

## INTRODUCTION

Today, 'social housing' is public housing that is rented to households who are unable to afford to rent from the private sector or buy their own home. 'Social Housing' is a collective term covering homes built and /or managed by district and borough councils and (since 1974) housing associations.

Traditionally referred to as council houses, due to the major role played by local authorities in their development, the origins of such provision can be directly traced to the late Victorian era. During this period laws were passed giving borough councils the power to build houses. However, very few councils (including Chesterfield's) did. Those that did, such as in London, Liverpool and Glasgow, were generally rehousing people displaced by road improvement schemes. (NB Chesterfield borough similarly undertook measures to improve local amenities).

The first effective phase of council house building, both in Chesterfield and across the country, took place following the end of the Great War in 1918. Between 1919 and 1939 considerable progress was to be made but the outbreak of war in 1939 was to put a temporary halt on developments. It was only after the end of World War Two in 1945, when England faced its worst housing crisis (with an estimated 750, 000 homes required) that 'the age of the council house truly arrived'.

The 1950's saw a huge expansion of council housing so much so that by 1961 around 26% of the population rented homes from local authorities as compared to 10% in 1938 (it had been around 1% in 1918). This figure was to increase to 40% by 1979 but thereafter council tenancy would decline and the official statistics for 2012 – 2013 show that only 16% of homes are 'socially rented'.

From Lloyd George's emotional epithet of 1918 of a 'Land fit for heroes' to Thatcher's 'Right to Buy' individualism of the 1980's through to the present day, house building has been, and no doubt will continue to be, an issue in British politics. 'Social housing' is without doubt an element of a society's welfare provision. Although History, despite what some may think, never repeats itself, it is possible to discern that there has been, particularly in terms of 'social housing' a continuing conflict between a social consciousness and economic pragmatism from the governing classes.

The market town of Chesterfield has experienced all of this.

The narrative that follows attempts to summarise how, from the start of the 19<sup>th</sup> C. to the present day, this has impacted on provision for some of the people from Chesterfield and its surrounding area.

## CHESTERFIELD AT THE START OF 19<sup>th</sup> CENTURY

At the start of the 19<sup>th</sup> C. the poor in the township of Chesterfield and its neighbouring villages and hamlets could receive help through a range of charities. In his 'History of Chesterfield' (1839), T Ford noted 20 'general', 5 'church' and 15 'miscellaneous' charities dating in origin from 1479 to 1825. Collectively these provided doles, food (usually bread), clothing and shoes, almshouses, education and apprenticeships. The sheer number of charities in Chesterfield suggest, as historians Bestall and Fowke later observed, that 'for some people at least these would have been a significant factor in maintaining a tolerable standard of living'.

Additional aid came in the shape of the parish Workhouse built between 1735 – 1737 (following Knatchbull's Workhouse Test Act of 1722) on South Place. This Workhouse, which would operate for just over a century, was funded by local subscription, almost entirely from the ancient families of burgesses of the region, who incidentally tended to dominate the corporation, the vestry and the manor courts that 'governed' the town.

Nationally, while the provision for the poor was extremely variable and often harsh, the workhouse in Chesterfield was described by Sir Francis Eden (himself not an advocate for poor relief) in his work 'State of the Poor' (1797) as being 'clean and efficiently spacious'. It accommodated 28 inmates that were principally very old or very young. A further 41 received 'outdoor relief' (representing together approximately 2% of the population).

Chesterfield typified, therefore, on a local scale what existed nationally vis. 'a network of institutionalised charities combined with parish relief'. Chesterfield's support for its poor likewise replicated the underlying ideology that had emerged from the early Middle Ages. The Statute of Cambridge (1388); the Vagabonds & Beggars Act (1495) and various Elizabethan 'Poor Laws' (1552, 1555, 1575, 1597 and 1601) distinguished between the 'impotent' and 'able bodied' poor – the former deserving of help, the latter less so.

Many of Chesterfield's charitable bequests for instance, not only focused on the apparently most vulnerable 'poor widows' or 'decayed housekeepers' but also emphasised that the recipients needed to be 'the most respectable' (George Taylor's almshouses in Saltergate, 1668) or from 'good families come to poverty' (Anne Heathcote, 1710).

Other charities also specified that relief be given to 'the inhabitants of the said town' (Earl of Shrewsbury, 1591) or 'indigent people' (Milward, 1713). These last examples also reflect the thinking embodied in the Act of Settlement (1662) that allowed individuals to be returned to their parish of birth if in need of poor relief. That is unless they had obtained a certificate of settlement from their original parish. Indeed, Eden observed in 1797 that the Chesterfield vestry was extremely reluctant to grant such settlement certificates while Bestall and Fowkes noted that in 1831 the Chesterfield vestry still advised that 'all servants must not be employed more than 51 weeks' so as to prevent settlements being gained by persons who ought to be settled elsewhere'.

