



Flying into Trouble

As some of you may have seen in the news recently, a plane from Bicester Airfield crashed in Heyford Park on Saturday 2nd April. It was a light aircraft and crashed into a block of flats near Camp Road, not all that far from where I live. It immediately brings to mind a similar incident in 1954 when a small aircraft crashed into one of the houses in Priory Close, Bicester. The block of flats was unoccupied at the time and the pilot managed to escape the aircraft before the crash and parachute down, suffering several injuries but surviving, whereas his 1954 counterpart wasn't quite so lucky.

The 1954 incident involved an RAF Chipmunk training plane, which had been practicing some aerobatics over the town when the pilot suddenly lost control and it plunged to earth. Two men were on board, the captain, Flying Officer Cooper, died in the crash, while the second pilot, Pilot Officer William Price, was rescued from the burning wreckage by local residents.

Back then Priory Close, just off Priory Road, consisted of six police houses. The wings of the aircraft were broken off as it skidded between two of the houses and across the road, where it smashed

into the family home of Police Sergeant Fred Ferris and burst into flames.

The collective efforts of the policemen, their wives and some nearby workmen to rescue Pilot Officer Price from the burning wreckage led to Air Commodore MacDonald writing to Chief Constable James Bailey on behalf of the RAF, stating: "When members of the Oxfordshire Constabulary reached the crash, the aircraft was burning and there was a risk of explosion from the petrol tanks. Nevertheless, they and members of their families fought the fire with buckets of water and hoses and succeeded in extricating the second pilot without thought for their own safety. Pilot Officer Price might have been burned to death had it not been for their brave and timely action."

Members of 47 Squadron, then based at RAF Abingdon, later presented a plaque to Sergeant Ferris as a token of their esteem.

It goes to show how much worse the recent incident could have been, especially considering that the building's first residents were due to move in only about a week after the crash happened.

- Matthew Hathaway



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Roll of Honour

The following are the local men, and those buried locally, who died in the Second World War, 80 years ago.

Pilot Officer John Fraser Anderson, of Ontario, Canada.

Died: 3rd April 1942 Aged: 19 Served in: Royal Canadian Air Force
(Buried in Middleton Stoney)

Flight Sergeant Richard St.Julien Gregory, of British Columbia, Canada.

Died: 3rd April 1942 Aged: 24 Served in: Royal Canadian Air Force
(Buried in Middleton Stoney)

Pilot Officer Jack Edward Piggott, of Saskatchewan, Canada.

Died: 3rd April 1942 Aged: 21 Served in: Royal Canadian Air Force
(Buried in Middleton Stoney)

Sergeant Walter Anthony Skinner, of West Malling, Kent.

Died: 3rd April 1942 Aged: 21 Served in: Royal Air Force
(Buried in Middleton Stoney)

Driver Leonard Charles Smoker, of Bicester.

Died: 6th April 1942 Aged: 24 Served in: Royal Army Service Corps

Flight Sergeant William Herbert Phillips, of Toronto, Canada.

Died: 17th April 1942 Aged: 23 Served in: Royal Canadian Air Force
(Buried in Middleton Stoney)

Lieutenant Francis Ruck-Keene, of Bletchington.

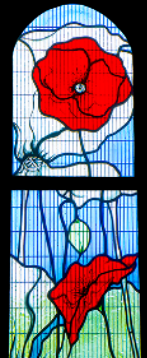
Died: 18th April 1942 Aged: 23 Served in: Royal Navy - HMS Upholder

Flight Lieutenant John Elcock Morgan, of Canada.

Died: 20th April 1942 Served in: Royal Canadian Air Force
(Buried in Middleton Stoney)

Flight Sergeant Donald Jack Taynen, of Ontario, Canada.

Died: 20th April 1942 Aged: 24 Served in: Royal Canadian Air Force
(Buried in Middleton Stoney)



Bicester's Boer War (Part 2)

Continuing the reminiscences of Lewis Turney.

