Homes for Heroes 100

Council Estate Memories

Edited by Melanie Kelly

Bristol Festival of Ideas

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Foreword/

I am often asked what it was that made the difference in my life; what helped me move beyond the adverse circumstances of my childhood to become Mayor of Bristol. I list a number of factors. Among them are my family, boxing, a couple of committed teachers, outward bound, my faith and homes that were safe and secure.

Those homes were council properties. The first was a two-bedroom ground-floor flat in Humberston Walk, Lawrence Weston. The second a two-bedroom house off Stapleton Road in Easton, the next street over from my nan and grandad.

I carried a sense of vulnerability as a child that extended to my mother and sister. The importance of having a front door we could close to the outside world, a base that was ours and bedrooms we could rest in – although we actually needed three bedrooms – should not be underestimated. We were renting but it was our space. It was my house! It was a key part of the platform for mine and my family's liberation.

In the hundredth anniversary of the Addison Act, the role of council housing is something to celebrate and learn from. It's this history and the importance of council housing to my own journey that's underpinned my commitment to getting houses built in general and building council houses in particular.

Delivering high-quality, secure homes in strong communities is one of the key policy tools we have for tackling poverty; improving physical and mental health, and educational outcomes; and building the resilience of our workforce and economy. And with the failure of the current housing framework to deliver the quantity of homes and the failure of the private rental sector to guarantee the quality and security of homes we need, it is essential we support the drive to unlock a new wave of council house building across the country. If we succeed, our cities and country will win.

Marvin Rees
Mayor of Bristol

Introduction/

Homes for Heroes 100 is a programme of coordinated community projects, special events and new publications marking the centenary of the Housing Act 1919 and the development of the first large-scale council estates in this country.

These specially commissioned essays have been written by a range of people who have lived in council housing, some of whom will be speaking at the Festival of the Future City (16-19 October 2019). In addition to Bristol, the locations described include Basingstoke, Cambridge, Cardiff, Fife, Gateshead, Saltcoats, Slough, Stevenage, a rural village in Cornwall, the outskirts of Birmingham and several parts of London. The authors' experiences range from the brutal to the idyllic, demonstrating the best and the worst of council housing provision. A number of the essays refer to the revelation that came with the transfer to secondary school, when children were first made aware that to be a council tenant might be considered a sign of failure. The authors have encountered class snobbery, racism, crime and violence as well as supportive neighbours and previously unimagined comforts like hot running water, and the sense of security that comes with knowing you hold the key to your own front door.

Some contributors have chosen to focus on personal stories, those that make them happy, proud, angry or regretful. Others have looked at the broader implications of council housing, its impact on those who live there and the challenges for those responsible for its delivery. Reading these essays, it is clear that council housing can be perceived as both a bleak prison from which you long to escape, and a blissful haven after years of struggle. Or somewhere in between.

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The Festival of the Future City 2019 will include a series of sessions on council housing past, present and future, among other themes. The festival will also showcase some of the work that has taken place during the Homes for Heroes 100 programme. Visit **www.futurecityfestival.co.uk** for details.

Paul Smith: Bristol/

For my parents, being allocated a council flat in the 1960s was a huge achievement. It symbolised security and independence. Being nine-months old at the time, I wasn't aware of its impact.

My mum and dad had both grown up in council housing; my grandfather had been involved in building it during the post-war boom. Growing up on a council estate was just the norm for me, as all the relatives we visited also lived in such areas. My dad's parents lived in Knowle West, built in the 1930s, and my mother's parents lived on another, smaller estate in the Cotswold town of Winchcombe. Until I went to secondary school, pretty much everyone I knew was a council tenant. It didn't occur to me that we were separate or stigmatised or anything other than typical.

It seemed that the council ran almost everything and determined everything: roads, open spaces, colour of front doors, schools and youth centres. There was a doctor's house across the road, which was just a larger council house, still owned by the council, and the priest for the church next door to our flat lived in a council flat in one of the tower blocks. The council even helpfully placed a post on the rectangle of grass outside our flats with a sign saying 'No ball games'. It made a great goalpost, as did the strategically placed trees at the two ends of the 'pitch'.

Two things happened when I was 11 that were of huge significance: we managed to exchange our flat with an elderly couple who had a house in the same street and I started at secondary school.

Living in a flat had restrictions. The first was we were always being told not to run around and disturb the elderly man who lived below us. The coal bunker was downstairs in the garden and the garden was shared. In a house, no-one was underneath us, the coal bunker was actually within the house (when we were converted to electric heaters, it became a little office), and the garden was all ours. It also meant my brother and I could have our own bedrooms. The garden was enormous and completely overgrown – excellent for dens – until over time we took control of it.

Going to secondary school introduced me to people who didn't live in council housing; they owned their own homes. It was here that the class divide started to become clear. Many kids from Whitchurch looked down on those of us from Hartcliffe and they didn't mix much with us Hartcliffe kids after school hours. On reflection, whenever I was with teenagers from Whitchurch it was in Whitchurch or in town, never in Hartcliffe.

The subtle and not-so-subtle stigma about living in council housing created a certain amount of siege mentality and Dunkirk spirit that developed into a pride in the area and a sense of identity. For some – not me – this developed into a gang culture that was played out in fights with the neighbouring estates of Knowle West and Withywood. Anyone from outside the area wouldn't be able to tell you where Hartcliffe ended and Withywood began, but we knew. These rival gangs would come together at Ashton Gate to fight similar gangs supporting other football teams. This sense of siege became greater in the summer of 1980, following the St Pauls' riot. Most days, a riot van was parked near the shopping centre. Clearly, Hartcliffe would be next.

The media would often describe Hartcliffe as an inner-city estate (it's five miles from the centre of the city) and even a 'no-go' area. But it never felt dangerous or unsafe to walk around, and the contrast between the media portrayal and the reality was huge. Being on the edge of the city meant that it was only a short walk into the countryside and the estate itself was very green with plenty of open space.

At 18, I left Bristol to go to university. In some ways this was an escape; in others it became an assertion of identity. Within a year, my circle of university friends was mainly comprised of similar working-class refugees who gravitated towards each other in what was a largely middle- and even upper-class environment. (There was an agricultural school at university

Paul Smith (right) at Hareclive Road, Hartcliffe, Bristol c1970 (author photo). Denham House, one of five blocks of flats on Bishop Road, Hartcliffe, 1964 (Bristol Archives 40826/HSG/57/1).

The main shopping area of Hartcliffe, still partly under construction, depicted in the *Bristol Housing Report 1964* (Bristol Reference Library B14100).

where the ownership of acres seemed the entry qualification rather than A levels.) We didn't quite fit in there, and when we went home we didn't quite fit there either. At university we felt looked down on; back in the estates we would be accused of having 'posh friends' and not wanting to mix with the 'likes of us'. As estate undergraduates ('estate' meant something different to the agricultural students), our identification with our home areas became stronger. When people asked where I was from, I would say Hartcliffe first, Bristol second.

Returning home after university, I was selected to stand for the city council representing a ward that included about half of Hartcliffe plus some of Whitchurch.

It was as a councillor that I came across the initials NFH – Normal For Hartcliffe. It was a code used by social workers and doctors to describe the conditions of children in the area. What would be unacceptable in other parts of the city was NFH. Poverty, poor health, abuse and neglect could all be explained away with three letters. It's not clear if it meant that these things were of no concern and that NFH was just a professional shrug of the shoulders, or whether it was a call to action. I suspect the former.

It's almost impossible to write about growing up in the area without a reference to the riot of 1992, although some people hate it being discussed. That year, local professionals and community activists had been working on the latest regeneration-programme funding-bid, this time called City Challenge. The estate had been visited on a lovely sunny day by government minister Michael Portillo and a gaggle of civil servants. Portillo had a tour of the estate and said 'it's quite nice here'. That was the death of the bid. The greenery, trees, all in the shadow of Dundry Hill, meant that the area could not compete with grimy, boarded-up, litter-strewn inner cities. By tragic coincidence, the day the official announcement was made, the police killed two youngsters from the estate in a botched recovery of a stolen police motorcycle. That night, some of the estate's usual suspects piled out of the pub and headed for the library at the top of the shopping precinct. Part of the library was a 'cop shop', a drop-in office used by the police. The crowd torched it and then started on the rest of the shops. The police showed up, there was a bit of a standoff, it started raining and everyone went home.

The report of the incident on the media the next day – along with the helpful maps – brought everyone looking for a fight with the police from an 80-mile radius to the area and a full-scale riot with petrol bombs, riot shields, police charges and helicopters. Unlike a terraced inner-city area, the semi-detached homes and large gardens of Hartcliffe meant that the area was permeable and much harder to contain rioters, so the damage and activity were spread across the estate. The next night, the police presence became huge and the riot was over.

What followed was a new focus on the area leading to the building of the Gatehouse Centre; a building incorporating business workshops, employment training, crèche, café and community spaces. The building of the shopping centre followed more than a decade later.

I also took some time to research the history of the area. I found the original plans in the city archives. Here I could see all the proposed facilities that were never built; the cinema, the cricket pavilion and the network of youth facilities. While Bristol and Somerset councils haggled over who would get the estate, the city council's boundary was extended to incorporate it, the ambition of post-war reconstruction diminished and, as the money became tighter, the quality of the homes also deteriorated, with brickwork replaced by concrete.

I moved out of Hartcliffe in the late 1990s. I was, and am, opposed to Right-to-Buy so I didn't make a killing from the cut-price deal available. Within a short time of moving out, the new tenants bought the house and built a wall with stone lions on the gateposts.

Today, I still feel that Hartcliffe shapes my identity and character. I still feel huge affiliation and loyalty to the area. I was angry earlier this year when once again a BBC presenter saw the area as fair game for misogyny and sneering middle-class disdain for working-class people in a 'humorous' song. (A parody of Blondie's 'Heart of Glass' about a promiscuous woman from Hartcliffe was performed on local radio in a mock-Bristolian accent.) The area has changed. The trees planted when I was a baby are now enormous and dominate the gateway into the part of the estate where I grew up. The new shopping centre has removed the burnt-out buildings but replaced landscaped rose gardens with an almost empty concrete car park. However, in essence, the area has changed very little. In some ways, nor have I: just older, greyer, slower and hopefully wiser.

Paul Smith is the Cabinet Member for Housing at Bristol City Council. He is the councillor for the Bristol Central ward. Previous roles include South West regional officer for the National Housing Federation.

Joan Smith: Acton, Stevenage and Basingstoke/

My first home was a Georgian mansion standing in 200 acres of grounds, with stables, an orangery and a boating lake.

It was also a council flat, albeit a very unusual one: we lived on the first floor, overlooking a tree-lined drive, and our front door was flanked by a monumental arch that led onto a south-facing terrace. It was a lovely place to live, a world away from the grimy northern streets my parents had grown up in, but the most significant feature from their point of view was the indoor bathroom. At night, they no longer had to find a torch and tiptoe outside to an outdoor privy, and they even had piped water – no more carrying pails up the back stairs from a standpipe in the yard. Their address didn't sound like social housing – the house was still known as 'the large mansion' – but that's what it was, and my parents were incredibly grateful to have it.

Gunnersbury Park had once belonged to the Rothschilds but the family was long gone by the 1950s, and the estate in Acton was owned jointly by two West London councils. While Dad was still working as a gardener in his home town in the north-east, he heard that jobs in the park came with a council flat, something he was prepared to move 300 miles to acquire. Twelve months before I was born, my parents moved into an airy, two-bedroom flat above the old Victorian kitchens, where the only reminder of the house's history was a door opening onto an internal staircase; in the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, the servants had used it to access the main section of the house when a member of the family rang a bell.

Dad had voted Labour in the 1945 general election and he was proud of the fact a working-class family was now enjoying the amenities, including the huge park, which were once the exclusive preserve of a wealthy family. He especially loved the walled garden where he worked in the old Victorian glasshouses, cultivating seedlings and learning more about his trade as a gardener. After work, determined to make up for the education he'd missed when he left school at 14, he had tea with me and my mother then rushed off to evening classes.

Both my parents came from South Shields, a windswept coastal town on the south side of the River Tyne. Like everyone else in their families, they had spent their entire lives in private-rented accommodation, often moving from one flat to another in the same street when the rent was increased or the landlord served an eviction notice. My mother's family lived at several different addresses close to Tyne Dock, a heavily industrialised part of South Shields from which my grandfather used to sail on steamships transporting coal to London or Hamburg. A couple of times a year, we made the long journey by public transport from Gunnersbury Park to South Shields and I stared wide-eyed at the wash-house in my grandmother's backyard, where she had taken in washing to support herself and four children after she was widowed. The toilet, with its old-fashioned cistern and long, dangling chain, was in an unlit wooden privy on the far side of the wash-house; a few years earlier, the night-soil man had made regular journeys along the cobbled lane behind Taylor Street, collecting human waste with his horse and cart. I dreaded having to use it in the dark and I was even more nervous about staying with my mother's elder sister, Auntie Doris, because her backyard contained a door, festooned with cobwebs, that led down into an Anderson shelter – an underground bomb shelter which was a relic of the Second World War. None of my relatives in the north-east had a garden and none of their landlords ever showed any interest in improving the properties they owned, not even in terms of providing basic amenities like indoor bathrooms.

Our council flat in West London was paradise by comparison. It was the first in a succession of council flats and houses that Dad was offered when he changed jobs, most of them in parks owned by the local authority.

Gunnersbury Park (author photo).

Joan Smith with her parents in their council flat at Gunnersbury Park, mid-1950s (author photo).

When we moved to Slough, 15 or so miles west of Gunnersbury Park, our new home was the back half of a cricket pavilion which stood on its own in the middle of playing fields. After a couple of years we moved again, to a mill town in West Yorkshire, where Dad was offered a detached house on another private estate that had passed into the hands of a local authority. My aunts and uncles came to visit, admiring the modern kitchen and large garden while they remained stuck in cramped, soot-blackened Victorian terraces in the north-east. I knew we were the lucky ones in the family, entitled to social housing because of Dad's job, but I didn't realise that our accommodation was entirely untypical of the purpose-built council estates that were being constructed up and down the country.

At some point in the 1960s, my maternal grandmother was offered a new one-bedroom flat in South Shields. It was clean, modern and had an indoor bathroom, but it was on an estate that displayed everything that was wrong about the social housing of the period. Constructed on a bleak tract of land on the outskirts of the town, it had few trees to brighten its appearance or shield the residents from the bitterly cold winds that blew from the North Sea. My grandmother's flat had no garden, no outside space at all in fact, and it was a long bus ride from the shops in the town centre – not an easy or comfortable environment for an elderly woman who was losing her sight.

Around this time, Dad got a job as a parks superintendent in Stevenage, the first of half a dozen new towns planned by the Attlee government (under the New Towns Act 1946). Labour ministers had been sufficiently far-sighted to see the post-war housing shortage as an opportunity as well as a crisis, allowing them to sweep away Victorian slum housing and replace them with modern homes. Thousands of Londoners were encouraged to move from the East End to what had until very recently been a village in Hertfordshire, a decision that caused uproar among existing residents. A Labour minister, Lewis Silkin, was shouted down when he arrived to outline the government's plans at a public meeting in the existing village, but he brushed aside objections. 'People from all over the world will come to Stevenage to see how we, here in this country, are building for the new way of life,' he declared.

