

KEELEY TRAVEL is a travel agency that doesn't sell holidays run by architectural historian Tom Keeley. This travelling agency acts as both guide and tourist, visiting one destination at a time. KEELEY TRAVEL is interested in the echo between people and their surroundings, and what the gaze of the tourist can show us about the everyday through architectures, landscapes, histories and geographies. Design by Simone C. Niquille.

GUIDEBOOKS

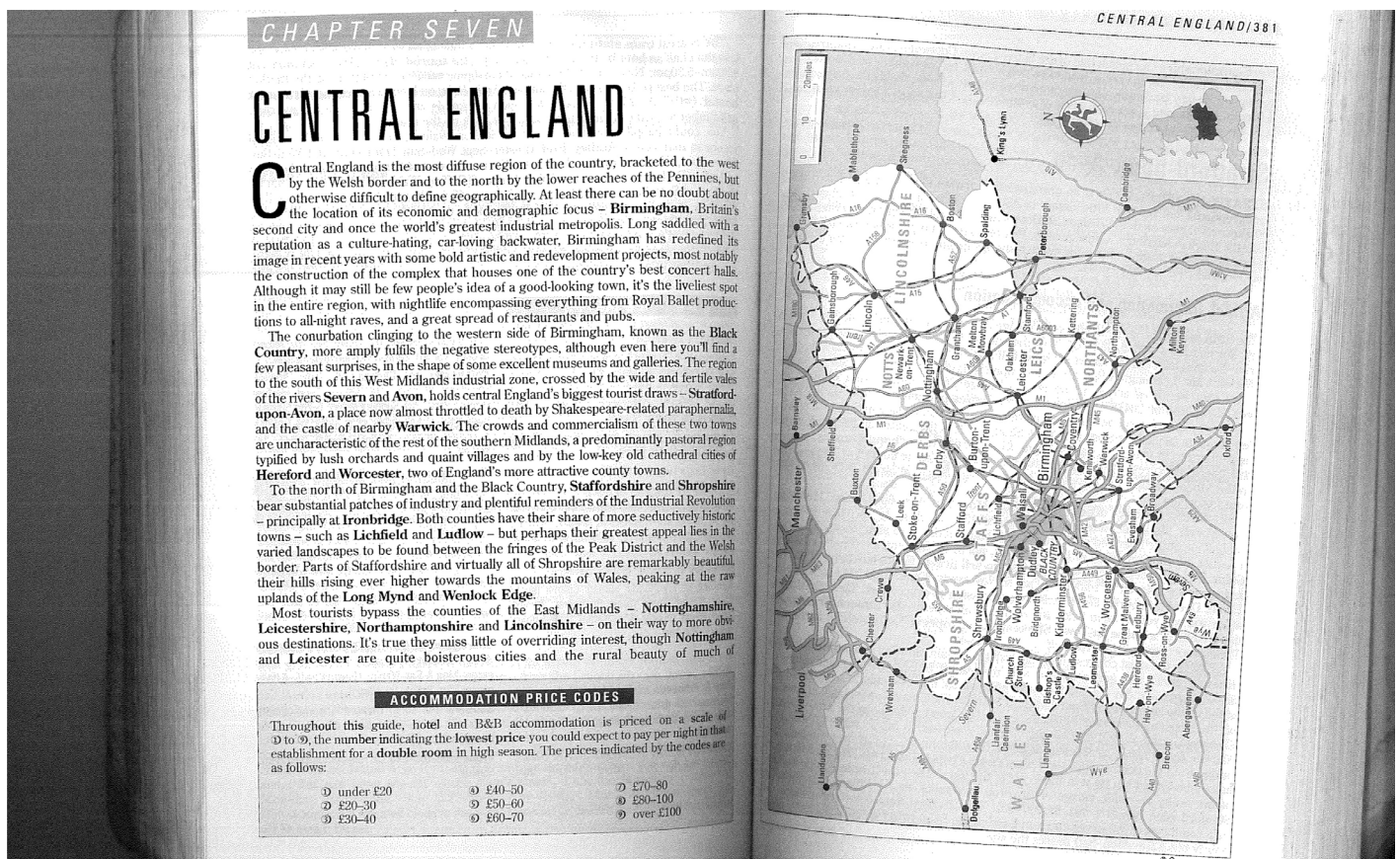
I've long been absolutely obsessed with guidebooks. Not sure how the habit started, but it's fair to say it has spiralled out of control.