It can be seen, therefore, that the generous bequests from philanthropic and often, religiously motivated individuals and families along with local rate payers' contributions to the

workhouse were at the same time subject to an inherent, cautious prudence regarding how such benefits should be distributed.

The costs of poor relief in Chesterfield increased more than nine fold between 1774 and 1817. Expenditure had roughly doubled between 1774 (£334 12s 7 ¼ d) and 1795 (£586 18s 2 ½ d) and by 1817 had escalated further to £3035 2s 4d per annum. The overseers of the poor and the ratepayers of Chesterfield must have been 'acutely aware of the mounting pressures on the system' (Bestall and Fowkes). Making matters worse, in 1820 Chesterfield Corporation, that had by that date also become trustees for many of the local charities, was criticised by the Charity Commission for poor administration and incurring a debt of some £700!

This problem, however, was not confined to Chesterfield. Nationally, the spiralling costs of poor relief led to a number of enquiries during the 1820's. It resulted in the government appointing a Royal Commission in 1832 to undertake an extensive investigation into the operation of the poor laws. By this time Chesterfield was, like many other areas in central and northern England, starting to change. With its population growing, the town itself was becoming rather cramped and increasingly overcrowded and its archaic institutions (unchanged since the Restoration Period) were coming under more and more pressure from the changing world that it faced.

How Chesterfield responded would again be influenced by national developments.

### **CHESTERFIELD: 1834 to 1914.**

In 1834 the Whig Government introduced the Poor Law Amendment Act. Heavily influenced by the 'utilitarian wisdom' of contemporary philosophers and political economists and religious perceptions about the morality of the poor, the intention was to curb costs, end the abuses of the old system (particularly in southern agricultural counties) and ensure that poor relief was provided only through a workhouse.

The New Poor Law's main innovation was to be an administrative one. For the purposes of poor relief, parishes were joined together into new 'Unions' run by a Board of Guardians elected by local ratepayers and property owners. Chesterfield consequently became the administrative centre of an enlarged 'Union' of 34 parishes from North East Derbyshire that included Staveley, Dronfield, Brampton and Ashover. (NB 1767 had seen the creation of the Ashover Union).

An additional consequence of the creation of these 'unions' was the need to accommodate the expected increasing number of paupers. Across England and Wales many new workhouses were to be built, most modelled on the structure and operating principles of the Southwell Workhouse in Nottinghamshire that had been established in 1824 by the Reverend J T Becher. Chesterfield's new workhouse was opened in 1840 in Newbold Road with a capacity for 300 inmates.

It is worth noting that the poor rate in Chesterfield had already been reduced from £2, 645 in 1832 to £1, 685 by 1837. In that year, the old workhouse accommodated 7 men, 8 women, 3 boys and 1 girl and the historian Best comments that 'few poor houses in the kingdom are under better management than that of Chesterfield. The comfort of its unfortunate inmates is consulted in all arrangements – every room is kept remarkably clean and good discipline maintained'.

Best mirrored his contemporaries' confident anticipation that: 'The New Poor Law will be to occasion a permanent reduction, and at the same time to increase the comforts of those who are driven to the necessity of subsisting upon parish relief, and to produce a higher tone of moral feeling than now generally exists among the poor'.

The Chesterfield Guardians similarly hoped the new Chesterfield workhouse would be: 'a good and efficient workhouse which shall not have the appearance of either a prison or a palace and which shall be an asylum for the aged, the helpless and the infirm, while at the same time it shall hold out no inducement to the idle and profligate to enter within its walls.'

Such views might appear as over optimistic even naïve. The new workhouses deliberately established a segregated environment that saw virtually no contact between the old and infirm, able bodied men, women and children. They were modelled on an austere, almost prison like regime that was intended to be the 'last resort' of and only for the destitute. It would, as the historian, R K Webb later observed, subsequently arouse 'a persistent, burning sense of injustice among the working classes'.

The prospects for the poor of Chesterfield and district at the start of the Victorian period and on the eve of Industrial Revolution therefore looked bleaker than ever. The arrival of the railway and the discovery of coal and iron ore in the 1840's, however, were to transform the region's economy and lead to a considerable increase in opportunities for work and a significant growth in the area's population. Chesterfield borough's population, for instance, almost doubled between 1851 (7, 103) and 1891 (13, 241).

