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Once Britain's "city of a thousand trades" (the inscription above recalls past glory), Birmingham was almost paralysed by the recession. Derelict sites, once throbbing little workshops, remain as ugly reminders. But industry is again on the upswing, and the city is recovering its old, fierce self-esteem. Reports by Alexandra Watson and Maureen Messent, photographs by Jeremy Nicholl.

THE BUSINESS GUIDE

BIRMINGHAM

The worst enemies of Britain's second-largest city seem to be the British people. They so often claim to hate it. If sending someone, metaphorically, to nearby Coventry is to ignore them, sending them to Birmingham means total excommunication. A business trip to the city is considered about as glamorous as having one's adenoids out. For many businessmen it means little more than a few visits to the crowded halls of the National Exhibition Centre.

Even "Brummies" find it hard to get dewy-eyed over their city. Like Manchester and Liverpool,

Birmingham was created by profit-driven industrialists and furnished by their philanthropy. Unlike them, it has no soul: it is still looking for one.

Yet there was a time when, as one observer says, "all eyes looked towards it". In the 1960s, Birmingham and the West Midlands was one of the most prosperous parts of the country. Its manual wage and productivity levels were second only to those in the South-East. Flanked to the north-west by Wolverhampton and the Black Country, and to the south-east by Coventry, the city became the com-