Thinking back, it probably began one stage earlier with holiday brochures. I would pour over them imagining which hotel in which resort I would go to, what the buffet would be like, what my preferences were over the kind of swimming pool I desired (freeform, swim-up pool bar, preferably through a waterfall). The holiday destinations of the Med were my patch, occasionally travelling further afield to the Maldives or Caribbean if I was feeling particularly flash. These brochures enabled me to go on holiday at home, to experience places that I may never go to and trips that I could never afford, especially aged 11 in suburban Birmingham.

Cosmos, Thomas Cook, and Lunn Poly were my gateway, but I soon graduated on to actual guidebooks. These not only covered far flung destinations, travelling across the world in bed each night, but also those closer to home. The 1998 edition of the Rough Guide to Britain became my bible, and I would read about how the world might understand my hometown, and other places I know, when read from afar.

At this point my world was relatively small. But the guidebooks permitted an understanding of other places and what they mean, and how different cities have different founding myths and trajectories. Above all it garnered a thoughtfulness in terms of a point of view: what does over there look like from over here? And how does that get recorded and why? I wanted to understand

'Central England', The Rough Guide to Britain (1998)



which bus would get me from A to imaginary B, how living in the city would feel, where the train station was, what the cityscape looked like from above.

These guidebooks fascinated me - and continue to - not only for the way they describe a place and what they include in their descriptions, but also for the way they document a particular space at a particular moment in time. They are immediately documents of history, out of date as soon as they are written. They act as a record of place and space without necessarily having been written as such.

Picture the scene, it's the late 90s, New Labour have recently won a landslide, and British cities outside of London are experiencing a renaissance. The Rough Guide to Britain charted the rise of the café bar, boutique hotels, mini-breaks, the proliferation of coffee shops, and the burgeoning club scene that had its roots in rave culture some years earlier. But more than that it spoke of an optimism and a very different Britain to the one we have today. The maps trace a record of building and demolition, of civic ballsy-ness and corporate monopoly. The internet as we know it didn't really exist, and Ryanair et al had yet to explode into the collective consciousness.

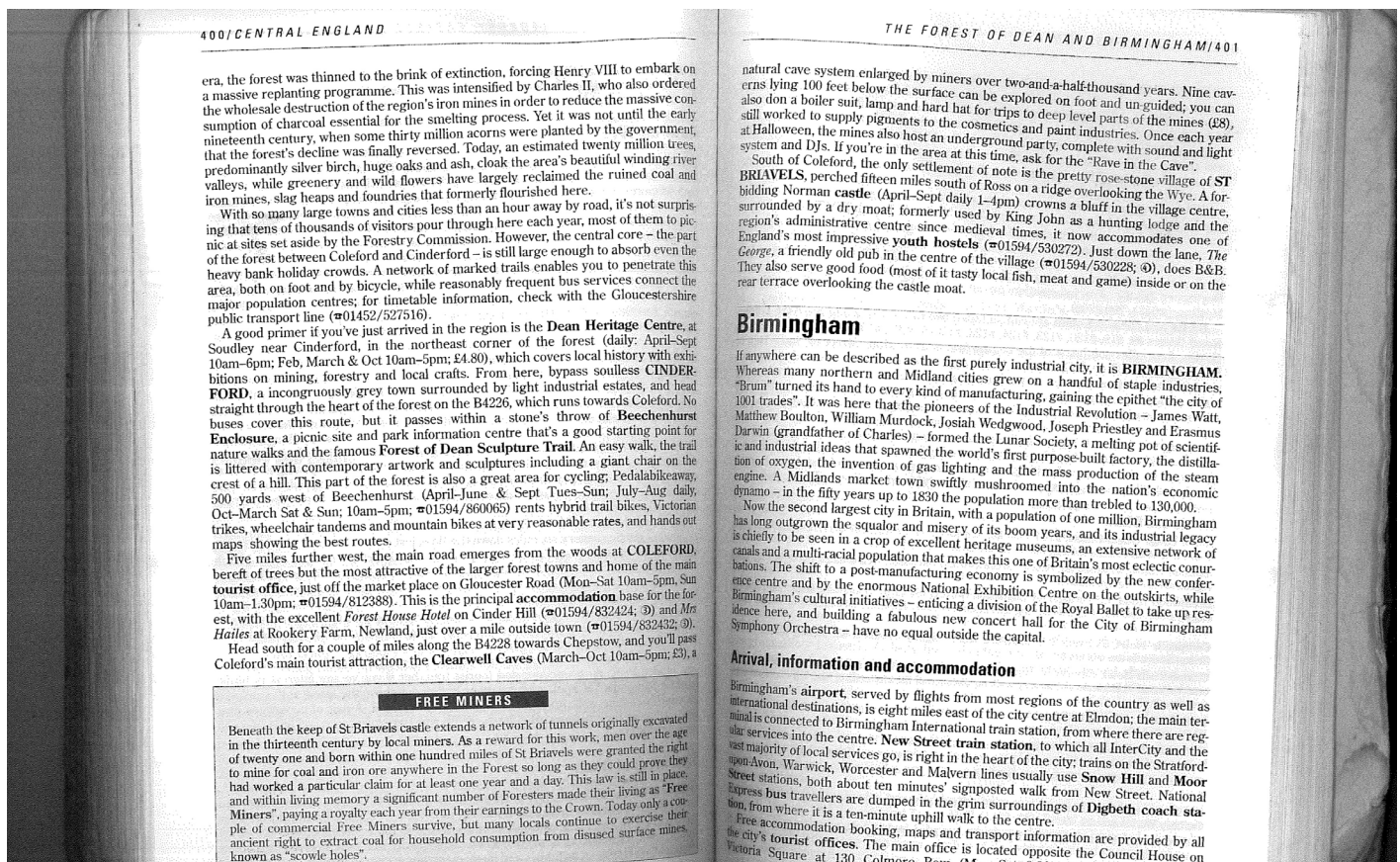
It was curiously analogue, clubs produced flyers rather than Facebook pages. Word of mouth over social networks.

