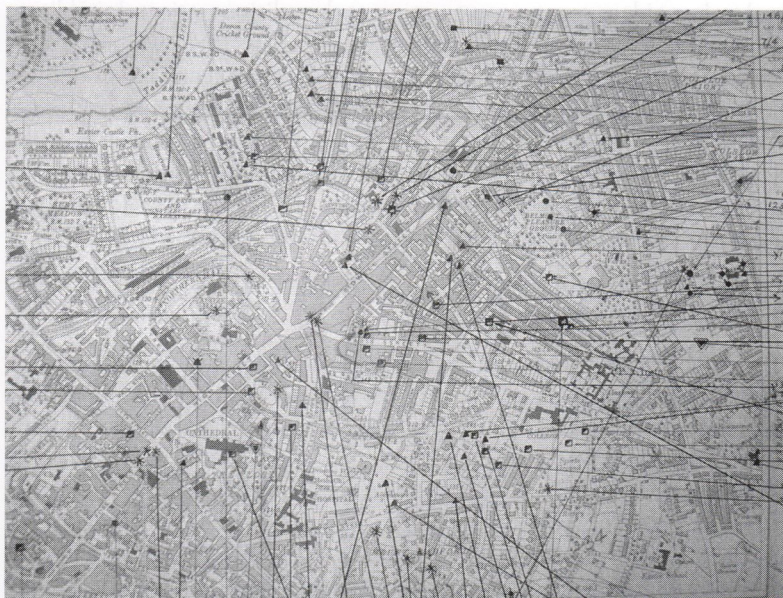


Figure 2: Bomb damage survey, Exeter 1942 from TNA, HO 193/59.
(Reproduced courtesy of The National Archives)

Though these numbers do not compare with the damage done in Greater London, the impact upon a small regional shopping centre was significant. While the loss of shops and other premises was devastating, so was the loss of much of Exeter's historic core. Most damaging for the city government was the loss of rates from the destroyed premises. As they were mainly businesses they would have brought in higher business rates. According to a post-blitz survey carried out by the Board of Trade, Exeter lost a total of £158,778 through the damage to business and trade premises.⁵

Almost immediately following the raids, Exeter officials set to work clearing the bomb sites. Yet this necessity was not free to the City: labour

Redevelopments: I. Exeter', *Town and Country Planning* 26 (1958), 378–80; W.G. Hoskins, *Two Thousand Years in Exeter* (Chichester, 2004); G. Goss in 'Exeter – A New Chapter in a Long History', *Enterprise* 2 (1957), 11–13; D. Davies, *The Bombing of Exeter* (Exeter, 1973); N. Venning *Exeter: the Blitz and Rebirth of the City* (Exeter, 1988).

5 Excluding London, see National Archives, Kew [hereafter TNA] file BT 64/1111 dated 1942. See also Table 1. The nearest small blitzed city on the list was Norwich with losses estimated at £88,275. Exeter appears in various records with differing population figures but all are near 65,000 as of 1943. Of the blitzed cities the nearest in size to Exeter is Southampton, an industrial and port city with nearly double Exeter's population.

had to be paid, as on any construction or demolition project. In addition to the loss of rate revenue and the clearing costs, there was significant damage to all statutory undertakings, and the clean-up and repair of these became yet another cost to bear. It must have been obvious to Exeter residents that many others in Britain suffered the same or worse inconvenience and expense, particularly in London. Therefore it is not surprising that little mention of appeal or application for Government assistance seems to have been made until almost a year had passed.⁶

III Post-War Context

On a global scale there are significant factors to consider regarding bomb damage itself. In the destruction of the built environment, household or manufactured goods lost are the quickest to replace, but buildings – some of which have a life of many decades if not hundred of years – are the slowest and most difficult.⁷ Building takes both a great deal of labour and a large amount of costly materials, so the replacement of houses, shops and factories is a greater economic hardship than other war-time losses. In the situation Britain faced after World War II, not only was labour scarce, but materials were both in short supply and tightly rationed. Beyond the basic shortages of steel, timber, brick and concrete was the over-riding factor of a national economy in crisis. Between the balance of payments deficit in the Dollar Area and the consequent necessity of exporting as much of these materials (particularly steel) as possible, the situation for the rebuilding of bombed areas was extremely bleak. At the same time the average Briton was concerned more with the housing shortage than the national or world economic crisis. Pressure from the public to build – especially houses – was intense.⁸

Luckily for the new Labour government elected in 1945, war-time controls made post-war management – including the nationalization of industry and land on a large scale – relatively easy compared to the earlier peace-time situation.⁹ From 1947 control of rebuilding at the national

6 No mention was found in local press, City Council meeting minutes, or in Hansard before April of 1943.

7 See N. Rosenberg, *Economic Planning in the British Building Industry* (Philadelphia, 1960); Ministry of Works, *The Distribution of Building Materials and Components* (London, 1948).

8 H. Jones, "'This is Magnificent!': 300,000 Houses a Year and the Tory Revival after 1945' *Contemporary British History* 1 (2000), 99–121; G. O'Hara 'Social Democratic Space: the Politics of Building in 'Golden Age Britain, c. 1950–1973', *Architectural Research Quarterly* 10 (2006), 285.

9 See N. Rosenberg, 'Government Economic Controls in the British Building Industry', *The Canadian Journal of Economics and Political Science* 3 (1958), 346. See also G.

level rested with the newly created Investment Programmes Committee (hereafter 'IPC'), based on the war-time Investment Working Party, which was to oversee all capital investment for the country. Investment in building was controlled – through the IPC – by decisions on what industries and other areas would be allocated what investment, for the greater good of the national economy.¹⁰ It is notable that the IPC did not actually have any member representing the Ministry of Health (originally responsible for housing) or the later ministries concerned with planning.¹¹ At the same time, however, the ministry responsible for planning would implement the new laws: the planning acts passed in 1944 and 1947 drastically changed the way in which Britain controlled land and building.

The Town and Country Planning Act of 1944 was war-time legislation primarily intended to deal with the issues of war damage in terms of property loss and reconstruction. The subsequent 1947 Town and Country Planning Act was the Labour government's follow-up which effectively nationalized land and development, creating strict controls for all future planning and building. This was arguably the most far-reaching legislation enacted by the Labour government and carried consequences still felt in Britain today.¹² Such legislation also supported the IPC's control of investment as well as who built what, where and when.

