

Institution: University of Westminster
Unit of Assessment: 30 History
Title of case study: Altering perceptions of suburbs and the new towns
<p>1. Summary of the impact</p> <p>A historian of suburbanisation and social change, and of town planning, Clapson has challenged a powerful anti-suburban prejudice in popular and elite cultures in Britain, and sought to confront negative perceptions of the British new towns.</p> <p>His impact is international in reach. He has been translated into four languages since 1999 – Dutch, French, Italian and Japanese - and has been invited to speak at major international conferences. He has made many media contributions, and has been cited in policy documents and popular histories of Britain. His influence stems from his nuanced and less hostile position towards suburbanisation and planning.</p>
<p>2. Underpinning research</p> <p>Since joining the University of Westminster in 2002, and building upon his previous research interests, Dr. Clapson has developed an original synthesis of social history with urban and planning history. This has proved to be a very fruitful field of study. Planning history tends to be ‘top down’, concerned with elite networks, leading town planners, and the agencies and organisations of town planning, while social history focuses upon the experience of populations in the context of social and cultural change. In fusing these two broad approaches, Clapson has challenged negative perceptions of suburbs, suburbia and of the new towns in England, and in the USA, emphasising the contribution of housing and town planning to rising living standards and their relationship with growing levels of choice born of affluence. In particular, Clapson has argued that the new city of Milton Keynes reveals much about the nature of social and urban change in late twentieth-century Britain, and that the city was at the crossroads of an Anglo-American intellectual culture of town planning. These viewpoints were previously ignored by most social historians, and urban historians. They have changed both professional and public perceptions of the new city.</p> <p>Fusing social history with urban history enables the general and the specific, the global, national and local, to be brought together to emphasise the significance of individuals, groups and associations as key actors and agents of change. Active participation in the International Planning History Society, and in urban history and planning history conferences, has assisted his research.</p> <p>Clapson questions predominant media myths, and current policies such as New Urbanism, In sharp relief, he argues that low-density suburban living, and planned new town environments, unfashionable in so many academic and professional circles today, have been:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - genuinely popular with the majority of the population since 1945 - sites of integration as much as segregation during the 20th century - sites not of suburban neurosis or the new town blues since 1945 but areas of community formation and of negotiations between affluence, individualism, and associative culture - effective lived alternatives to ‘urbanist’ conceptions of city life
<p>3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)</p> <p>The monographs that form the case-study are as follows:</p> <p><i>Invincible Green Suburbs, Brave New Towns: Social Change and Urban Dispersal in Postwar</i></p>

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England (Manchester University Press, 1998)

Suburban Century: Social Change and Urban Growth in England and the USA (Berg, 2003)

A Social History of Milton Keynes: Middle England/Edge City (Taylor and Francis, 2004)

Working-Class Suburb: Social Change on an English Council Estate, 1930-2010 (Manchester University Press, 2012)

4. Details of the impact

The reach of Clapson's research has been both national and international since 2008, consolidating and extending his reputation.

In the media, Clapson's work has been taken up by the journalists Andy Beckett, who writes for the *Guardian*, Tom Chesshyre, a travel writer for the *Times*, the broadcaster and writer Dominic Sandbrook (freelance) and Daniel Knowles, who writes on British affairs in the *Economist*. Clapson was consulted by Knowles for an article in the *Economist* (October 5 2012) on growth areas in Southern England, in which he was quoted. He was further consulted by Knowles on 26 July 2013 for an article on the British new towns, in which he was quoted, published in the *Economist* on 2nd August, 2013. Weekly sales of the *Economist* are currently 1.5 million.

Clapson was invited by the Housing Industry Association, Australia, to speak at their annual summit *Building Better Cities: Housing Australia's Future*, held at the Sofitel Hotel, Wentworth, Sydney, 4 July, 2013. Entitled 'The housing crisis and its social consequences', his talk followed that of the then Shadow Treasurer in Australia, Joe Hockey. He also participated in the panel session, speaking alongside leading economists from Australia and the OECD, Australian academics from the universities of Sydney and Wollongong, and housing industry experts. Over 180 people attended the Summit, and the speaker's slide were posted on the HIA website and are available at the following link: <http://hia.com.au/media/Industry-policy/Housing-Australia-Summit.aspx> (current October, 2013)

In 2011-2012, having included photographs from Reading Museum Service in his monograph *Working-Class Suburb*, Clapson was invited by the Community Engagement Officer for Reading Museum Service, to advise on the *Reading in Living Memory* permanent display at Reading Museum. An initial display was launched in December 2011, attended by over 50 people including the Mayor of Reading and members of Reading Borough Council. The final version of the permanent display was launched on 17th January, 2012. Reading Museum receives 140,000 visits annually: the first exhibit that visitors encounter is *Reading in Living Memory*.

Clapson was invited to speak to an evening session entitled 'Connections', held by the Milton Keynes Forum, the Civic Society of Milton Keynes, which includes councillors, members of Milton Keynes Council and members of the public, on 16th July 2009. He spoke against traffic planning expert Professor Stephen Potter of the Open University on popular preferences for transport in Milton Keynes. Over thirty people were in attendance.