The sum of this is that I've decided to write a guidebook, at least a guidebook of sorts; one that follows the walk I completed in March 2019 of the border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. This may not be a Rough Guide, but it will begin to investigate and disseminate the border in a way that relates to both the mode of travel, and the specifics of the sites it visits.

What would happen if the format was extended or broken? Is the guidebook still a guidebook if it travels to places that no longer exist? What if it went back in time or blurred historical periods? What is valuable to the casual tourist and how might that become a critical act? How does the guidebook shape our view of places, and in turn, our experience of these places when we visit them?

I'm not sure, but there's something in the digestible nature of the guidebook, the way they perform place through text and print; democratising travel for those that actually venture away, as well as those that travel while reading from home.

'Birmingham'



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0121/693 6300). Five minutes' walk from New Street station in the other direction, there's a smaller branch and useful city ticket shop at 2 City Arcade, off New Street (Mon-Sat 9.30am-5.30pm; 0121/643 2514). There are also offices open Monday to Friday 9am to 5pm and during major conferences in the International Convention Centre (ICC) in Centenary Square and two in the National Exhibition Centre (NEC), next to the airport. The city council run their own office in the Central Library, Chamberlain Square (Mon-Fri 9am-8pm, Sat 9am-5pm; 0121/235 4511 for information, or 236 5622 for tickets).

With much of the cheaper accommodation located out of the city centre, you are likely to be using **local buses** at some point: West Midlands Travel (WMT) is the largest operator (the blue and silver buses), although vehicles of every hue can be seen jostling for custom on the city's streets. The off-peak day pass for WMT buses (also valid on most other operators) is good value for money (£2.30) and can be bought on the first bus used. If you're using **local trains** as well, it makes sense to buy a Centro Daytripper (£3.85). For information on all local public transport, call the Centro Hotline (0121/200 2700).

B&Bs and cheaper hotels are concentrated two miles west along the A456 Hagley Road (buses #9, #19, #120, #123, #124, #126, #136-8, #192, #193, #292) and in Acocks Green, four miles south of the centre (trains from Moor Street or Snow Hill, or buses #1, #11, #37 or #38). Central hotels are generally geared up to the expense-account trade, although a few new cheaper ones have made staying centrally more viable. The NEC tourist office co-ordinates cut-price weekend short stays (0121/780 4321) in most of the city-centre hotels, with prices starting at around £18 per person per night. These are available for Friday, Saturday and Sunday nights all year round and every night in July and August. In the centre of town there are also a couple of places offering B&B for gay and lesbian visitors – see the "Lesbian and Gay Birmingham" section on p.409. At the time of writing, the city's summer-only **youth hostel** was inoperative, but it's likely to be back in action by 1999 – the tourist offices will have details.

