

# The Best for the Most with the Least



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COUNCIL HOUSING IN BATH 1945-2013 – A SOCIAL HISTORY

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For eighty years Bath City Council was the builder of over 4000 properties rented to tenants whose rents were subsidised from local rates. As a pioneer in the building of good quality council houses at Dolemeads to the controversial Ballance Street development the city has provided appropriate homes for its poorest.



This exhibition presents the story of the city's provision, for those most in need, in peacetime and war.



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**The Museum of Bath at Work**

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Museum of  
**Bath  
at  
Work**



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# For the Poor

## PROVIDING FOR THE HOMELESS TO 1900

The public funded provision of housing for the very poor is a recent phenomena. From at least the 11th century charitable groups – normally attached to religious organisations provided very limited hostel accommodation – in almshouses (or hospitals as they were often called) normally only found in the larger towns. By the 18th century local rates – collected by parish authorities – paid for ‘outdoor relief’ to those very poor, who had a least a home. The homeless might be lucky to be provided by a local benefactor. Needless to say many received no help whatsoever.

In the 1830s the provision of local, parish based, relief to the poor was becoming unsustainable. The increase in population and mobility of workers had put an unacceptable strain on this provision and in the New Poor Law of 1834, accommodation for the homeless, over a ‘union’ of parishes was provided in the Union Poorhouse. Here accommodation was exchanged for work – often hard physical labour.

In the 1850s local authorities were given powers to raise local rates to pay for the public services. In 1875 the Public Health Act – the first code of sanitary health in Britain – linked the quality of housing and particularly public rented accommodation – with public health.

In 1890 the Housing of the Working Classes Act placed a statutory duty on local authorities to regulate housing standards, to demolish housing declared unfit – by these standards – and, crucially, to re-house the tenants or occupants in public housing, paid for by local rates. This legislation laid the foundation for a succession of increasing strict laws on rented accommodation and the providing of council housing.



St Catharine's Hospital. A medieval almshouse for the accommodation of a small number of lucky homeless.



The Bath Union Workhouse at Odd Down in 1930. For almost 100 years the homeless of the Bath area could be accommodated here. For most of that time by exchanging work for a home.



The Housing of the Working Classes Act 1890.



Photographs taken in the homes of the poorest in Bath in Avon Street 1905.



# Beginning Again

## 1945-1946

Of all the shortages at the end of the Second World War, of which there were many, the most acute was that of housing. Losses due to bombing and the condemning of much of the earlier housing stock as being unfit for habitation, were compounded by a rise in the birth rate after the war – and the consequent need for family housing. In Bath a further complication was the arrival, at the outbreak of war of thousands of Admiralty staff, now needing permanent accommodation.

The pre-war approach to housing – providing replacement accommodation for those displaced by demolition of unfit properties only – was completely inadequate and in any case the arrival of the Labour government in 1945, with a socialist commitment to suitably housing all the poor, forced changes on Bath City Council from above.

However the shortage of building materials, of trained construction workers (many of whom had yet to be demobilised from the Forces) and of time, demanded new solutions to the building crisis rather than the traditional brick and stone housing of the 1930s. Repairs were undertaken to those buildings that were in reasonable condition and Bath City Council bought a large number of older city centre properties – in Norfolk Crescent, the Royal Crescent, the Circus and the Paragon – for renting.

The most immediate and successful solution was the provision of entirely prefabricated housing – initially single storey temporary buildings of steel and wood. The first prefabs were delivered to Bath in late 1945 and many were supplied by aircraft making businesses. The two bedroom bungalows took 40 hours to assemble and were complete with bathroom and heating.

The shortage of flat land to build upon, in Bath itself, meant that, in the same way that the interwar garden suburbs had been built on the hills surrounding the city, so the prefab estates were set up at Odd Down, Twerton and Whiteway. The largest estates being at Wedmore Park and Odd Down (212 prefabs installed) where prefabs survived until the 1960s.



Delivery of Pre-fab bungalows to the Wedmore Park Estate 1945.



Wedmore Park, Whiteway. Pre-fabs prior to removal in the late 1960s. (Bath in Time) – Bath Central Library.



Inside a Pre-fab kitchen at Wedmore Park. 1947

Pre-fabs bungalows at Odd Down. 1948.



Displaced children in Bath.