On another level, there was the oft found divide between issues the voting public felt were priorities and how Government managed the economy. Additionally, while Exeter's officials felt they were pressuring

O'Hara 'Nationalisation and the Nationalised Industries in Post-War Britain: Attempts at Modernisation' unpublished paper, Rome, May 2008; P. Addison, *Now The War Is Over* (London, 1985), chapter 2.

10 Cmd. 7268 *Capital Investment in 1948*. (London, 1947); A. Cairncross, *Years of Recovery: British Economic Policy, 1945–51* (London, 1985); J.C.R. Dow *The Management of the British Economy 1945–60* (Cambridge, 1964), pp. 158–162; M. Chick *Industrial Policy in Britain, 1945–1951: Economic Planning, Nationalisation and the Labour Governments* (Cambridge, 1998); Rosenberg, 'Government Economic Controls', 345–54.

11 Originally the Ministry of Works (separately the Ministry of Reconstruction), later Works and Planning, then Town and Country Planning (hereafter MCTP), then Housing and Local Government.

12 In 1999 the Town and Country Planning Association claimed that 'the central principles of the 1947 Act remain intact and have set the framework for the entire pattern of development in the UK over the last half century'. The Town and Country Planning Association, *Your Place & Mine, Reinventing Planning: The Report of the TCPA Inquiry into the future of planning* (London, 1999), p. 6. For the aesthetic impact of the 1947 Act, see J. Lubbock '1947 and all that: why has the Act lasted so long?' in I.B. Whyte (ed.), *Man-made future: planning, education and design in mid-twentieth-century Britain* (New York, 2007), pp. 1–15.

the government on the rebuilding and other similar post-war issues, a gap separated the section of government they brought their concerns to and the actual group (IPC) that would make the higher level decisions. In fact, MPs from all blitzed cities pressured the Ministry of Health (for housing), and later the planning ministries, as regarded allocations and development. Yet for many years the IPC did not include either ministry on their committee or in their discussions.¹³

IV Exeter's Experience

Exeter officials' pleas to Whitehall fell on deaf ears. Issues such as the loss of rates were first noted by Exeter's Finance Committee in a report to the City Council dated 13 April 1943. The report stated the committee's frustration at the refusal of the government to provide any assistance toward the loss of rate revenue.¹⁴ Fortunately, by January 1943 officials realized that with the pending introduction of new planning legislation – the 1944 Act – they would need to have a plan in place for rebuilding the city after the war. A committee created by the City Council, called the Re-planning and Reconstruction Committee, reported a visit from W. Morrison, Minister for Town and Country Planning in September 1943. He urged the appointment of a consultant to advise on the re-planning of

13 See TNA, CAB 21/2975, CAB 134/437–442, 444–457, 982–984, CAB 139/209. For other cities see below note 45.

14 Devon Record Office (hereafter DRO) and West Country Studies Library (hereafter WCSL) Exeter City Council minutes (hereafter ECCM) 20 April 43. A note states that a deputation was appointed and sent to the Ministry of Health without success (the group included the Town Clerk, the Mayor, an Alderman, two City Councillors, the Chair of the Finance Committee and the City Treasurer). It does seem unusual that the City would send their deputation to the Ministry of Health rather than someone responsible for economic/funding decisions – such as the Treasury, the Exchequer or the War Damage Commission, or even the Ministry of Works. As the Ministry of Health was still responsible for building licenses and housing at the time, City officials may have thought they were the proper ministry to approach. In a thorough search of Hansard no other city appears to have taken up the same matter of rate loss (in Parliament) during war-time. The (Conservative) M.P. for Exeter, A.C. Reed, spoke only immediately after the raid, on 3 June 1942, urging that, generally speaking, persons who had been bombed out of their houses should be given some financial assistance from the government (Hansard 380:782). Reed did not speak again on the issue in the 1942–43 session of parliament, or at all in 1943–44, although City Council minutes state their appreciation for his assistance in this matter. Cities unable to cope financially due to war-time rate loss were eventually given 'Equalization Grants', Exeter was not among them, see Cmd. 9559 *Report of the Ministry of Housing and Local Government for the Period 1950/51 to 1954* (London, 1955). Also see TNA, CAB 102/878 War Damage Commission.

the city.¹⁵ A short list of planners was drawn up, interviews conducted, and Thomas Sharp – a prominent planner who was at that time employed in a project for the Ministry of Works – was selected and officially appointed in October 1943.¹⁶ The City Council contracted with Sharp for a general plan 'which they could work with' and asked that his plan be thorough but not too detailed.¹⁷ He was given a fairly extended time period for completion, with a plan expected in approximately 12 months.

In the interim, the primary focus of the City Council turned, unsurprisingly due to the national housing shortage, to housing and accommodating bombed out families. Councillors closely followed any government plans for assistance: for example minutes dated in September 1944 noted the Ministry of Health's possible offer of prefabricated houses. After the City Council's fruitless visit to Whitehall in April 1943, the matter of financial assistance appears to have been dropped until near the end of the war. In February and September of 1945 the City Council decided to try again and sent a second and third deputation, again without success.¹⁸

In October 1945 J.C. Maude, Exeter's new Conservative M.P., made his maiden speech in a Commons housing shortage debate. He asked when the government would be returning to their owners both housing and offices – many of which had been requisitioned for war-time – because the housing shortage was particularly severe in blitzed cities.¹⁹ Again, later in the 1945–46 session he inquired about housing assistance for bombed cities.²⁰ In both cases, no definite answer or assistance was

- 15 WCSL, ECCM 28 September 1943.
- 16 WCSL, ECCM 28 September 1943, 26 October 1943; Sharp Archives, University of Newcastle, GB 176 TNS Agreement signed 10 May 1944. Sharp was one of the most prolific post-war planners, completing more than 10 plans for cities or counties in the 1940s and 1950s.
- 17 J. Brierley 'Exeter 1939–1974: The Reconstruction of a City'. (former City Engineer) unpublished M.A. thesis, Dept of Architecture, University of Manchester, 1980, (held by WCSL), p. 170.
- 18 WCSL, ECCM 27 February 1945. On 29 May 1945 the minutes also stated a recommendation that 'each political section in the Council should now be requested to approach their respective National Headquarters with a view to their assisting the City'(sic). The local press also reported an official visit of complaint to the MCTP, see *Western Morning News* (hereafter WMN) 10 May 1950. The February 1945 delegation was composed of the same members as the prior visit to the Ministry of Health, with the addition of the Sheriff and with a request that MP Reed accompany them, the September 1945 note does not name attendees, but states that the new MP Maude was asked to join the delegation. The Council continued to send delegations until at least 1952, later complaining about the amounts of their allocations.
- 19 *House of Commons Debates* [hereafter HOCD] 414:1293–97, 17 October 1945.
- 20 HOCD 418:254 WA 31 January 1946.

forthcoming. In Whitehall and Parliament, the focus was certainly on the war and, in its immediate aftermath, on the most pressing economic issues such as the best course to transition the war-time economy into peace without spiraling into inflation. Blitzed cities were an emotional issue, but for the Government not a practical one.