The Bicester Herald of 6th April 1900 confirmed Lewis Turney's promotion to Sergeant and his arrival in South Africa. The short, three-line paragraph follows on from a description of a letter received by Mrs T. Parker of Scarrott's Yard in Sheep Street from her son, Private W. Baughan, of E Company, of the Oxfordshire Light Infantry. In this he tells of the lack of provisions due to the Boers intercepting a supply convoy and giving details of an action that he had been in, stating; "I can picture you looking in the papers for me to see if I was wounded or killed; but it was not to be; yet I was never in such a warm place in all my life. The bullets were coming all around us; it was like waiting for death." The

intensity of the fighting is commented upon by another Bicester man, Private Herbert Frederick Reeves, of the Launton Road, of the 1st Welsh Regiment. The Bicester Herald of 13th April reports that he was in hospital with a sprained foot, which he sustained in crossing the river at the battle at Paardeberg Drift on Sunday 18th February. He describes this as the worst engagement he had been in. He added that the 1st Welsh was the first regiment in the field and had it "pretty warm" before any other regiments came up.

In a letter home published in the same edition of the Herald, another Bicester man, Arthur East of Banbury Road, of the No. 12, Field Hospital, Natal Field Force, sought to reassure his parents following a prolonged

lack of communication. It transpired that he had been one of the 10,000 “penned in like rats in a hole” at the siege of Ladysmith between 2nd November and 1st March. He described the deteriorating conditions: “We lived very well for the first month; then the next month we only got half rations; but the next two months we lived chiefly on Indian meal and horseflesh.” Ann Spokes Symonds, in “Oxfordshire People and the Forgotten War”, page 62, also makes mention of those besieged in Ladysmith being reduced to eating horseflesh. Arthur East goes on to report, in a letter published in The Bicester Herald of 18th May, that the day after lifting the siege, General Redvers Henry Buller commanding the relieving force “..went through the camp, and you should have seen him stare when he saw the men. He expected to see strong healthy men, but he met living skeletons instead; and when he saw our graveyard he was dumbfounded. There lay 685 poor fellows all dead from enteric fever. We used to think it nothing strange to go on duty at night and have 15 or 16 die before we came off duty in the morning...But this number who died was nothing to the number who died round Ladysmith fighting to defend it.” The relief of Ladysmith was later remembered by the Royal Navy’s Field Gun Competition, which was part of the now discontinued annual Royal Tournament.

As in the Crimea half a century before, disease was as much a killer as the enemy. He continues his account: “Many a thousand poor fellows have gone to their graves. The heat is something terrible, especially at Christmas time. We buried over 600 in our camp that died from enteric fever. It was horrible! Ten or twelve funerals every day. Nearly every one of our fellows have been down with it; but, thank God, I have escaped the disease so far.” Enteric fever, or typhoid, was endemic in South Africa at the time. Jackson’s Oxford Journal called it: “That terrible scourge which has wrought more havoc among our brave warriors at the front than even the Boer bullets.” Inoculation was of limited effectiveness. It had been given to troops heading for South Africa but by January 1900 there was criticism of the serum. Some recipients were so badly affected by it that soldiers referred to it as the “painful and loathsome” vaccination. The worst cases were so ill that by the time they reached the Cape they had to be shipped back home. By June 1900 the consensus was that it was too risky, and the programme was discontinued. Lewis Turney’s military record makes no mention of him receiving the vaccination. His continued service in South Africa would indicate that if he did, any reaction he might have had was not sufficiently severe to require an immediate return journey home.

We left Lewis Turney at the railway station at Elandslaagte where, while on commissariat guard, he appears to have taken part in repulsing an attack by

about a score Boers. There then follows a detailed, day by day, listing of the places he and his unit passed through on his way to Dundee, which he reached at 3.30 p.m. on 12th May, which he describes as a “rather pretty & nice part of [the] country having 3 coal collieries but blown up & windows smashed by Boers.” After a days’ rest he was on the move again arriving at Ingogo at 1.30 p.m. on 19th May with its monument to the 75 officers and men of the British Army who fell there on the 8th February 1881 during the First Boer War; Boer losses were just 8. He makes mention of a message received from Queen Victoria: “Delighted at your success and your entry into Dundee. Trust all wounded doing well. V.R.I.” The Diary continues: “Natal Army Orders (Special) Newcastle 20/5/00. General Commanding. Congratulations [to] all officers, N.C.O.s and men of the force upon the result of their 10 days hard work.”

