

Leicester's Victorian Terraced Housing

In April, the Group hosted an evening of two talks that built on events run by the Centre for Urban History (CUH) at the University of Leicester. The talks were about Leicester's terraced housing and followed two public events held by CUH in the previous six months as part of preparation for a funding bid to look at the history, current state, and future of Leicester's Victorian and Edwardian terraced housing.

During the events held by CUH, the need for better insulation and the issues around external insulation were raised. Leicester Civic Society have previously highlighted this, and the South Highfields Neighbours group have identified more than 80 houses in their area that have had external insulation applied. It has become clear that not all the insulation has been done well and that poorly applied insulation can harm buildings. Mostly, it seems that this is being done in a piecemeal and unsatisfactory way. In conservation areas, it is forbidden to add external insulation without permission, and there are a few examples where insulation has had to be removed.

The evening in April was in two parts. Colin Hyde gave an overview of the history of terraced housing in Leicester and Justin Webber, Senior Building Conservation Officer at Leicester City Council, gave a talk about the issues affecting housing now, the limits of the Council's powers, and what might be done looking forward. There was a good turn out from members, friends and the public, and there were many interesting comments and questions.



Terraced housing on Fairfield St, Leicester (credit: Colin Hyde)

Since the talk, the BBC have carried more stories about the deleterious effect of poor-quality insulation. This is an ongoing story that affects many people in Leicester. One of the greatest legacies of the Victorian era, and one that is still very visible today, is the mass housing produced for working people. If this housing is to continue to provide shelter and warmth for the population it will need to be adapted to modern standards, but the issues around this are not simple. The Victorian Society can provide a voice in favour of the best possible solutions.

Recent Leicester Group Activities

A Trip to Oakham

On Friday 12th September 15 members and supporters assembled at All Saints', Oakham, for a very interesting visit under the guidance of Dr Chris Baker. Before retirement Chris was Professor of Civil Engineering at Birmingham University, but he now lives in Oakham and has immersed himself in the history of the town and of its spectacular church – the largest church in the smallest county in England. Essentially dating from the late 13th and 14th centuries, the church underwent a substantial 'restoration' by Sir George Gilbert Scott in 1857-58. Before Scott's intervention, the North Chapel and the Chancel were under a single roof, but Scott differentiated them with new roofs with brightly painted panels. The pews and choir stalls are also by Scott, of very high quality. The church is bright and airy with slender arcade columns and large clerestory windows seen to advantage on a bright September day.



Oakham Church (credit: Peter Ellis)

After a break for lunch, the party then visited the Rutland Museum, a short walk from the church, to see a remarkable exhibition of watercolours, mainly of East Midlands subjects, by **John Louis Petit** (1801-1868). Petit was a remarkable man, theologian, poet, but above all an accomplished and prolific artist – he is believed to have left something like 15,000 paintings on his death! He did not sell his works and never accepted commissions, but painted for his own satisfaction and to illustrate his lectures on architectural history and several books on

the same subject. He lived in Lichfield but travelled widely, and painted wherever he went. His paintings were dispersed after his death, and Petit was largely forgotten. In the 1980s a large hoard of his pictures was discovered in an attic or outbuilding of a house in Surrey which had once belonged to Petit's grand-niece. Their importance was not realised, and many were sent to local auction rooms, and sold without attribution.

Once 'discovered' by the art establishment he was labelled 'Britain's Lost Pre-Impressionist', because he painted what he saw without any attempt to 'prettify' or add special effects. He did choose the best viewpoints, and his pictures are remarkably accurate – this exhibition included St Martin's (now Leicester Cathedral) in 1845, before the alterations by Raphael Brandon in the 1860s, and Thurnby before the demolished chancel was replaced in 1880, as well as what is possibly the only picture of the 'Great Pit' at Swithland Slate Quarries.

