




RESEARCH ARTICLE

‘A firm foundation for future understanding, respect and friendship’: the ideals and reality of post-war town twinning, 1945–2020

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Abstract

Formalized in the 1970s through the Middlesbrough–Oberhausen Town Twinning partnership (Partnerschaft Oberhausen–Middlesbrough), the connection between the two post-industrial towns dates back further to informal connections in the early 1950s and an age of reconciliation between the two nations. This article explores the origins, mechanisms, benefits and challenges of town twinning by drawing upon a rich body of empirical evidence from local authority records, press coverage, interviews and community reminiscence. The study provides the first academic analysis of the changes, challenges, continuities and continued relevance of town twinning in one of Britain’s leading pro-Brexit areas.

In 2014, the Middlesbrough–Oberhausen Town Twinning (MOTT) group / Partnerschaft Oberhausen–Middlesbrough marked 40 years of town twinning with a celebration in Middlesbrough’s Council Chamber. MOTT’s chair Shirley Alexander reflected: ‘The friendships are the most important thing to me but there’s also the cultural aspect. We take our visitors all around the North-east and when we’re over in Germany we visit all the castles and restaurants and everything. To have continued for 40 years is quite an achievement.’¹ Echoing Alexander’s praise of the enduring relationship, Councillor Bob Brady added, ‘This is a very rare and special occasion. The twinning fosters friendship and understanding between the two towns. I think it has been very successful.’ Visitor Bianca Pietron also stressed the importance of the inter-cultural exchange the connection provided and 77-year-old Hans Katernberg noted, ‘In the past there was some mistrust between our nations. I think this kind of exchange has helped create understanding and friendship’, whilst Joyce Richardson observed, ‘You realise how much we have in common with the Germans. Really we’re cousins.’² Some seven decades earlier, this sense of kinship seemed unlikely between two of Europe’s manufacturing heartlands whose iron and steel industries played a

¹‘Middlesbrough’s town twinning with Oberhausen celebrates 40th anniversary’, *Evening Gazette (EG)*, 12 Aug. 2004, www.gazettelive.co.uk/news/teesside-news/middlesbroughs-town-twinning-oberhausen-celebrates-7598748, accessed 9 Sep. 2020.

²*Ibid.*

central part in each country's war effort and with it became targets of enemy attack. Newsstands in England and Germany in 1940 were stacked with newspapers reporting successful attacks on the north-east England steel town by the Luftwaffe or acclaimed Royal Air Force attacks, with headlines such as 'Oberhausen gets its blitz', depending on their location either side of the North Sea.³ Through bonds instigated by education exchanges and formally cemented as twin towns, North Rhine-Westphalia former steelworks and Middlesbrough's landmark Transporter Bridge, damaged during World War II air raids, now served as the spaces and places where international friendships were formed. This enduring bond between 'cousins' seems a textbook example of the post-war reconciliation achieved by empowering local authorities and their citizenry to, as Langenohl has argued, 'forge and re-establish connections among people who were not only perfect strangers but also former enemies'.⁴

The sentiments expressed towards the enduring connection between the north-east England post-industrial town and the German steel manufacturing centre are consistent with patterns observed by Vion centred on creating 'bonds of friendship' instigated through international exchange.⁵ Whilst anniversary superlatives hint at some of the common themes associated with town twinning, they fail to explain the motivations, benefits, challenges and success of the town twinning connection between the Ruhr and the Tees settlements that has engaged thousands of citizens across the decades.

Through a case-study of Middlesbrough's town twinning activities, this article begins by outlining the aims and origins of the town's twinning partnerships. Attention then turns to the urban agents and mechanisms that have ensured the connection has survived where other twinning initiatives have declined or lapsed. Adopting a single-town focus and, in particular, focusing on Middlesbrough's experience of twinning allows this article to analyse the continuities and change in the town twinning relationship, challenges overcome and benefits of the international interactions across the North Sea. It also allows for a considered assessment of any impact the 2016 Referendum on Britain's membership of the European Union (otherwise known as Brexit) could have on future relations and the direction of British engagement with town twinning, especially with continental partners. Whilst such a focus means that the German motives and experiences are not explored here, it is posited that the article sheds new light on the British experience of town twinning through a case-study approach.

Defining international inter-urban cousins, friendships and twins

The origins and core principles of inter-urban relations between two towns, normally from different countries, are generally agreed as having fundamental goals of post-war

³Oberhausen gets its blitz', *Daily Mail*, 16 Jun. 1943.

⁴A. Langenohl, 'The merits of reciprocity: small-town twinning in the wake of the Second World War', *Journal of Borderlands Studies*, 32 (2017), 557–76.

⁵A. Vion, 'When local institutions structure bonds of friendship: evidence from the experience of French cities during the Cold War (1948–1990)', *European Consortium for Political Research Workshop: The Politics of Friendship, Granada*, cited by S. Ewen and M. Hebbert, 'European cities in a networked world during the long 20th century', *Environment and Planning C: Government and Policy*, 25 (2007), 327–34; N. Clarke, 'Globalising care? Town twinning in Britain since 1945', *Geoforum*, 42 (2011), 115–25.

reconciliation (for those instigated in the 1940s and 1950s) and of creating new and eventually longer-term beneficial relationships across borders. However, what Jańczak has dubbed ‘terminological chaos’, coupled with the complex and multidimensional range of international connections, complicates contextualizing and understanding of ‘twin’ relationships.⁶ Clarke too points to the lack of a universally adopted definition of ‘town twinning’ and the rich array of ‘sister cities’, ‘friendships’ and ‘good practice’ partnerships that might be considered ‘town twinning’ enacted elsewhere.⁷ In the case of this current study, there is no evidence from the early 1950s international exchanges between the Ruhr and England’s north-east that the relationship was ever considered a ‘town twinning’, despite the key tropes that underpinned formal twinning in the 1970s, specifically education exchange, friendship, mutual understanding and peace.