# Model Dwellings for Artisans

1900-1945

The first project which involved Bath City Council intervening to provide new accommodation was informed by a report on the insanitary condition of housing, in Lampard's Buildings on Lansdown. On a steeply sloping site 36 new houses were erected after the council had purchased – compulsorily – a haphazard row of rat infested cottages and demolished them. The new houses, completed in 1900, comprised two and three bedroom cottages and one bedroom maisonettes. None of the houses had bathrooms and a w.c. was provided outside.



Lampard's Buildings in 1925. The first council houses are behind this small group.

A much larger scheme for new council accommodation at Dolemeads – on a seven acre site – was proposed in the same year, although completion of the scheme took until 1939. The first 42 houses – almost identical to those at Lampard's Buildings but in red brick-were officially opened by Dowager Lady Tweedmouth in 1901. The rents were set at 5/- a week – a sizeable sum and beyond the reach of the poor – these houses were designed for the rising working class.



Housing at Dolemeads before the building of the first council housing. (Bath in Time) – Bath Central Library.

At the end of the First World War in 1918 central government pledged to provide homes for those returning from the European battlefields. This resulted in new legislation by which local authorities would be subsidised in the provision of council housing. During the 1920s a series of large scale estates, largely built on the hills at the edge of Bath, were completed. These estates replaced slum housing in Avon Street, Walcot and Widcombe. First came the Englishcombe estate – completed in 1925 – where the first semi-detached council houses were built, as part of a planned 'garden suburb'. These first houses set the standard for the interwar accommodation with three bedrooms, a bathroom and w.c (inside and upstairs) and a living room – the orientation of which, could be adapted according to which side of the road it was on – which always faced the sun.



Dolemeads. The new houses in Excelsior Street.

Estates of similar houses followed at Rudmore Park (1926), Southdown (1927), Larkhall (1926), Odd Down (1931) and Whiteway (1938) to the south of the city. The houses were faced in Bath Stone and the best material were used. In all these estates the houses were set in spacious gardens.



The Kingsmead Apartments 1932.

A development of three, four storey, steel framed blocks at Kingsmead – of maisonettes – was completed in 1932. The Whiteway estate had 86 houses unfinished and abandoned when the Second World War broke out in September 1939.



Roundhill Park built in 1938.

# Towards the Really Better

1946-51

Bath City Council strategy for longer term council accommodation had four elements. Firstly to resume the building of estates begun before the Second World War – namely the Whiteway Estate abandoned in 1939. Secondly to continue the ordering of pre-fab bungalows. Thirdly to investigate entirely new sites for building of permanent but prefabricated housing. Finally to continue the repair and renovation of older houses acquired from private owners in the older building stock of the city.

In order to provide quickly assembled housing at a time of shortage of traditional building materials, a number of manufacturers had devised two storey house designs made from pre-fabricated components of concrete and steel. Often the houses were then faced with brick or even stone – but not always.

The three designs most used in Bath were the Cornish house, the Unity house and the BISF house. The first design – made by the Central Cornwall Concrete and Artificial Stone Company – involved pre-stressed concrete and wooden frames filled in with brick, stone or, more typically, concrete blocks. A mansard roof covered the first floor. Houses of this design were supplied to the new Twerton Estate and the Southlands Estate at Weston. Further Cornish houses were supplied at Odd Down and Whiteway as these estates expanded.

Unity Houses – with components supplied by Unity Structures Ltd – employed a steel frame overlain with brick or stone and the BISF (British Iron and Steel Federation) houses – were used extensively in Twerton and used not only a steel frame but an upper storey made of steel plates. The BISF houses were designed by architect Frederick Gibberd.

To speed up the building and commissioning of houses, the Labour Government improved the paying of subsidies to local authorities and imposed maximum rents on both the public and private sector. As a result of the control of the supply of building materials and labour directed to council house building, private construction virtually ground to a halt.

## THAT BATHAMPTON LAND

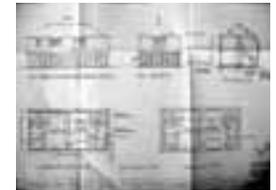
Bath Proposed to Discuss Alternative Sites  
A further letter from the Bath South Ward District Council on the Bath City Council's proposal to acquire land at Moorlands for building purposes was before the Housing Committee at their meeting when a vote was recorded that the S.D.C. be informed that the committee are prepared to discuss with those representing the alternative sites referred to in their letter of September 26, and that it considered the proposed meeting should be held with the view of its accordance with the wishes of the City Council.



A Cornish style house of concrete at Southlands, Weston.