At the same time, in 1945 bombed out business people in Exeter organized themselves into a 'Blitzed Traders Association' to press for action from the City Council and collectively keep abreast of any potential news or developments in finding new premises, obtaining temporary shops, and applying for relief from the Board of Trade. Most of the traders faced great financial difficulties, since temporary shops were not erected until at least 1947.²¹ According to former City Engineering department employee, Norman Venning, the traders had signs erected: '...there were displayed on the various bombed sites notice-boards indicating the name of the firm that formerly stood there and, if they were trading elsewhere, their new address'.²²

The most notable actions taken by the city were to continue with both the finalization and approval of the plan by Thomas Sharp, and to submit an application under the 1944 legislation for a Declaratory Order covering the bomb-damaged acreage in the city centre.²³ Although past his contracted time frame Sharp was not satisfied that he had completed the plan when the Exeter City Council insisted that he appear and present a report in March 1945.²⁴ The council was impatient and clashed to some extent with Sharp's perfectionism; the City Council was apparently eager to show Whitehall that they were ready to get started. The final plan presented in May of that year included provision for a traffic relief road around the north side of the city, and a plan for rebuilding the central shopping area. The plan was exhibited to the public on 27 December 1945, being officially opened by Lewis Silkin, the new Minister for Town and Country Planning.²⁵ Its central elements were

21 WCSL, ECCM. Process initiated in 24 July 1945. See also WMN 28 February 1945, 29 September 1945, 15 March 1946, 26 September 1946, 5 December 1946 and 25 June 1947; *Express & Echo* (hereafter *E&E*) 16 May 1945, 13 March 1946, 14 November 1946, and 26 February 1947; Venning, *Exeter*, p. 20. Venning worked in engineering for Exeter City Council for 29 years.

22 Venning, *Exeter*, p. 12.

23 A Declaratory Order was in effect preliminary approval for the amount and specific area of land each municipality would be able to purchase under the 1944 Act. When ready to move forward they would submit a further 'Compulsory Purchase Order'.

24 *E&E*, 13 March 1945. It had however been 16 months since he began the contract.

25 *E&E*, 28 December 1945, also the WMN reported on 15 January 1946 that 20,438 people – nearly one-third of the city's population – had attended the exhibition of Sharp's proposals.

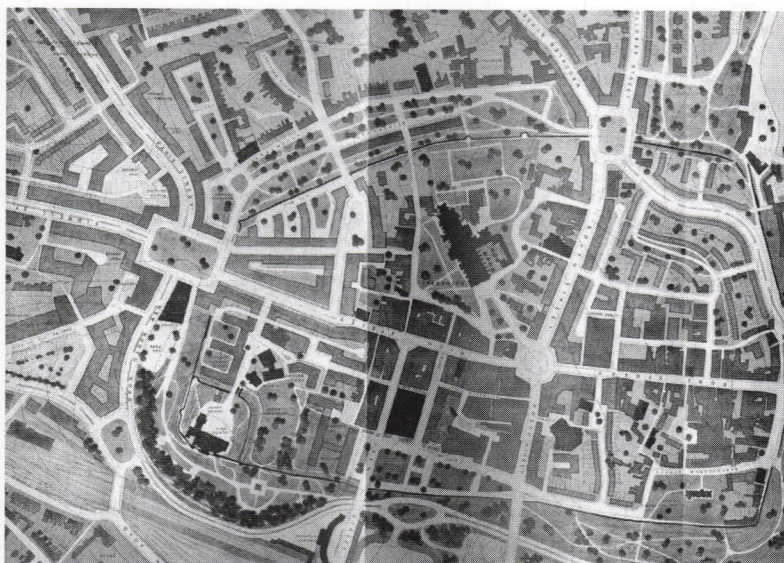


Figure 3: Thomas Sharp's plan for Exeter from *Exeter Phoenix* (1946).

a northern route for a large by-pass road, widening of several major shopping streets (including High Street), new intersections to include a major roundabout at the largest, and a new pedestrian shopping area to be created, cutting across the network of old narrow streets and oriented to have a view to Exeter Cathedral.

Demonstrating the fact that Exeter was among the first of the blitzed cities to publish such a plan, and probably because they had used Sharp – a very well-known planner at the time – the Exeter exhibition was followed by a further show in London. It opened in March 1946 to coincide with the full colour publication of Sharp's plan in book form, entitled *Exeter Phoenix*.²⁶ Though generally well-received, particularly nationally, objections surfaced in the local press. Sharp's plan was considered radical but not controversial, yet the reaction of the local MP summed up a very practical perspective. He was quoted in the papers as saying that he liked the plans but queried who would pay for all the work:

'It is a beautiful plan that will make the city lovely, but who is going to pay for it?' asked Mr. J.C. Maude, K.C., M.P. for the city, at the Exeter Insurance Institute lunch yesterday.