“The 3rd Mounted Brigade and the 2nd & 6th Division have driven over Laing’s Nek from carefully prepared position on the Biggarsberg including that which the enemy had christened (the Gibraltar of South Africa) a force of over 7,000 men and are only checked at Laing’s Nek itself by a fresh commando sent from the Transvaal forces in the Free State. This result which reflects the greatest credit on all the troops has been obtained by continuous hard work, long marches and steep [?]tain [?]ing far more trying and [?] than the most severe fighting.”

“Signed, H. S. G. Miles (Col).”

Sadly, during this period, we learn of a Bicester related death in South Africa – Thomas Grantham, the son of Mr and Mrs Thomas Grantham of the New Buildings in Bicester, formerly of the 4th Dragoon Guards and subsequently of the Army Medical staff and serving as a corporal on the hospital ship Maine. The Bicester Herald of 20th April states that: “He was well-known in Bicester as a finely-built soldier, being over six feet in height. For a short time, he drilled with the now defunct Harriers Club, by the members of which he was greatly admired for his smartness.” Aged under 40, he left a widow and young child. The RFA Maine (pictured), a convalescent ship, had been donated by the Atlantic



Transport Line with funds raised by American Ladies Hospital Ship Society, led by Jennie, Lady Randolph Churchill, the American mother of Winston Churchill. The Maine sailed for South Africa on 23rd December 1899, with Jennie Churchill aboard, and arrived at Durban on 23rd January 1900.

The Bicester Herald of Friday, 27th April, informed its readers that there were nearly 40 Bicester men at the front, including J. Nelson of Chapel Street, with the Medical Corps, who, it is reported, had arrived at the Royal Albert Docks en route to the Cape. The Herald of 4th May identifies two further men from Bicester who were serving in South Africa, and who had written home: J. Goteslow, serving with the Oxfordshire Light Infantry and George Shillingford, of the New Buildings, serving with the 2nd Coldstream Guards.

The Herald of 11th May had a letter from Trooper John King of Waterloo Farm describing an action in which he had been involved: "... and every man available was ordered to turn out mounted. We started off at half-past ten and went out at full speed for about ten or eleven miles and found the enemy on the ridge called Black Kop. Fighting began as soon as we got there, and kept on till sunset, when the enemy surrendered. We took 67 prisoners, killed eight, severely wounded 4, and several slightly. On our side were Capt Boyle, Lieut Williams, Sherwood, and Sergt Campbell killed; and Frank Gibbard, Throckmorton, and Strutt wounded. The wounded go on as well as can be expected. Two or three of the other regiments also lost some, but I do not know exactly how many."

At this point Lewis Turney's Journal gives a detailed description of the of the instructions for the treatment of Boer prisoners of war.

"Issued with Field Army Orders Natal 24th May 1900. Rules to be observed by all troops serving in the Transvaal and Orange Free State dated Kroonstad 18th May 1900."

Far too long and detailed to be quoted in full in the current format, the section concludes: "We are fighting for the health and safety of our comrades in defence of our flag against an enemy who has forced war upon us for the worst and lowest [?] by treachery, conspiracy and deceit let us bear ourselves as our cause deserves."

Support for the war was not universal. The Bicester Herald of 25th May reported that: "At a meeting of the "Stop the War" Committee, Mr W. T. Steed said the Transvaal peace delegation were prepared to accept "any terms – enfranchisement, disarmament, anything – only leave our independence."

But the big news carried in The Herald that Friday came in the form of a telegram from Lord Roberts that arrived at the War Office, sent at 3.00 pm on 20th May, from Kroonstad. It stated that although: "No official intimation has yet been received, but Reuter states that

the relief of Mafeking has been effected." The siege had lasted 217 days, from 13th October 1899 to 17th May 1900 and turned its commander, one Colonel Robert Stephenson Smyth Baden-Powell, 1st Baron Baden-Powell, OM GCMG GCVO KCB KStJ DL, into a national hero. Queen Victoria approved his promotion from Colonel to Major-General, and he would later go on to become Lieutenant-General in 1907.