It was a utopian vision, conceived by ministers who would never have to live with the bland, featureless architecture that became characteristic of new towns. In Stevenage, the pedestrian-only shopping centre was a genuine innovation, opened by the Queen two years before we arrived, but it looked more like an illustration from a developer's advertising brochure than a real place. The town was run by a development corporation, appointed by the government, which started out with good intentions, acknowledging that most people wanted to live in houses rather than the high-rises that were being built in existing towns where land was in short supply. But the result was half a dozen large council estates with an identical set of amenities: a row of shops, a community centre, a pub, a school and a church.

The planners seemed to think that once they had provided housing and shops, their job was all but done. The new town didn't have anything resembling culture in any form: there was no theatre, no art gallery, not even a cinema to serve the thousands of ex-Londoners who'd been used to going 'up West' to catch a show at weekends. Franta Belsky, the Czech sculptor who was commissioned to provide a statue for the town centre, once remarked that 'a housing estate does not only need newspaper kiosks and bus-stop shelters but something that gives it spirit', an observation which went entirely unheeded by the development corporation. The old town, with its population of 6,000 people, *did* have a cinema but if you wanted a social life in the new town, the choice was between the pub or the church. In a signal of the benevolent paternalism that characterised the government's approach to the new town, Stevenage had lots of churches, yet the one on the Bedwell estate where I lived was so poorly attended that it was eventually demolished. At the same time, any manifestation of individualism on the part of council tenants was rigorously suppressed, so much so that we weren't even allowed to choose the colour of our front door. Ours was purple, just like all the others in our little cul-de-sac, and we were not allowed to change it even though my mother hated it.

The planners' biggest mistake, however, was a failure to diversify the town's housing stock. There was no attempt to create a mix of social and privately-owned housing, thereby entrenching the division that already

existed between the old and new towns. I had no idea, until we moved to Stevenage, that living in social housing carried a stigma, but I was the only girl in my junior school class who got a place at the girls' grammar school; the 11-plus had recently been abolished, leaving the head teacher to decide which secondary schools we would attend, but low expectations of children from council estates were already deep-rooted. Separated from my friends, I found myself in a class with girls who certainly didn't live in social housing; they came from the old town or nearby villages, carried violin cases and talked about holidays with their parents in gites. The school's academic record was excellent but the girls who thrived came from the old county, not the new town's council estates.

No doubt the glaring class divide I experienced had something to do with the fact that Stevenage was an artificial construct, created with a focus on clean, modern housing to the detriment of everything else. Later new towns could have learned from its mistakes, recognising that segregating council tenants on drab estates encouraged snobbish attitudes. A few years later, however, when my parents moved to one of the later new towns, it became evident that the same errors were still being made. Basingstoke was originally a market town in Hampshire, bigger than Stevenage old town, with assembly rooms that had once been visited by Jane Austen. It should have been easier to integrate the new town with the existing infrastructure but the planners appeared to have set out to do precisely the opposite; a brutalist concrete shopping centre and multi-storey car park were built next to the old high street and market square, squatting beside it like a rebuke to anyone who valued more harmonious styles of architecture. In the depths of winter, we moved onto a council estate which was miles out of town and only half-completed; our new house had one welcome innovation, central heating, but it was constructed of cheap materials and the metal window frames constantly dripped condensation. There were as yet no shops on the estate and the bus service hadn't started, so Dad had to give me lifts to the girls' high school on the far side of the old town. Once again, girls from council estates seemed to be in a minority or kept quiet about where they lived; council house girls went to the other school, I was told, a secondary modern called The Shrubbery which was universally mocked as 'the scrubbery'.

I couldn't wait to finish my A levels and go to university, although I was met with barely concealed astonishment when I suggested taking Oxbridge entrance exams. Instead I went to Reading University to read Classics, surprising just about everybody except myself and the school's deputy head, who had taught me Latin. Not long afterwards, my parents managed to exchange their house on the grim new estate for an older council house, closer to the town centre and built in traditional materials. They lived there for several years but their final home, in a village near Worcester, was a lovely between-the-wars house which had been built as accommodation for army officers but was now owned by the council. Dad was very happy there, rightly regarding the provision of decent, affordable homes as an essential part of the social contract between government and people.

After she was widowed, and despite having voted Labour all her life, my mother took advantage of Margaret Thatcher's reforms and bought their council house, becoming a home-owner in her early 70s. I had mixed feelings, disapproving of the damage council house sales did to the public housing stock, but I knew it would give her the freedom to sell up and move back to South Shields when she became less mobile and needed the support of her family. Her decision to buy was the consequence of an inequality that's always troubled me, grateful though I am to have grown up in social housing: to this day, friends who live in council flats and houses have fewer choices about where to live, and less power over their lives, than those of us who own our homes.

I know there is more consultation with tenants these days, at least in areas with enlightened local authorities, but some councils still infantilise their residents and don't listen even to legitimate anxieties about safety. I can't help thinking that when they designed and built social housing on the cheap, local authorities were reflecting and reinforcing snobbish attitudes towards people who couldn't afford to buy their own house or flat. Even now, the stigma that attaches to council estates hasn't gone away, if anything getting worse as the gap between rich and poor has widened. From personal experience, I think that one of the reasons is the way in which post-war governments, no matter how well-meaning, marooned working-class people on housing estates that actually exacerbated class divisions. Plumbing matters, but so do people's self-esteem and aspirations.

Joan Smith is a columnist, novelist and human rights activist. She is a former Chair of the PEN Writers in Prison Committee and current Chair of the Mayor of London's Violence Against Women and Girls Board.

Alan Johnson: North Kensington and Slough/

The issues around council housing – its availability, unavailability, its quality and its political salience – have been dominating features of my life, as they were for my mother.

She was the second of 11 children born to an Irish mother and Scottish father in Liverpool at the beginning of the twentieth century. In 1926, when she was five, the family moved into one of Addison's 'Homes for Heroes' at 25 Warham Road, Anfield. Her father (my grandfather) had been wounded in the Great War and never worked again.

That house in Warham Road must have seemed unbelievably luxurious at the time; it was semi-detached with a living room, kitchen, three small bedrooms upstairs, indoor toilet, backyard and a neat little garden between its latched wooden gate and the front door. The reason I can describe it so accurately is that my Aunt Peggy, the youngest of my mother's siblings, still lives there today. It remains council owned.

My mother left Liverpool aged 18 at the outbreak of World War Two, to work in the NAAFI where she met my father, a lance-corporal who played piano at army concerts. They married in his parish of North Kensington, West London.

I'm not sure if any 'Homes for Heroes' were promised after the Second World War in the same way as after the First. Such a home certainly never materialised for my mother. My older sister and I were born into slums condemned as unfit for human habitation in the early 1930s, 20 years before my birth. My mother's dream was to have her own front door; to escape the multi-occupied premises she'd become trapped in (my father having departed the scene when I was a small child) where at least one family occupied every floor. There was no electricity, no running hot water, no bathroom and no toilet save for the awful, decrepit 'kharzi' in the tiny backyard. The walls were damp, doors misaligned, windowpanes cracked and potato sacks served as curtains.

We lived in Southam Street, a road immortalised by the renowned photo-

Alan Johnson with his daughters Natalie and Emma on the Britwell Estate, Slough c1970 (author photo).

journalist Roger Mayne in a series of photographs taken between 1956 and 1961. He recorded both the squalor and the vibrancy of life there; the spirit of survivors inhabiting the uninhabitable.

Like everyone else in Southam Street, my mother rented. The lucky ones like us rented from a Housing Trust: the unlucky ones rented from gangster landlords like Peter Rachman.

The only hope for occupants of slums like these in London, Manchester, Bristol, Glasgow, Cardiff and every major city in the UK was to be offered a council house. Such an offer usually preceded the coming of the bulldozers which, in North Kensington, cleared the space necessary for the construction of high-rise towers such as Trellick and Grenfell.

For my mother, the bulldozers arrived too late. The offer of a council house in Welwyn Garden City came two weeks after her death. Suffering from a serious heart condition made worse by the damp conditions we lived in, the slums had contributed to her early demise.

But for me and my first wife, the offer came only a year after we were married. When the road we lived in, off Ladbroke Grove, was being demolished to make way for the A40 extension into London, we received a 'take it or leave it offer' to either move to a council house in Slough, 30 miles away, or find our own accommodation.

We moved, with enormous gratitude, to an end of terrace, three-bedroomed house on the Britwell estate similar to the one my mother had moved into as a child in Liverpool, except that we had a lovely garden with an apple tree at the back rather than a concrete yard.

We lived there for 20 years, raising three children in a strong community, safe in the knowledge that, as long as we paid the rent on time, we would always have a decent home to live in.

We'd been on the Britwell for more than ten years when the Thatcher administration introduced the Housing Act 1980, providing subsidy for council tenants to purchase their homes. For us and our neighbours, the debate over Right-to-Buy wasn't some dry academic discussion about the role of social housing and the virtues of a property-owning democracy. The effect around our neighbourhood was immediate and profound.

I remember a friend, Robert from two doors down, demolishing my carefully constructed argument that this was a bad policy that would have serious consequences for future generations. Robert asked why we should spend the rest of our lives paying rent that would eventually exceed the value of the house, only to see the homes we'd cherished through the decades handed over to somebody else when we popped our clogs.

My first wife and I didn't exercise our Right-to-Buy but didn't feel morally superior to those, like Robert, who did. It was an offer that was very difficult to refuse, particularly as many who accepted were convinced that the money paid to purchase their council house would eventually be used to build new ones.

For me, the memory of my mother's dream of her own front door and the serenity that the allocation of a council house had brought to my life always made the issue of council housing more personal than political.

Alan Johnson is a former home secretary and Labour MP. He is the author of This Boy, Please Mister Postman, The Long and Winding Road *and* In My Life: A Music Memoir.

Liz Clare: Cambridge/

In February 2019, Historic England – the public body for the historic environment where I work – launched a Valentine's Day campaign to discover the buildings or places people felt so strongly about that they'd write them a love letter.

Cue a social media flurry of images of cherished places from the iconic to the humble, and the reasons they were so valued. Not surprisingly, many people said their love letter would be to their childhood or family home. These posts made me uncomfortably conscious that I hadn't even considered writing a love letter to mine. They were post-Second World War, unremarkable council houses. Didn't I love them? Why not?

The love letters campaign tapped into the strong emotional connection people feel with places, currently a hot topic in the heritage sector and beyond (see for example the National Trust's This Place Matters). But emotional responses can be positive or negative and it begs the question: what about places that aren't quite so easy to love or, worse, are stigmatised as the source of many social ills? Does how we feel and talk about them not matter?

I think they do matter, and how we feel and talk about them is very important. Certainly, council housing evokes strong feelings, but not always based on clear-eyed assessment or lived experience and, even then, there are binary narratives. In a brief and unscientific scroll through online personal histories of growing up in council housing, it's easy to spot the rose-tinted, romanticised version, where life was not-as-bad-as-all-that, and the opposite which says, emphatically, yes-it-really-was. So if it's not love, it's definitely complicated.

Like my parents before me, I grew up in council housing. In the twentieth century, Cambridge expanded rapidly. From the 1930s, large new housing estates, mostly council-funded, began to fill in the areas between the old parishes and the city's northern limits. This is where both my parents grew up. My dad's family moved to Cambridge from the north-east to find work and they settled in newly-built cooperative housing in the 1930s. My mum's parents married at the start of the Second World War, but my granddad was captured in North Africa in 1941, and my grandmother and her daughter

were dependent on immediate family for housing for the rest of the war. Vulnerable to family tensions and resentments, there were times when they had to move on. They would now be classed as homeless.

Without post-war social housing, my grandparents would have waited a long time for their own family home. But soon after my granddad was demobbed in May 1945, they were given a prefab in Chesterton, one of the 156,000 built by councils across the country following the Housing (Temporary Accommodation) Act 1944. My mother was too young to remember it herself but recalls her parents had very fond memories of it. It was comfortable, spacious and light; it had an indoor bathroom, a fully fitted kitchen, and a small garden. Most importantly, it was a place for my family to finally start their lives together. With the arrival of a third child in 1948, the prefab was no longer big enough, and my family moved to a new three-bedroom home on the northern edge of Chesterton.

It was a typical late-1940s council semi – they're easy to spot, there are thousands of them across the country, the same design replicated over and over again for speed and economy of construction. They aren't particularly lovely to look at, and there are no frills, but that was the point: they were simply well-built houses designed for a good standard of family life. In *Municipal Dreams* (Verso 2018), social historian John Boughton notes that most post-war housing was 'aspirational: the mark of an upwardly mobile working class' and a characteristic of a state that took its duty of care in terms of decent housing very seriously (p3). I would agree that, both in the design and in the lived experience, this is true.

All the rooms in the house were spacious and most had built-in storage. The two reception rooms had lino flooring (great for sliding games, my mum recalls) and there was an upstairs bathroom. To modern eyes, it lacked essentials – the kitchen was fairly basic, with a pantry complete with slate shelf, and there was no central heating (I remember ice fronds on the inside of the windows on cold mornings). But over time, kitchen appliances, fitted units and portable heating remedied this.

The space around the houses reflected the same ethos – functional, respectable and with room for aspiration. Each house had outbuildings including a coal store, WC and a workshop; some were used for paid work, all were used for 'making do and mending'. The orderly semis lined an avenue planted with rowan trees, the road and pavement separated by grass verges kept neatly mown by the tenants. The back gardens were large enough for a lawn and play area, flower borders, and ample space to grow food for the family. Each front garden included a parking space (soon a necessity as families acquired their first cars), and were beautifully planted and carefully tended, which spoke volumes about how the families, many of them of returning service personnel, felt about their homes. My grandparents' council house provided space not just to function, but to thrive, in fact to live in ways many aspire to today – growing your own food, tending a garden, and mending and repurposing things rather than throwing them away.

So why the stigma? Although it provided more space and mod cons than the nineteenth-century terrace my grandmother had grown up in, my mother was always conscious that hers was a council house. My mother's own family were dreadful snobs and reminded her of this frequently. Although it was a happy and comfortable home and remained so all her life, she was just a little ashamed of being a council tenant.

I have to say, I understand that feeling. I have always been conscious of the way the place where I grew up is viewed by the rest of Cambridge, and how the *type* of place I grew up in is viewed pretty universally. I know how ingrained stereotypical views of council tenants are, and how difficult and draining it can be to challenge them. So it's taken me more time and courage to 'come out' as a council house kid than it did to say that I have depression.

There must be thousands who grew up in a new council house in the late 1940s, as my mum did, but fewer who, like me, lived in a new council house in the 1980s. Ours was one of the last homes squeezed into an awkwardly shaped plot up against the outer ring road and green belt. The northward expansion of this part of Cambridge, known as Arbury, began in 1957, when the city council started to develop 100 acres for housing. The completion of our part of the development – Kings Hedges – marked the end of this expansion, not just because there was no more space to build on, but because it was the last significant phase of local authority investment in housing in Cambridge.