26 Sharp, *Exeter Phoenix*.

That has never been explained. I am not in any sense trying to put the brake on the progress of the scheme, but how is it to be paid for? Will the burden be put on the rates or is the money to be provided by the Government?²⁷

This question had not yet been seriously considered by the City Council. As stated by the Council and in a few local summaries by involved parties, the Council only intended to make use of Sharp's plan 'in broad outline', even while it had been prepared in detail.²⁸ In both this situation and that of similar cities, it appears that plans like Sharp's may have been intended for implementation by the planner, while in practice they presented a more idealised view of the future. This feeling varies by city, and was often dependent on the politics of the local government. In Exeter the council and MPs were Conservative before, through and after the war, while cities like Plymouth, with a Labour council, were more apt to 'plan boldly' and mean it.²⁹

Although the City was unable to start substantial reconstruction, the Declaratory Order was approved by the Ministry of Town and Country Planning in December 1946. It is remarkable that the order approved covered 75.64 acres of central Exeter whereas it was documented by the Ministry that the war-damaged area totaled only about 37 acres.³⁰ That the government was willing to double the size of the bombed area and allow Exeter potentially to acquire so much land in the city centre was unprecedented for a non-industrial city. The next step involved filing for a Compulsory Purchase Order (CPO) so that the City could acquire the land to be redeveloped and then control when and where and how the city centre would be rebuilt. Once it became clear how much land the City Council would control, there were unsurprisingly severe objections from many of the blitzed traders, as well as from property owners and local voters.³¹

Local traders were justifiably concerned that the City Council would work to redevelop the city centre by holding their costs to a minimum, but at the same time afraid the Council would raise ground rents and thereby increase the City's pre-war rate revenues. The traders feared this would squeeze them out of their old locations because more 'multiples'

27 WMN 3 January 1946, 'But Who Will Pay? Asks City M.P.'

28 Venning, *Exeter*, p. 18; Brierley, 'Exeter', p. 170; WMN 13 March 1946.

29 See Tiratsoo, *Reconstruction*; Hasegawa, *Replanning*; Essex and Brayshay 'Vision', 417-41.

30 Cmd. 8204, p. 60.

31 TNA, HLG 79/171 War damage redevelopment: notice of motion: Declaratory Order, Exeter CB. See also WCSL clippings book: E&E and WMN dated February 1945 to December 1948.

(national chain stores) would come in able to pay higher rents. Several sources state that Exeter's High Street was one of the highest valued sites in the southwest before the war. Certainly at the least it was a very desirable location – serving not just the city but a large portion of the population of the rural southwest of England.³² After a public inquiry in 1946 to consider the objections of the traders, and further discussion with the Ministry, the first Compulsory Purchase Order was approved for 65 acres in August of 1947; of this, 60 acres was for the High Street area alone.³³

Exeter City Council had worked diligently to pursue re-planning and rebuilding of the city centre, and in 1946 had created a new department for planning with a new Chief Planning Officer, Harold Gayton. Yet many factors continued to hold up any serious start on the full clean-up of blitzed sites or any actual building work. Physically, by 1945 only some bomb sites were cleared, but it was still another four years before any real building commenced.³⁴ To combat the problem of the post-war labour shortage, the City Council apparently approached the local prison governor to request the use of convict labour, which was permitted.³⁵ Another major task before full clearance and before any road rebuilding was the necessity to coordinate all of the statutory undertakings.³⁶ City officials had to establish where new roads were to be laid out, and if they intended to follow all or part of Sharp's traffic plan.

Of all the complexities involved in securing both approvals and allocations, the roadway designs proved to be the biggest stumbling block for the city administrators. On 13 March 1946 the local newspapers reported that the City Council had approved the Sharp plan on the recommendation of its Re-planning Committee, but – as shown – it was only 'in broad outline'.³⁷ A final modified version of Sharp's plan was not actually adopted until September 1947.³⁸ Very likely the Council and Committees went forward with Sharp's plan as a tool to secure approvals

32 See D. Childs 'Exeter: A Survey', *The Architects' Journal*, 21 August 1952, p. 216; Goss, 'Exeter', p. 11; G. Goss 'The Economics of Rebuilding' in R. Hackett, *The Municipal Journal* 61:3158 (1953), 1836.

33 Cmd. 8204, Appendixes IV & V; Venning, *Exeter*, pp. 21, 30.

34 Photographs of mid-1945 in Venning's publication show the city centre and state that 'some measure of orderliness had been established by the demolition of ruined walls of buildings, the random filling of basements and general clearance work. It was thus possible to look across the devastated areas where the extent of desecration was at once evident'. Venning, *Exeter*, p. 10.

35 Ibid., p. 23.

36 Ibid., pp. 23–25.

37 WMN 13 March 1946.

38 E&E 29 September 1947.

from Whitehall, knowing any delay in obtaining authorisation would mean a delay in material allocations, which would greatly slow rebuilding efforts. In addition, building in Exeter had to conform to the whims of Government, who – after the 1947 Act – played a role in every British city's specific plans.

While applying to the Ministry of Transport for approval and financial assistance on road rebuilding, the city was told that it would have to carry out a traffic census before approvals would be considered.³⁹ Both the City Council minutes as well as ministry files show that there was considerable disagreement between city officials and the Ministry of Transport regarding Exeter's plans.⁴⁰ The Ministry of Transport was to fund 75 per cent of the cost of the roads, and considering that Exeter at the time was effectively the gateway to the southwest of England, it was a matter of importance to both governing bodies. After contentious and prolonged negotiations a contract was finally signed for the initial stage of sewer building in July 1949, with a roads contract following in September 1950.⁴¹ Although labour shortages and labour rationing were a significant factor in the delays, and the issues of infrastructure – including road building and locations – were also important, the tight rationing of steel and other materials was to play an even greater role in the delay of rebuilding.

In the end it was seven years after the bombing that work in Exeter finally commenced on a 'new' city centre. The first contracts for land acquisition and leaseholds began to be signed in 1948–49. On 21 October 1949 (the then) Princess Elizabeth visited Exeter to unveil a commemorative plaque for a new development that was to be called 'Princesshay', the one portion of Sharp's plan which was fully implemented.⁴² However, these starts were almost purely ceremonial, since no building could commence without a steel allocation. The first allocation came through with a building license in October 1949 for one site only and work began on this project, the Pearl Assurance House on the High Street, in 1950.⁴³

39 *E&E* 24 September 1947; TNA, HLG 71/1284. This Exeter planning file holds a great deal of correspondence on issues between the City of Exeter and the Ministry of Transport as well as the Ministry of Town and Country Planning.

40 *E&E* 18 February 1949, noted in *The Municipal Journal* 11 March 1949; TNA, HLG 71/1284. See also Brierley, 'Exeter'.

41 Venning, *Exeter*, p. 36–37.

42 *Ibid.*, pp. 27–28.