"It was the same at Bicester as at most other places – the people all but went mad last Saturday on hearing the news of the relief of Mafeking." So reported the Advertiser on 25th May. News had arrived by the early morning trains and was known across town by eight o'clock. Wary of the correctness of the news at first, flags were at first tentatively displayed, but once the news had been confirmed people began to display their flags in earnest and "the general impression of brightness being increased by a half-hour's peal on the bells of the parish church." "Throughout the day nothing was talked of but the relief of Baden-Powell and his gallant men, and the strained feeling everywhere apparent during the preceding week gave way to a cheerfulness not equalled by any other piece of good news since the commencement of the war." At 8.30 in the evening, a procession led by the fire engine "Princess May", with several firemen in uniform, at its head, began from the King's Arms Hotel. They were followed by the local company of the Church Lads' Brigade, and a string of cyclists and others, each carrying a lighted torch. Some of the bicycles were decorated with Chinese lanterns, while others bore placards containing expressions such as "Good Old Mafeking" and "Cheers for Roberts", a reference to Frederick Roberts who, from 23rd December 1899, had been in overall command of the British forces in South Africa, subordinating the previous commander, General Redvers Buller. The procession included a mock coffin of the President of the South African Republic, Paul Kruger. The Advertiser then goes on to give a lengthy and detailed account of the celebrations which went on late into the night and appear to have included the firing of anvils, the Advertiser likening the noise to the sounds of a bombardment throughout the day. Bicester's streets emptied as the focus of the celebrations shifted to the Market Square where the impromptu 'hearse' for the coffin of Paul Kruger became an ad hoc stage for speeches and songs with Mr T. Grimsley of Sheep Street acting as chairman. The Square is reported to have been filled to its utmost capacity, not only with Bicester's inhabitants, but also with people from the surrounding villages.

However...

[To be continued.]

- Mark Lewandowski

Talks Update

Unless the situation changes again, these talks will all be held at the Clifton Centre, with appropriate safety measures in place. Recorded versions will then be available to view on our website afterwards.

The recording of our March talk will be available on the website in the next few days, until 30th April.

Monday 25th April

(One week later than usual) Matthew Hathaway takes us through the changing face of Bicester's streets as described in his recent book, **Bicester Reflections**.

Monday 16th May

Eberhard Sauer returns to give his long-awaited update on the findings of extensive works carried out at **Alchester**.

Monday 20th June

Simon Townley gives an insight into various broad themes in the VCH's approach to towns in his talk on **Towns in the Victoria County History**.

Bygone Bicester (Taken from the Bicester Advertiser)

14th April 1882

METHODIST FREE CHURCH BAZAAR & ENTERTAINMENT

On Monday last a bazaar for the sale of all kinds of useful and fancy articles was held in the large schoolroom of the Congregational Church (lent for the occasion by the committee), for the purpose of raising funds for the removal of a debt resting upon their place of worship in Sheep Street.

During the early part of the morning willing hands had been engaged in erecting stalls and arranging the various articles for disposal, which was completed in a neat manner. At the entrance to the room was erected a refreshment stall, upon which was placed all kinds of tasty treats, and "the cup that cheers" also had a prominent position. Around the room were hung pictures which had been presented by friends interested in the affair, among which we noticed "Livingstone", "The Venerable Bede", "The Emperor Claudius", and several others, those being all for sale.

The doors were thrown open to the public at two o'clock, but during the early part of the afternoon business was very slack. It is a well-known fact that prize-fighting has made strides in England of late years, one being held in a chapel in London only a week or two since, and the visitor was rather taken aback when the small talk went round the room that a "fight" was to be held at five o'clock, but on this occasion it was simply a "tea-fight", to take place in the infant schoolroom. A large number entered for this competition, indeed space could not be found to accommodate them, thus necessitating a relay.

Again entering the sale room, arrangements are being made for the evening's entertainment, which consisted of dialogues, stump speeches, singing, &c. The first "speech" was by Mr T. Plant, on "Temperance", followed by dialogue, by Messrs F. Mansfield and T.

Plant, entitled "The Careless Servant", a sketch from "Handy Andy", both very laughable pieces, which caused much amusement.