Whilst addressing the confusion around terminology, it is also worth noting that the challenges posed by shifting local government structures since the late 1960s in Britain have further complicated ‘inter-town links’, ‘sister cities’ and ‘town twinings’. Twinning agreements have been signed with towns or areas that have at various stages been absorbed by new county boroughs and city regions; this has meant that the authorities’ responsibility for the arrangements at a local level have changed over time. For instance, Middlesbrough’s international ties developed during a period when the area’s municipal identity was in a state of flux. Initially, Middlesbrough was represented by the County Borough of Middlesbrough before incorporation into the County Borough of Teesside (1968–74) and then the Cleveland County (1974–96, as one of four constituent districts in a two-tier system with Cleveland the upper tier). Eventually, unitary authority status as Middlesbrough Borough Council was established in 1996, although this has since been rebranded simply as Middlesbrough Council to add to the confusion around twinning provenance found in other twinning partnerships elsewhere and poses a challenge to researchers on local government history.⁸

Post-war origins and exchanges

Although Middlesbrough’s formal town twinning with Oberhausen was agreed in 1974, the relationship between the two former heavy industry heartlands dates back to educational exchanges during the early 1950s, although the specific details of the exact origins and motivations for the link between the areas are difficult to confirm. The oldest surviving account of the partnership in the collections of Teesside Archives are the diary entries and report of Karl Weinert which reveal his experiences as one of 30 participants visiting Middlesbrough on a trip arranged by the Oberhausen Education Department in 1953.⁹ Weinert’s account includes observations on

⁶J. Jańczak, ‘Town twinning in Europe. Understanding manifestations and strategies’, *Journal of Borderlands Studies*, 32 (2017), 479.

⁷N. Clarke, ‘In what sense “spaces of neoliberalism”? The new localism, the new politics of scale, and town twinning’, *Political Geography*, 28 (2009), 496–507.

⁸S. John, ‘Productive European cooperation between Britain and Germany: the Swansea–Mannheim town twinning partnership and exchanges between Wales and Baden–Württemberg, 1950–2000’, *Contemporary British History*, 36 (2022), 552–90.

⁹Teesside Archives (TA), U/MTT/55, report and diary of Karl Weinert of a visit organized by the Oberhausen Education Department to Middlesbrough in Yorkshire from 15 to 30 Aug. 1953. I am grateful to Felix Fuhg and Tom Williams for assistance in translating the original German text.

rationing restrictions in England, visits to the Teesside town's landmark Transporter Bridge, experiencing folk dancing, a football match between German and English participants and a visit to Middlesbrough's Ayresome Park football stadium. The visit also included a visit to ICI which brought comparisons between practices on the Ruhr and the Tees. An incident involving a Canadian airman abusing the visiting Germans as they readied to depart brought regret and apologies from the hosts and the report notes that the 'sympathetic cordiality with which the English said goodbye meant much more to us'.¹⁰

Consistent with early post-war international exchanges elsewhere, the Middlesbrough–Oberhausen connections of the 1950s and 1960s were promoted through educational and youth exchanges. Early participants recall the prominent role played by schools and closely associated the experience with interactions with host families providing accommodation. Local municipal government too played an important role in facilitating and funding these early European exchanges, mirroring the broader municipal internationalism often overlooked in histories of town twinning, as observed by Clarke.¹¹ It was, after all, local councillors – advised by employees of the local authority – who served as gatekeepers of the town's interactions in Europe, from the ceremonial municipal commitments to new formal twinings to the minutiae of the itineraries of a youth group's visit to a local museum. This was evident dating back to 1957 and interest from an unnamed Austrian town in forming 'inter-town' links with the County Borough of Middlesbrough. This early proposal failed to progress owing to financial constraints, whilst the Middlesbrough director of education pointed to an existing educational link with Oberhausen.¹²

Education exchange visits continued into the 1960s, with civic officials from each town attending notable events in each location. These included Middlesbrough representatives visiting North Rhine-Westphalia for the Municipal Hall's official opening as part of Oberhausen's centenary celebrations. The new decade also saw Middlesbrough Council set about exploring the potential of establishing an inter-town link following the town clerk's correspondence with the British Bilingual Association, the International Union of Local Authorities and the United Towns Organization.¹³ Despite a decision to establish a civic link with Le Harve having been secured within months, the 'pairing' was deferred on the suggestion of the French mayor owing to financial difficulties and a preference to focus efforts on completing large capital projects in the port.¹⁴ Competing priorities also posed an issue for Middlesbrough–Oberhausen relations by 1965, with the latter's mayor reaching out

¹⁰Private collection, Tom Williams' translation of Karl Weinert's diary and report. Instances of hostilities towards German visitors were not isolated to Teesside but were recognized as having a detrimental impact on the development of twinning. For example, the refusal of Oxford's mayor to provide an official reception for visiting former German Wehrmacht paratroopers was described as a 'monstrous insult' by the Oxford Veterans' Association and was brought to the attention of the Foreign Office's twinning staff despite the visit falling outside of any twinning arrangement. Town twinning between West Germany and UK: Congress of Linked Local Authorities, 1967. See The National Archives (TNA), FCO 131/89.

¹¹N. Clarke, 'Town twinning in Cold-War Britain: (dis)continuities in twentieth-century municipal internationalism', *Contemporary British History*, 24 (2010), 173–91.

¹²TA, CB/M/C/1/118, Middlesbrough Council minutes, Standing Sub-Committee, 11 Feb. 1959, 1583.

¹³TA, CB/M/C/1/121, General Purposes and Parliamentary Committee, 14 Jun. 1960, Middlesbrough Council minutes, 150.

¹⁴TA, CB/M/C/1/122, General Purposes and Parliamentary Committee, 26 Sep. 1961, Middlesbrough Council minutes, 674.

to the town clerk in referencing the limited contact between the two towns and recommending consideration be given to renewing broader links.¹⁵ The following year, as relations recovered, Middlesbrough Council extended an invitation to the mayor of Oberhausen to attend events marking the Fédération internationale de football association (FIFA) World Cup Finals coming to Middlesbrough Football Club's Ayresome Park.