43 Brierley, 'Exeter', p. 42.

V Exeter in the National Context

Exeter – like the other blitzed cities – had to wait for IPC approval of investment allocations (which essentially meant steel allocations) before the planning ministry could issue building licenses. This fact seems still to have been hidden from local governments, not just Exeter, many of whom continued to raise points in Parliament to both the Ministries of Health and Planning, throughout 1949 and all the way into 1953.⁴⁴ Although in both ministry and City files it is obvious that Exeter had a poor relationship with both the planning ministry and the Ministry of Transport, their difficulty in obtaining both funding and allocations for building was shared by many other blitzed cities.

Comparisons with other cities are difficult because there was no blitzed city truly like Exeter. Exeter's primary revenues before the war came from both tourism and its position as a shopping hub in the southwest.⁴⁵ Other blitzed cities – larger in size and with more industry – such as port cities Bristol, Southampton, Portsmouth, Hull and Plymouth, therefore received more Government attention in the post-war focus on rebuilding industry and increasing exports. More comparable smaller cities which suffered similar 'Baedeker' raids such as Canterbury, Bath, Norwich and York had not sustained the level of damage to their centres as Exeter and therefore were not national priorities. If the size of the bombed area in Exeter is compared with other cities based on population, the damage ranks in the middle, though much higher than any other 'Baedeker' city. The size of Exeter's Declaratory Order was small compared with the larger port or industrialized cities, but very large compared to their damage acreage. In their Compulsory Purchase Orders Exeter obtained far more land proportionally and even literally than several worse hit cities such as Bristol, Coventry or Southampton.⁴⁶

An alternative comparison is in the amount of IPC investment allocation. In the five years (1949–53) that allocations were made to the 'blitzed cities', the 18 cities selected by the planning ministry for priority, Exeter received more than twice the allocation of Canterbury, and more

44 Representatives of blitzed cities such as Plymouth, Coventry, Bristol, Southampton, Portsmouth, Birmingham, Hull, etc. were regular speakers or questioners. See C. Flinn 'Overlooked Constraints: The Reconstruction of Blitzed City Centres in Britain 1945–1955', unpublished M.A. thesis, Oxford Brookes University, 2007.

45 DRO, Group G, Box 7/63. Development Plan for Exeter, 1950, p. 1. Also R. Hackett 'Exeter Rebuilds', *The Municipal Journal* 61:3158 (1953), 1838.

46 See Table 1. TNA, CAB 134/455, HLG 71/34, HLG 71/1571, HLG 88/10, also Cmd. 8204 pp. 57–60, and Cmd 9559 (Appendices).

Table 1: Exeter and Other Blitzed Cities

	EXETER	Bath	Bristol	Canterbury	Coventry	Hull	Plymouth	Portsmouth	Southampton
Population (1951)	75,680	77,380	435,390	26,130	251,590	294,410	206,110	242,020	180,100
Total Rateable Value	686,409	630,674	3,365,328	222,219	1,629,433	1,703,164	1,655,278	1,776,837	1,474,158
Bombed Area (acres)	37	unknown	80	26	unknown	136	492	165	145
Est. Damage to Trade (per Board of Trade)									
in £	158,778	8,056	464,280	21,552	315,260	548,376	401,837*	unknown	370,607
Declaratory Order (acres)	75.64	55.5	247.0	none	274.0	245.8	413	430	261.68
Comp. Purchase Order(s) (acres)	66.5	na	20.65	2.29	4.35	53.47	125.47	13.03	16.42
IPC Allocations:									
1949 steel (tons)	450	0	390	0	750	450	750	750	270
1950 <i>unavailable</i>									
£ in 1951	350,000	none	250,000	140,000	550,000	300,000	550,000	450,000	250,000
£ in 1952 before reductions									
	400,000	none	1,000,000	200,000	600,000	300,000	1,000,000	500,000	500,000
£ in 1953	300,000	none	350,000	100,000	400,000	400,000	400,000	400,000	350,000
£ in 1954 proposed before IPC									
disbanded	350,000	none	500,000	150,000	550,000	550,000	550,000	550,000	500,000

[Notes: Plymouth loss is not a Board of Trade figure, but loss of rateable value from bombing per NAUK files. Sources: CAB 134/455, HLG 71/34, HLG 71/1571, HLG 88/10, also Cmd. 8204, pp. 57-60 and Cmd. 9559 (Appendices).

funding in some years than Bristol or Hull.⁴⁷ Investment allocation reports show only the investment directed to each city for rebuilding *outside* of government building, building for industry or for housing, health or education, so it is perhaps unsurprising the small, non-industrial Exeter ranks highly compared to other cities. Yet cities such as Coventry and Birmingham had both central shopping as well as larger outlying areas to be rebuilt, and did not receive substantially more investment, though both had more industry. Exeter officials were ready with their officially submitted plans very early, and it appears they put more pressure on the government than some other blitzed cities. However, rebuilding was still slow and allocations at the start allowed only a few new buildings per year. By the time the allocations were able to cover more than just a minor amount of construction Exeter received amounts that matched those in cities like Birmingham and Manchester.⁴⁸

Yet for all the blitzed cities the IPC, until 1951, made almost no allocations beyond the basics of housing, government/public services and industry. Although some blitzed cities were at least likely to receive allocations for industry – i.e. Portsmouth, Coventry, Hull and Bristol – the 'Baedeker' raid cities had no recourse to such funding.⁴⁹ Therefore cities that had been shopping centres for their county or for a large local area had to make do with temporary shops and offices – if they were even able to acquire the materials to construct them – until they could rebuild the holes in their cores. In fact, even within the IPC the recognition of blitz reconstruction as a line item in the capital investment allocation report did not happen until 1952, and no actual 'programme' had been implemented before 1951.⁵⁰

An additional issue for cities from the slowness in the rate of allocation was the cost. In fact, it was the Exeter Town Clerk, C.J. Newman, who – while attending a planning conference – pointed out to Minister Lewis Silkin that once each city completed their CPO and purchased the land

47 Ibid.

48 See TNA, HLG 71/1571, also CAB IPC reports (see note 14). In March 1949 Medland (MP for Plymouth) had worked out that the amount of steel allocated for blitzed cities was .00034 of the national output of 15½ million tons of ingot steel. *HOCD* 463:157–174 (21 Mar 1949). See also TNA, CAB 134/982. The very small sizes of the allocations led R. Morley (MP for Southampton) to point out that at these rates the allocation might allow each city to build perhaps one or two new shops or offices per year and the time to rebuild fully at such a rate would be over 130 years. See *HOCD* 508:1906–16 (4 December 1952).