In some respects, the parts of Arbury developed before Kings Hedges, in the 1960s and 1970s, reflected progressive thinking and the council's continued aim to be a provider of decent housing. These developments were designed for people not cars, and the high-volume housing – arranged in blocks of low-rise flats – was set around large, open green spaces in the European style. But by the 1970s, estates of this kind up and down the country had become associated with petty crime and anti-social behaviour, and Arbury was no different. It acquired a reputation as a 'problem estate' and it stuck. Unfairly, Kings Hedges was seen as an extension of a failed project and was tainted by association with Arbury and all it represented. It wasn't allowed time to develop its own identity, good or bad.

And it had every chance of being a good place. Whoever designed Kings Hedges seems to have taken the most successful elements of developments that came before it and offered a new take on decent, aspirational housing. Like its predecessors, Kings Hedges was designed for people rather than cars, and this influenced the layout of the estate. Its meandering cul-de-sacs are impossible to drive down at any speed. Many of the homes turn their back on the roads, and instead overlook courtyards, walks, or parking areas bordered with raised beds.

Instead of blocks of flats, Kings Hedges is a development of traditional terraces, semis and maisonettes, all with gardens or outdoor space. The buildings aren't stunningly beautiful, but they have enough design

features to create variety and interest in what might otherwise have been an unrelieved sea of brickwork. With the emphasis on domestic scale and people not cars, Kings Hedges has the feel of a place that has developed in an organic manner over time and this, coupled with traditional housing types at a more human scale, made it a genuinely pleasant place to live in.

I'm not going rose-tinted here. In those early years, a sense of community did develop as the kids made friends and their parents followed suit. There were troubled families and individuals, the occasional anti-social behaviour, and the fact that there was no shop or community centre did make the place, and all of us who lived there, feel a bit forgotten about. But I don't recall a sense of threat or unease on the estate, and in those first years it didn't deserve to be seen in the negative way that its forerunners were.

Decline started around the time when public money for housing ran out and just before Right-to-Buy. The estate required public subsidy to remain fresh and functional but, by the late 1980s, maintenance of landscaping, communal areas and walkways had all but ceased. The first abandoned car and whispers of serious crime came then. More families exercised their right to buy, fences were built up between gardens and carports were closed in.

Kings Hedges might have been the last council housing in the area but, by the 2000s, land between the ring road and the busy A14 road – Arbury Park – was being privately developed to provide 900 new homes. In a *Guardian* article published on 11 October 2009, Germaine Greer criticised the developer's attempt to create an aspirational housing estate through (numerous, failed) public art projects, rather than basic quality of design. But it was also up against stigma. Like Kings Hedges before it, Arbury Park suffers by association with the council housing estates it is built next to. It is telling that its residents renamed the development Orchard Park, removing a word that had become synonymous with all that is negative about council estates. Clearly how we design, name and talk about places is really important. Ultimately, these things profoundly affect how we live in a place and how we feel about it.

As the story of last century's council housing continues to unfold, I hope its reputation will be recovered, as people who experienced it quietly but persistently challenge lazy stereotypes with more balanced accounts of how life really was. So, would I write a love letter to the council homes I grew up in? No, I wouldn't. But I would send a heartfelt message to say: 'Chin up, be proud of your qualities, and know that you did your best to help people to thrive, to connect, to be comfortable, safe, and healthy. And a lot of the time, you did OK.'

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Brad Evans: The Rhondda Valleys/

If W B Yeats was right that it takes more courage to examine the dark corners of your soul than for any soldier to fight on the battlefield, what does it mean to examine our own childhoods when it comes to seriously thinking about violence?

We know about violence, we confront its appearance every day, we are continually forced to witness its occurrence, and yet most people don't really like to think about it – especially its implications for each of the lives we live. The more I have examined my own childhood, the more I have recognised the ways in which violence has made particular demands upon me. I immediately recall being bought various sets of toy soldiers. Often neatly coloured, it was easy for me to mark out who were the good guys and who would spend most of their time dead on their backs or launched in some explosive range across the room. I also recall watching the movie epic *Star Wars* for the very first time. Not only was *Star Wars* a major cinematic event, leading to endless playground battles over whom was to play Luke Skywalker, it was also a remarkable pedagogical force, which, as JG Ballard stated, normalised genocide and the aesthetics of mass slaughter in the name of entertainment.

But these memory recalls are all too easy to access. They don't require much emotional and critical investment beyond the painfully obvious. And it's only more recently that I found the courage to truly come to terms with the more intimate and yet socially entrenched ways violence has made its particular calling. I grew up in the Rhondda valleys of South Wales. What marks out these communities is how they have become since the Thatcher period amongst the most socially deprived in the entire country, if not Europe. As is well documented, these former mining communities were once socialist strongholds. Not only were they integral to the once proud and now politically decimated history of trade unionism in the UK, they were also integral to the formation of the Labour party and institutional leftism more generally. After years of neglect these communities supported Brexit by some considerable margin. They have also become a cause for concern regarding widespread racial intolerance and far-right membership to known groups, which expressly advocate violence against immigrants. It should be pointed out here the very presence of actual immigrants in these communities is minimal. Such connections between local anger and rage

against a non-present or symbolically absent 'other' certainly needs far greater contextualisation.

Like many people in the valleys, my grandfather and his father before him were coalminers. They both worked in the Fernhill colliery, which was situated at the very top end of the valley basin that was majestically carved into the unforgiving landscape during glaciation. As a result of changing global economic conditions and the decline in demand for fossil fuels, by the late 1960s and early 1970s the guarantee of employment in the mines was no longer a given and the government started to have to deal with increased unemployment. Furthermore, when I was born my father had already developed a debilitating life-long illness, so the family moved to one of the newly constructed social housing projects on what was locally called the Penrhys housing estate.

Built in 1968 to much fanfare, this estate recently marked its fiftieth anniversary. Call it hubris or, more accurately, structurally induced poverty, perched some 1,170 feet (357 metres) above the Rhondda floor, the steep warren of grey council blocks elevated on the brutally exposed hillside quickly became an isolated community of poverty and crime separated from the impoverished valley life below. In a tragic inversion of the familiar hierarchies of privilege and poverty so apparent in these communities (often, for example, the wealthiest to live on any street during the mining period had their house perched higher up on the mountainside), this estate was topographically segregated and yet visible for all to see at a distance like a beacon of despair. Penrhys would become a quintessential poverty trap. In order to get in and out of the place, you had to go up a steep one-mile road that was often battered by what locals refer to as 'sideways rain'. Most people on the estate could little afford public transport, let alone the ownership of a motor vehicle. Or, as Zygmunt Bauman claimed, the idea of a No-Go area is not that you can't visit, but its people are unable to leave. The road to Penrhys was truly a road to perdition in the most earthliest sense of the term.

When I was around four years old, I vaguely remember my mother taking me on foot to see her parents who lived at the top of the valley and close to the colliery where her father worked. Whatever the weather, she would walk most Saturdays with myself in a children's buggy on the 12-mile round trip. My own memory of this was being rained upon, wet and cold. Such conditions economically and climatically were the norm for many of the unemployed in the valleys.

Penrhys was initially sold as a utopian ideal, 954 houses home to 4,000 people, offering the best views of the Welsh valleys. By the time it opened, most of the inhabitants were unemployed or marginalised as being 'problem families'. Even its architectural and lauded design was more alienating. Unlike traditional terraces, the entries to these flats and houses faced away from one another, which only added to the sense of isolation. With a tragic foreboding, the estate was officially opened on

The open expanse behind Ton-Pentre (author photo).

Friday 13 September 1968. The weather was cold, grey, windy and miserable. Residents soon discovered that the revolutionary heating system was a failure. Tenants who lived the closest to the boiler house sweltered, while those further away shivered on the brutally exposed hillside. Just after opening, the estate was also witness to the brutal murder of an 11-year-old girl whose body was found in a vacant and just completed home. By 1976, many houses were vandalised, doors broken, prone to burglaries of what meagre possessions they contained, and random assaults, often in broad daylight by other known residents, commonplace.

Over time, the estate developed a notorious reputation for violence, domestic and drug abuse, alcoholism, high rates of suicide, and it even started to make national news as resident youths on a ritualistic basis were seen burning vacant lots and parts of their own communities. Fire fighters who arrived were routinely assaulted and subject to all kinds of abuse. Unemployment on the estate was put between 75 and 80 percent, with most of the others claiming some form of invalidity benefits from the state. Such unemployment was permanent for most, spanning some three generations of families born into such dereliction. Those who would be lucky enough to be relocated, often with their children, would nevertheless already be marked out as Penrhysers (like my family was) and stigmatised as being uneducated, rough, violent and liable to commit local crime. Though it should also be noted there was a complex multi-layered dynamic at work here; for if you lived in the valley itself, you would then be subject to similar forms of stigmatisation from those who lived beyond its topographical confinements. It was on this estate that I also first recall seeing visible images of fascism. Often you would see on the walls the symbol for the National Front, accompanied by the words 'God Save the Queen'.

Generation after generation living upon this estate were faced with endemic poverty and isolationism. And yet they would be represented in British Parliament and in local council by successive leftist politicians who

also contributed to their neglect and abandonment. Even though the fate of Penrhys has changed somewhat as many of its vandalised homes have now been destroyed, communities like this remain today. All manner of social problems, especially of children, are still evident, though their causes are often divorced from wider historical and social dynamics and reduced to individual pathology. My family eventually moved to the more affluent village of Ton-Pentre, where I grew up and where they still live today. We lived in Kennard Street, again on a hill, but thankfully much less of a climb. Behind the house where we lived there was an open expanse of land where I used to routinely play as a child. It was only recently I found out that my great-grandfather, Joseph Brookes, used to take part in what was called mountain fighting – basically boxing without the gloves – on this very same land to supplement his income from working in the pits with illegal payments from prize money and invariably betting. He was also a well-known local artist.

These valleys have always known violence. For children growing up here it was part of the normal fabric of life. Social housing in the valleys created communities that were increasingly violent by design, resulting in generations of neglect which have come to manifest themselves in forms of anger and outrage by persons who don't really know where to direct it.

Structural violence maims not only the body but also the mind and intellectual spirit. Since the complexities of structural violence (as continually witnessed on housing projects throughout the UK today) cannot be reduced to singular root cause explanations, there is a need to address its lasting effects by drawing upon expertise from across all sectors of contemporary society. Developing the education tools that address multiple audiences are central to this if we are to endow young people with the capacities to think, question, and imagine better futures for themselves and their communities.

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Natasha Carthew: Downderry/

For me, growing up in a council house in Downderry, Cornwall, meant I was part of a community that always had my back; an extended family who relied on each other to babysit the kids, or to lend you that elusive 50 pence for the 'lecky' meter until my mum got paid from one of the many local cleaning jobs she worked.

As kids, we always had a group of friends to head down to the beach with in summer (our estate was 100 metres from the sea) or up to the fields and woodland where we made camps in the trees.

It was important in those early days to not only be a part of the community, but to also be a part of something that was secure, permanent and protective; the things that getting a council house meant to my mother, sister and myself. It was a place that we could call home without the threat that we would be asked to move on at the whim of a landlord who needed the space for holidaymakers at ten times the rent.

The security that came with obtaining our house was huge but getting one in the village where my family had lived for generations was even bigger. We were a proud family and proud of our Cornish name. Everyone knew us in the village and we knew all of them. The possibility that we might have had to move to another community or a town would have been heart-breaking for us. This is why I know first-hand why council houses are so important and why they should be available to those who need them: not just people who live in poverty, are homeless or living in sub-standard conditions, but also those whose identity and culture are entrenched in the countryside but who cannot afford to live there.

Rural areas have proportionally less affordable housing than urban areas (many villages lost most of their social housing when council housing was sold off and not replaced); only eight percent of housing in rural areas is classed as affordable, compared to 20 percent in urban ones. Add to this the fact that rural wages are on average lower than those in urban areas, and it's obvious why rural communities are facing a crisis. The average age in rural communities is rising as young people and families are being

Natasha Carthew, aged six, with other children enjoying a rare night out to watch a clown perform in Downderry's Working Men's Club (author photo).

priced out. To keep our rural communities thriving, we urgently need to protect the affordable homes already built and to make sure they don't get sold off as holiday homes. The gap between average wages and average house prices is growing faster. In addition, it takes longer and costs more to build social housing in villages than in cities and large towns. We need to demonstrate the positive value of housebuilding in rural areas, and to show how building affordable housing is helping rural communities to survive and thrive.

Our countryside is in the grip of a housing crisis. In over 90 percent of rural local authorities, average house prices are more than eight times higher than average incomes, while a single person on an average rural wage can expect to spend 46 percent of their income on rent. To seriously tackle this rural housing crisis, planners need to build more small-scale council estates that will empower rural communities and help them succeed for generations to come.

I still remember that first day our mum collected us from school and told us the keys to our new home were ready. The moment she opened the door, we flew in to skid on our knees across the linoleum, followed by half a dozen kids from the estate. As a young child, I was yet to witness the stigma of social housing; that came a few years later when I had to catch the school bus to travel ten miles to secondary school in the nearest town and was called 'council house trash' for the first time. School was a place where kids were divided into the haves and the have-nots; the kids who came from rich houses and those like us. Although some kids called us trash, you could always tell it was really their parents that you could hear talking. The few of us who came from our village council estate were on free school meals and that meant the walk of shame every lunchtime to the front of

the dinner queue. Kids from all over our corner of Cornwall who lived in and around the edges of poverty stood like outcasts in a Dickens novel. But in those moments, we as a group became stronger, fortified with the knowledge that there were many like us and our sense of community grew into a feeling of pride that came from being a bit different.

Insults about those living in social or council housing will always be thrown around; sometimes they will stick. However, this housing provision is not a simple case of deciding where poor people should be put. It is about where people who can't afford to live in this increasingly capitalistic, covetous country would actually be happy, live heartily and thrive.

In rural areas we will always have that additional problem, the growth of second-home owners, rich folk who have bought up every available small miner's or fisherman's cottage to holiday in maybe once or twice a year. This has not just ripped the soul out of our villages but has also taken away affordable homes from those who really need them. Add this to the fact that nearly every council-built house is now privately owned, and I fear families such as my own have been completely pushed out of their communities.

Council housing is important because it is secure housing and, for kids like me growing up, that meant safety, community and a place to be free and to dream of a future that was not bogged down with the uncertainly of inflated rents, or the worry of having to leave my home village behind for good.

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Natasha Carthew aged 12 at her home (author photo).

David Olusoga: Gateshead/

If the intention had been to mark out certain children and to ensure they were subjected to ridicule and bullying, then our teachers would have struggled to come up with a better system.

Had they set out to make the hierarchies of wealth and social class among the children under their care obvious and evident they could hardly have devised a more precise and subtle ritual. I don't know why they did it. I suspect it was nothing more than thoughtlessness and adherence to an old practice that no one had ever thought to question.

