

Housing and re-housing

A national housing crisis followed the end of war in 1918. Pressure on accommodation was nothing new in the centre of Sunderland, with its subdivided properties. Some were rooming houses for young or rootless people, others split between several, often the families of manual workers who were settled but could not afford a complete house. In the 1890s many shared houses were in Monkwearmouth or the port area, or east of Mowbray park in Bishopwearmouth. After 1945, rooming houses concentrated in the town centre and near Roker park, while Hendon and areas of Roker closest to riverside industry had high proportions of divided houses.ⁱ

So acute was the housing shortage that the Usworth aerodrome huts, abandoned at the war's end, were seized by 38 homeless families in 1921 and renamed 'Liberty villas'. For the poorest, there was little choice but to take any available space. Sunderland was bottom-heavy in terms of social class, had high levels of poverty and its typical house was a modest cottage with two bedrooms, when large families were the norm. The Sunderland cottage did not lend itself to being sub-divided, but nor was it really large enough for the average family. Unsurprisingly, the town registered high in any index of overcrowding. A high proportion lived at more than two to a room in 1891. Over 20% of the population in 1936 were in overcrowded conditions – the national average was 3.8% – placing Sunderland top among county boroughs. In 1961, Sunderland still had the highest density per room, 0.83, of any English or Welsh town.ⁱⁱ

By the 1960s, of course, there had been a vast programme of public building, perhaps 7,000 new houses by 1939, and almost 20,000 during the 20 years from 1945, making Sunderland the third highest house-builder among 157 towns. Housing stock, though, was still considered poor. In 1936, the rate of overcrowding was actually higher in the new council estates than in the private sector, for new public housing had only three or four rooms. In the case of Marley Pots, the council was pushed by the Ministry of Health into reducing most homes to just three rooms, though standing fast against the ministry's attempt to remove mangle sheds from the scheme.

Despite higher rents, sparse amenities, and cramped households, life on the fringe of town in a new house was generally preferred to shared accommodation in the slums. The socialist writer Vera Brittan noted after a visit to Monkwearmouth in 1935 the 'terrible slums, and crowded rooms with indescribably filthy bedding', worse than anything she had seen, even in Glasgow. Of one batch of 179 tenants relocated in 1934, 103 needed their bedding and furniture disinfested before the medical officer would allow them to occupy houses on a new estate. By then, 1,455 properties were included in programmed slum clearance, some in the east end described as 'structural slums', never capable of being attractive or healthy. Even after the war, 43% of households either had no piped water or shared a supply, and more than half did not have a bath. Clearance resumed in the 1950s. After 1960 there were still properties without electricity or laundry facilities, and sharing access and facilities. The demolition programme of 1960-5 targetted 1,100 homes around Dock Street, Monkwearmouth, 600 near Hendon Parade, and 400 in Bramwell Street, Hendon.ⁱⁱⁱ

Yet there had been decided and energetic improvements, an upturn in which local councils and the North Eastern Housing Association had been instrumental. NEHA, set up by central government in 1936, cushioned councils in the most impoverished

areas from the expense of house-building. In its first two years it started or completed more than 2,000 homes in Sunderland. Most notable were the Garths, virtually the only case of a council estate in the central districts, a direct replacement for the east end burgage plot slums. These blocks were typical of their era, with long and heavy access balconies. The council built 4,800 dwellings 1919-45, of which 5% were tenements (small blocks of flats), and not popular. By 1966, of 20,800 post-war dwellings, 4,400 were tenements.^{iv}

The councils were very active builders between the wars, the small rural district outside the borough boundaries sponsoring more than 1,100 council houses (48.9 per thousand population) compared with the county borough's 5,500 (33.2 per thousand). There was far more private building in the borough than in the outer rural areas, and private builders, with 5,600 new houses in the same period, in fact outperformed the borough council.