Beyond local concerns, the 1960s also saw the value of international links promoted through a number of national initiatives and congresses, including the Reciprocal Congress of Linked Local Authorities in Great Britain and North Rhine-Westphalia in 1967. The Congress attracted the patronage of Her Royal Highness Princess Margaret and Herr Heinz Kuhn, minister president of North Rhine, and representatives from Middlesbrough were among dozens of representatives from local authorities across Great Britain who accepted invitations to attend the event. Foreign Office correspondence hailed the Congress as providing 'considerable impetus to the practice of "Town-Twinning", which has been one of the most effective forms of Anglo-German co-operations since the war'.¹⁶

Despite an increase in town twinning in the ensuing years, success was limited, with Foreign Office papers from Anglo-German Information Talks held in Hamburg in 1971 noting:

Town twinning between Britain and Germany has, largely due to the efforts of the British Council and the availability of most pump priming funds, been more successful than twinning between Britain and other countries...But the success is only relative and enthusiasm in Britain for twinning, with a few outstanding exceptions, falls far below that generated in Germany.¹⁷

A 'lack of interest at a municipal level' and reluctance to spend ratepayers' money on what were popularly criticized as junketings were offered as explanations for the international disparities. The criticisms were evident in debates on Middlesbrough's twinning in the 1970s, with concerns raised by the national Joint Town Twinning Committee guidance and which continue to pose a challenge for contemporary perceptions of the Partnerschaft Oberhausen–Middlesbrough.¹⁸ Yet, in the early 1970s there were indications on Teesside of a heightened engagement with international activities. The local authority sent delegates to the Congress of Anglo-German Linked Local Authorities in Münster to explore educational and municipal collaborative opportunities and provided investment in youth exchanges between Teesside and Oberhausen.¹⁹ This reflected broader trends observed in Britain's post-war

¹⁵TA, CB/M/C/1/126, General Purposes and Parliamentary Committee, 28 Sep. 1965, Middlesbrough Council minutes, 690.

¹⁶TNA, FCO 131/89, town twinning between West Germany and UK: Congress of Linked Local Authorities, 1967.

¹⁷TNA, FCO 13/427, Information Talks between United Kingdom and Germany.

¹⁸Joint Twinning Committee of the Local Authority Associations of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, *Places in Partnership: A Twinning Handbook* (London, 1988), 14; David Budd, Oberhausen–Middlesbrough Town Twinning Questionnaire responses, Oct. 2020.

¹⁹TA, CB/T/1/9, Further Education Sub-Committee, 16 Jun. 1971, Teesside Council minutes, 289; TA, CB/T/1/10, Further Education Sub-Committee, 14 Jun. 1972; TA, CB/T/1/11, Further Education Sub-Committee, 13 Jun. 1973.

deindustrializing towns and cities that sought renewal by diversifying their economy and changing their approach to place-promotion.²⁰

Towards formal ‘town twinning’

From the late 1960s, numerous attempts to establish formal town twinning links with Teesside were explored. Initially, this was not with Oberhausen despite each area’s similar origins as nineteenth-century boomtowns, with their shared economic and cultural interests, similarity in character, occupations and approximate comparable size that provided the foundation for transnational twinning of other industrial centres.²¹ In fact, Teesside’s German twin might instead have been Saarbrücken had 1968 twinning proposals progressed. Foreign Office correspondence reveals communication between J.C. Swaffield, secretary of Whitehall’s Joint Twinning Committee, and J.R.E. Carr-Gregg from the Foreign Office Cultural Relations Department on a proposed link between the newly formed Teesside Borough and the Saarland, Germany. The letters pointed to how ‘economically and industrially the two areas had much in common and apparently encountered similar problems’, but also noted a lack of certainty on the position of the newly formed borough in terms of twinning.²²

One twinning agreement that would come to fruition was that with Dunkirk (Dunkerque) in France. The mayor of Dunkirk proposed the connection to Teesside County Council in August 1972, which identified commonalities between the two areas including strong ties to the iron, shipbuilding and chemical industries and the challenges of deindustrialization common to both areas.²³ Discussions advanced in December that year and, following a reorganization of local government that replaced Teesside with Cleveland County Council, the first of the twinning ceremonies took place in France in April 1975, followed four months later by an event in Middlesbrough with local veterans of Dunkirk in attendance.²⁴ The agreement centred on three key principles commonplace in twinning across Europe:²⁵

Whereas the Borough of Middlesbrough and the town of Durkirk having agreed by resolution to form a Twinning Agreement do now formally Resolve: Firstly to honour this Twinning Arrangement by establishing and maintaining friendly relations with each other;

²⁰A. Kefford, ‘Disruption, destruction and the creation of “the inner cities”: the impact of urban renewal on industry, 1945–1980’, *Urban History*, 44 (2017), 492–515; O. Saumarez-Smith, ‘Central government and town centre redevelopment, 1959–1966’, *Historical Journal*, 58 (2015), 217–44; J. Greenhalgh, ‘The new urban social history? Recent theses on urban development and governance in post-war Britain’, *Urban History*, 47 (2020), 535–45.

²¹Joint Twinning Committee, *Places in Partnership*, 9. The absence of a fixed criteria for twinning produced a number of ‘esoteric excuses for twinning’ including tenuous joint links to an individual or even two areas possessing major Palaeolithic sites, as in the case of Mauer in Germany and Tautavel in France. See W. Zelinsky, ‘The twinning of the world: sister cities in geographical and historical perspective’, *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 81 (1991), 1–31.

²²TNA, FCO 131/91, town twinning between West Germany and UK folder.

²³TA, CB/T/1/10, Management Committee, 16 Aug. 1972, Teesside Council minutes, 940.

²⁴TA, U/MTT/20, ‘Twin towns seal their friendship’ newspaper cutting, no date.

²⁵TA, U/MTT/60, Official Twinning Ceremony, 12 Apr. 1975; TA, U/MTT/20 ‘Middlesbrough et Dunkerque officiellement jumelées’, newspaper cutting, no date.