49 I.e. those cities that had been targeted by the Germans as historic or scenic 'gems'. See Rothnie, *Baedeker Blitz*.

50 TNA, CAB 134/452 [IPC (WP)(49) 72 Addendum, dated 25 April 1949. 'There is no specific programme for the whole field', p. 2].

the 'clock will run against them'. Since they would be paying loan charges without assurance about when they would be able to begin building, they would pay out with no time frame toward recouping the cost and the loss of rates.⁵¹

How, then, were the blitzed city centres to commence building? In Exeter from 1949, when the smallest of starts was made, until 1954, when the Conservative government relaxed several key controls (removal of the 100 per cent 'development charge' and a simplification of building licensing), construction proceeded at a slow pace. How it was paid for, and how its appearance was determined is a story based on the coexistence of a fledgling welfare state with a market economy. In his book *Property Boom* journalist Oliver Marriott tells the story of the origins of the building boom in the mid-1950s. Here was found the practical solution to the high cost of rebuilding.⁵² Exeter played an early part in the story: Marriott tells how two enterprising young war veterans – Louis Freedman and Fred Maynard – formed a property company in 1949 and won a bid to develop shops in an estate of new council houses in Bristol. Noticing the blitzed cities held great opportunities they then persuaded Plymouth City Council to allow them to secure the leasehold on a prime city centre site. This site was taken at a fixed ground rent for a specific term and Freedman and Maynard – as Ravenseft Ltd. – proceeded to develop 41 shops at their own expense.⁵³

Ravenseft's success with Plymouth drove them to pursue other blitzed cities and in 1950 they acquired the right to develop buildings on the new street for Exeter.⁵⁴ This small development company was later to be bought out by one of its original investors and absorbed into a corporation that became one of Britain's biggest landlords, now Land Securities.⁵⁵ The trend had started for cities needing to rebuild war damage – including London – to use private investors, often as speculative developers, to build on publicly controlled land. The market economy had brought a solution to the welfare state where both sides would benefit financially.

51 TNA, HLG 71/34 Conferences with Local Authorities. Transcript of question from C. Newman (Exeter) to Silkin (MCTP), October 1947.

52 O. Marriott, *Property Boom* (London, 1967).

53 Ibid., pp. 75–78.

54 Ibid., pp. 74–81.

55 P. Ambrose and B. Colenutt, *The Property Machine* (Hammondsworth, 1975), p. 38. Land Securities still controls the Princesshay development, which was torn down and redeveloped in 2004–2007.

VI Exeter's Local Issues

Even though by 1950 some progress had been made on buildings in the city centre, this covered only about 5–10 acres of the nearly 60 in the central shopping area which was to be redeveloped. Though only 37 acres were said to have been destroyed, the CPO allowed the City Council to purchase and pull down any building in the 60 acre area for redevelopment. Investment allocations picked up slightly the next year and by 1952, ten years from the blitz, most of the north side of the High Street had been rebuilt.⁵⁶ Still, the southern portions of the city centre were very slow in getting underway. Roadways and statutory undertakings in the very core near the High Street were completed but the further construction of the inner by-pass road did not start until 1954.⁵⁷ Exeter's appearance from 1942 to 1950 was that of a large bomb site, followed by a transformation to a huge construction zone. But the experience of many other blitzed cities is similar, and rebuilding continued slowly for all of them, even into the 1960s and 1970s.

Yet the City of Exeter faced a few further problems of its own. The city government in the post-war era has been repeatedly criticized by historians, journalists and Exeter citizens.⁵⁸ City officials' priorities were questioned, and official interests often clashed with what others perceived as the public interest. Allegations of disenfranchisement of local businesses, the destruction of historic buildings, and poor relationships with both consultant(s) and national government, indicate some of the difficulties that were being faced in Exeter. Certainly the city officials' efforts to bring Exeter to the attention of national government and secure both funding and allocation were thorough and, if irritating to those they pressed, constituents had to applaud their efforts. But forming difficult relationships with public servants in Whitehall may have often hurt the city's cause, rather than helped it.

The difficulties Sharp had in dealing with Exeter officials are mentioned in both the Sharp archives and in the National Archives. A letter to Sharp goes so far as to say 'what sons of bitches that Exeter City

56 See WMN 6 September 1952; Venning, *Exeter*, p. 58.

57 The by-pass road was finally approved in March 1952 on the south side of the city centre, not on the north as in Sharp's plan. WCSL, Exeter Planning Committee report, 6 March 1952. The first section took five years to complete, later sections were not completed until 1959–64 and some later still. Venning, *Exeter*, pp. 66–72.

58 See: Hoskins, *Two Thousand Years*, pp. 139–144; Davies, *Bombing of Exeter*; R. Fortescue-Foulkes, *Exeter, a City Saved?* (Exeter, 1977), also unpublished BA (Hons) Architecture dissertation by D. Minns, 'The Post-War Redevelopment of Exeter' 1979 (held at WCSL). See below, notes 60 and 61.

Council is composed of.⁵⁹ This tone is exemplified in the situation shown in both City Council minutes and the local press: for example, officials attempted to negotiate and fix ground rents for the blitzed traders on new sites before the traders were told how much War Damage Commission compensation they would receive for their old sites. Additionally, several sources strongly criticized many aspects of the way certain officials carried out their duties.⁶⁰

The local press was critical and while their attacks were not often directed at specific councillors or city officials, they did take up the cause of local business people, particularly the displaced traders who had been bombed out. At issue were the attempts by the City to redevelop the shopping areas without consulting or giving priority to the old businesses and also the slowness of the provision of temporary shops to keep traders' businesses running until they could acquire new space. Former City Engineer John Brierley claimed that the City had done all it could to recognize the best interests of the traders, but some traders obviously did not see it this way.⁶¹ From the time of the blitz in May 1942 to the actual provision of shops the wait was five years for some, and a further year or two for most.⁶²

Further upsetting many residents and shopkeepers, city officials made a constant effort to plan for an increased rateable value in the centre of Exeter. The effect of this policy was that in the redevelopment, preference was apparently given to national chain retailers. Some businesses, such as Marks and Spencer and Lloyds Bank, were already established and disputed the sites the City tried to give them when they were not offered a chance to re-occupy their old sites.⁶³ The report by City Planner Gayton, submitted with the Development Plan (under the new 1947 Act) in 1950, shows an increase in the city centre of 34 per

59 Sharp Archives, University of Newcastle, GB 186 THS, de Cronin (of *The Architectural Review*) to Sharp (dated 25 May 1945), Sharp to Richards (dated 3 Oct 1949). Additionally, in several memos both Transport and MCTP civil servants complain that the City Council forbade Sharp from speaking with government ministers and civil servants. See TNA, HLG 71/1284 '1944 Confidential Special Investigative Report' (handwritten, undated notes).