Trade was far more brisker in the evening, and the articles went off at a rapid pace. Amongst the ladies who had charge of stalls were Mrs Scott, Mrs Ryder, Mrs Roberts, Miss Ryder, and Miss Ellen Ryder, who were most assiduous in their endeavours to procure customers. For the purpose of disposing of some of the goods several "draws" took place, the lucky winners thereby obtaining their prizes at a cheap rate.

The refreshment stand was gracefully presided over by the Misses Chisholm and Fysh, who were most eager up to closing time to prevail on the visitors to partake of refreshments.

At about 7:30 it was announced that a few of the junior members would give one of Walker's humorous dialogues, entitled "Ignorance at the Bar". This represented a court of justice, and the prisoner (E. Grimsley) is charged with the offence of "refusing to receive the instructions which had been offered him, and making no progress in educating himself during the past twelve months". The prisoner was found guilty, but strongly recommended to mercy; and was labelled "Ignoramus: the boy who won't learn". The various characters were well represented. The following was the cast:

Mr F. Mansfield - Baron Legality (Judge)
Mr T. Plant - Mr Gripp (Lawyer)
Mr F. George - Mr Puzzle (Lawyer)
Mr E. Grimsley - John Dunce (Prisoner)
Mr C. George - Policeman
Mr E. Ryder - Mathews Peterkins (Witness)
Mr E. Birt - Augustus Sept. Snaffles (Witness)
Mr F. Ryder - Archibald Simmons (Witness)
Mr Mumford - John Dunce, sen. (Witness)

The next item on the programme was a "stump oration" by T. Plant, entitled "Electric Light", this was a very amusing piece.

During the evening the proceedings were enlivened by several members of the choir giving selections of music, and we may add the affair was a perfect success. Great credit is due to those who have laboured so hard to bring the entertainment to a happy termination.

We understand a fancy fair will be held during the summer.

20th April 1917

BICESTER NURSING HOME ANNUAL MEETING

The annual meeting of the subscribers to the Bicester Nursing Home was held on Tuesday afternoon at the Home in King's End, when Captain Fane presided and there were also present Mrs Tubb (secretary), Mr Tubb (treasurer), Mrs Keith-Falconer, Mrs Fane, Mrs Davey, Mrs French, Mrs Paragreen, Miss Goodale, Rev T. Smith, Mr W. Davey, Mr J.T. Mountain, etc.

The Chairman read the report of the Committee on the work carried on by the institution during the past year as follows:

In the town - The nurses have paid 3,477 visit. The number of free cases being 69; paying cases, 47; maternity, 41; of these 24 were doctors' cases and 17 were midwifery. They have assisted in five operations and upon more than one occasion given assistance at the VAD Hospital.

In the Home - Sixteen patients have been received (2 males, 13 females and 1 child). The free bed has been occupied upon three occasions.

School nursing - In June the school nursing was discontinued, owing to the work being taken over by the health visitor appointed by the County Council. Up to that date, from January 1916, visits to the schools and homes of the children, to the number of 193, were paid.

Nurses - The committee wish to express their great appreciation of the services of their nurses. Their matron, Nurse Plater, has devoted twenty years of her life to the work. Nurse Gurney has now completed three years work in Bicester, is going to be married, and as her future husband is on active service has offered to continue her work in Bicester for the present. The Committee feel sure her patients will join with them in wishing her every happiness.

Welcome additions to the funds have been received from the following sources: offertories from the Parish Church, the Congregational Church, and the Wesleyan Church. The latter having also given the proceeds from an organ recital, and a donation from the Friendly Societies sports.

Thanks are again due to the medical men in the town for their kindness and ever ready assistance. The Committee offer their good wishes and hopes for his

safe return to Dr Montgomery who has joined the RAMC and is expecting shortly to be ordered abroad. Grateful acknowledgement is again due to Mr Bowden for so kindly attending to the chimneys free of charge.