BISF steel houses at Shaw's Way, Twerton in 1949.



Plans of Cornish concrete houses for Twerton and Weston.



Map showing the Whiteway, Twerton and Moorlands sites.



Cornish houses at Southlands Estate Weston, 1950.

## A Real Example – The Moorlands Estate

1946-8

Of all the post-war building projects in Bath, the Moorlands Estate in Oldfield Park, was considered the most prestigious. It was the first estate to be completed and planned after the war and was designed with 205 houses on a site between Hensley and Cotswold Road. The houses were traditionally built of stone and brick rather than system built like the developments at Twerton.

The Bath Chronicle reported:

‘The layout provides for all the front gardens to be open with lawns and formal flower beds and no wire or fencing. The gardens will be linked with terraces which will be most attractive and quite different from the usual council estate appearance. The living rooms will face south and have a sun terrace outside. Each will have a dining room and a utility room where washing can be done. Every house will have outbuildings to include a garden and fuel store and the bathroom in every house will be upstairs’.

Work began in August 1946 and the first houses were available a year later. The last, 205th house was completed in February 1949.

Anuerin Bevan – the Minister of Housing- – visited the estate on February 18th and met the first tenant of the last house to be built, 39 Chantry Mead Road.

At a speech to a small crowd he said:

‘These houses are suitable for everyone , not just low income families. When I come across local authorities that are not paying sufficient regard to the design of their houses and the use of materials, I will tell them to visit Bath and see a real example of what they should do’.



Completed houses on Cotswold Road.



Anuerin Bevan – Minister of Housing in the Labour Government.



Chantry Mead Road, the last set of houses completed in February 1949.



Houses in Cotswold Road.



Anuerin Bevan at Chantry Mead Road addressing a small crowd of residents outside No 39 in February 1949.



## The Twerton and Weston Estates

1945-51

In March 1945 land had been acquired in West Twerton on the former land of the Carr family, including their former home – Wood House – and at Weston and year later. Large estates – on the garden suburb pattern – were planned with permanent, prefabricated buildings. Initially an estate was also planned at Bathampton but the instability of the land, on what became playing fields, forced this development to be abandoned.

In Weston 280 houses – for up to 300 families – were planned and local residents feared a great change to the character of the village when 54 acres of land was bought for development. 120 houses were to be of the Unity design and the remainder of Cornish houses. The Weston development included two sites. The first and largest – The Weston Estate comprised Eastfield Avenue, Holcombe Green, Brookfield Park and the Weal. The second estate at Southlands.

In Twerton 18 acres of land was bought and in 1947 the first road of 42 houses in Freeview Road was complete. Cornish houses and BISF houses were installed and in the following years the estate extended south and west including the much admired Day Crescent (named after Alderman Sam Day – Chairman of the Bath City Council Housing Committee). At its completion the Twerton estate comprised Day Crescent, Shaws Way, Pennard Green, Cleeve Green, Cameley Green, Freeview Road, Pennyquick View, Hinton Close and Newton Road.

The Cornish and BISF houses had poor sound and heat insulation. In January 1953 a public meeting was called to discuss the matter. The Bath Chronicle reported:

‘One resident of a two storey maisonette house in Day Crescent in Twerton said ‘Whether you are in the bedroom, dining room or bathroom noise from other tenants can be heard. We can even hear our neighbours cutting four slices of bread every morning. When the cistern is filling up it is like an express train and there is a dog in the maisonette above us that gnaws a bone all day. We live in utter misery. They say an Englishman’s home is his castle but it certainly isn’t here!’



BISF steel houses at Freeview Road Twerton 1948. This was the first part of the Twerton estate to be completed.



More BISF houses at Shaw's Way Twerton. 1948.



Cornish concrete and steel house at Eastfield Avenue, Weston.



BISF houses at Freeview Road under construction. (Bath in Time) – Bath Central Library.



Cornish concrete and steel houses at Day Crescent, Twerton.

## New for Old

1951-1960

In 1951 the Labour Government, whose housing policies had laid down the standards for acceptable public housing, was replaced by a Conservative one. A major cause of dissatisfaction with the Labour government had been the slow rate of providing council housing and repairs. Shortages of materials continued but the over generous allocation of space and facilities in each council house was also blamed.

A result of the new government's election was a relaxation in building legislation and greater support for private building – which had been made difficult after the war. The amount of space to be allocated to each house was reduced – so council houses became smaller. The Labour restriction of a maximum height for buildings to be six storeys was also abandoned – this allowed the building for the first time of high-rise blocks of flats. In fact from 1956 a government subsidy was available to build multi-storey blocks.