Secondly to foster and develop mutual understanding and respect between the people of Middlesbrough and the people of Dunkirk;

Thirdly to encourage and assist youth and adult organisations, clubs, companies, groups and all classes of persons in Middlesbrough and Dunkirk to communicate and exchange visits with each other, thereby developing human and cultural relations and establishing a firm foundation for future understanding, respect and friendship between the people of Middlesbrough and the people of Dunkirk for all time.²⁶

Although formalized through agreement between the towns' civic bodies, there was recognition of the need to extend the twinning beyond exchanging official civic visits. In the case of the Middlesbrough–Dunkerque Town Twinning Association, this brought together elected councillors and voluntary involvement through a steering group including representatives of Middlesbrough Swimming Club, Middlesbrough Trades Council, Teesside Polytechnic, the Dunkirk Veterans' Association and representatives from the local authority.²⁷ Despite the success of exchanges in facilitating youth exchanges, there was criticism by Conservative Councillor Arthur Scott Cunningham of the lack of economic developments brought by the link-up, lack of information on costs and concerns that it was the same people participating in the twinning. The criticism prompted the Labour leader of the local authority Councillor Walter Ferrier, an influential figure in local town twinning, to respond defensively that the association was 'really getting off the ground'.²⁸

Proposals for other twinning agreements emerged with varying degrees of success in the following decades. A new link between Cleveland and Szczecin, Poland, was promoted in October 1974 through Anglo-Polish Week events in Middlesbrough that brought the Polish Ambassador Artur Starewicz and President Jon Stopyra of Szczecin to Cleveland.²⁹ Despite apparent enthusiasm for the connection in local newspapers, progressing the relationship took a number of years.³⁰ A 'Cleveland Days in Szczecin' or 'Cleveland Week' festival hosted in Poland in 1978 brought together musical performances, civic ceremonies and exhibitions and was hailed a success despite logistical problems and the theft of musical equipment from the Cleveland contingent. The next year, cultural and educational visits between young people from Poland and Britain followed, but the connection soon waned.³¹ Upon the Joint Twinning Committee approaching Cleveland County Council highlighting the growing potential for new links with Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, the council's response was that its first priority was to re-establish links with Szczecin.³²

Beyond Europe, the mid-1970s witnessed tentative steps made towards a twinning arrangement across the Atlantic Ocean with Cleveland, Ohio, that attempted a shift towards economic partnership and commercial benefit that side-lined the more traditional twinning based around international co-operation motivated by

²⁶TA, U/MTT/20, Jumelage Dunkerque Middlesbrough opening ceremony booklet.

²⁷TA, U/MTT/25, 'Sorry, wrong number', newspaper cutting, no date.

²⁸*Ibid.*, 'Trips for a "select few"', newspaper cutting, no date.

²⁹'Smiles of friendship from the "twins"', *EG*, 7 Oct. 1974.

³⁰Recent correspondence with Middlesbrough Council's civic support and town twinning officer has revealed only a small number of gifts from Szczecin in the civic collection.

³¹TA, CC/C/3, Cleveland Days in Szczecin 1978 album.

³²TA, CC/S/1/13, Policy & Finance Committee, 16 Apr. 1984, 1635.

friendship and cultural exchange. In 1976, a delegation of Cleveland County representatives, including the chair of the council, group leaders and the chief executive, arranged to visit the World Trade Week in Ohio in an apparent show of enthusiasm for promoting trading links or, more cynically, a junket.³³ Meanwhile, the connection with Oberhausen continued with regular educational links between Germany and Britain. In 1974, the connection effectively segued into a formal twinning agreement on exactly the same terms as those agreed with Dunkirk and was confirmed at a borough council meeting in Middlesbrough the following year with visitors from Oberhausen in attendance.³⁴ Celebrations to mark 25 years of exchanges took place two years later when the Oberhausen flag was proudly flown at Middlesbrough Town Hall to mark the milestone.³⁵ Other symbolic initiatives increasing the visibility of the link followed, including the naming of the Middlesbrough Brücken in Oberhausen, the installation of road signs promoting the twinning in Cleveland and production of various commemorative items, often provided by the volunteer-led Partnerschaft Oberhausen–Middlesbrough and Middlesbrough–Oberhausen Town Twinning Association.³⁶ Sporting competitions also brought the two areas closer together over a number of decades, with swimming matches between youngsters continuing for several decades through the Walter Ferrier Trophy, named in honour of the Middlesbrough mayor so instrumental in establishing the twinning that he was awarded the Order of Merit of the Federal Republic of Germany.³⁷

The late 1980s brought interest in new international connections that loosely fall within the realms of town twinning proposals but with a distinctly different focus to the existing partnerships. The first was an approach by the North American Kentucky mountain town of Middlesborough, which sought to establish a ‘sister city’ link centred on generating economic benefits. The American town’s executive director of tourism visited England in December 1988 and highlighted the financial benefits of a sister city programme that would encourage exchange tours and activities driven by the American town’s strategy to make tourism a central focus for development.³⁸ Despite enthusiasm from North America, no progress was made in establishing formal ties. This could be explained by the Kentucky town’s representatives’ focus on economic benefit, which was in contrast to the traditional principles of friendship, mutual respect and human and cultural relations that underpinned the twinning agreements with Dunkirk and Oberhausen. Left-wing political leanings and a lack of interest in commercializing town twinning had after all been a key feature of the Middlesbrough and Oberhausen link, a fact made evident just months before the December 1988 visit of Kentucky delegates when an international trade union link was cemented between town hall staff in Cleveland and young trade unionists from

³³TA, CC/S/1/3, Resource Planning Committee, 26 Apr. 1976, Cleveland County Council minutes, 1040.

³⁴TA, CB/M/C (8) ACC 3262, Middlesbrough–Oberhausen Agreement souvenir; TA, CC/N/CC/256, Cleveland County colour negatives showing town twinning mayor of Middlesbrough with visitors from Oberhausen.

³⁵TA, CC/S/1/5, Education Committee, 12 Oct. 1977, Cleveland County Council minutes, 489.

³⁶‘The stamp of Dunkerque’, *EG*, 30 Nov. 1979. Amongst the gifts exchanged between the towns are a range of plaques and pottery that now form part of Middlesbrough and Oberhausen archival collections in Britain and Germany.

³⁷Gillian Smith, Oberhausen–Middlesbrough Town Twinning Questionnaire responses, Oct. 2020.

³⁸Middlesbrough Reference Library (MRL), twinning newspaper cuttings, ‘Twin offer from the USA’, *EG*, 8 Dec. 1988.