The ritual took place on the first day of each academic year in my redbrick junior school, high on the hills above the River Tyne in the town of Gateshead. On those late autumn mornings, after we had been ushered from the assembly hall, we were dragooned into our new classroom. There we were each allotted a little wooden chair and placed behind a square wooden desk – objects of antiquity that had little indentations in which the inkwells of our Edwardian predecessors had once rested. The desks were arranged into neat, regimented lines in front of our new teacher, who would hush the class and open the new register. My hands would begin to tighten into fists and I would start to feel a cold and sickly form of anxiety. Among my multiple fears was that my voice would creak or that when I spoke other children would openly and immediately laugh or mock, rather than waiting for a later opportunity. With head down and ballpoint pen poised above the grid-lined pages of the register our teacher would read out the names of each child then, with one word, demand that we divulge the information that revealed everything that I wanted so much to conceal – my family's poverty. The wounding question came in the form of a single word – address?

When it came to my turn I had to divulge not the name of a street, road or an avenue but something called a 'walk'; an ersatz street, a 'street in the sky', the planners had called them. A 'walk' on a vast, sprawling, ugly, deprived, densely populated and widely reviled council estate. A sink estate, a place in which, it was universally presumed, no one would live unless they had no choice. This I had to divulge in front of my whole class, my enemies and the bullies.

The children who lived in the better streets of our declining little town, children whose parents had jobs that enabled them to perhaps afford a second-hand car, did not fear the first register of the school year. For them memories of this little ritual have probably faded. But poor children are acutely aware of the minute gradations of poverty. Just as the children of the wealthy calibrate one another's status by learning to decipher the back-stories told by the cars in which parents drop their children off at boarding school, those of us at the other end of the scale knew how to precisely calculate relative poverty. We were acutely aware of what we were and what we were not, what we had and what we lacked, and we could read the signs; hand-me-down clothes, plastic shoes rather than leather ones, school trips suspiciously missed. Those just above the poverty-line live in close quarter with those below it. They know intimately what poverty looks like and they know its address.

In our school in the 1970s, and again for reasons that have more to do with thoughtlessness than vindictiveness, another marker of poverty was literally pinned to the chests of the poorer children. As if we were being marked out as social undesirables or degenerates by a totalitarian state, those of us from families deemed poor enough to qualify for free school meals had our meal tickets attached to our shirts and jumpers with safety pins, to prevent us misplacing them. Those little grey and red tickets advertised our poverty to everyone – other children, their parents, the teachers, the dinner ladies, the lollipop lady who ferried us across the road and through the school gates. When that indicator was combined with the publicly declared fact that I lived on a council estate infamous for its deprivation, my lowly status was clear to all. A council-house boy on free school dinners.

When I look now at the few grainy black and white pictures that survive of my council estate it looks like something from the other side of the iron curtain. The Soviets called developments like it 'Khrushchyovka'; cheap prefabricated concrete homes built to house those with nowhere else to go, named after Soviet statesman Nikita Khrushchev. In the USSR these bleak rectangles of concrete, with their small windows and dark stairwells, were presented by the state propaganda apparatus as a temporary stop-gap. They were vertical prefabs that would be replaced with more palatial homes the moment Russian communism reached its 'mature stage' and the workers' paradise had been realised. Many of them are still standing. In Britain there was never any pretence of impermanence. The estates were the solution to the slums of the nineteenth and early-twentieth century. They were their direct replacement, often built on the land on which they had stood. They were the future, not some staging post on the way to it.

The Victorian slums had been known as 'rookeries', 'hells kitchens' or 'devils' acres'. When they were cleared in the twentieth century, a new argot was devised by the planners. Mass housing built for the poor was arranged into 'estates'. A strange word to choose. The Americans were more honest. Their council estates are known as 'projects'. In Scotland they are called 'schemes', the people who live on them 'schemies'. Both words hint at the

idea of civic action, the verb in the ascendant. In our town, as in others, the planners took things one step further. Although everyone understood that my home was on an 'estate', our grey blocks of social housing, made of prefabricated concrete slabs assembled on the banks of a then polluted industrial city, were officially known as a 'village'. Fourteen horizontal blocks, like towers laid on their side, homes for 3,500 people constructed at a cost of £3,700,000. They represented the apotheosis of the career of the Borough Architect Leslie Berry, the final flowering of his 'village community idea'. Berry's concrete village was self-enclosed, with its own shops and even a 'village hall': a windowless brick square as unlovely and unloved as every other aspect of the whole dismal project. One of the old Victorian terraces that had been demolished to make way for the new estate had been known as St Cuthbert's Terrace and so Berry's urban village was given the name St Cuthbert's Village.

There is a series of photographs of Harold Wilson, the Prime Minister who prophesised how the 'white heat' of technology would transform Britain, on a visit to Gateshead in April 1970. Laid out on a table in front of him, in one photograph, is a scale model of St Cuthbert's Village. Flanking Wilson is the lord mayor and the local councillors, the men who had convinced themselves that the new estate was the solution to the old slums. In another photo Wilson is shown pulling a cord that opened a pair of small velvet curtains and revealed a plaque that recorded his official opening of the new estate. Within just a few years of that official opening St Cuthbert's Village had become a new slum, itself in need of clearance. Twenty-five

St Cuthbert's Village, Gateshead, 1970 (by kind permission of John Matthews, Northumberland & Newcastle Society).

years after Wilson's visit all but one of the blocks, and the 'walks' that connected them, were demolished, including my childhood home.

During the hottest weeks of the hottest 1970s' summers I spent living in St Cuthbert's Village, the foundations of the old terraces that had been demolished to make way for the estate could be seen as brown lines of dry grass. Other than those ghostly traces there was nothing to suggest they had ever existed. I don't remember when I first learnt that living on a council estate was shameful, but that sense of shame wasn't unique to me or my generation. The people who had lived in those terraces knew that same stigma. Many of the children who had lived out their childhoods in those houses had attended the same Victorian school I had gone to, and sat in the same square wooden desks, where they too had been made to divulge their addresses to earlier generations of teachers and school bullies. The stigma of the old slums had, by some unknown mechanism, been transmitted to the new estates and the inhabitants of the new concrete slums, almost as if the soil itself had been contaminated. The stigma remained potent because within its DNA was another feature of the Victorian past, the lingering belief that poverty is evidence of moral failings.

That I can recall, four decades later, my feelings and my shame about living on a council estate testifies to the potency of this stigma. Yet from the end of the second decade of the twenty-first century I look back at our prefabricated home in our concrete village and realise that we were, in a sense, fortunate. In 2019, families like mine, with little money and few options, are not given homes on council estates. They are placed on waiting lists that never shrink. Instead of life in a damp concrete apartment, they spend years in privately rented B&Bs. Some live out much of their childhood in conditions closer to the slums of the nineteenth century than the estates of the twentieth. The challenge that planners and experts should have spent the past four decades addressing was how to rid council estates of the stigma that had become attached to them. They could and should have spent those years asking themselves how it is that in other European nations social housing is both well-built and popular? But those questions were left to the academics, as the supply of new social housing was cut off by political edict pitilessly pushing the people for whom such homes are needed to the margins of society.

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Robert Walton: Cardiff/

151 is probably not a number of much significance to most people, but to my family it instantly conjures a smile and a nostalgic gaze into the middle distance.

For my parents, 151 provided an opportunity to bring up their children in their own home and to escape the restrictions of sharing a house with Mum's father and his partner, as they'd done for the first seven years of marriage. For us children – Maxine, Paul and me – 151 brought seven 'green and golden' years to our 1950s childhood: playing with friends in the garden or indoors; singing and dancing to records on the radiogram; helping around the house; and running free and safe in the streets and green spaces of a new council estate on the eastern edge of Cardiff.

Robert, Maxine and Paul Walton at 151 Llanrumney Avenue, Cardiff, c1955 (author photo).

Like many estates in post-war Britain, Llanrumney was planned in a spirit of optimistic re-construction, holding on to some of the principles of the garden city movement. Houses were brick-built in small rows rather than the long, dark-stone terraces associated with inner-city Victorian workers' housing. Decent-sized front and rear gardens offered the opportunity to grow veg and to plant shrubs and flowers. Communal green spaces lent an open, airy aspect, as did the playing fields of Rumney Rec and the woodlands of legend-haunted Llanrumney Hall.

In Spring 1953, we were one of the first families on the estate. Dad had to go to work the day we moved in because he couldn't afford a day off, so he cycled to Wagon Repairs Ltd in the docks where he was a carpenter while Johnny Workman's van moved whatever possessions we had to 151. It was about a mile away from where we'd lived in a couple of rooms in Grancha's house and I recollect myself, five-years old, holding hands with my younger sister, Maxine, and trailing behind Mum as she pushed baby Paul in a pram along the pavement on Newport Road. Number 151 sat on the crest of the incline up Llanrumney Avenue. A concrete path led to the porch and blue door; downstairs, a front room for best, a hallway and kitchenette, a small living room at the back; upstairs, three bedrooms and bathroom. A bonus was 'the outhouse': with a separate front entrance, it was a passageway to the back garden, big enough to store coal, bikes, tools, paint, toys etc, as well as having – wonder of wonders! – a second toilet.

To a five-year-old with little sense of time, it seemed no time at all before we were settled into our home. Mum and Dad papered the walls, with anaglypta in the hall and stairwell, pink floral patterns in the front room, and colourful exotic fish in the ocean of our bathroom. The kitchen was Mum's domain, where she baked Welsh cakes and let us run our fingers around the mixing-bowl to scoop out the tasty leftovers. On Friday evenings, when Dad came home, he handed over his unopened wage-packet which Mum emptied onto the worktop, a strict Chancellor of the Exchequer divvying up the cash for next week's expenditure, slipping coins into our money-boxes out of reach on top of the kitchen cabinets. Of an evening, Mum did the ironing, humming along to tunes on the radio, while Dad gave us a bath upstairs and carried us down to dry us off in front of the living room fire, singing songs by the Inkspots or reciting little poems.

The living room was compact, with a fireplace, a dining-table and chairs by the window, one armchair, Singer sewing-machine and, eventually, a small television set. The coal fire was Dad's major domestic responsibility. Up at 6.30am, he'd use a gas poker to set the flames leaping and for much of the year the fire blazed all day. From Wagon Repairs, Dad got cheap timber that he chopped into kindling in the outhouse, later setting up a little firewood business on the side with his father and brother. As well as board and card games, the dining-table served as a play structure for our games of imagination: a pirate ship, a stagecoach held up by bandits or, with blankets draped over the legs, a secret cave. If this seems like a rose-tinted picture of a carefree childhood in a harmonious family, I'm lucky enough to

be able to say that it was extremely happy. Yes, there's a hint of rose to it – the only shadow being the time that Dad went into hospital with a football injury and was off work for weeks: in the kitchen, I saw Mum in tears as she tried to work out how to make ends meet. There were probably other money worries in those austere times but, while my parents kept them from us, they always emphasised the importance of saving.

Sheila Walton and her daughter Maxine in the front garden at 151 Llanrumney Avenue, c1957 (author photo).

Our neighbours were couples in their 30s who'd survived the war and started young families – the Fletchers, Checketts, Wickhams and the Carrs in the corner-house with the big front garden and garage. Friendships came easily. With hardly any traffic, we organised noisy street games like touch, hopscotch and 'Please Jack, may I cross the water?', stretched a rope across the road and chanted skipping rhymes, roller-skated down the hill, sprinted to the lamp post and back, or spent all day down the Rec playing football, cricket and baseball – the Welsh version, native only to Cardiff, Newport and Liverpool over the border. Perhaps it's a boy's eye view but our parents didn't seem anxious about us venturing all over the estate on our bikes or wandering down to Rumney River where the bridge at the end of Ball Lane gave access to open countryside.

Llanrumney's name is derived from the Welsh 'glan', meaning 'bank' or 'shore', and the river that flows from the Rhymney Valley. Its sole historic building is Llanrumney Hall in Ball Road, built in 1450. It became home to five generations of the Morgan family whose most famous, or infamous, son, Henry, was born there in 1635. A ruthless privateer, Henry Morgan captured Panama for King Charles II in 1671 before being knighted and taking up residence in Jamaica –which is why there's a Llanrumney on that island, on riverside land that the slave-owner gave to his wife. When Cardiff Council compulsorily purchased the hall and estate in 1951, it made considerable provision for open space to be retained. Behind the hall, the woods became our Robin Hood glen where we galloped through bluebells and ferns on imaginary horses. On hot days, we discarded our daps and waded into the stream running down to the fenced-in lake we called the Fishpond. This was presided over by a fearsome warden who, so the story went, would lock trespassers in a room in the hall that was haunted by the ghost of Llywelyn ap Gruffyd, last Welsh Prince of Wales and allegedly buried on the site.

It never felt as though we were short of facilities, though perhaps expectations were fewer. Dr Chivers had his practice across the way. When the first No 48 bus chugged up the road, we ran alongside, waving at the driver and conductor. The sweet shop on Llanrumney Avenue kept us kids happy with its bubblegum, liquorice and gobstoppers. It wasn't far to the enormous County Cinema for Saturday morning flicks. More importantly, a couple of primary schools and a secondary modern provided up-to-date, spacious facilities and playing-fields. While I have only vague impressions of infants' school, my four years in Bryn Hafod Juniors were times of creative learning, social education and healthy exercise. Tweed-jacketed headmaster Mr Lewis led an inspirational staff. All the girls had a crush on Mr Perry who took the sports teams. All the boys had a crush on perfumed Miss Macey with her stomach-melting smile and wicked temper – but we knew that Mr Perry and Mr Rogers, the Welsh teacher, were also rivals for her affections because the girls told us so. Mrs Bancroft took Standard 4 (Year 6 now), played piano for assembly with gusto and coached us through the 11-plus with composure and rigour. For me, it was Mrs Jones who made the biggest impact as she encouraged us all in Standard 3 to

Paul, Maxine and Robert Walton at 151 Llanrumney Avenue, c1954 (author photo).

love music, poetry, art, nature, geography and to explore the exciting fields of knowledge that stretched before us. Arithmetic and spelling became energetic games. Story-times magically conjured up Welsh legends. Handwriting was a precious art. A short, elderly lady with long grey hair and dressed in black, she was called a witch by some kids and it's true, she could 'give the eye' that struck fear into the naughtiest child. But she was so enthusiastic and generous in her teaching that I'm certain it was her influence that led me to pursue a lifelong career in teaching.

In 1960, my parents took over the first of their two pubs in Cardiff so we moved to inner-city Canton, leaving behind us an estate full of friends, open air and adventure. A decade later, I took up my first teaching-post in Hartcliffe School in Bristol, and I know that for the five years I worked there, living close to the estate constructed as a 1950s housing initiative similar to Llanrumney, I felt that, although I was already knee-deep in a different social world, Hartcliffe offered an ID fingerprint from the past, a sense of home.

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Ian Jack: Farnworth and Fife/

My parents moved into their first council house in the early 1930s, a house I was never inside because they left it before I was born.

They referred to it in their frequent retrospective conversations simply as 'Iris Avenue'. 'Oh, we should never have left Iris Avenue... I don't know why we ever left Iris Avenue,' my mother would say, to which there was never any good reply other than some quiet agreement from my father that it was indeed a regrettable puzzle that we had done so, but there could be no going back. In fact, Iris Avenue wasn't so far away, two minutes' walk at most. Down Lily Avenue, across Daffodil Road and there you were: the lost paradise of Iris, to me a house like any other, but to my parents and my older brother an infinitely superior home to our new address at the corner of Lily and Lupin.