The Committee wish to thank all the subscribers to the fund and the kind friends who have sent so many useful gifts, amongst which have been a bath chair, Mr Flemons (the late); old linen, Mrs Ashmore, Mrs E. Coggins, Mrs E.F. Tanner, Mrs Watts, Mrs Finch, Mrs Wright, Mrs May (Hethe), Miss Quartermaine and Anonymous; fruit, Mrs Withington, Mrs Truman, Mr Tubb; vegetables, Mr Sansome (Stratton Audley); potatoes, Mrs Heape, Mr Chinnery, Mrs Scrivener; firewood, Mrs Ashmore, Mr Tubb, Mr Holland, Mr Jones (gardener); mince pies, Mrs Davey and Mrs Watts; books, Mrs Fane; face washers, Mrs Scrivener; cakes, Mrs Tubb and Mrs Withington; puddings, Mrs Truman; honey, Mr Little (Chesterton); soap and night lights, Mrs Ashmore; eggs and game, Mr Tubb; also a grant from the Oxfordshire Needlework Guild, consisting of house linen and garments.

In conclusion the Committee appeal earnestly for generous support by subscriptions, donations and gifts to enable them to carry on their work amongst the sick.

Mr Mountain moved the adoption of the report, which was seconded by Mr Davey and carried.

18th April 1941

FUNERAL OF ENEMY AIRMEN

The four airmen comprising the crew of a German bomber, which was shot down near here on the evening of Thursday last week, were buried at the little church of St Lawrence, at Caversfield, on Easter Monday afternoon. Full military honours were accorded, 24 RAF sergeants acting as bearers, with a similar number as bearer party, and two officers in charge.

The four coffins, covered with the Nazi flag, and placed in line, filled the chancel and half of the nave. The RAF Chaplain (Rev M.T. Haggerty) conducted the funeral service, which included the 23rd Psalm, a lesson, and a prayer for "Those who mourn will mourn for these, Thy sons".

The coffins were then laid side by side in an open grave, three volleys being fired by the firing party, who also presented arms. Afterwards a number of people were allowed to file past the grave.

7th April 1989

CALL FOR TOWN HERITAGE CENTRE

A heritage centre should be set up in Bicester because the town's library is inadequate, town councillors have been told. The chairman of Bicester Local History Society, Mrs Jill Wishart, told members of the council's parks, cemetery and amenities committee of the need for a centre rather than a museum. She

suggested it could be at the council's offices at the Garth.

Mrs Wishart said: "A museum in the strict sense of the word is not the best alternative for Bicester. However, the present library facilities are inadequate to provide a simple study centre. The heritage or study centre would be a local facility where people could get quick access to documents relating to Bicester. Bicester library is too small to provide that facility."

Mrs Wishart said that the proposed centre would include an exhibition area equipped with stands and tables with the ability to allow temporary exhibitions or to allow local organisations to display. The centre would also store a reference area containing published material relating to Bicester. The Society also suggests a committee room should be available to other societies

for slide shows and lectures.

Local schools would like to have a local historical centre to visit rather than have to travel to the nearest museums at Banbury or Oxford, the Society says. It doesn't want to see a museum on the scale of those at Banbury or Woodstock, and the accent would be on historical records as much as artefacts.

But some members of the committee gave a cool reception to the idea of the centre. Councillor Mr Charlie Breeze told Mrs Wishart: "You seem to be talking about an arts centre."

The Mayor of Bicester, Councillor Mr Ray Bainton, wondered whether the County Council could provide an extension to the library which could accommodate the centre, but Mrs Wishart said there were no plans to improve the library's facilities.

Homes Fit for Heroes Talk

We welcomed Sheila Allcock to the first face-to-face talk of 2022. Her talk had been put together in 2019 to commemorate the centenary of the first council houses.

The Housing of the Working Classes Act 1890 gave local authorities powers to build council houses, although this were not compulsory. The need for additional housing was often the consequence of slum clearance, but houses were constructed in inadequate numbers to meet the need and rents could be high, as no government subsidies were available at this time.

The end of the First World War created a huge demand for working-class housing in towns throughout the UK. The Tudor Walters Committee, headed by Sir John Tudor Walters, an architect turned Liberal MP, was tasked with establishing how many houses were needed; where they should be located; what they should look like; who should build them and how they should be financed. He recommended subsidised building of high-quality properties, which were sometimes larger than privately-built dwellings, at no more than twelve per acre.