Oberhausen in echoes of the internationalist solidarity and local 'Labourist' ideals underpinning town twinning inspired connections between workers elsewhere.³⁹ Guests of the National and Local Government Officers' Association (NALGO) trade union, the 23 'activists' were received at Middlesbrough Town Hall by Middlesbrough Mayor Malcolm Pritchard and the group's activities on Teesside had an explicit political edge, culminating in an anti-apartheid disco in Middlesbrough Town Hall's Crypt at the end of the week.⁴⁰ These developments reflected broader trends of Labour-led local authorities both distancing themselves from the economic-led priorities of the Thatcher government and exercising authority at a time when central government policy subverted local government authority.⁴¹

Given the key role of enhancing relations between the European 'twins', it is unsurprising that twinning provided a platform for strong advocacy of European economic and municipal legislation and integration.⁴² The relationship with Oberhausen in particular saw this manifested in informing local Teesside political engagement with the European arena when, in May 1989, Middlesbrough councillors responded to proposals by their Ruhr compatriots to back a resolution to support the European Charter of Local Self-Government. The Charter placed local government and communities at the heart of democracy and encouraged members to prepare the economy, employees and institutions for the single European market, as well as encouraging participation in European elections.⁴³ Encouraged by compatriots from Oberhausen, Middlesbrough councillors' backing of the Charter was at odds with the Conservative government's refusal to sign the Charter, and provided local Labour leaders with an opportunity to criticize their political opponents. Council leader and Labour Councillor Mike Carr pointed to the reluctance of Margaret Thatcher's government to decentralize power, whilst Labour's local candidate in the forthcoming European parliament election seized upon the Oberhausen resolution to lambast the Conservative party's ability to represent the country on the European stage.⁴⁴ Although a limited example of twinning's influence on local politics, Oberhausen's encouragement of their Middlesbrough twins was deemed noteworthy enough to be framed in the press as 'Twins make Euro-pledge', highlighting the role of the international relationship in shaping joint support in favour of empowering local government and a proposal that also backed European environmental initiatives.⁴⁵

Beyond German–British political unity, the following year brought a new direction in Middlesbrough's international connections through a loosely defined 'protocol agreement' with Masvingo in Zimbabwe. Noted in the local press as the

³⁹The most prominent example of this is Coventry where the city's left-wing Labour council proactively sought to build relations underpinned by 'Labourist' internationalism and relations. See M. Haynes, 'Coventry in the long boom', in J. Begley *et al.* (eds.), *Revival of a City: Coventry in a Globalising World* (Cham, 2020), 82.

⁴⁰MRL, twinning newspaper cuttings, 'Town hall staff cement union', *Northern Echo*, 24 Mar. 1988.

⁴¹D. Payling, "'Socialist Republic of South Yorkshire': grassroots activism and left-wing solidarity in 1980s Sheffield', *Twentieth Century British History*, 25 (2014), 602–27.

⁴²J. Grosspietsch, 'More than food and folk music? Geographical perspectives on European town twinning', *Geography Compass*, 3 (2009), 1292.

⁴³MRL, twinning newspaper cuttings, 'Euro charter is backed', 19 May 1989.

⁴⁴*Ibid.*

⁴⁵MRL, twinning newspaper cuttings, 'Twins make Euro-pledge', 5 Jun. 1989.

borough's first with a 'Third World country', the connection reflected a broader trend in European town twinning of establishing new relationships with African nations.⁴⁶ In 1990, a series of 'development' orientated secondments were established alongside educational links, but troubles in Zimbabwe severed relations, although promising efforts in the past decade have sought to reconnect Middlesbrough and Masvingo. The 1990s also brought an approach from representatives of the Province of North Moravia and the City of Ostrava, Czechoslovakia, to establish links with Cleveland. The proposal from an area previously nicknamed the 'Steel Heart of Czechoslovakia' was centred on knowledge exchange, training, technology transfer and facilitating new business as part of the European Commission's OUVERTURE Programme aimed at promoting links between public authorities in Western and Eastern Europe.⁴⁷ The link-up failed to come to fruition, although there is little explanation in the historic record to suggest the reasons for this. Despite efforts to rekindle the connection, the decade also brought an end for the Middlesbrough–Dunkerque Town Twinning Association despite the organization entering the Royal Mail International / Sunday Times Twin Town Awards 1989 and enjoying an active programme in the early 1990s.⁴⁸ The decade also brought new challenges for the Oberhausen–Middlesbrough twinning as the upheavals of German reunification brought a temporary break in the Partnerschaft. The European Unity Year in 1992 led to renewed efforts to rekindle the link and a number of visits supported by small grants from Middlesbrough Borough Council followed in the ensuing decade.⁴⁹

An 'entrepreneurial turn' in town twinning

As Grosspietsch has noted, widely achieved reconciliation in Europe has made the development of new objectives necessary in order to continue town twinning's relevance.⁵⁰ An 'entrepreneurial turn' and 'commercialisation in town twinning' has been observed by Coperus and Vrhoci in some post-1989 Western and Eastern Europe twinning partnerships and 'the economic side of twinning' was already promoted in the November 1990 Local Government International Bureau's *International News*.⁵¹ The new millennium brought marked change in Middlesbrough's town twinning practices. The early years of the 2000s brought one of the more remarkable twinning suggestions – a proposed new link with the Democratic People's Republic of Korea's capital Pyongyang. The suggestion came following the highly successful and unprecedented return of the North Korean heroes of the FIFA World

⁴⁶MRL, twinning newspaper cuttings, 'African link', *Northern Echo*, 22 Mar. 1989; V. Mamadouh, 'Town twinning: over the (ir)relevance of the paradiplomacy of European cities', in V. Mamadouh and A. van Wageningen (eds.), *Urban Europe: Fifty Tales of the City* (Amsterdam, 2016), 339–46.

⁴⁷MRL, twinning newspaper cuttings, 'Possible links with North Moravia, Czechoslovakia – progress report', Cleveland Council, Jul. 1991.

⁴⁸TA, U/MTT/19, programme of the group from Middlesbrough, Feb. 1992. I am grateful to Nigel Sayer and Julie Lewis for sharing their recollections of interactions with various twinning partners.