Humphrey Spender's Mass Observation photograph of canvassers on the corner of Daffodil Road and Daisy Avenue during the 1938 Farnworth by-election campaign. The houses are of the same kind as the one in which Ian Jack was born (photo used with kind permission of Bolton Council, Bolton Museums 1993.83.16.07).

All the estate's streets were named after flowers, some quite exotic sounding – for example, Lobelia – though most were more straightforwardly English. Farnworth Council had built the scheme on a site to the west of the old town, separated from the mills and the traditional terraces of two-ups, two-downs by an expanse of green playing fields that were lined on one side with prefabs, each with a fridge and an ice compartment where some sophisticated families made lollipops. I'm remembering how things were in our Lancashire town circa 1950. Rationing was still in force; factory hooters wailed to declare the start and end (lunchtime on Saturdays) of every working day; a family further up Lupin still wore clogs.

Other than the enviable little fridges in the prefabs, it seemed to me that our house had everything. It had a hall, a parlour and a big kitchen downstairs, while upstairs lay two bedrooms, a bathroom, and a narrow boxroom, which was where I slept. The house, like most others on the estate, was a semi-detached, but as it stood on a corner the garden was extensive: it spread in three directions, front, side and back, and contained a hen house, an air-raid shelter and an ornamental pond as well as blackcurrant and gooseberry bushes, a rhubarb patch, and an untidy lawn that faced the back garden of a house in a parallel street. A German incendiary bomb had fallen in this neighbouring garden some years before; my brother often thrilled me with the story of its dazzling and unexpected appearance.

Heating, including hot water, came via coal fires, with coal delivered by coalmen to a coal store that had a separate outside door next to the kitchen. Rent was paid weekly in cash to a Borough of Farnworth rent collector, who stood at the back door in his trilby and raincoat and entered the sum in a rent book.

Did my parents find any of this undignified? Did they 'aspire' to home ownership, or dream of a car in a garage where the rhubarb grew? I find it hard to think that they did. The street had only one car at that time, and its appearance (straight-backed and mainly immobile until Sundays, with a running board and little curtains in the rear window) did very little to promote the acquisitive instinct. As for property, apart from an aunt and uncle in Scotland who had a small bungalow, I can't think that we knew anyone who owned the house they lived in. Private-renters were a different matter: a few of our friends and relations lived in homes that were lit by gas or a Tilley lamp, where the lavatory was located in the backyard and all-body washing required a trip to the public baths. My parents and many of our neighbours had grown up in such places: it was from one of them – the bleakly titled Cemetery Road – that my parents had moved to their house in Iris Avenue. In these new and encouraging surroundings, all kinds of enthusiasms were released: regular bath-times, cooking, fretwork, model-making and (most of all) gardening. The tenants of council houses felt blessed and made their improvements.

Dad made the garden pond and the wooden yacht that we sometimes floated in it. During the war, he'd adapted the garden hut into accommodation for hens, but by 1950 the hens had gone, to be replaced in the hut by gardening and woodworking tools, a bench, a vice, a bicycle and lots of old tobacco tins (Ogden's Walnut Plug, Player's Navy Cut) that rattled with nails and screws. Here, Dad did the work – boots and shoes soled and heeled, toys crafted, punctures mended – that kept the domestic show on the road, leaving the council to do the important external refurbishments such as painting all the woodwork a Bramley-apple green.

I don't want to evoke too happy a picture: this life had its flaws. In Iris Avenue, we'd had neighbours, Scots like ourselves, who disapproved of my parents' Sabbath-breaking activities such as buying ice-cream from the cart with an Italian name on its side that was pulled around the streets by a pony. Now we had neighbours who loudly admired Winston Churchill – 'our Winnie' they used to call him – which Dad found despicable. More worryingly, especially if you were a shy child, a nearby street with a misleading name, Pansy Road, was filled with large, rumbustious families ('Pansy Roaders') who were said to have been cleared from the slums and stood ready to pick on you at the slightest excuse. But the biggest imperfection by far was our house's location in the wrong country. After more than 20 years in Lancashire, my parents decided they wanted to go back to Fife, and when Dad found a job there in 1952 the question arose of where we would live. Buying a home was out of the question, but then so was joining the long waiting list for a council house. The only other solution was a council-house exchange, in which somebody from Fife went to live in our house in Lancashire and we moved into the house they vacated.

We found such a family, but they had a flat not a house – one of four flats in what was called a tenemented villa. Ours on the upper floor was reached by an outside stair and then, at right angles, an inside stair, and it comprised a small living room, a small kitchen, a bathroom and two small bedrooms. Fife County Council had built this and several similar villas in the late 1920s, to form a cul-de-sac on a hillside that in spring ran ablaze with the blossom of gorse (whin) bushes, hence our street's name, Whinneyknowe. But a continuing tradition of floral names, iris followed by lily followed by whin, couldn't disguise the decline in our accommodation. In our new dwelling, the smell of fried herring and stewed meat rose through the floor from the flat below; its inmates spat streaks of phlegm on our shared path; at night, up came the sounds of a whining dog, football results on the radio, drunken shouting, the crash of an axehead as it broke up overlarge lumps of coal. What was so unbearable about Mr Ashburner's 'Our Winnie' compared to this?

It wasn't just the neighbours. Our new home didn't meet the physical standards of the one we'd left. The Lancashire house had been built of glistening Accrington brick, but in Fife the council houses were 'harled' – rendered with cement and gravel – to protect inferior bricks from the weather. The coal needed fetching in a bucket from the coal bunker up two

Ian Jack's father and two brothers with the family tandem outside their house in Lily Avenue (left) in 1940, five years before the author was born.

flights of stairs, and in strong westerly winds the chimney expelled smoke into the living room while the mobile cowl (we called it a 'granny' because of the shape) on the chimney-top clattered uselessly round and round. We were told our street had been built to house families cleared from the ruined old lazaretto, or leper colony, down on the shore: not that by that time they were actually lepers.

We got used to it and then we liked it. Our drying-green (the communal area for clotheslines) backed on to a wood, and our windows had wonderful views. On a clear day from the east-facing window above the stair we could see the conical hill, the 'Law', 25 miles away at North Berwick; from the kitchen and living room the spectacular Forth railway bridge filled our view to the south. It was our third and last council house. Dad died in its front bedroom. Mum made her final journey in an ambulance from the end of its front path.

I had left home long before, to live in a bed-sit in Glasgow in the early 1960s. Around that time, nearly two thirds of Scottish households lived like my family in houses rented from the local authority. They made so many lives better than they might otherwise have been.

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Roger Griffith: Bristol/

Large-scale council housing came into being through the 1919 Addison Act with a vision to build homes 'fit for heroes' returning after the First World War.

Over time, this vision evolved into one of providing homes that would be a sanctuary for people needing to build – or rebuild – their lives and for those on lower incomes looking for affordable rents. Council housing was a lifeboat for my mother and me from the mid-1970s until the mid-1990s.

After her divorce, my mother chose to move to Bristol. We lived in one room in a house of multiple occupation in Easton for over a year in 1975/76 and shared a bed that was no more than a big piece of foam on the floor. Mum's efforts to gain more secure and stable accommodation were eventually successful. We were offered a council flat on the top floor of a three-storey block without a lift, on a 99 percent white working-class housing estate on the outskirts of Bristol in Lawrence Weston. Mum didn't drive, we were miles from friends and our black culture. My mum – not one of life's complainers – got a job in nearby Shirehampton and made the best of our new environment.

Aged 11, I befriended an older girl at Lawrence Weston Comprehensive School who was also dating the local hardman. I was not untouchable, but I did now have someone to watch over me as no one messed with 'Sally'. My quick wits meant I made a range of friends from different backgrounds. You could count the number of black families on the estate on one hand. I forged friendships with one family through Colin White and we became each other's best-man at our respective weddings. Another friend, Tony 'Pilch' Pearce, is now a teacher in Brighton, a place we then only knew through our Subbuteo football teams.

Due to my mother's insistence I addressed all my friends' parents as 'Mr' or 'Mrs'. This meant I often got invited to 'tea', something my West Indian upbringing had no reference of but I intrinsically knew was an important occasion. I was always grateful for the cakes and sandwiches that would've sustained any cricketer at Lords. While I played with their children, these various parents would fill the gaps in the void left by the rest of my family being more than 120 miles away in London. We lived without fear of life's

Roger Griffith revisiting where he used to live in Lawrence Weston, 2019 (photo by Stacie Flynn).

everyday dangers. Soon we had a tight gang of kinship rather than terror. We fought, argued, laughed and cried together. Whenever one of our brood got into trouble, we took the musketeer approach. All for one and one for all.

The youth clubs, boxing gyms and a plethora of sporting clubs kept most of us away from the glue-sniffers, speed-freaks and junkies. At Avon Boys' Club, we honed not only our football skills, but also developed sporting prowess in table tennis, darts, snooker and many other games. We learned teamwork, camaraderie, sportsmanship and time-keeping, even if I'm still working on the last one. We were drilled in a never-give-up attitude, no matter how better the opposition or inclement the weather.

I left school without qualifications, unprepared for what life would want from me because I didn't have any expectations. I don't remember a single conversation about furthering my education, let alone visiting a university. This is an irony I begin most of my lectures with today, as I'm now a part-time lecturer with UWE Bristol. Poor schooling meant my brothers-in-arms and I were viewed as cannon fodder for the nearby industrial factories at Avonmouth that belched toxic waste into our living space.

We were catapulted without a safety net into an adult world. Packed pubs beckoned us to an oasis of adventure. It was solace for those seeking to escape the routine with alcohol, music or the chance of a sweet illicit encounter: to turn the daily grind into a physical one. An honest day's work

or a small loan from a mate could sometimes be found to alleviate rising debt as unemployment levels reached one in ten levels (three million), making prospects for the unskilled bleak. The pubs on the estates were homes to midweek darts, skittles and pool teams and pre- and post-match meeting places for local football teams if you weren't watching your beloved Rovers or City play away.

When he was a young boy, Marvin Rees and his sister Dionne briefly became our downstairs neighbours. Their mother Janet, like mine, had been grateful for the sanctuary and safety of a council home – though not for the local abuse. Our mothers became lifetime friends and I'm still proud that the young boy I saw then is now the Elected Mayor of Bristol.

I was annoyed when my car was broken into for its stereo and belongings, devastated when I was burgled, pleased when security doors were introduced to stop drunken passers-by using the ground floor of our block as a toilet. I became a father at 18 and had years of unemployment as my life swung violently out of my control, much like the rest of the country. Around me, I watched predominately black housing estates like St Pauls, Toxteth and Tottenham – three miles from where I was born – rise up in flames and rebellion fuelled by the humiliating ritual of aggressive stop-and-search policing.

I miss the banter and camaraderie of life on the estate. It could be vicious yet have the most acerbic observational humour of the finest stand-up comedians. It certainly helped to build my character, sharp tongue and canny pragmatic skills in response to an array of insults and challenges. There were no safe spaces and this sink-or-swim approach to growing up is not recommended for the faint-hearted. Gossip was given verbally, not via text and, in this vital currency, key information was exchanged such as where the local suspected paedophile lived. Our resilience meant we drew up a verbal risk assessment and would take the long way around that spot lest the troll come out to ply us with cheap alcohol or worse.

We walked or cycled everywhere, using today's quaint relics such as telephone and post boxes as landmarks. As I grew older, I became more aware of the ritual racist abuse. I recall one vicious attack that took place when I was alone at a bus stop, which left me physically and mentally scarred. It was carried out by two assailants who shouted 'Nigger' at me, individuals who hated what they didn't understand. I was lucky, I got up: Stephen Lawrence in similar circumstances did not.

Survival skills were honed over many skirmishes with a range of authority figures that were coming into my life. When my mum moved, I had the right to continue to rent our flat.

Living next door to one of the largest ports in the country, stolen goods were in ready supply. Our estate was full of its own Del Boy clones and dealers trying to make a living. Televisions, pirate videos, fake goods, drugs

or whatever you required could be delivered to your front door for the right price without you having to leave your home. Nobody, however, was going to give any public ratings, because talking to anyone beyond your circle or crew was forbidden. Inevitable adolescent tensions appeared in our gang and, like many boybands, we split up.

One of my local pubs, The Penpole Inn, like other pubs that acted as social clubs across the country, has disappeared as we now suggest a 'Netflix and chill' instead of a rallying cry of 'Cider I up, landlord!'

Loyalty, straight-talking and a pragmatic no-nonsense approach to life are values I learned from living on that estate and still hold today. These values were identical to those I inherited from my family who were part of the Windrush Generation. When they arrived, they didn't get homes for heroes, just signs that read 'No Blacks. No Irish. No Dogs'. Excluded from council lists, some 'parderned' together in informal cooperatives to buy their own homes so they could make a major contribution to Britain after the Second World War.

I went to evening classes in secret, self-taught myself about my black culture, gained confidence, discovered who I was and dedicated the rest of my life to become all that I could be. I chose to 'move out' as a career beckoned belatedly at age 25. In addition, circumstances and maturity changed me from an estranged father to a lone parent caring for my son and a fresh start was demanded. More irony came as I became a trainee housing officer in Hartcliffe for my landlord Bristol City Council in 1991. I turned my life of living in council housing into an 18-year career, rising to the rank of senior housing manager before redundancy in 2009.

Clint Eastwood was our Hollywood hero back then and I describe my time in Lawrence Weston as 'the Good, the Bad and the Ugly'. The reality for a skinny, small, black kid on the brink of adolescence without immediate family or friends meant life was tough, but it was also the making of this man.

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Natalie Bloomer: Stevenage/

The transformation of Stevenage into Britain's first new town in the late 1940s was the result of big thinking and big investment.

New estates, made up mostly of council housing, were designed to encourage a sense of community and provide everything that newcomers to the town would need. The idea was to create areas with good houses, good schools and good local services for working-class people moving out of London.

By the time I was born there in 1982, these estates were well-established. Our family didn't have much back then; our most valuable possession was a sky-blue Ford van that my dad used for various jobs. But what we did have was a safe and secure home. Something many people can't say today.

Our house sat in the middle of a row of other council houses. At the end of the street was a park and a local authority-run play centre, where I spent most of my time. A doctor's, dentist, church, row of shops, pub and primary school were all within a ten-minute walk. Everything we needed was right there.

I knew the estate like the back of my hand. A system of underpasses and cycle tracks means that you can walk around most parts of Stevenage without ever crossing a road. This meant that as children we were out playing from a very young age. My memories of the summer holidays are of one child after another running in and out of my house, or of me running in and out of theirs.

The sense of community that the town's planners had hoped for certainly existed. I never felt any shame about living on a council estate. It was just normal. It felt like most of the town was made up of council houses and almost all of my friends lived in a home similar to mine.

People in our area did all types of jobs. When I was very young, my dad did a bit of hairdressing, set up a dating agency (he was even best man for one couple he got together), worked at John Lewis and eventually got a job writing NIBs (news in brief) for the local newspaper. I'm still not sure how he landed that job, but he was determined to make the most of the opportunity. He sent off for a journalism course that he could study at home

and turned our shoe/gas meter cupboard into a makeshift office. I'd often pop in to slot 50p into the chunky metal meter to keep the gas on and there he would be sat, amid all the shoes, reading his books.