In 1919, Parliament passed the ambitious Housing, Town Planning etc Act which promised government subsidies to help finance the construction of 500,000 houses within three years, built to Tudor Walters' standards. However, the economic downturn of the 1920s meant that only 213,000 houses were built, as government funding was cut.

The 1919 Act - often known as the 'Addison Act' after its author, Dr Christopher Addison, the Minister of Health - was nevertheless a highly significant step forward in housing provision. It made housing a national responsibility, and local authorities were given the task of developing new housing and rented



accommodation where it was needed by working people.

In 1920, the London County Council (LCC) introduced housing bonds at a guaranteed return of 6%. A total of £4m was raised to build new public housing.

1923 saw the withdrawal of subsidies and, additionally, permission was granted to local authorities to sell off their housing stock and build houses for sale. This was swiftly reversed in the following year, by the incoming Labour government.

The 1920s were a major period for council house building; the Becontree estate (pictured above) in the Essex parishes of Dagenham, Barking and Ilford was started in this period and by 1935 had grown to 27,000 homes, making it the largest council estate in Europe. Houses were supplied with gas, electricity, bathrooms and front & back gardens. Tenants were expected to adhere to strict rules concerning pets, house & garden maintenance, housework and their children's behaviour.

The outbreak of the Second World War effectively put a stop to house building. As the war drew to a close, Britain faced its worst housing shortage of the twentieth century. Part of the initial response to this problem was a programme of short-term repairs to existing properties

and the rapid construction of ‘prefabs’ – factory built single-storey temporary bungalows. They were expected to last for only 10 years, but they proved very popular with some residents particularly as, unlike some traditional houses, they had fully fitted kitchens and bathrooms. To further meet the shortage and bring the cost of housing down, a new form of construction was pioneered, commonly called ‘PRC’ (Pre-cast Reinforced Concrete). They required less skilled workers to construct. The city of Leeds led the way with the highest number of PRCs built.

To add a local note, PRC-constructed houses developed problems in the early 1980s and part of the solution was the addition of a brick skin, which radically changed their appearance. One of the few remaining houses where the original construction is still visible is situated in George Street.

In the decade after 1945, 1.5 million homes had been completed and some of the demand for housing had been alleviated. The percentage of the people renting from local authorities had risen to over a quarter of the population, from 10% in 1938 to 26% in 1961.

Looking at Oxford, in July 1920 Headington Rural District Council completed the first of twenty-four council houses in the London Road area, described by John Betjeman as, “A neat council house scheme.”

There followed the Gipsy Lane estate in the late 1920s and by 1939, 2000 houses had been built, including those at Rose Hill.



The Blackbird Leys estate was built in the 1950s & 1960s in response to slum clearance in the Oxpens area of the city. It covered 260 acres previously occupied by a sewage farm and housed many workers from Morris Motors. The first residents moved in in 1958.

The Parker Morris Committee drew up an influential report in 1961 that specified standards of building for council houses, entitled Homes for Today and Tomorrow. Its report concluded that the quality of social housing needed to be improved to match the rise in living standards, with the result that the standards were often higher than those adopted by private builders.

People’s attitudes towards council houses varies. Some people feel that to have a stable home is a right for families, whilst others consider the provision of social housing to be welfare. The system is seen by some to favour those who have already secured a tenancy, even when they are no longer in dire need. Additionally, security of tenure and subsidised rents mean that there is little incentive for tenants to downsize from family accommodation when children leave home, leaving those in greater need on the waiting list without the prospect of obtaining a property. The Cameron government took steps to address this situation with the under-occupancy penalty in the British Welfare Reform Act 2012, whereby tenants living in social housing with rooms deemed "spare" face a reduction in housing benefit.

The Cutteslowe Walls were built in 1934 to divide the City Council's Cutteslowe estate from private housing to the west which was developed by the Urban Housing Company, the developers fearing that their houses would not sell well because of the adjacent social housing. After escalating public protests and several unofficial attempts, the walls were eventually officially demolished in 1959 after the council compulsorily purchased the land on which they stood.

- Sally James

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