⁴⁹MRL, twinning newspaper cuttings, 'Re-forging twin links', *EG*, 1 Sep. 1990.

⁵⁰Grosspietsch, 'More than food and folk music?', 1284.

⁵¹S. Couperus and D. Vrhoci, 'A profitable friendship, still? Town twinning between Eastern and Western European cities before and after 1989', in E. Braatt and P. Corduwener (eds.), *1989 and the West: Western Europe since the End of the Cold War* (London, 2019), 143–60; TA, U/MTT/20, *Local Government International Bureau International News*, Nov. 1990.

Cup 1966 Finals to the town and site of one of the biggest shocks in football history when the Asian minnows beat Italy 1–0 at Ayresome Park.⁵² A formal link with Pyongyang did not materialize and the fervour for celebrating the town's international profile did not migrate to town twinning. By 2003, Middlesbrough's links with Oberhausen had weakened, prompting Deputy Mayor Bob Brady and fellow Labour Councillor David Budd to set about exploring how twinning links 'with a purpose' focused 'more on how our two communities can help each other deliver better services and economic well-being' could be achieved.⁵³ Utilizing town twinning to support cultural and economic ambitions was not a new phenomenon – as early as the 1960s Birmingham and Lyon enjoyed notable success through collaborations between business, marketing and trade organizations – and Middlesbrough Council's shifting focus reflected the new 'commerce phase' of twinning.⁵⁴ This was the first time Middlesbrough had overtly pursued a strategy to inform broader cultural and economic development through twinning and in the ensuing years developed reciprocal understanding around health, education, regeneration and welfare whilst rejuvenating traditional exchange activities. This 'move away from a civic focussed link to one that was more business orientated' targeted particular services that resulted in greater council staff and executive elected member involvement in Middlesbrough–Oberhausen interactions.⁵⁵

In 2005, celebrations of over half a century of relations brought a visit by Oberhausen students to Britain and a civic event that brought together councillors and members of the wider community involved in twinning and the early youth exchanges dating back to the 1950s.⁵⁶ Middlesbrough Council planted a flower bed in the town's Ayresome Gardens designed in the twins' coat of arms, a number of flowers were planted by schools and the Middlesbrough Room of Middlesbrough Town Hall was renamed the Oberhausen Room.⁵⁷ Although the cultural and civic events celebrating Middlesbrough's twinning with Oberhausen were relatively small scale and traditional, these activities now formed part of Middlesbrough Council's Strategic Plan that identified twinning as playing an important role in community engagement and raising the profile of the town's heritage.⁵⁸ Two years later, benefits of the new purposeful twinning were evident when Oberhausen senior managers

⁵²T. Warwick, 'The FIFA World Cup, international friendship and the "Mystery Men of the East"', *North Korean Review*, 15 (2019), 51–72.

⁵³'Twinning benefits for the young', *EG*, 6 Feb. 2007, www.gazettelive.co.uk/news/local-news/twinning-benefits-for-the-young-3752117, accessed 20 Sep. 2020; David Budd, Oberhausen–Middlesbrough Town Twinning Questionnaire responses, Oct. 2020.

⁵⁴TNA, FCO/13/187, town twinning between France and UK, 1967–68; S. Ewen, 'Transnational municipalism in a Europe of second cities: rebuilding Birmingham with municipal networks', in P.-Y. Saunier and S. Ewen (eds.), *Another Global City: Historical Explorations into the Transnational Municipal Moment, 1850–2000* (New York, 2008), 101–18; R. Cremer, A. De Bruin and A. Dupuis, 'International sister-cities. Bridging the global–local divide', *American Journal of Economics and Sociology*, 60 (2001), 377–401, cited in Grosspietsch, 'More than food and folk music', 1291.

⁵⁵Nigel Sayer, Oberhausen–Middlesbrough Town Twinning Questionnaire responses, Oct. 2020.

⁵⁶Middlesbrough Council (MC), Deputy Mayor Report to Council, 18 May 2005, <http://democracy.middlesbrough.gov.uk/aksmiddlesbrough/images/att13724.doc>, accessed 20 Sep. 2020.

⁵⁷MC, Executive Member for Environment Report to Council, 22 Jun. 2005, <http://democracy.middlesbrough.gov.uk/aksmiddlesbrough/images/att11611.rtf>, accessed 20 Sep. 2020.

⁵⁸MC, Strategic Plan 2006/07–2008/09 (Part II), 44, <http://democracy.middlesbrough.gov.uk/aksmiddlesbrough/images/att8642.rtf>, accessed 22 Sep. 2020.

undertook a fact-finding visit to Middlesbrough. Their visit to Middlesbrough's Sure Start children's facilities provided insights into 'facilities, working partnerships, good practice and vision which might be used to improve children's services in Germany' and brought positive feedback from the visitors.⁵⁹ A year later, Mayor Ray Mallon pledged to send a group of council staff to Germany to learn more about the swimming pool leisure development in Oberhausen with a view to informing the elected Mayor's Sports and Leisure Strategy.

Cultural interactions through art and music including exhibitions and band exchanges enjoyed a renaissance too. For instance, Middlesbrough bands performed at the Olgas Rock Festival as part of a collaboration with Oberhausen for Ruhr City of Culture 2010, with performances screened at Middlesbrough venues holding German-themed nights to mark the occasion.⁶⁰ In the same year, Middlesbrough Institute of Modern Art (MIMA) collaborated through the ArTwins project to showcase artists and works from Oberhausen's twin towns.⁶¹ In 2015, Budd was elected mayor of Middlesbrough and his cabinet continued the focus on twinning with broader cultural and economic benefits, with the town's executive member for culture describing an Oberhausen cultural exchange visit to Middlesbrough as an opportunity to sample the town's cultural regeneration, explore cultural collaboration and as a potential avenue for 'tapping into European funding for cultural projects'.⁶² The Oberhausen link also featured in Budd's 2025 Vision for Middlesbrough, with the twinning explicitly referenced in plans for community development.⁶³ During Budd's tenure, cultural exchanges continued to provide important connections through youth exchanges, chiefly facilitated through 'MULTI', an international youth initiative organized by the City of Oberhausen centred on developing friendships with international partners through education and leisure activities.⁶⁴ These co-existed alongside cultural and economic policy interest, as highlighted by Kevin Parkes, a member of Middlesbrough Council's senior management from 2007 to 2020 and most recently as executive director of growth and place:

The primary basis of the relationship is to share experiences and how things are done in the respective areas. I have been over to Oberhausen and seen, particularly, how their cultural facilities have operated as well as business activities, and looked at the economics of how Oberhausen as a town is operating.⁶⁵

⁵⁹MC, Executive Member for Children's Services Report to Council, 28 Feb. 2007, <http://democracy.middlesbrough.gov.uk/aksmiddlesbrough/images/att9646.doc>, accessed 20 Sep. 2020.