Clapson was invited by the two-year UrbanBuzz programme, investigating the nature and potential of sustainable communities in London and the South East, to host the evening conference 'The Social Life of Suburbs', jointly organised with UrbanBuzz and held at the Old Cinema, University of Westminster, 23 April 2008. Clapson spoke against the writer Iain Sinclair at the conference. Over eighty people including members of the public attended. (BuzzNet contract 0805: £5,274.61)

Clapson's research and its impact since 2008 consolidated the recognition he gained prior to

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2008. For example, *Invincible Green Suburbs* was quoted by Jules Lubbock, the architectural expert, and a former speech-writer to the Prince of Wales, in an online article entitled 'Planning is the problem' in openDemocracy on 3 July 2001, an article with over 4,500 reads: http://www.opendemocracy.net/ecology-urbanisation/article_442.jsp (current October, 2013) he was also invited to contribute to a BBC Radio 4 'You and Yours' programme feature on English suburbia, broadcast 7 May 2004.

His work on Milton Keynes was enhanced by a financial award in 2003, of £2,200 from English Partnerships to provide colour illustrations for *A Social History of Milton Keynes: Middle England/Edge City* (London: Frank Cass/Taylor and Francis, 2004). The journalist and planning expert Paul Barker wrote a favourable review of *A Social History of Milton Keynes* in the *Independent*, 11 February, 2005. He was invited to contribute to 'Voices from Milton Keynes', with Jonathan Glancey, a programme broadcast on BBC Radio 4 in 'Archive Hour', 19 June, 2004. That Clapson can claim to be an authority on the history of Milton Keynes was further evidenced in the invitation by the Taylor and Francis to write a lengthy introduction to the republished *Plan for Milton Keynes* (Routledge, 2013). This is an output in REF2.

Finally, Clapson's work has also had some impact on policy discussions. It has informed publications by Milton Keynes Council and the Department of Communities and Local Government (DCLG), whose web-links are still current (October, 2013). This demonstrates influence upon professional town planners and the local authority for Milton Keynes, and on experts working for the DCLG.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

Citations by broadcasters, journalists and writers since 2008:

'Texas in the shires', *Economist*, 29 September, 2012:
<http://www.economist.com/node/21563731> (current, October, 2013)

The *Guardian* journalist Andy Beckett, in his best-selling book on the Seventies, *When the Lights Went Out* (2010, second edition, p.427) agrees with Clapson that the early movers to Milton Keynes can be seen as pioneers.

The travel writer Tom Chesshyre, in *To Hull and Back* (2010, pp. 192-93) accepted Clapson's view of Milton Keynes as an 'edge city'.

The journalist and broadcaster Dominic Sandbrook has picked up on Clapson's work. In *State of Emergency: The Way We Were: Britain, 1970-74* (2010, p. 718) he wrote that *Invincible Green Suburbs* and *A Social History of Milton Keynes* 'are terrific on suburbia.'

Citations in official reports:

A Social History of Milton Keynes: Middle England/Edge City (2004) is referenced in its bibliography by a local authority: Milton Keynes Council, *Milton Keynes Regeneration Strategy* (2008).

It is also cited for its arguments on high levels of community participation and associative action in Milton Keynes, in the report by the Department of Communities and Local Government, *Transferable Lessons from the New Towns Programme*. On its website, the DCLG summarises a key finding of the book as follows:

'Generally the N(ew) T(own) D(evelopment) C(orporations)s felt they were successful in involving communities in governance. It is difficult to test this impression on the basis of existing research. However, the New Towns appear to have more community organisations

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than areas of older cities with comparable socio-economic characteristics (e.g. Clapson, 2004)'.

The report is web-published on two DCLG websites (current, October, 2013):

<http://www.communities.gov.uk/documents/housing/pdf/151717.pdf>;

http://www.futurecommunities.net/files/images/1_4_CLG_New_Towns_review_0.pdf

Public engagements since 2008:

The press release to accompany Clapson's talk to the Milton Keynes Forum stated:

'Dr Mark Clapson is a social historian and is the Reader in History at the University of Westminster. A resident of MK, he is the author of *A Social History of Milton Keynes: Middle England/Edge City*, which was a look at the development of the city from a social point of view and which emphasised the importance of the grid network in being a key component in the establishment of social networks across the city.'

<http://www.miltonkeynesforum.org/mkforum/wp-content/uploads/2010/06/09-07-16-meeting-press-release.pdf> (current, October 2013)

The invitations from Reading Museum Service (RMS) can be corroborated by contacting Brendan Carr, Community Engagement Officer, at RMS: Brendan.carr@reading.gov.uk

Following participation in the Housing Industry Australia Summit, Clapson received a letter from the Chief Economist of the Housing Industry Australia, dated 24 July, 2013, stating 'Your presentation was a comprehensive and informative address which was enthusiastically received by attendees and I appreciate your participation in the panel discussion later in the day.'