Hotels and B&Bs

Atthol Lodge Guest House, 16 Elmdon Rd, Acocks Green (0121/707 4417). Comfortable guest house in a south-eastern suburb, handy for the airport and NEC. ☉

Ashdale House, 39 Broad Rd, Acocks Green (0121/706 3598). Well-situated B&B, serving good vegetarian and organic food. ☉

Brentwood Hotel, 127 Portland Rd, Edgbaston (0121/454 4079). Good-value small hotel near the Hagley Road, also offering self-catering apartments (0121/420 2301) on a nightly or weekly basis. ☉

Campanile Hotel, 55 Irving St (0121/622 4925). Slightly downbeat but handily placed just off Bristol Street, in the city centre. ☉

Chamberlain Hotel, Alcester St, Highgate (0121/606 9000). Splendid conversion of a magnificent Victorian workhouse within easy walking distance of the city centre, offering excellent value doubles. ☉

Cook House, 425 Hagley Rd (0121/429 1916). One of the better-value small hotels along the Hagley Road. ☉

Hotel Ibis, Ladywell Walk, Arcadian Centre (0121/622 6010). Chintzy and rather anonymous, but well-situated, bang in the Chinese Quarter, near the major theatres and nightclubs. ☉

Kennedy Guest House, 38 York Rd (0121/454 1284). Low-key and functional B&B, near Hagley Road. ☉

Old Farm Hotel, 108 Linden Rd, Bournville (0121/458 3146). Friendly hotel, just 250 yards from Cadbury World museum. ☉

Oxford Hotel, 21 Oxford Rd, Moseley (0121/442 4212). Decent, comfortable stop in this trendy southern suburb. ☉

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Town House, 435 Hagley Rd (0121/429 2482). Good B&B for single rooms. ☉
Travelodge, 230 Broad St (0121/644 5266). Ultra-anonymous central chain hotel (in the thick of bars and clubs), but worth trying for good-value doubles, all en suite. ☉

The City

The focus of Birmingham's city centre is where the main shopping thoroughfares of New Street and Corporation Street meet at right angles, just outside the shopping complex that houses New Street station. These streets contain an array of samey chain-stores and tarted-up precincts; more interesting are the multifarious **markets** in and around the infamous **Bull Ring**, yawning under the Rotunda at the intersection of New and High streets. Bulls used to be tethered and baited here, in the belief that if the animal died angry, the meat was better. The Bull Ring indoor shopping centre is scarcely – thankfully, it is due to be demolished in the next few years. On the far side of the complex, on the edge of the market stalls, stands **St Martin's**, the city's grime-blackened parish church, dating back to the fourteenth century, but completely rebuilt in the late nineteenth.

The finest church in the city is **St Philip's**, a bijou example of English Baroque, occupying a grassy knoll on Colmore Row, west of Corporation Street. Consecrated in 1715 as an overspill for the packed St Martin's, it became the city's cathedral in 1905 at the expense of the parish church, largely due to its superior position in a less congested, more upmarket corner of the city centre. The church was extended in the 1880s, when four new stained-glass windows were commissioned from local boy Edward Burne-Jones, a leading light of the Pre-Raphaelite movement. The windows are typical of his style: intensely coloured, fastidiously detailed, and rather sentimental.

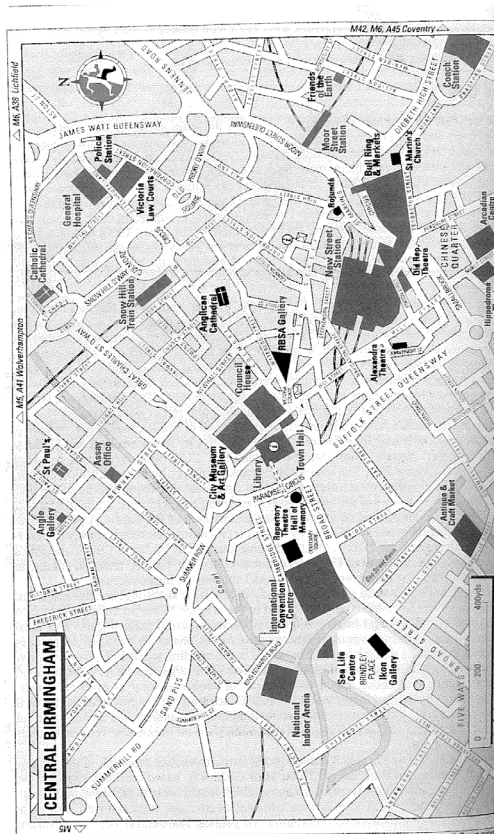
One of the world's most comprehensive collections of Pre-Raphaelite art, including an entire room of Burne-Jones' work, is housed in the **City Museum and Art Gallery** in Chamberlain Square (Mon-Sat 10am-5pm, Sun 12.30-5pm, free), two hundred yards along Colmore Row. The overwrought ranks of pieces by Rossetti, Holman Hunt, Millais and Madox-Brown are more than most eyes can take, though some of the portraits avoid the fussiness of the big allegorical and religious paintings. England's largest provincial museum contains a lot more than just masses of Pre-Raphaelite. A good collection of eighteenth- to twentieth-century British art includes a thorough survey of Birmingham landscapes from 1750 to 1850 and numerous works by David Cox, Constable's seventeenth-century Italian works, and a small showing of Impressionists.