60 DRO, ECCM, 21 December 1948; WMN 22 December 1948; *E&E* 3 December 1948; Hoskins, *Two Thousand Years*; Rothnie, *Baedeker Blitz*, pp. 28, 42, 45–6. See BBC WW2 People's War Memories website: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/ww2peopleswar/stories/37/a4005037.shtml>

61 See *E&E* 18 August 1948, 3 December 1948, 21 March 1950; Brierley, 'Exeter', pp. 30–40.

62 Venning, *Exeter*, p. 20; see above note 22.

63 TNA, HLG 71/1284 Kennedy to Henson, 18 November 1947; *E&E* 10 April 1951, Brierley, 'Exeter', p. 36.

cent in floor space for offices alone.⁶⁴ Writing in *The Municipal Journal* in August 1953, the City Treasurer stated that 'the rebuilding of the blitzed areas will be largely self supporting and will more than restore the rateable value lost in 1942'.⁶⁵

Another stumbling block the city created for itself emerged over the issue of the by-pass road. While the council allowed Sharp to submit a plan for a northern by-pass, and approved it in outline form, council officials did not think it was feasible, nor did the Ministry of Transport. Both parties felt a southern by-pass was necessary but could not agree on the route. The crossing over the Exe river was also a concern, as there was only one bridge to transport all cars over in 1945, and anyone planning for the future realized they would need to accommodate much greater numbers of vehicles, even if they underestimated the actual scale.⁶⁶

It is unfortunate that Exeter did not follow more of Sharp's plan. Though his plans could be controversial, his success in the city of Durham showed that he had a good grasp of traffic resolutions. Not quite comparable in size to Exeter but still an historic cathedral city, Sharp had completed the Durham scheme almost immediately prior to the Exeter plan.⁶⁷ Durham did in fact implement the major part of Sharp's traffic plan and as a result kept their historic core intact. Today Durham is generally more highly regarded for its beauty than Exeter.

Local historians have argued that Exeter lost much of its history and beauty with the unprecedented number of historic buildings removed from the city core. Many writers speak with regret of the losses suffered at the hands of the City Council. Not only were individual older buildings pulled down for redevelopment, but whole areas of historic interest were removed as well. Examples include Bedford Circus as well as Dix's Fields, which suffered severe damage but when inspected by the Ministry of Works was recommended for preservation.⁶⁸ Even where historic buildings were left with intact facades, in Exeter they were removed rather than adapted for re-use.

According to the local newspaper, Exeter City Council was also at fault for acquiring such a large amount of unblitzed land in order to carry out

64 DRO, Group G, Box 7/63, Development Plan for Exeter, December 1950, Report by H. Gayton (Approved with modifications, July 1954), and Gillie to Newman 19 July 1954.

65 H.C. Haley, 'Financing the Rebuilding', *The Municipal Journal* 61:3158 (1953), 1831.

66 See TNA, HLG 71/1284 Exeter reconstruction file.

67 T. Sharp, *Cathedral City: A Plan for Durham* (London, 1945).

68 Hoskins, *Two Thousand Years*, pp. 139–144; Rothnie, *Baedeker Blitz*, p. 137; TNA, HLG 79/171 includes a memo (no author, no date): Gaston of the Ministry of Works visited Exeter and stated that the area at Dix's Fields is Grade II and should be preserved, even where only facades remain. The City acquired these properties after a legal battle and tore them down.

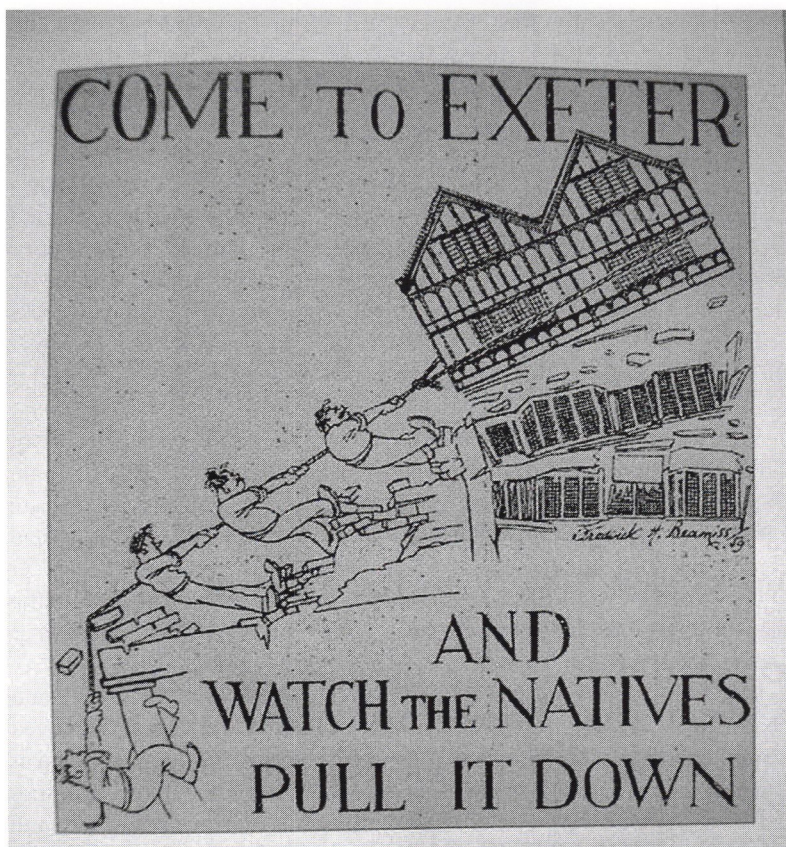


Figure 4: Cartoon from 1959 by F. Beamiss (courtesy Isca Collection).

their development plans.⁶⁹ This went against the spirit of the 1944 legislation, yet the Ministry approved the 75 acres for Exeter's Declaratory Order, at twice the size of the amount of city centre land damaged in the blitz. Clearly Exeter might have retained more of its historic core and city officials could have regulated the rebuilding to be more pleasing to the eye. But the war, the post-war economic situation and two successive governments must share responsibility as well for the lack of investment and the pace of rebuilding, which made the city impatient to recover both physically and financially from the devastating effects of the German bombing raids.

