

SIR HERBERT MANZONI, CBE.

The man who has been said by some to have put a concrete collar round Birmingham was born in 1899 at Birkenhead, the son of an Italian potter and sculptor who worked in the Arts and Crafts style. He attended Liverpool University, and left with a formidable list of qualifications, mainly in civil engineering.

He started work as Assistant to the Borough Engineer of Birkenhead, and in 1923 moved to Birmingham to take up an appointment as engineer and architect in the Sewers and Rivers Section of the Public Works Department. He married in the same year. His work on hydraulic design for the department was outstanding, and he was appointed City Engineer and Surveyor in 1935. He was awarded a C.B.E. in 1941.

After the Second World War, Manzoni was mainly occupied with the clearance of thirty thousand slum dwellings and the redevelopment of five housing areas, of which Lee Bank is an obviously successful example. By 1942 he had conceived the idea of an inner ring road to divert traffic from the central streets. Planners were forecasting a fourfold increase in traffic after the war. Manzoni was in charge of the project from the beginning, including the acquisition of land and buildings, demolitions, and the design and building of two-and-a-quarter miles of road, tunnels, underpasses and flyovers, at an estimated cost of thirty-five million pounds. The war's legacy of bomb sites and dereliction, and also the reduced amount of traffic, obviously helped the scheme, and it went ahead with all speed during the fifties.

Manzoni was knighted for his services in 1954. He became President of the Institute of Civil Engineers in 1960, and retired in 1963 after forty years' service to the city, twenty-eight of them as City Engineer. In 1961 he received an Honorary Doctorate of Science Degree from Birmingham University. The whole of the ring road was officially opened by the Queen in 1971. A tribute at this time describes Manzoni as a completely unruffled person, and almost impossible to fall out with. His creed was that cities become out of date just like kitchen utensils. The first transport crisis was solved by the canals, the second by the railways, and the third by the motorways.



Sir Herbert Manzoni

Manzoni lived at 71 Wake Green Road from about 1937 until his retirement, when he moved

to a flat in Edgbaston. He died in 1972. Manzoni Gardens, off the Bull Ring, were named after him. He founded the Herbert Manzoni Memorial Scholarship, which provides funds for a student of urban planning to study abroad, and for one from abroad to study here.

A tribute in the Birmingham Post stated: "Nowhere in Britain has development been approached so determinedly and carried out as comprehensively as during his 28 years as City Engineer," and "in 1973 he was ahead of his time in trying to plan for the growth in car ownership." A further tribute states "He was probably the finest civic officer Birmingham has had this century, known nationally and Internationally, and he has held practically every high office open to a man of his profession."

He is a controversial figure now, for having given priority to cars, and for sending pedestrians underground, but it has to be faced that Birmingham still has few traffic problems compared to other large cities.

Fred Price

----oOo----