He went on to become news editor of the paper and trained my mum to be a part-time features writer. It was around this time that my parents decided that, like so many people around them, they would buy our house under the Right-to-Buy rules. A few years later we moved away from Stevenage and into the first non-council house any of us had lived in. But like any good working-class story, things weren't all smooth sailing. By then my parents were freelancing and the soaring interest rates of the early 1990s made it increasingly hard for them to make the mortgage repayments. Before long, we returned to council-house living and although my dad continued to write in his spare time, my parents went back to doing reliable jobs which paid the bills rather than the journalism that they had loved.

When people talk of their childhoods on a council estate, they often speak of having had a desire to escape. I never had that urge. In fact, as soon as

Natalie Bloomer, Stevenage, early 1980s (author photo).

I moved out of home at 17, I put my name down for my own council house. The problem was that by then the amount of social housing in England was dwindling fast and you had to be in emergency need to stand any real chance of being housed. Despite working for the minimum wage for many years, I was not seen as an emergency case and instead was forced to rent privately.

Although all my family still lives in council or housing association homes, it has been 20 years since I have, and I can honestly say that I have never experienced the same sense of community that I did as a child in the 1980s.

Today, with soaring levels of homelessness, there is a lot that could be learned from new towns like Stevenage. They might not have been the prettiest or most cultured places, but they provided safe and secure housing for families and gave people a foundation on which to build their lives. My dad wouldn't have had the time or energy to train to be a journalist if he had been fighting to keep a roof over our heads.

Right now, there are thousands of children stuck living in B&Bs and hotels waiting for a permanent home. What does that teach them about their self-worth? About their future prospects? I recently spoke to a woman who was living in appalling conditions in a flat in South London. She said: 'I've always told my daughter that if she works hard, she can achieve anything. I'm not sure I can tell her that anymore.'

When my parents bought our council house, they believed it would be replaced with another; we now know that never happened. In Stevenage, council housing stock has dropped from around 30,000 in the 1980s to around 8,000 today. This saddened my family greatly and my dad always said that buying the house was one of his biggest regrets.

Today, more than a million people are currently stuck on council-house waiting lists and right across the country people are struggling to make ends meet because of the increasing cost of private rent. A similar vision to the new towns of the 1940s and 50s would go a long way towards tackling the crisis. All that is needed is the political will.

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Janice Galloway: Saltcoats/

Recalling the house I grew up in isn't difficult: in that way domestic space does with children, the compactness of the rooms and the tiny back garden spring immediately to mind.

My memories are more snapshotic than filmic – related to atmosphere and the sensations of the moment than anything else – but those fragments are filled with scent, sound and startling sensory detail. Between the ages of one year and 20, I lived in that same house, a modern-build in Wellpark Road, Saltcoats, twice.

The first time, I came with a full set of parents. I wore pull-on leathery baby shoes and nappies and had never seen my sister Nora. I knew she existed, but since she had already run away to Glasgow to marry someone without letting anyone know where she had gone, only from telling rather than from seeing her. What I recall clearly was Dad being drunk. Dad throwing the pot of dinner my mother had made for our tea, and seeing it turn in the air as it flew over a wall and was lost forever.

Mum putting Dad to bed, watching the man next door's pigeons flying up in a grey-white cloud every time my mother opened the back door to take out washing, and learning to plant potatoes. Sensory or practical things. And Mum, in the kitchen and alone save for me most days, saying every day that our home was 'a catch'.

We lived close to the railway station, after all. If our proximity to the sea caused the windows to coat with salt in windy weather, our town was lively in summer, when Glasgow tourists arrived to sit on the sand hoping to catch tiny fish in rock pools. Glasgow people had a single week of holiday, my mother said. And where they came was here. It was a source of pride.

What she mentioned as little as possible was Dad. And my 18-years older sister who had run away. Grateful for small mercies, my mother placed her love and trust into the house. The house would see us all right.

Before long, of course, she gave up on the house's power to keep life under control and packed a bag in an attempt to run away with me one evening, hopefully before Dad came home. That hope did not pay off. He caught us

Janice Galloway sitting between her sister and mother at 23a Wellpark Road, Saltcoats, early 1960s (author photo).

on the very verge of escape and locked her outside where she cried, and all I could do was look out and see her doing it. But things slowed down. Things always did. And when Dad fell asleep on the rug, as he often did, she got me to post the key outside and we bolted. She had found a single room above a doctors' surgery where we were allowed to stay by said doctors in return for cleaning the surgery and waiting room by night, and simply keeping quiet by day. Some string tied on to a dish towel made me an apron so I looked the part. 'They're getting two cleaners for nothing', she said. 'We're a bargain.'

The attic room wasn't much more than a double cupboard, but the share of back-green, washing line and an outside toilet won her over. Before long, however, my runaway sister turned up at the door, having left her husband and baby behind, to insist she should live here, too. There was an argument but my sister won. She was that type. Thereafter, we were three, with one mattress in front of the fire and a tiny space to cook in and wash dishes. After a year of this (and Nora bringing boyfriends home during the day when Mum was out working), we finally moved back to the place we had escaped and settled back in. It was safer now, Mum said. Not only that, but we had two bedrooms (my sister had one to herself while me and Mum shared), a living room, indoor bathroom and a kitchen with a cooker. We had two strips of grass outside and, just in time, were close to the school I was due to attend. We got it back because Dad had died, she said when I asked. We were – she shook her head – damned lucky.

That luck also gave us more than one window. It gave us an indoor toilet and a tiny back-green where washing hung out to dry instead of being

draped on the windowsill. That our modest council home was 'modern', even if the space inside was tight, was something to be proud of. As if these things were not enough, we were near an Italian café that sold ice-cream made by Italians who stayed on after the war and made gelato to their own recipe. Small children walked to school alone in those days and sometimes neighbours waved as they stood at their windows, polishing the glass. Those same women would be there when I came back, my schoolbag trailing on the concrete paving, ready to ask after my mother and encourage me to stick it at school.

At weekends, I could dig in the thin runnel of soil outside the back door, eventually learning to plant potatoes, cabbages or carrots. I was allowed to weed the thin border where Mum had planted roses, which blossomed near sprays of geraniums and phlox, and sat staring at Mr Greer next door's pigeon loft, a whole barn full of birds testing their wings, coo-rooing at all hours of the day and, by some magic, never flying away completely. And my mother, at last, returned to being a woman with privacy and her own door key. All we had left behind was a rabbit hutch, she said. We'd be fine now.

Actually, we weren't that fine in the end, but we knew something important. We knew we were entitled to live here and have the key to our own door. We knew we could choose to paint the front door any colour we liked – it became my job from the age of ten – and watch TV if we weren't so noisy that the sound carried to the folk upstairs. Over time, I could even play a beat-up piano someone gave us from 4.30pm when I got back from school to 5.15pm, when neighbours were coming home from work. And – extraordinary thing – the people that lived nearby knew me by name.

It was not bliss but it was – as promised – damn lucky. I still know it now. That house was the remaking of my mother. And me? I recall every detail.

I still play the piano.

Janice Galloway is an author of novels, short stories, poetry and non-fiction, as well as collaborative works with sculptors, painters, musicians, typographers, photographers and videographers.

Lynsey Hanley: Chelmsley Wood/

The late geographer Doreen Massey could have been looking inside my mind when she wrote that 'much of life for many people, even in the heart of the first world, still consists of waiting in a bus shelter with your shopping for a bus that never comes'.

Rarely has a single quote summed up so closely, and so humanely, the experience of living on one of the many peripheral council estates built in Britain throughout the twentieth century.

Massey grew up in Wythenshawe, a vast 1920s estate in south Manchester modelled on the early-twentieth-century garden city movement, while Chelmsley Wood, where I grew up, was a purpose-built estate just outside the city boundaries of Birmingham. When built in the late 1960s, it flattened a bluebell wood – the eponymous Chelmsley, a fragment of the ancient Forest of Arden – and gobbled greenbelt land as far as the law and public outrage would allow.

When I moved there with my parents, I was 20 months old and the estate had just entered its second decade of existence. It didn't feel new but it did feel quiet and empty. Nearly 60,000 people were hidden in there, making the estate feel like an efficient filing cabinet. Yet when we first met, I would tell my (then to-be) husband stories that seemed to focus on moments in which the estate appeared colourful, even picaresque.

Still relatively fresh off the coach, having only left for university in London a few years earlier, I'd tell him about the van that parked outside our house every Friday evening to serve fish and chips from its back door. The sweetie van and the pop man, who delivered cherryade once a week and gave us 10p for every bottle we returned. These were moments of action and the sudden presence of others: moments when everybody's doors would suddenly fling open for ten minutes before closing again to drink and eat in private.

It's odd to think that public housing could deliver such private lives and there are two possible reasons for this. The first is that the people who were

allocated a house or a flat on the estate by the city council were desperate for some privacy, having lived shoulder-to-shoulder for generations in tenements and back-to-backs, with lodgers and multiple siblings and front doors you could never close for fear of being thought snobbish. Families were given a home they could call their own, even if they didn't own it.

The second, sadder, possibility is that because the estate I grew up on was built from scratch and filled with people who had come from all over the city, it felt less a community than a vast group of people thrown together: a colony built on suspicion and homesickness. Unlike a town or a village, the estate, like so many others built in Britain over the course of the last century, didn't grow organically, but was prepared to order like a recipe. The ingredient that was missing was a sense of home and a sense of ownership of our surroundings.

It would be a cliché, but nonetheless a fitting one, to describe council estates as the Cinderellas of British housing, and their inhabitants frozen into a way of living and being that, by and large, they never chose for themselves. Council housing has only recently, due to a prolonged crisis in housebuilding and housing affordability, become as covetable as it was in the early years of Britain's mass council housing programme. For decades, by contrast, property was sold from government downwards, not only as a democratic right but as a ticket to full citizenship. The former you were given or put into, and the latter you chose – which, in a country that covets the buying and selling of little patches of land, had the power to define and determine your social and economic status.

Yet that wasn't always the case. Nye Bevan, the first post-war housing minister who combined his brief with founding the National Health Service, sought to recreate the social mix of the Welsh village life he grew up with by insisting that the New Jerusalem could only be built from the finest materials. If council houses were of sufficiently good quality, he argued, the whole nation would want to live in them, not just the poor. He sought out local stone, provided for two toilets – one upstairs, one downstairs – and insisted on huge gardens for all new council housing.

The trouble was, innumerable voters with growing families had been left either homeless or badly housed by the war. They voted him and the Labour government out because his focus on quality wasn't getting the job done fast enough. If that hadn't happened, and the Conservatives hadn't won the 1951 election on the promise of millions of new council homes, we might now be living in a very different society. Harold Macmillan, the housing minister of the early 1950s, trounced Bevan's point that a good-quality housing stock meant a more equal share for all in the nation's future prosperity. Instead, he built houses quickly and cheaply because his voters wanted them right away. He didn't argue with them because he believed that council tenants, nearly all of them, would one day become homeowners. A council house was no longer an integral part of the New Jerusalem but a mere stop-gap on the way to individual ownership.

Seeing council housing differently to other forms of housing – privately-owned or privately-rented – meant that architects, planners and ministers could play around with the form in order to squeeze out as many dwellings as possible from the money and space available. The thought of how many tower blocks he'd sanctioned that day thrilled a young Keith Joseph, the Conservative housing minister of the early 1960s who went to bed counting, instead of sheep, the number of planning applications he'd approved.

Conservatives believed that those who bought their homes from the council formed a new affluent working class who shared little in the way of lifestyles and values with the people they left behind – people who, they believed, could be looked down upon because they had no ability or desire to turn their home into a pot of money. The fact that many of us, eventually, move at least some way up the economic scale gives us a chance to blame the ones who don't. Even now, petty snobbery is nowhere more alive than in the realm of who is housed where, as has been shown in the indefensible use of 'poor doors' for social housing tenants in London, disbarring them from using communal gardens and from entering apartment blocks through the front reception area.

Yet there is now, I believe, a window of opportunity to fundamentally rewrite a series of tired popular narratives about the role of place in the formation of our personal and communal identities. Places, like the one where I grew up and where Doreen Massey formed the insights that made her such a valuable and much-missed geographer. New council housing, once again built directly by local authorities who have formed their own municipal building companies, is springing up around the country – still in far-too-small numbers – giving us the chance to reassess the damage caused over many decades by prioritising the needs and desires of homeowners over those who rent. Perhaps it's not that people on estates like ours have been 'left behind' by social and economic change. Maybe the problem has always been not that the bus left without us but that the bus never showed up in the first place.

Lynsey Hanley's books include Estates*, a mix of memoir about growing up in council housing and social history. She is a regular contributor to the* Guardian*, the* Financial Times *and the* London Review of Books *blog, and is a visiting research fellow at Liverpool John Moores University.*

John Savage: London/

The death of my father soon after the end of the Second World War – a drawn-out process from the outcome of his Royal Navy service – pushed my mother and her two children into a return to her own parents' home in the bomb-damaged slums of Woolwich, South London. My brother was eight and I was young enough to have retained no recollection of my dad at all.

The house was a private rental in what must have been a vast private tenancy arrangement. It was made up from one half of a converted eighteenth-century inn, located about 200 yards from the gates of the Woolwich Dockyard. It had no electricity, was lit by gas mantles and the only water supply was a cold tap with an earthenware sink housed in a lean-to addition at the rear of the building. It had an outside water closet 100 feet or so from the back door. The winters of the late 1940s were very cold and ice on the inside of bedroom windows was a normal feature. General heating was from a coal-fired kitchen range and infrequent coal fires in the hallowed 'front room' on special occasions. It was the time of smog before the Clean Air Act was introduced. The winter atmosphere was poisonous because the coal used throughout the district was of low quality. Serious chest infections were a mark of our lives and I live with the effects to this day.

There was an interesting moment when our electric public tramway system was finally dismantled. The roads on which the tramcars ran were paved with wooden blocks that were waterproofed and preserved by the liberal coating of coal tar. I assume now that the use of wood served to somewhat reduce the noise made by the steel wheels running on tracks at all hours of the day and night. The coated blocks were stripped from the road and left in piles by the pavement for anyone to retrieve as free fuel for that winter's fires. It was a generous gesture and I made many wheelbarrow runs to satisfy my grandmother's insistence that we should have our share. It was, I like to believe, the burning of this foolish bounty that pushed the legislation over the hill.

Blocks of St Mary's Tower Flats, Woolwich, viewed from Frances Street, 2013 (John Boughton).

In the mundanities of day-to-day life, the lack of any realistic facilities combined with a young boy's general reluctance made washing oneself an infrequent occurrence. However, a strict and unavoidable fortnightly Saturday night ritual was maintained. A galvanized tin bath, taken from its hanging place in the outside alleyway and placed in the kitchen in front of the cooking range, was filled with hot water from numerous kettles. Care was required to avoid burning one's leg on the fire-side of the bath.