Birmingham's industrial prowess is amply demonstrated throughout the museum. The ground-floor Industrial Gallery, housed in the original Victorian building complete with ornate skylights and huge gaslights, contains beautiful stained glass and local ceramics – and leads to the genteel Edwardian tearoom, one of the most pleasant places in Birmingham for a midday break. Elsewhere in the building you'll find galleries devoted to silver, base metalwork and jewellery. Upstairs is a large and rather old-fashioned natural history collection, linked to a couple of rooms looking at ancient worlds. Tucked down by the back entrance off Great Charles Street are two interesting local history galleries, which focus mainly on the industrial beginnings and development of the city. The adjoining Gas Hall is one of the country's most impressive venues for touring art exhibitions.

Chamberlain Square is also bounded by the huge municipal monolith of the domed **Council House**, and the classical **Town Hall** (1832-46), based on the Roman temple of Nîmes. The rather stark **Central Library**, which would seem to be based on a multi-story car park, brings the tone down a little and its entrance attracts a variety of soapbox speakers, airing their views on religion and politics. The central focus is a fountain

'The City'

'Central Birmingham'



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commemorating Joseph Chamberlain (1836-1914), whose political career took him from the Birmingham mayor's office to national prominence as leader of the Liberal Unionists and figurehead of the resistance to Irish home rule. On the steps lies a statue of the city's first MP, Thomas Attwood, his coat-tails tumbling down the concrete.

On its south side, Chamberlain Square opens onto the beautifully refurbished Victoria Square, whose centrepiece is a stunning fountain designed by Düring. Just across the raised flowerbeds you'll see a far less popular piece of contemporary sculpture: Anthony Gormley's rusting, thrusting **Iron Man**. On the corner of Victoria Square and New Street is the old-fashioned gallery of the **Royal Birmingham Society of Artists** (Mon-Sat 10.30am-5pm; £1), which hosts some interesting temporary exhibitions. On the other side, walk through the hideously kitsch Paradise Forum – entered the showpiece **International Convention Centre** (ICC) and the Birmingham Repertory Theatre. Centre-stage on the wide paving is a butter-coloured sculpture called **Forward**, a simplistically rousing image of the city's history by Birmingham-born Raymond Mason.

On the canals at the back of the ICC, turn left for the bright, boat-filled **Gas Street Basin** (regular public boats operate from here and the ICC quayside), or turn right for a canal-side wander up to the huge dome of the National Indoor Arena, where the canal capically in the waterside bars, shops and clubs of **Brindley Place**, named after the eighteenth century Birmingham town engineer who was responsible for many of Britain's early canals. On the side of the main canal junction, the shell-like design of the **National Sea Life Centre** (daily 10am-5pm; £6.50) rises up. Although it is interesting enough, with opportunity to view and even touch many unusual varieties of fish and by-ought. A couple of blocks back, in the heart of the Brindley Place complex, an imposing old Victorian school has now become the home of the city's celebrated **IKON** touring exhibitions of contemporary art.

Where the canals fork at the Sea Life Centre, take the right turn along the Birmingham and Fazeley Canal and you'll pass by (and even under) everything from Victorian warehouses to the 500ft Telecom Tower. After about half a mile, you'll reach **Cathedral** (1839-41), the first Catholic cathedral to be built in England since the Reformation. Perhaps more rewarding is Birmingham's two-hundred-year-old **Jewellery Quarter**, immediately northwest of the city centre, and well signposted. Hundreds of silversmiths, jewellers and goldsmiths. Although their industry has waned, there are still around five hundred jewellery-related companies in the quarter, many of which can be visited. Amongst the traders and bargain-hunters thronging the streets, don't miss the beautifully proportioned Georgian **St Paul's Square** and the city's most famous industrialists. Just off the north-western corner of the square is (very) Birmingham's best bet for radical art and installations. A few blocks north is the **Jewellery Quarter Discovery Centre**, 77-79 Vyse St (Mon-Fri 10am-5pm, Sat 11am-5pm; £2). Built around a factory that was abandoned in 1980 but atmosphere of the old works, where dozens of workers would be wedged into tiny, hot and noisy spaces to churn out earrings, brooches and rings. The factory comprises the growth and decline of the trade in Birmingham. The new Jewellery Quarter station – a