Apartment blocks were built at Snow Hill and in 1952 building began at the Phoenix House complex in Julian Road – on the site of a bomb site.

An old people's home – Quebec House- was built near Freeview Road on the Twerton Estate. By 1957 75% of the 2.5 million houses and flats built since 1945 had been constructed by local authorities.

In Bath council housing continued to be built on the sites acquired before and just after the war. In 1952 the Housing Department reported that 2685 houses had been built in the city since 1945. Generous amounts of space had been purchased at Weston, Twerton and Whiteway to allow expansion of these sites gradually. Many people however were still living in the temporary pre-fab bungalows and the rising birth rate – a consequence of the return of demobilised soldiers getting married and having children- continued to put pressure on the council.

One final aspect of Conservative government policy was to make it easier for local authorities to sell council housing – a policy which would be revisited some thirty years later.



Maisonnettes on the Wansdyke post-war section of the Odd Down estate.



Much housing unfit for habitation remained in the 1950s. These properties were in Corn Street.



The Mayor of Bath with the Harris Family in their delapidated home in Walcot Street. They moved into new premises at Weston in 1952.



Phoenix House in Julian Road completed in 1954. Blocks of maisonnettes began to appear in many districts of the city during the decade.



Berkeley House – Bath's first skyscraper on the Snow Hill estate, completed 1957.



The building of tower blocks in landscaped setting in the UK during the 1950s followed European practice where such buildings had been first built in the 1930s. This block, much as the Snow Hill estate, is in Sweden.

## It's Wonderful Here – The Snow Hill Estate

1952-68

Many of the houses in the Snow Hill area of Bath, off the London Road, had been declared unfit for habitation before the Second World War, but replacement was delayed until the decision was taken to purchase the entire district for rebuilding in 1949.

Initially the plan was to replace the jumble of Georgian terraced cottages with semi-detached houses but this was quickly reviewed after the height restriction on new building was relaxed and instead the architects – Snailum, Huggins and Lefevre – opted for a series of long blocks of apartments and maisonnettes surrounding an eleven storey tower block.

Clearing of the site began in 1952 and the first two blocks – which won an RIBA medal for Terence Snailum – Walcot House and Dover House were completed in 1956. Berkeley House – the first tower block in the south west- was completed in December 1957 and construction of the entire estate was completed by 1968.

The long blocks in the Scandinavian style – Longacre House, Dover House, Walcot House, Calcot House, Snow Hill and Saffron Court face south. They were built in open lawns and terraced along the hillside, in an echo of 18th century building in Bath. Only Inman House – one of the last blocks built – runs up the hillside. The blocks were roofed in copper sheeting – a maintenance free solution.

The estate was highly popular and the waiting list was long. On 31st December when the Berkeley House tower was completed over 1000 people visited the show flats.

When the Mayor of Bath visited the first tenants of Dover House a resident said 'It's wonderful here – I wouldn't go back to my old house in Snow Hill Road for a thousand pounds. For the children it is a godsend'.



Walcot House and Dover House. Finished in 1955 this first phase of the scheme won a bronze medal from the Royal Institute of British Architects.



Children on the building site at Snow Hill. The entire estate took more than ten years to complete. (Bath in Time) – Bath Central Library.



These houses in Weymouth Square had been declared unfit for habitation in 1949 and were demolished two years later to make way for Dover House.



Clearing the Snow Hill site for rebuilding 1953.



Berkeley House tower finished in 1957.

## Yesterday's Tomorrow

1960-1980

By 1960 most of the unfit housing – but not all – had been demolished and most of the bomb damaged housing replaced. However, as late as 1968, prefab bungalows were still occupied at Wedmore Park, Whiteway.

The garden suburb estates at Twerton, Weston and Whiteway were however complete.

A change in perception of council housing had occurred during this period and dissatisfaction with the estates was growing. As many of Bath's estates had to build on the city's outskirts – due to the shortage of appropriate land – residents relied upon bus services to get into the centre and shops, entertainments and other leisure facilities were considered inadequate. There was also a growing scepticism that the new way of living – in the apartment blocks – was any better than terraces they replaced. Commentators referred to the Berkeley House tower as a 'vertical slum'.

As a result the two last large scale building projects undertaken by Bath City Council – The Rosewell Court development and Ballance Street Flats – were built at a time when the concept of high-rise living was becoming unpopular.