A new committee

As many members and friends of the Group will know, there has recently been a hiatus in the activities of the Leicester Group. At the start of 2025, a new committee was formed and the Group's work continues. The previous committee had done an excellent job of running the Group since the death of Jon Goodall, but after many years of effort the members wanted to step down. In the absence of any obvious successors, it took a while to reconstitute the committee, but we have now done that and are hopeful of taking the Group forward towards its 50th anniversary in 2027, and beyond.

The members of the committee are: Peter Ellis (Treasurer), Colin Hyde (Chair), Graham Lees, Leigh Picciano-Moss and Jane Russell (Secretary). If anyone else is interested in getting involved, please contact us. We are still represented on the Victorian Society's website and on Facebook (links at end of newsletter).

Autumn/Winter Programme of Talks

All talks take place at the Friends Meeting House, 16 Queens Rd, Leicester LE2 1WP at 7.30pm. Our talks are open to all, but we will ask all attendees to register in order to comply with fire regulations. There will be a charge of £3 towards the cost of room hire and other expenses (if you would bring the exact change we would be grateful). There is car parking at the Meeting House and on the adjoining roads.

Tuesday 4th November 2025

Edwardian Houses and Gardens at Leicester University Botanic Gardens

A talk by Rowan Roenisch

As many visitors are aware, the Leicester University Botanic Gardens are very special – not just for the plants, but also the architecture. Of the four houses, three may be described stylistically under the general banner of the Domestic Revival. However, two reveal Arts and Crafts Movement features.

The original lecture developed from a leaflet produced around 2012 for visitors to the Botanic Gardens. Currently, owing to the University's serious financial problems, the gardens are under threat and a scheme to rescue them is vigorously underway. In light of this, and having finally confirmed the role of George Bankart (Leicester's distinguished plaster-maker and Birmingham Guild of Handicraft member), as Vice President of the Leicester Group of the Victorian Society, Rowan has recently successfully achieved a Listing upgrade to The Knoll, of Grade II*.

Tuesday 2nd December 2025

Victorian Christmases in Leicester

A talk by Cynthia Brown

How was Christmas celebrated in Leicester in the Victorian period? Cynthia Brown will take a look at some of the festivities that accompanied the religious festival, including sporting and theatrical events, charitable giving, advice on 'sensible' Christmas presents – and complaints about 'over-commercialisation'.

Tuesday 3rd February 2026

Leicester's Board Schools

A talk by Neil Crutchley

The Education Act of 1870 was the first piece of legislation to deal specifically with the provision of education in Britain. It enabled rapidly expanding towns and cities to provide schools in areas where none existed and allowed for the setting-up of school Boards to build and manage these new schools. Leicester acted quickly and by January 1871 the Leicester School Board was in operation, its members drawn from local residents, civic figures and

clergy. The Board lasted for thirty-three years. Its success in providing mass education for Victorian Leicester was remarkable and evidence of its work is still visible in the city today. This illustrated talk looks at the Board's personalities, its workings, and its architectural legacy.

Tuesday 3rd March 2026

The History of Brookfield

A talk by Emma Probett

Brookfield has a rich history firstly as one of the foremost fashionable houses showcasing one of the first instances of the Tudor revival in Leicester in the Victorian era, turned home to the first Bishop of Leicester since the 9th Century, then becoming the UK's largest Red Cross packaging site for POWs, then being transformed into a nursing school, and lastly – coming full circle – into the hands of the University of Leicester's School of Business. Join us to learn about Brookfield's last 150 years as the home to Thomas Fielding Johnson (one of the University's most prominent founders) and its long legacy after his death.

Tuesday 7th April 2026

Industry and ardour – a brief history of allotments in Leicester

A talk by Cynthia Brown

Allotments are now more popular than ever – but there has always been more to them than producing food or flowers. This talk will look at their origins in Leicester to rescue working men from 'the deadly fountain of poverty', through to 'back to the land' movements in the later 19th century, and their crucial role in digging for victory in both World Wars. It will also consider the role of allotment societies, their social aspects, and some of the challenges they have faced – rabbits not least among them.

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