During this period cyclical unemployment (a term not used at the time) would cause considerable distress to workers and their families. In an era when the stark poor law represented official welfare provision, private charity would again try 'to assuage the privation: in 1862 a soup kitchen operated in Chesterfield, and in 1877 a Relief Fund was opened in the town to deal with the worst case of distress' (T F Wright). In 1875 eleven almshouses for 'poor persons of good character' were to be built and administered by Chesterfield Municipal Trustees. However, for those that had recourse to the workhouse their situation must have been desperate. The publication in 1866 of a 'less than favourable report' by the Poor Law Inspector, R B Cane, of Chesterfield Workhouse's Infirmity provision, highlighted appallingly insanitary conditions and shameful neglect of the inmates, reflecting the level of abuse endemic in the system.

As the pace of industrialisation grew in momentum during the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> C. the now burgeoning industrial areas faced increasing problems of overcrowded and insanitary living conditions for its labouring classes. National legislation saw attempts to give local councils some powers to deal with these issues. The Labouring Classes Dwelling Act (1866); the Artisans and Labourers' Dwelling Improvement Acts (1874 and 1879) and the Housing of the Working Classes Acts (1885, 1890 and 1909) enabled some improvements to be undertaken.

In Chesterfield the worst overcrowding was the 'Dog Kennels', located immediately in the centre of the town, south of Low Pavement. A council committee was set up to consider the 1890 Act that allowed councils to apply for loans to finance housing. The Committee subsequently proposed that 20 cottages at a cost of £180 each (exclusive of land) should be built on Derby Road. This scheme, however, was shelved in 1893 in face of rising costs.

Chesterfield Corporation did, however, undertake works on sanitation, measures on public health, paving, lighting and the municipal control of water, gas and electricity by which they had 'sought to ameliorate the social conditions of the people living in the borough'. Discussions would continue as to how to improve housing provision for the working classes. In 1911, for instance, the council began an enquiry in to buying land and the building of houses but a scheme to erect 38 houses on St. Augustine Road (at a cost of £185 each) was deferred due to the outbreak of war 1914. Indeed, as T F Wright observes in his 'History of Chesterfield, 1851 – 1939' only a few authorities did in fact build council houses before the First World War (less than 5% of houses built during this period were council houses) and 'Most, like Chesterfield, awaited Addison's 1919 Housing and Town Planning Act'.

It may therefore appear that the period before the outbreak of World War One was one of general inertia in terms of social housing development. In percentage terms this may be the case. However, there were a number of individuals who sought to address the worsening problem of 'urban decay' on both national and local levels. Here, the roles of the architectural and planning partnership of Richard Barry Parker and Raymond Unwin alongside that of councillor, later alderman and mayor of Chesterfield, William Rhodes, deserve some comment.

Richard Barry Parker, who was born in Chesterfield, and Raymond Unwin, who was originally from Rotherham, had met while working at the Staveley Coal and Iron Works in the 1880's. They established their architectural and planning partnership in Buxton in 1896 that aimed to improve housing standards for the working class. Both were influenced by the ideals of the emerging Arts and Craft Movement that considered how design affected society and how the living and working environment moulded the character of the individual. They had designed St. Andrew's Church in Barrow Hill (1893) and several houses in the Arts and Craft Style elsewhere before establishing their reputation by planning the New Earswick model village near York for the philanthropist, Joseph Rowntree in 1902. They were successful in being commissioned to plan the first 'Garden City' in Letchworth (1902) and a second at Welwyn (1919), both in Hertfordshire.

Their work with its emphasis on 'generous green spaces' and the need for urban planning policies, gained them both national and international reputations. Unwin, in particular, became increasingly involved in public sector. He had an influential role on the Tudor – Walters Committee on working class housing whose report was published in 1919. Unwin had demonstrated the principles of building homes rapidly and economically while maintaining satisfactory standards for gardens, family privacy and internal spaces and thus indirectly influenced much inter-war public housing. Ultimately the legacy can be seen in the New Town Movement that emerged after the end of World War Two.

Of more immediate local importance to housing developments in Chesterfield were the contributions made by the architect, Percy Bond Houfton and councillor, William Rhodes.