Outer areas, particularly near coal mines, the likes of Tunstall, Ryhope, Hylton and Ford, were colonised with council estates. Sunderland Rural District Council made a vigorous start, soon after the end of war. They resisted profiteering in 1919, when the church authorities tried to sell housing land at double its value. They fought price-fixing by federations of builders in 1920. While rents in the borough were relatively high, the rural district responded to need during the era of the general strike by carrying huge rent arrears, and reducing rents by a quarter in 1928.^v

The main interwar schemes proceeded about two miles from the town centre, where land could be cheapest. The centrifugal pattern was re-established, a girdle of new building almost encircling the older town, initially along the Durham, Hylton and Chester roads. The borough's first big housing scheme was at Plains Farm in the 1920s. Then came Humbleton, Leechmere in Monkwearmouth, and from 1929 an estate centred on the demolished Ford Hall. Marley Pots, on the fringes of Southwick village, started in 1931, had 154, mainly three-roomed, houses. Much of the private building concentrated in Fulwell during the 1930s, St Michael's before and after the Second World War, and Seaburn Dene after 1945.^{vi}

The 1945 housing emergency was met with prefabs, the first of which were built that year in Hendon. More permanent council housing was located in outer areas, some only newly part of the borough, so that by 1966 development had spread as far out as the expanded boundary, to the present A19 western bypass. During this era were built Pennywell, Grindon, Springwell Farm, Thorney Close, Farrington, Carley Hill, Witherwack, Hylton Castle, Hylton Red House and Town End Farm estates. Town End alone, completed in the mid-1960s around the site of Hylton's lost medieval village, had 2,342 houses and flats, for 8,000 people. For all their modernity, the houses had old-fashioned features such as cold storage larders, soon made obsolete by refrigerators. A workmen's club, built in 1962, gave focus to the community, as did a junior school and two pubs. The Hylton Castle estate received its first tenants in 1953, continuing to expand for more than a decade. As well as club and pubs, facilities eventually included a police station with officers' houses, library, health centre, and a row of shops central to the estate.^{vii}

The 1960s brought new housing models. Doxford Park, far from town between Silksworth and the present A19 bypass, was the last major development, a small shopping mall accompanying the mix of council and private properties with troublesome flat roofs. In contrast, at the heart of the port came new building and refurbishment, including spectacular tall blocks transforming the skyline. High-rise flats were built in the east end, and near St Peter's in Monkwearmouth, as well as in the town's shopping area, where three 19-storey blocks overlooked the new pedestrianized zone and multi-storey car park of 1969. Gilley Law estate (1964-7) was a mixed development including high-rise flats and maisonettes near Silksworth, with a heating system designed to run on locally mined coal. And with the boundary changes in 1974, the vast estate of Washington New Town, owned by a development corporation until it passed to the council in 1980, became part of Sunderland borough.^{viii}

ⁱ Robson, *Urban Analysis*, 121-3;

ⁱⁱ Brett, 24; Robson, *Urban Analysis*, 86-7; Sinclair, 38; R. Ryder, 'Council house building in Co. Durham, 1900-39: the local implementation of national policy', in M.J. Daunton (ed.), *Councillors and tenants: local authority housing in English cities, 1919-39* (1984), 26, 43, 79; Dennis, 138

ⁱⁱⁱ Robson, *Urban Analysis*, 86-7; Ryder, 'Council house building', 48, 75, 79, 50; Dennis, 150-2, 166-7, 172-80; Adie, *Corsets to Camouflage*, 154; Sinclair, 38-9; RTP, 178-9; Brett, 108-9

^{iv} R. Ryder, 'Council house building', 52-3; Pevsner, 454; Corfe, 77; Robson, *Urban Analysis*, 98; Sinclair, 23; Dennis, 215

^v R. Ryder, 'Council house building', 48, 60, 62, 81, 83, 86;

^{vi} R. Ryder, 'Council house building', 70; Robson, *Urban Analysis*, 96-7; Corfe, 77-8; Brett, 108

^{vii} Sinclair, 39-41, 75-7; Robson, *Urban Analysis*, 96-8; Corfe, 85-6; Brett, *Hylton*, 34-40, 16-21

^{viii} Sinclair, 74-7, 80-1, 71, 136; Corfe, 85-6; Robson, *Urban Analysis*, 97-8; RTP, 199-200, 204-5