I paid dearly, mostly with embarrassment, for my lack of hygiene, particularly on one occasion when I was bent over in front of my whole class in a wintertime gym session and beaten with a slipper because my feet were black with grime. It was presumably meant to teach me to change my ways and was yet another example for me of thoughtless learning imposed at my grammar school. The sanctimonious middle-class teacher presumably had no idea that we had had no running water at home for many days and he probably would not have cared.

We were scheduled for rehousing under the slum clearance scheme but were very far down the queue. It was odd seeing the gradual disappearance of families and friends from around us, moved onto great new housing

estates like those further out at Kidbrooke, perhaps only three miles away but, in reality, totally removed from all old origins. The well-intentioned rehousing broke the proximities and traditions of many families that had hitherto lived in the urban villages of the Dockyards and Woolwich Arsenal area for many generations in an atmosphere of retained Dickensian life that was to be lost forever. Just across the road from my grandmother's house there was a vast low-roofed open-fronted smithy where I frequently watched the giant of a leather-aproned man shoeing horses for the many brewers' drays and Co-op milk carts that remained a vital element of post-war transportation. It could have been any rural village scene. I remember the drama of a horse slipping on ice at the top of the hill near my primary school and the milk-float crashing on to its side. There were hundreds of broken bottles and a deluge of milk on the hill.

The old house was finally equipped with electricity in 1954, too late for us to have viewed the coronation of Queen Elizabeth the Second in the previous year even had we been able to afford a television. I was 13 years old when we reached the front of the rehousing queue and moved just a quarter of a mile up the hill of the milk-float incident into the second floor of a block of council flats. It was one of four 13-storey buildings perched on the slope. My mother, brother and I were placed in a two-bedroomed apartment and the council put my grandmother, then widowed, in a single-bedroomed unit with its front door exactly across the landing from ours; a small but thoughtful piece of facilitation for continuing family interdependence.

Our flat had a bathroom with instant hot water supplied by a gas-heated Ascot boiler. The bathroom contained a lavatory (inside) and the hall and living room were heated by underfloor electric heating that drew power only in the night-time hours. The authorities had also provided a community laundering area with washing machines and driers for use by the residents of the four blocks, together with a play area with a charming little castle atop a brick-paved mound for the children to play in and be safely watched. This alone transformed the humdrum and often brutal experience of the weekly wash-day for so many women, but my mother considered it inappropriate to have our linen on view for our neighbours to see. I was despatched each Saturday morning to the launderette in the centre of the town. It took me a good few weeks of boring rotational viewing before I learned that, for two-bob of my hard-earned pocket money, I could pay the lady attendant to handle the process while I went off to the other new innovation, frothy coffee at the coffee bar where the young strived to be intellectual by playing chess.

As an odd aside, I learned to appreciate shiny, well-presented things. My uncle, an ex-professional artilleryman, taught me how to bull (polish) my school shoes until I could see my face in the toes; a habit that has persevered to this day. With this preference guiding me, I discovered that the hard matt-brown Marley tiles of the flooring throughout our new palace could also be polished to a mirror-like finish. It remained one of my tasks to maintain the gloss until I left home for marriage.

Mercifully, and at a very timely period of my life and the onset of serious puberty, I had become regularly clean and have never lost the delight found in the availability of instant hot water. It was a long time still before I discovered the added benefits of deodorant and that was only after a painful rejection by one of my first girlfriends.

Fifty years on, I visited, outside, the high-rise that propelled me into a more civilised and comfortable existence. The blocks looked rather forlorn and I vowed not to pass that way again. The slum clearance process was vital, but many good, less-damaged houses were swept aside along with those uninhabitable from war damage and neglect. Great historical neighbourhoods were bleached clean and deep family and neighbourly ties were severed.

There was, of course, an urgency of need but it is a sadness that, with more imagination and strategy, so much more could have been achieved and we might not now be seeing the relatively early dilapidation and destruction of so much of that post-war reconstruction.

If only the organisers of our lives could look farther over the horizon. It is after all only one life that we get. War and calamity may be unavoidable but slack thinking should be eschewed. The after-effects, like those of the great smog, blight the individual forever.

John Savage was the Executive Chairman of the Bristol Initiative and Chamber of Commerce and has worked for more than 40 years running a variety of businesses and charitable organisations. He is a former High Sheriff for Bristol.

Cash Carraway: London/

Temporary Prison

Let me tell you about my time in prison.

Not the HMP sort. It's a different sort of...
jail.

Not the barred window kind.
Or the 6ft cell with bunks type.
Or handmade shivvies hastily constructed in a pointless revenge situation sort- of- kind- of- thing.

This. Is. Not. Dramatic. Televised. Incarceration.
Not: Orange is the New Black.
Not: Prisoner on Cell Block H.
Not: Bad Girls.
Not eating your dinner from a plastic tray as a woman who has been convicted of killing her own kids *diarrhoeas* into the exposed toilet next to your chewing mouth.

This prison doesn't include solitary confinement.
Parole boards.
Suicide watch.
Time off for good behaviour.
Rehabilitation.

But you're still trapped.
There is no escape.
Me and my daughter had been sentenced for up to 12 years in temporary housing.

Biddy, she was six when we went to our first hostel, she was counting on her fingers as she said –
"Temporary is ALL the years until I'm an adult."

You'd get less for murder.

***

The council were chucking women and kids out of the city:
Enfield – if you were... *lucky*.
Birmingham or Grantham or Retford if your debating skills weren't strong enough to argue your case to stay within a 100 mile radius of your support networks.
The woman in front of us – she couldn't speak a word of English but she cried when she heard Peterborough.
Everyone understands what Peterborough means.

I said to our housing officer; please don't send us out of London, I've lived here all my life, we- just- wouldn't- cope, our lives are here, we have nothing but these bin bags but everything we have is HERE, we'll take somewhere small, somewhere *terrible* if we can stay in London. Even if it's the worst flat in the city we'll take it.

The housing officer had something close by that was so bad its last three tenants had begged to be removed from the housing register.

I'll take that challenge, I said.

She printed off the address.

It was on the Churchill Gardens' Estate, Pimlico.

***

Number 11 Lenthall House.

Appearing before me like heaven does to a recently exploded suicide bomber –
The most beautiful council estate we'd ever seen.
Grade II listed, crammed with working class pride.
Clean and multi-cultural, a celebration of vibrancy, diversity and everything great about London.
32 imposing blocks lining the River Thames.

We're standing at the door. Belongings in bin bags. Keys in hand.
The centre of our city.
Promising a daily dose of poison fumes to hit up our urban veins.
Front row seats at the brutality of life interrupting *crass* glass tower regentrification south of Vauxhall Bridge.

When you live in a place like this you can do anything.
Even IF you're an estate kid.

...You know the stories you hear about murderers playing games consoles in their cells all day?
...You remember the article about the rapist with the wide screen TV?
...You recall all that talk about paedophiles sleeping soundly with goose down feather duvets?

Well, this small studio flat on the Churchill Gardens Estate is me and Biddy's luxury prison.
Our PlayStation. Our 96-inch plasma. Our frivolous, comfortable hotel bedding keeping us warm.
The one thing people like us don't deserve.
Yet are allowed thanks to the invention of social housing.
Surrounded by opportunity; walking distance to the best gallery.
Good schools. Fancy restaurants. A stroll to Belgravia.

The locks were
busted.
We didn't need the key after all! Let's do the tour.
Left of the door –
A bathroom;
toilet seat stained in a way only the darkest parts of your head could imagine.
Its rim housing the germs
of *all* its temporary tenants over the past 12 months, 2 years and more.
The bath, black. The bath, cracked. No way to soak and relax without rectal abrasions but thank god for our landlord who is lending his old RTB council flat back to the council for a mere £465 A WEEK (he'd installed shower taps so we'd only be cursed with foot cuts.)
To the right: The kitchen.
You- wouldn't- want- to- eat- there.
Regardless of how many times you bleached the counters they remained wet and greasy like the dick pic sent from a balding banker post drunken Tinder swipe.

There
was
a
washing machine – a treat in a place like this.
A wet lump of underwear remained. I...
investigated.
A Primark label providing *insight* to 11 Lenthall's former tenants who'd fled straight after vomiting against the living room walls.
Boy's pants aged 3-4.
Woman's knickers size 14.
A mother and her son.

Where did they go?
I left them inside.

In the almost year we were at 11 Lenthall – we *never* used that washing machine.

***

I met an Arab at the Launderette on Lupus Street.
30 years he'd lived on the estate.
He asked us if we liked it.
"We love it, we hope we can stay."
He asked us about the flat.

11 Lenthall.

Biddy, she was seven at the time, she said;
"*Even my own bum dump is too clean for that flat.*"

11 Lenthall. It's disgusting. We're thinking of escaping. Temporary housing is killing me. I don't think I'm going to make it through this long stretch. A friend has offered to lend us the deposit for a private rental.

No. He said. Don't give up now.

As we waited for our clothes to wash he invited us to his flat at the top of Sullivan House.
He served peppermint tea and baklava on his peaceful balcony as we stared down our stoic acquaintance across the river: The Battersea Power Station.

Look at what you could have.

Escaping this prison would be a big mistake.
Serve your time.
Keep your head down.
When the council offer you a permanent tenancy take it.
... It will be somewhere bad.
It will be in the worst part of London.
Take the tenancy:
Top of a tower.
Crackheads sleeping outside your door.
Rape threats in the lift.
Take. The. Tenancy.
Do up the flat.
Paint the walls.
Lay some carpets.
Change the horrible taps.
Put up a lovely chandelier from Argos.

Then.
Once you've lived there for a year – you swap with another tenant. That's your get out of jail card. You can live wherever you want to live. Take your life back. Then you will be free.

He gave us hope.
We finished our tea.

We stayed on the
list –
hoping we'd
remain in Churchill Gardens
but –
the guy who'd bought 11 Lenthall... under RTB and
rented it *back* to the council
wanted us out so he could do it up and sell it on for a
seven-figure sum.

The council. They moved us OUT of London.

Number 24 – The Cockpits Estate, Kent.

Crouching under us like sad gimp flashing at a bus stop.

We got our offer.
Early release.
Our permanent council flat.

50 miles from London.
Take it or leave.

What choice did we have?

***

Let me tell you about the racist.

Not like your grandma in 1987 racist. Not like 70s sitcom racist.
Not like Benedict Cumberbatch 'coloured' racist. Not even Morrissey racist.
I'm talking racist, racist. Proper racist.
Racist playing free and easy with the N word, the P word and all the anti-Semetic words. Twitter campaigns behind anonymous faceless accounts demanding freedom of speech racist. Pulling the scarf of a Muslim teen on the tube racist. Pissing on the steps of a Synagogue racist. Racist like hunting for black boys at night racist. Shooting dirty looks at a mixed-race baby racist. Kicking in the head of a homeless Romanian woman as she begs for spare change racist. *That* kind of racist. Cheering Tommy Robinson outside court racist. Shouting in a megaphone at an EDL march racist. Refusing to watch Spike Lee films racist. Wanting to choke a Lithuanian prostitute racist...

He accosted me on the way to The Cockpits.

Said he knew the estate well.
Said his grandma had lived there.
Said it was a safe place.

Said no blacks or Muslims. Not like London.
Said I was *welcome* because I was white.

He parted with some casual advice:
"If you bring any black men to your flat, there'll be shit through your letterbox."

The Cockpits. It's hell out here.
The resting place of UKIP posters.
St George flags flying off the shoulders of Kent bodied men on mobility scooters.
A hateful poverty dumping ground in the middle of the countryside.
We are nothing but fly tipped humans.
We are the unmarked bodies ripe for landfill.
No supermarkets. No culture. No buses. No escape.
Just racists. And a post office that closes on a Monday.

Biddy, she was eight by then. She turned to me and said.
"If where we were before was prison then this place is death row"

Social cleansing is... exile.

You'd get less for murder.

Cash Carraway is an award-winning playwright and a spoken word artist.
Skint Estate*, her memoir about life in the gutter, was published in 2019.*

Cash Carraway, 2019 (photo by Becky Glover).

Durre Shahwar: Cardiff/

My experience of being working-class is a mixture of social housing and migration. My family was one of the last to benefit from the Right-to-Buy scheme that was finally abolished in Wales in January 2019.

I don't remember the announcement of the abolition itself, or its coverage in the news, only my dad's urgency that we buy the council house that we had been living in for the past nine years or so while we had the chance. He was very aware that this was our only chance to have a home that wasn't temporary for the first time in nearly 20 years. Since we had moved to the UK, we had occupied five different houses, moving between government and Home Office authorities and local councils. The nomadic lifestyle is less appealing when not pursued by choice but as a necessity to escape religious persecution and stay alive.

Today, I look out at my parents' house and feel a sense of relief at being able to have a family home that belongs to us on official deeds and documents. Something I only realised that many of my peers had throughout their entire life as I got older. Yet still, that sense of relief is always accompanied by a mild anxiety surrounding 'what if?' scenarios where things go wrong. Things such as job losses, illnesses, political tensions, Brexit and its ruinous social and economic effects on the UK, and on Wales in particular. I will never forget the months when we received notices about rent arrears in bold, red letters threatening eviction if not paid by a certain date. The working-class anxiety never quite leaves you.

When my family first moved into the house that we now own, we would find cat faeces deposited in our front garden for many months. This, accompanied by the disappearance of two doormats, and a ball thrown with such strength and intention that it cracked our living room window, made us realise that we weren't quite welcome. I still often suspect that we aren't. But at least such incidents no longer occur. At the time, Llanedeyrn was one of the least racially diverse areas in Cardiff, and still is, comparatively. Most BAME communities are populated in the centre of the city or by the docks, due to Cardiff's trade and coal mining industry. Yet despite all this, my dad would continue to distribute Season's Greetings and Christmas cards in December and sweets at Eid. Over time, we started receiving more and more cards back. Dad's perseverance and the carrying on of South Asian neighbourly formalities had paid off.

Llanedeyrn, Cardiff photographed by the author's brother, Safeer Mughal.

Social housing and the Right-to-Buy schemes have received many criticisms over the years, usually from those who had the privilege of never needing to access such schemes in the first place. Regularly, the right-wing media, politicians and various public figures blame migrants for lack of available social housing. We grew up conscious of having to prove our worth through our contribution to society, as well as a heavy embarrassment. The demonisation of migrant communities is done with misleading facts. Statistics published in 2015 indicated that 91 percent of social housing is allocated to UK-born citizens. In fact, most migrant families are likely to rent privately due to the high restrictions on who can and cannot access social housing. Even if migration was controlled, it would have very little effect on the issue.

For my family, social housing was the somewhat patchy safety net that allowed us to grow up, study, work and live. My siblings and I were socialised into a weird amalgamation of cultures in our formative years. We were regularly mistaken for being middle-class as we apparently projected supposed 'middle-class values'. One of these was getting educated above the level of bachelor degrees at Russell Group universities, thanks to Welsh Government bursaries and scholarships. Such misconceptions and stereotypes about working-class families sadly still exist, but it wasn't until a few years after university that I really became more aware of them. I also began to realise the disparity between my peers whose parents were middle-class or from a working-class background like mine. There were kids whose parents would help them buy cars and houses in their mid-twenties and those who didn't, and the class culture between the two was strikingly different. I had less world knowledge and experience to share. I

only knew things I had learnt from books. Even among my working-class friends, I struggled to relate. None of them were helping their parents to buy a family house for everyone to live in like my siblings and I were. Something that would always fill me with a sense of pride, jealousy and frustration all at once.