The Rosewell Court development was, uniquely, in the centre of Bath and only the clearing of the badly bomb damaged district around Kingsmead Square in the late 1950s, had allowed new building so close.

Construction on the ten storey block, of 40 flats and 11 bed sitting rooms was began in 1960, but by 1967 it was already being described as Nightmare Court.

In November 1967 the Bath Chronicle reported:

'Old people, who make up many of the residents have been frightened to death because men had been found sleeping on the stairs and both lifts had been out of action. Mr Askin a resident said the lifts were out of action once a week. "I can tell you an awful lot goes on in these lifts and young vandals get into the flats fool about and then off they go!"



As late as 1968 some families were still living in Pre-fab bungalows. These last, at Wedmore Park were replaced with modern flats on the Whiteway Estate.



Rosewell Court. Built on a bomb site this development recognised through the Parker Morris proposals, that car parking should be provided for council accommodation.



A common criticism of post-war council building was the lack of shopping facilities. At Rosewell Court although close to the city centre, shops were included in the self-contained development.

## A New Way of Living: The Ballance Street Development

1972

By and large the architectural approach taken by Bath City Council, even to its high rise apartment blocks, was to use brick and Bath Stone and to adopt a consensual style. The Ballance Street development – where a confined and steeply sloping site was to be built upon- employed as much exposed concrete as Bath Stone and the approach to its building was uncompromising.

Ironically the area for development surrounded Bath City Council's first row of public housing – Lampard's Buildings. Some bomb damaged houses were surrounded by a jumble of cramped 18th century terraces declared unfit for habitation by the mid-1960s. Demolition of Ballance Street, Mount Pleasant, one side of Morford Street and the Edwardian council houses in Lampard's Buildings were cleared in the mid-1960s and by 1972 the Ballance Street development of 350 flats and maisonettes was complete. Such was the outcry surrounding the development that the eastern side of Morford Street was left untouched and further rebuilding abandoned. The tennis court building which is occupied by the Museum of Bath at Work was consequently left and the museum took possession in 1978.

As the last major public development of housing it was criticised for its style at a time when the very idea of council provision and high-rise apartment living was being questioned. In 1973 Adam Ferguson's book 'The Sack of Bath' questioned the whole idea of replacing houses – which could be renovated – with such blocks and described Ballance Street as 'The most detested addition to the Bath scene'.



The Ballance Street Development was completed in 1972 and was almost immediately condemned as unsuitable for Bath.



Ballance Street today.

# A Right to Buy – The End of the Council Provision?

1980

As late as 1979 40% of the population lived in council accommodation and one third of the whole housing stock in the UK was in council hands. Nevertheless investment in council accommodation had fallen dramatically during the 1970s and in 1979 a Conservative government was returned to power with a new policy on public housing – The 1980 Housing Act.

A major element of this legislation was a compulsion to local authorities to sell council housing. From the beginning sale of council housing had been possible and the provision of new homes had always exceeded the numbers sold – however the Right to Buy legislation, as it became known, made it compulsory to offer public housing for sale. As a result many of the better quality and better located properties were quickly purchased by those who could afford them – often to resell them themselves. In Bath many of the flats in the Georgian terraces were quickly bought.

Across the UK 1 million houses were sold in ten years and at the same time spending restrictions were placed on councils making the building of new council housing virtually impossible. After fifty years of almost uninterrupted growth the number of council houses began to drop.

A major problem for some of the purchasers was that the pre-fabricated permanent houses – the Cornish, Unity and BISF houses used at Weston, Twerton and Whiteway – had suffered from corrosion of the metal bars used to reinforce the concrete components. This made them practically unmortgageable and almost impossible to resell.

Nevertheless the policy was considered a great success and in the cases where private tenants were unable to buy individual properties some local authorities sold the remaining housing stock to Housing Associations. In Bath and North East Somerset The Curo Group – formerly Somer Housing now administers the former council housing.

In 2008 12% of all houses were rented from councils and 6% from housing associations. The remainder are now in private hands.



Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher discusses the Right to Buy legislation with prospective home owners. 1980.



The Kingsmead Flats were eligible for the scheme but most remain in Housing Association possession.



Cornish Style houses in Southlands, Weston. After many decades the reinforcement in the concrete components of these houses began to corrode.



Properties up for sale after 1980 at Snow Hill, Whiteway (from the air) and Weston.