⁶⁰MC, Executive Member for Regeneration and Economic Development Report, 15 Sep. 2010, <http://democracy.middlesbrough.gov.uk/aksmiddlesbrough/images/att1261.doc>, accessed 22 Sep. 2020.

⁶¹'Young artist wins international competition', *EG*, 13 Aug. 2010, www.gazettelive.co.uk/news/local-news/young-artist-wins-international-competition-3700472, accessed 10 Oct. 2020.

⁶²MC, Executive Member for Culture Report to Council, 6 Jan. 2016, <http://democracy.middlesbrough.gov.uk/aksmiddlesbrough/images/att1007273.pdf>, accessed 18 Oct. 2020.

⁶³MC, Vision for Middlesbrough 2025 – Update, 24 Jan. 2018, <http://democracy.middlesbrough.gov.uk/aksmiddlesbrough/images/att1013013.docx>, accessed 20 Oct. 2020.

⁶⁴www.multi-online.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/2019-Erfahrungsbericht-Multi-England.pdf, accessed 20 Oct. 2020.

⁶⁵TA, Kevin Parkes interview with Tosh Warwick, Aug. 2020.

Emphasizing this beneficial knowledge exchange, Parkes also noted how Middlesbrough Council looked at Oberhausen's approaches to housing, reuse of industrial buildings, arts and culture, and sought to learn from the shared experience of decline around the steel industries of both areas:

The steel industry has largely gone from Oberhausen now, very similar to Teesside, and therefore a lot of emphasis over the years has been on how you transform and redevelop your economy in the face of industrial restructuring... it is interesting to see how they go about their work and how they undertake their activities...it is interesting to see different perspectives.⁶⁶

By providing a 'proof of concept', studying Oberhausen's approach to regeneration played a role in shaping the next steps taken to address similar issues posed for its Middlesbrough twin. It also points to leading local officials utilizing twinning by drawing on commonalities to inform local government approaches to the changing urban economy and structure.⁶⁷

Political change, declining engagement and twinning after Brexit

In 2018, the Middlesbrough and Oberhausen traditional twinning partnership (MOTT) creaked towards its half century anniversary and depleted membership numbers prompted an appeal to attract new participants to help secure the future of the link. Ageing and retired members coupled with the death of participants have presented a problem for a number of twinning organizations in Britain and many have disbanded as recruitment and succession plans have failed.⁶⁸ The appeal in Middlesbrough had limited success and two years later the MOTT group once again called for new recruits as Chair Shirley Alexander declared, 'Time has taken its toll on our membership, and many of our original members are no longer with us or too old to host. For reasons we don't understand Germany doesn't have the same problems of attracting new and young members.'⁶⁹ The rise of the digital age where transnational communication is instantaneous and discovery of new places through interactive online platforms might partially explain the trend given that the MOTT group's activities are primarily driven by physical, face-to-face meetings rather than online, digital interactions. However, the relative parity in access to digital communications in Germany and Britain in a digitally globalized world does not explain the more successful recruitment in Oberhausen, and more research in this area is required.⁷⁰

The May 2019 local government elections brought extensive change in the political composition of Middlesbrough Council. The town's Labour party lost control of Middlesbrough Council Chamber for the first time in several decades

⁶⁶*Ibid.*

⁶⁷D. Schott. 'Review of Historikertag 2002: Entwerfen oder erhalten, entdecken oder gestalten. Der Umgang mit Geschichte in städtischen Politikentscheidungen und Zukunftsentwürfen des 20. Jahrhunderts. H-Soz-u-Kult', *H-Net Reviews*, Oct. 2002.

⁶⁸Langenohl, 'The merits of reciprocity', 572; 'Bishop's Stortford Town Twinning Association folds after more than half a century', *Bishop's Stortford Independent*, www.bishopsstortfordindependent.co.uk/news/stortfords-town-twinning-group-folds-after-more-than-half-a-century-9095262/, accessed 20 Oct. 2020.

⁶⁹'Group seeks new members to keep friendship alive', *Love Middlesbrough*, 23 (2020), 21.

⁷⁰See M.S. Laguerre, *Global City - Twinning in the Digital Age* (Ann Arbor, 2020).

and Independent candidate Andy Preston was successful in his campaign to become the town's elected mayor. Although it is difficult to fully appreciate the implications of these changes for town twinning given the relative immediacy of the political overhaul and the emergency measures and restrictions brought by COVID-19, there are signs of both promise and concern for the partnership. One of the newly appointed Executive Member for Culture and Communities Mieka Smiles' first reports highlighted a successful visit to Middlesbrough by Oberhausen cultural staff exploring opportunities for collaboration on cultural programmes and knowledge exchange, with Smiles expressing an eagerness 'to share good practice between ourselves in the future'.⁷¹ A return visit to Germany took place in early 2020 and activities including an artist exchange were planned before the COVID-19 global pandemic brought cancellations.