69 *E&E* 6 December 1946, 24 September 1947.

Conclusions

On the national level, all blitzed cities faced the problem of securing funding from the Government. Although the IPC and the Labour government, followed by the Conservatives, were in a very difficult position economically and faced tough choices, the paucity of funding – at under one percent of total government capital investment – stands far below what the rhetoric of 'homes fit for heroes' seemed to justify at the time.⁷⁰ As early as 1943, Churchill had told his Cabinet that preparation should start right away on 'rebuilding our shattered dwellings and cities, on which there is or may be found a wide measure of general agreement'. However, those cities that had faced the terror of bombing – followed by substantial revenue losses from loss of rates and business, and increased expenditure from war-damage clean-up – received no priority for rebuilding. This clearly tested their morale, particularly after receiving verbal promises from Whitehall that they would receive help.⁷¹

Many ministry committees and groups working on the blitzed cities question stated that they were deserving of more priority. None was forthcoming.⁷² Conversely in 1952 just as the 'blitzed cities programme' finally began receiving separate IPC allocations, the Chairman, F.F. Turnbull of the Treasury, wrote an internal note arguing that 'We should bury a number of awkward quarreling points such as miscellaneous local government services and blitzed cities'. Instead, he suggested, they should be lumped together with other 'miscellaneous' work for a general allocation and fight it out within their regions.⁷³ Fortunately for the blitzed cities successive planning ministries did pay some attention to their plight, at least verbally, though they did not sit on the decision-making committee. By 1953 the IPC had finally added input from

70 J. Stevenson, 'Planners' moon? The Second World War and the Planning Movement' in H.L. Smith (ed.), *War & Social Change* (Manchester, 1986); K. Jeffreys, 'Rebuilding Post-war Britain: Conflicting Views of the Attlee Governments, 1945–51', *New Perspective* 3 (1998). See above note 9.

71 M. Tichelar, 'The Conflict over Property Rights during the Second World War: The Labour Party's Abandonment of Land Nationalization' *Twentieth Century British History* 2 (2003), 165–88. Tichelar notes that during difficulties over the 1944 Act, 'Atlee reminded Churchill that his previous public commitment to adequate powers for rebuilding blitzed cities had been highly explicit in his reconstruction broadcast to the nation' 177. See TNA, CBA 66/42/17 War Cabinet Memorandum, 19 October 1943.

72 Early on, a civil servant in the MCTP wrote: '... here will be no lack of capital for building reconstruction which will be, together with basic industries [and 'housing' added by hand] the first to receive quotas of materials and labour'. TNA, HLG 88/10 Ministry of Town & Country Planning: Advisory Panel on Reconstruction of City Centres. Draft report by H. Wells, dated 31 May 1943.

73 TNA, CAB 134/983 [IPC (WP)(52) 50, 11 October 1952 'Note on Control', para 5].

Housing and Local Government (particularly Dame Evelyn Sharp) and the funding allocations rose, though not substantially.⁷⁴ All blitzed cities received short shrift from the Labour government, and only saw minor improvements to their allocations when the Conservatives were returned to power. In this case, the post-war rhetoric in hindsight amounted to a series of political gestures rather than real action. In pre-automation Whitehall, Labour struggled to coordinate all its efforts to plan and organize anew, while the Conservative dismantling of much of this imperfect machinery at first created even more difficult issues for rebuilding.

The result of Exeter's High Street redevelopment has sadly earned notice in the press for its blandness.⁷⁵ This seems highly selective: many High Streets in Britain are similarly unappealing. Like many regional shopping centres, Exeter is a mix of a few very old buildings with a large number of 1950s simple 'neo-Georgian' buildings. There is a lack – on Exeter High Street mainly – of any variation in size and texture. Perhaps as testimony to the lack of appreciation for the rebuilding efforts of the 1950s, the flagship 'Princesshay' development by Ravenscroft Properties was pulled down in 2004. It has been replaced by a bigger, newer and more modern shopping centre – blessed by a Labour government and with yet more floor space to bring higher rates to the city and rents to the developer.⁷⁶

In the *Oxford Companion to British History*, Exeter's entry simply states: 'Since 1942 it has suffered grievously from both air raids and insipid post-war redevelopment'.⁷⁷ If it is 'insipid', and it seems there is not much disagreement on this point, why is this so? National policy and macroeconomics critically affected the outcome because governments were forced to put industry first, and the economic situation encouraged stripped-down or frugal building techniques. Was local government responsible for the failure to preserve history resulting in today's modern high street? Certainly the policies implemented to affect the greatest possible financial benefit to the city played the most significant role in the outcome. Additionally, correspondence shows that Exeter's

74 TNA, CAB 134/984 Investment Review 1953–54 [IPC (WP)(53) 4, 12 January 1953].

75 BBC news, 'Exeter tops BBC poll on Britain's blandest high street 2005' <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/england/devon/4610965.stm> accessed 5 June 2005.

76 'The £230m Princesshay development officially opened last September. The scheme has been heralded as the biggest single investment in regeneration in the city's history. It contains a mix of shops, restaurants and apartments', BBC News, dated 23 May 2008 at http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/england/devon/7415831.stm

77 D. Palliser in J. Cannon (ed.) *Oxford Companion to British History* (New York, 1997) p. 360.

government was both persistent and difficult for Whitehall to deal with, which led to many of their own problems. Finally, did the perceived greed of developers contribute to the lack of architectural character? Possibly, yet at the time Exeter High Street was rebuilt, the architectural press – for the most part – lauded the modernity of the new buildings and the use of modern technology. These questions deserve further investigation and are only partially answered here.

Historians of the post-war era too often focus on planning or architecture or economics or politics. In discussing the history of the built environment we need to look at all these factors, and more. Exeter's city centre demonstrates that High Streets created in the 1950s as a result of the need to repair war damage were and are products of their time and place, and of the people involved. While Exeter clearly could have destroyed less of its historic core in the redevelopment efforts, and city government of the time deserves the bulk of the criticism for their methods and extensive reach, the City provides an excellent example of the results of national policy and post-war realities.