Percy Bond Houfton was born in Alfreton in 1873 and educated at St. Mary's School, Chesterfield. His architectural practice (established in Chesterfield in 1898) was responsible for designing and erecting workmen's housing for colliery companies in Bolsover, Shirebrook, Micklefield, Creswell in Derbyshire and Brodsworth, Wharnciffe and Tinsley in South Yorkshire. Like Parker and Unwin, he was influenced by the Garden City concept and endeavouring to ensure that there would be 'ample space between houses, good playing grounds and institutes and amenities'. He subsequently became responsible for the design and layout of the social housing estates in Chesterfield in Boythorpe, Highfield and Derby Road (the one for Tapton was not built). Houfton also designed similar layouts for estates in Clay Cross, Ashbourne, Edwinstowe and for two in South Wales.

William Rhodes, a builder by trade, had been elected as councillor to the West Ward and in 1910 became one of the eight aldermen in the now enlarged borough council. He rose to prominence during the First World War when serving as Chairman to Chesterfield's Special Housing Committee. He gained wider recognition through his appointment to the National Housing and Town Planning Committee in the autumn of 1917.

As the historian T F Wright observes, he showed a 'notable grasp' of the reasons behind the housing shortages existing nationally at that time. He recommended that Government and Municipalities should work in tandem, with the former providing loans at normal rates of interest and subsidies where necessary and the latter providing decent sized areas of land with a limited number of houses per acre. In so doing, Rhodes had 'anticipated the main planks of Addison's 1919 Housing Act' and he would 'prove an excellent choice to spearhead the drive (to build houses) in Chesterfield' in the post First World War era. Indeed, Rhodes was to serve as Mayor between 1921 and 1922 and in November 1923 was to be admitted as the tenth Honorary Freeman' for his services to the town. Some further details of his service can be found in the following section.

### **CHESTERFIELD: 1914 -1939**

During the First World War, the provision and condition of housing in Chesterfield had become a major problem in the borough. Chesterfield's Medical Officer of Health, Dr Fraser, highlighted in December 1916, how overcrowded and poor housing was responsible for the area's high mortality rate. His recommendation was that a municipal housing scheme 'of at least 200 houses' be prepared for action once the war ended. Under the Chairmanship of Alderman Rhodes the scheme to secure sufficient land for at least 200 houses was formally approved by Council in February 1917. This was to be the 'true genesis of Chesterfield's progress in municipal housing after the war' (T F Wright).

The Housing and Town Planning Act (the Addison Act) of 1919 made it mandatory for local councils to provide housing for lower income groups and also provided subsidies (rather than loans) to enable them to do so. By the time this law was introduced Chesterfield council was already well placed to play its part in fulfilling Lloyd George's aspirational vision of a 'Land fit for heroes' by building 'homes fit for heroes'

In February 1919 a scheme to build 26 workmen's cottages on the St Augustine Road site was enthusiastically endorsed by no lesser a person than Christopher Addison. Some 567 houses at a cost of £800 each were subsequently built in the now extended borough of Chesterfield as a result of the Addison Act.

Building houses was not undertaken on a consistent basis and Chesterfield, like other councils across the country, would be affected both positively and negatively by changes in government and economic factors. Neville Chamberlain's Act of 1923, for instance, reduced subsidies and favoured private enterprise though 77 houses were built by the council under its own Town Planning Act that received Royal Assent in the same year. Wheatley's Housing

Act introduced by the Labour Government of 1924 (and subsequently re-enforced by Baldwin's Conservative Government in the following year) tipped the balance back in favour of councils by limiting their financial liability. Chesterfield made great progress as a result with some 1,125 houses constructed as a result.

As the number of houses increased, the Housing Committee began to deal with the daily management of the new 'council estates'. The appointments of two female 'Property Managers' (Janet Upcott being one) had been prompted by problems arising from a minority of tenants who had found it difficult to adjust to their new environment (especially those displaced from the Low Pavements area) and an increase in rent arrears (following the protracted coal dispute that ensued after the General Strike of 1926). While the duties of these Property Managers included rent collecting, monitoring housing and garden conditions, maintaining and improving amenities and fostering community spirit and they were in fact 'social workers trained in the Octavia Hill system which Alderman Rhodes had observed in operation on two London housing estates'.

Between the wars, Chesterfield Council demolished 817 slums and built 2,561 new houses. Most of this municipal housing was concentrated in 6 estates: St Augustine's (854); Boythorpe (382); Springfield (138); Racecourse (227); Barker Lane (214) and Highfield Hall (294). Along with the building of 4,445 private dwellings (much if it infilling) the housing stock in Chesterfield was increased by 6,189 houses to 17,906 by 1939. Although an official council report of 1936 expressed grave concern about housing conditions still prevailing amongst lower paid workers, T F Wright comments that by 1939, when war again put a stop to building, 'a considerable mitigation of overcrowding had thus been achieved'.