Brexit has also raised questions around the future of town twinning with polarized calls to end twinning arrangements or double up on efforts.⁷² Tausendpfund and Schäfer have highlighted the important role town twinning plays in enabling citizens to engage with other member nations and shaped positive political attitudes towards the EU.⁷³ The British citizenship turning its back on the EU and in particular 40,177 Middlesbrough citizens voting to 'Leave' (65.5 per cent of the vote), which made the town one of the country's leading pro-Brexit areas, is clearly at odds with these key twinning tropes. Concerns at the potential impact of the vote prompted immediate action from leading figures in the Middlesbrough–Oberhausen partnership, including Ori Atana, chair of Partnerschaft Oberhausen–Middlesbrough:

Brexit has disappointed people and it certainly does not make things easier... the day after the referendum I started rallying my fellow town twidders to be even more active than before. We issued a statement saying that to us Britain and Germany are no longer in the same club of nations but that otherwise nothing changes for us. Town twinning existed before the EU and it will continue to exist regardless of EU memberships and despite all the negative headlines and failures in the political area, the Brexit [vote] has propelled people and institutions to engage more in town twinning. It certainly has not affected the personal friendships that our town twidders share and it certainly will not hinder us from developing and cultivating our inspiring legacy.⁷⁴

The result also impelled the mayors of Middlesbrough and Oberhausen to jointly affirm that the relationship was more important in light of the Referendum.⁷⁵ Former Middlesbrough Council director Kevin Parkes too recalled how the twinning link provided an 'opportunity for us to retain some level of connectivity, at a civic level and at a public sector level, with the rest of Europe through Oberhausen'.⁷⁶

⁷¹MC, Executive Member for Culture and Communities, 24 Jul. 2019, <http://democracy.middlesbrough.gov.uk/aksmiddlesbrough/images/att1016613.pdf>, accessed 14 Sep. 2020.

⁷²H.E. Ryan, 'Brexit has made town twinning a battleground – but it's always been political', *The Conversation*, 6 Mar. 2020, <https://theconversation.com/brexit-has-made-town-twinning-a-battleground-but-its-always-been-political-131965>, accessed 18 Oct. 2020.

⁷³M. Tausendpfund and L. Schäfer, 'Town twinning and political support', *Local Government Studies*, 44 (2018), 552–76.

⁷⁴Ori Atana, Oberhausen–Middlesbrough Town Twinning Questionnaire responses, Oct. 2020.

⁷⁵David Budd, Oberhausen–Middlesbrough Town Twinning Questionnaire responses, Oct. 2020.

⁷⁶TA, Parkes interview, Aug. 2020.

Commitment and optimism for continued relations was evident in a number of responses to a recent survey on the Middlesbrough–Oberhausen partnership carried out as part of this current study. Mick Thompson, former executive member for culture and communities at Middlesbrough Council (2015–19), argued that twinning should be ‘given a higher priority to dispel some of the myths around our European neighbours’, whilst former youth participant and founding twinning committee member Jim D. Smith considered the partnership as ‘even more significant now that the UK has left’.⁷⁷ Another early youth participant hoped that ‘the strength of the twinning will live on regardless’, whilst former Middlesbrough Council leader Mike Carr suggested that ‘Brexit in itself need not change things negatively’, yet conceded that the ‘changing political complexion of both Oberhausen and Middlesbrough, and the divergence of economic and social circumstances’ would likely impact on twinning.⁷⁸ Initial responses from current elected members of Middlesbrough Council were encouraging, with Independent Councillor Carolyn Dodds expressing hope that funding to continue twinning would be provided by the local authority, whilst Conservative Councillor Mieka Smiles considered it ‘more important than ever’ that there is support for twinning in post-Brexit Middlesbrough.⁷⁹ Yet, data obtained from a Freedom of Information request to Middlesbrough Council on twinning has highlighted a significant decline in activity since the changes brought by shifts in local and national politics alongside the pandemic. In fact, no money has been spent by Middlesbrough Council on twinning and no events or exchanges have been recorded since March 2020.⁸⁰

Conclusion

This case-study of Middlesbrough’s broadly defined ‘twinning’ interactions has highlighted the complexity of international relationships established between towns and cities across post-World War II Europe. An extensive cast of civic officials, community groups, funding bodies, governments, trade networks and voluntary organizations have played important roles in shaping interactions across local, national and international arenas, spanning swimming competitions to entering into agreements underpinning approaches to the Common Market. The important role played by councillors and mayors in twinning underlines the impact that committed individual engagement has had in instigating and ensuring the survival of twinning partnerships. Moreover, it is evident that volunteerism has been both a vital asset for continued support of twinning and has exposed the partnership to the vulnerabilities of a strong emphasis on voluntary action without strong government support.⁸¹

From burgeoning youth exchanges of the 1950s centred upon reconciliation to twenty-first-century regeneration strategies exploiting twinning connections to inform economic strategies, the principles of international bonds and new cultural

⁷⁷Mick Thompson and Jim D. Smith, Oberhausen–Middlesbrough Town Twinning Questionnaire responses, Oct. 2020.

⁷⁸Ian Gray and Mike Carr, Oberhausen–Middlesbrough Town Twinning Questionnaire responses, Oct. 2020.

⁷⁹Carolyn Dodds and Mieka Smiles, Oberhausen–Middlesbrough Town Twinning Questionnaire responses, Oct. 2020.

⁸⁰Middlesbrough Council to FOI Request 018570, Feb. 2023.

⁸¹John, ‘Productive European cooperation’.

understanding have remained central to interactions despite changes in response to cultural, diplomatic, economic, political and social factors. The example of implementing a new purposeful relationship between Middlesbrough and Oberhausen has shown town twinning to be a platform for international knowledge exchange in contemporary society that offers numerous benefits whilst posing economic and practical challenges. By highlighting some of the core features of the enduring Partnerschaft Oberhausen–Middlesbrough, there are indications of the key features or ‘best practice’ that has ensured the survival of the Germany–UK link as other twinings have lapsed – namely a willingness to diversify, external funding, strong individual leadership and a mixed civic and voluntary delivery model. As for the future of town twinning as a viable movement in a post-Brexit world, the evidence from pro-Brexit Middlesbrough indicates that the result has led to expressions of interest to enhance twinning activities yet local, national and international circumstances have contributed to restricting activity. Through the case-study lens focused on the town twinning experience of a single town, it has been shown that the goals of reconciliation and healing international divisions during the 1950s have gone full circle and once again twinning offers the north-east manufacturing town a mechanism to connect with and learn from shared experiences with Oberhausen at a time of geo-political divisions within Europe.

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