### **PROGRESS: 1945 TO 1979**

The Labour Government of 1945 – 1951, with its focus on creating a 'Welfare State' that would cater for all from 'the cradle to the grave' inaugurated the second major phase of council house building. Led by Aneurin Bevan, who, as Minister of Health, ensured that the focus was on local authority involvement rather than the private sector. Initially, their commitment was for 300,000 'units' but a total of 1.2 million new houses would be built by 1951 (with only some 156,623 being of the 'pre fab' construction). Of these 80% were council houses.

The housing boom continued under the Tory government from 1951, who favouring private enterprise, promised to build 300,000 house per annum. The emphasis shifted at the end of the decade towards slum clearance, and many councils re-housed people in purpose-built flats or high-rise tower blocks.

Local Authority council house building would ultimately peak between 1965 and 1969 (when 50% of the 1.8 million houses that were erected were built by local authorities). Although there was a small upsurge of building between 1974 – 1975 (co-incidentally during another labour administration) the trend during the 1970's was for local councils to focus more on



maintenance than on building new homes while the 1974 Housing Act enabled housing associations to receive state funding to build houses.

### **BEGINNINGS OF DECLINE: 1980 - 2016**

The Thatcherite Government's Housing Act of 1980 was to prove a watershed event in the history of social housing throughout the country. This piece of legislation gave tenants the 'Right to Buy' their council house. Councils had been able to sell their housing stock since 1936 and the numbers sold in England rose from 7,000 in 1970 to nearly 46,000 in 1972. The difference the 1980 Act made was that it not only compelled local councils to sell at discount prices of up to 60% but also did not allow them to replace the sold stock. (N.B. The Conservative Government also scrapped the adherence to Parker Morris Standards established regarding minimum space requirements for social housing in 1961).

Not surprisingly the 'Right to Buy' resulted in a reduction of council housing stock. Some one million council houses were sold between 1980 and 1990 and the subsequent figure totalling is over 2 million. By 2010, 25% of housing authorities across the country were no longer responsible for rent collection or repairs and maintenance though in law they remained responsible for providing strategic and community leadership within their locality.

There has also been a polarisation between the more successful council estates, peppered with 'right to buys' and the less popular estates where a greater sense of social deprivation is apparent. In some instances the Council housing estates were fast becoming the accommodation of last resort for those left behind by society, as families on middle incomes sold up and moved out while many that remained increasingly tended to be on benefits or in low-paid work, or had drug and alcohol problems.

Parliamentary legislation between 1996 and 2014 reflect the changing circumstances and attitudes towards social housing and some of its tenants in particular. The Housing Act (1996); the Crime and Disorder Act (1998); the Housing Regeneration Act (2008) and the Anti-Social Behaviour Crime and Policing Act (2014) successively increased the powers of Local Authorities to deal with their tenants' anti-social behaviour. At the same time, however, local councils have conscientiously continued to support their more vulnerable inhabitants, often with diminishing resources. Thus, Chesterfield Borough Council's housing priorities for 2013 – 2016 has focused on three major strategies covering Tenancy; Homelessness and Affordable Warmth.

The importance of socially rented housing in meeting housing shortages has diminished considerably over the past 40 years while successive governments have placed more importance on its use as a 'safety net' for the vulnerable households. It is likely that 'social housing' will continue to stir emotions and debate as the future unfolds.

**REFERENCES:**

**Texts:**

'History of Chesterfield Volume II, Part 2, Restoration and Georgian Chesterfield':

J M Bestall and D V Fowkes (1984)

'History of Chesterfield Volume IV, Development of the Modern Town, 1851 – 1939':

T F Wright (1992)

'Modern Chesterfield: Its History, Legends and Progress':

John Pendleton and William Jacques (1903)

'History of Chesterfield and Descriptive Accounts of Chatsworth, Hardwick and Bolsover':

T Ford (1839)

'Modern England: From the 18<sup>th</sup> C to the Present': R K Webb (1969)

'Encyclopedia of Arts & Craft: The International Arts Movement, 1850 – 1920': (1968)

**Internet based references/articles:**

[Workhouses.org.uk/chesterfield](http://Workhouses.org.uk/chesterfield)

What is Social Housing: Shelter

A History of Social Housing: Brian Wheeler Political Reporter BBC News (April 2015)

A History of Social Housing: University of the West of England, Bristol (2008)

Council Houses: the rise, the collapse and the fall: Holly Bentley (2008)

Wikipedia:

Richard Barry Parker; Raymond Unwin. The New Town Movement