Even today, when I search 'council house' on Twitter, I come across many tweets in which it is used as a slur or an insult. It reminds me of how I was always conscious of sharing photos that would give away our area in the background and the weird displacement I would feel returning home from university to our council estate cul-de-sac. To drafty windows, creaky floorboards and leaky taps in a house that was too small for all of us, where we shared bedrooms even after the age of 20. To streets where smashed glass bottles on pavements would linger for years and to walls mismatched with creeping fungal invasions.

The bus back home would wind past all the posh mansions and bungalows before taking the exit on the roundabout that marked the beginning of our area with its distinctive council houses. I would sit and dream about the occupants of these red-brick homes that seemed so still, silent and closed off compared to our area. As a writer, I still unashamedly dream of living in one of those when my neighbour's dog barks too loudly for too long or domestic arguments spill out into the street. But I think I would also miss the 'hello' nods of our neighbours every morning and the Christmas cards.

Durre Shahwar is a writer and co-founder of Where I'm Coming From, an open-mic that platforms under-represented writers in Wales. She is currently doing her PhD at Cardiff University and working towards her first book.

Llanedeyrn, Cardiff photographed by the author's brother, Safeer Mughal.

Mary O'Hara: West Belfast/

The day we got the keys, I burst into the house, darted through the kitchen, ran up the stairs and headed straight for the room at the end of the landing.

Out of breath, I opened the door, walked tentatively in and closed it behind me. Everything smelled new. The bath, white and glistening, was to the right, the sink straight ahead, and the toilet to the left beside a small radiator. I was amazed.

This was to be our family's first bathroom. The home we were leaving was a two-up-two-down Victorian terraced house in the lower Falls Road area of West Belfast with no central heating, no bathroom and riddled with damp. The toilet was outside in the yard. During the week we washed in the kitchen sink (not so much a kitchen as a makeshift scullery with a plastic corrugated roof) and every Saturday in a tin bath, filled laboriously with pots of boiling water from the stove and placed in front of the living room fire.

I was seven-and-a-half when we were told there was a new four-bedroom house for my parents and the six of us children to move into just a few streets away, which was where the process of demolishing slum housing had been going on. I remember the rush to the bathroom with absolute clarity as, never having encountered a lock like the one on the door before, I managed to trap myself it in and had to be extracted later.

Other things I remember: the aroma of naked wood and freshly applied plaster; lots of doors and built-in cupboards in which to store things; large windows; the excitement of a garden back and front; the small playground right outside the door with climbing bars; the partially finished houses nearby; the anticipation of the friends I would make and the things we would do in this place, which was filled with newly-planted trees in the streets and places to play.

In our old street, we played on large concrete bollards that blocked the bottom of the road to prevent attacks by paramilitaries using vehicles against the adjacent army barracks. A tall metal barrier lined at the top with barbed wire closed the street off at one end, right behind the bollards. It was constructed as Northern Ireland's Troubles unfolded. Our street was

situated in one of the areas most affected by the violence. The British army patrolled numerous times a day and, because the street had only one way in and out, it was impossible not to feel hemmed in by circumstance and structures.

In the weeks prior to moving to the new council estate, I'd heard my parents and neighbours talk with excitement about it – especially the women who were looking forward to central heating, decent kitchens and bathrooms – but I was too young to grasp the full context or political backdrop. What I soon came to understand was that the new estates springing up in and around Belfast in the mid-to-late 1970s were a response to poor housing, and also to the historical discrimination that meant the Protestant majority experienced favourable allocation of council housing while those from Catholic backgrounds were left behind. Thousands of families had also been displaced due to violence and sectarian intimidation related to the Troubles.

What I now know is that the rehousing process resulted in even greater segregation of the two communities and that this had longer term ramifications for sectarianism and division, including the emergence of 'peace lines' along what are called 'interface areas', where largely Catholic and Protestant working-class communities border one another. These walls remain a prominent feature of many Belfast communities today.

My early years living on our council estate included watching as a massive brick 'peace wall' was constructed across one perimeter. It was a security decision. There were frequently pitched battles between people on both sides of the divide; sometimes they involved shooting. Over time, however, other walls went up. Parts of the estate – which had felt open and accessible when we first moved in – were cordoned off by a series of smaller walls that made it difficult to enter or exit certain areas. Everyone talked about how it was a strategy to stop people escaping the army and police during a riot or other disturbance. When I returned to visit family and friends on the estate as a young adult, it was beginning to feel more like a containment area than a housing estate.

Troubles aside, growing up in the earlier years on a newly-built council estate when I did was, I imagine, not dissimilar in many ways to my counterparts elsewhere in the UK. There was the sense of a fresh start. There was a lot of outdoor play and everyone knew their neighbours. There was an implicit understanding that this was the kind of housing people *should* be able to live and raise their kids in – not the slum-like conditions we'd been used to. By the time we moved to our new house in 1977, Northern Ireland had the worst housing stock in the UK and possibly in Western Europe.

Life was tough for many people on our estate, not least because of soaring unemployment, but also the place had its own character – and characters – and a certain degree of resilience and pride. The humour was

caustic, cutting and ever-present. When I first saw the 1981 Bill Forsyth film *Gregory's Girl*, apart from making me laugh hysterically, it was like holding up a mirror to some of my own experiences. The scene where Gregory is leaving the house and there are bunches of toddlers scrambling around without any apparent supervision getting under his feet, the curious cast of characters hanging around the estate or at the chippy, the banter and the wit and the general sense of a place where people knew and greeted one another, are all familiar. I felt a similar affinity when I watched Jonathan Harvey's exceptional 1990s LGBTQ coming of age film *Beautiful Thing*, based on his play of the same name and set against the backdrop of a post-war London council estate.

Our estate, whose boundary started about a half mile from Belfast city centre, was dominated by two-storey family homes. There were some flats, although not many, and there were no properties taller than three storeys high. When we moved in there was a small football pitch, some playgrounds and green spaces with trees and shrubs that brought colour and nature to the streets, and some squares and cul-de-sacs. People who had a garden for the first time planted flowers and vegetables. A local shop sat at the centre.

Not far away on the other side of a major road was Divis Flats, another kind of estate. Even at an early age, my friends and I were aware that Divis was different. We were always glad that, even when the Troubles, economic deprivation and high unemployment of our community were taking their toll, we lived in a place of houses, with outdoor space rather than being 'cooped up', as my mother put it, in densely populated flats in poor conditions.

In my teens, as the estate began to lose its initial sheen and as I became more politically aware, the broader cultural attitudes towards council estates and the people who lived in them began to resonate. These were the Thatcher years, when the sale of council houses in England was fetishised and when it felt that to rent a council house rather than own a home was a sign of failure, 'dependency' or of a lack of ambition. I am certain that we internalised those judgements.

My experience of council housing is a deeply personal one and, to an extent, not a typical one, because of the particular circumstances of Northern Ireland. Nevertheless, over the years as a journalist writing on social affairs, I've been in and out of my fair share and met, interviewed or collaborated with people living on estates ranging from youth workers to former gang members and aspiring filmmakers.

There are myriad aspects to council estates and the experience of living on one, but something that is always front of my mind is the stigmatisation of people who live on them, and how the wider culture encourages this destructive tendency. The structures we inhabit and the immediate physical and cultural environment that surrounds us can leave deep impressions

but the stigma attached to people living on council estates can be especially potent. It can have a negative impact on our view of ourselves and our place in the world.

Terms like 'feral youth', 'underclass', 'sink estates' and 'chavs' have helped foster and reinforce powerful, demeaning and dismissive stereotypes about people who live on council estates, which can then be conveniently appropriated to bolster arguments that undermine the principle of providing social housing. We need to challenge these stereotypes as a matter of urgency.

During 2018 and 2019, I had the great good fortune to collaborate with young people from council estates in England who were creating work, including films, to upend unfounded perceptions of the people who live on them and to educate others on the reality of life as it is actually lived. Their voices and their ideas are, I believe, fundamental to any shift in the way we provide affordable public housing in the future. Ask any child what it feels like to move into a safe, clean and spacious home that they can't be kicked out of at a moment's notice and you will understand why finding an answer to the housing crisis that Britain faces but is yet to tackle is so critical.

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Xan Brooks: Frome/

At the age of nine I bundled my belongings in the back of my mother's second-hand Citroën and we barrelled out of the city for a fresh start in the west. What an adventure this was; I could barely contain my excitement.

At our backs was a tumbledown South London house that we had struggled to sell (officially due to subsidence, although this was estate agent code for being in a predominantly black neighbourhood). At our fronts was a tumbledown Frome cottage we finally couldn't buy (the survey said the whole place was on the brink of total collapse). So we were out in the world, my mum and me. We were winging it, roughing it, living on a prayer. Council housing was the net that caught us as we fell.

Kids live in the moment. All we see are the details and we're liable to misconstrue even those, reframing them to fit a narrative which bears only a passing resemblance to the truth. My life at the time felt curiously thrilling but entirely safe. If someone had pointed out that I was temporarily homeless, I would have hastened to set them straight. Of course we weren't homeless, we were simply between homes, crashing for a few months in the downstairs corridor of a friend's house in Somerset. If they had said we were poor, I'd have corrected that too. I had food to eat, books to read and a brand new asthma inhaler to suck on; all of which proved that we were doing fine, thanks. Insofar as I even considered such matters, I regarded my mother and me as wealthy, dashing adventurers; a welcome addition to any humdrum country town. Others – the majority – saw us differently. To them we were a head-spinning disaster, a burden to society. The jobless single mum and her skinny, sickly son.

What's clear to me now is that we had pretty much bottomed out. We spent three months sleeping in that downstairs corridor. We had insufficient funds to purchase a place of our own. One Friday in December 1979, my mum's plan was to collect me from school and then drive north through the weekend because she had heard that there were houses that way you could buy for £10k. Sometimes I wonder how this last trip would have gone. It may well have been an adventure too far. But it never happened because that same day she was shown what the local authority referred to as a

'housing unit' on the outskirts of Frome. 'It'll do us for six months,' she told me that night. We wound up living there for the next five years.

As it happened, our grand arrival in the winter of 1979 coincided with the high-water mark for council housing in the UK, when more than 40 percent of families rented their homes from the state. Not that I was aware of this at the time. Not that I was even entirely certain where this house had sprung from. We needed somewhere to live and, hey presto, here it was. That was how British society worked in those days. The government looked after drunks, little children and cash-strapped single mums.

Besides, these weren't the Brutalist council blocks of popular imagination but rustic bijou buildings recently saved from demolition. The housing unit turned out to be a customised Victorian stable, so small that school-friends used to joke that I slept on top of the cooker. From there we moved to a converted weaver's cottage, part of a larger estate of low-income housing up by the old print-works. The neighbourhood was a grid of picturesque terraced houses. It could have provided the backdrop for a period movie.

At the Victorian stable I'd propped a stepladder against the garden wall so as to more easily visit the children who lived in the house behind. I did not do this at the weaver's cottage. Next door lurked the Gallaghers, who had a reputation as the worst family in town, a band of bawlers and brawlers, constantly in and out of the nick. And yet either the Gallagher legend had been inflated or the walls were so thick that they dampened their volume, because in all the years we lived there we barely heard a thing. The only occasional nuisance was Gallagher Sr, the man of the house, who had a habit of coming home drunk of a night and mistaking our house for his own. On finding his key wouldn't fit, he'd hammer at the door, demanding to be let in. He once pushed past me without a word and set himself down in the armchair by the telly – at which point it felt almost rude to ask the man to leave.

It would be nice to report that our troubles instantly ended the moment we were scooped up by the council – except that this would be a sugar-coated lie. Gradually, as I grew older, I came to see us for what we were: not a pair of glamorous swashbucklers but a single-parent household on benefits, struggling to make ends meet in what was then a fairly conservative, traditional town. Life, I grew to realise, was not exciting but scary. We had no money, we had few prospects. But it wasn't all bad because what we had was a house. Pretty much everything in my childhood had turned out to be precarious, liable at any second to be blown away like topsoil. But this was okay because what we had was a house. It was there in the morning; it was there every night. And today, looking back, do you know what strikes me as the most quietly miraculous aspect of that chaotic, anxious time? The fact that the house was never an issue. The fact that I was able to take it for granted.

If (as has been exhaustively documented) a privileged background provides an air of entitlement, it follows that a disadvantaged one fosters the opposite. Insecure childhoods breed insecure adults. Lack of opportunity becomes our natural state. Even assuming we do well for ourselves – even assuming, against the odds, that we land the posh jobs – we'll most likely suffer from impostor syndrome. We fret that we're unqualified, illegitimate and about to be rumbled. We stare at our payslip and wonder if we're really worth it.

Too much insecurity, in other words, can hobble a person for life. But a single foothold can prove invaluable. That's what council housing was for me. It provided the foundation that might be used as a springboard. It made me proud of my status. It helped me to like who I was.

Relatedly, I think, council housing lifted me out of one family and made me part of another. No longer was I some rugged, inhaler-wielding individualist, riding shotgun with my mother, somehow outside of society. Now I was a member of a wider community: the council-house generation, the underdog crew. We were raw and untested and newly empowered. We went at things our own way, freestyle, like Saul Bellow's Augie March. And we figured that if decent housing was a birthright, well then, guess what, a decent job might be, too. Yes, the door is shut to the likes of us. Our key doesn't fit, probably never will. So bang with your fist until someone opens up. Sit yourself in the big armchair. Dare the bastards to throw you out.

Xan Brooks is an award-winning writer, editor and broadcaster. He was part of the founding editorial team of the Big Issue *magazine and an associate editor at the* Guardian*, specialising in film.*

Xan Brooks aged 11 (author photo).

Kerry Hudson: Scotland and England/

'Council estates were built to be a utopian housing solution, you know.' I've lost count of how many times I've heard versions of this well-intentioned statement after I've told someone how awful growing up in council estates can be.

I think it is because they don't want me to take it personally, how unfit for use many of those flats and houses were, how genuinely frightening it could be to walk from one side of the estate to another, how you would wake up and look out and see only extreme difficulty and the hopeless outlook of the forgotten and the disenfranchised.

Of course, I could say all of this to the well-intentioned person – who often has never lived on a council estate – but I rarely, almost never, do. The reason? Because to talk negatively about social housing is still largely taboo. Those who had places to sleep affordably – no matter how damp or dangerous or stricken with social problems – are meant to be grateful. Those who grew up in happy, well-kept estates, who stayed there long after they might have left, will cry out that you're a traitor.

Before I turned 16, I lived on eight different council estates, big and small, north and south, as well as homeless B&Bs, housing association flats and small private rentals designed for housing benefit recipients. Sixteen different homes, one for each year. Because we were constantly on the move and were usually seeking council housing from the unenviable position of being officially homeless, my single mum with two children in tow was often shuttled to the top of the housing list. But the lack of housing choice became even more acute for us and so we were usually put in the flat no one wanted, on the estates that would be no one's preference. Flats on the top floor with no working lift; ones by the communal bins for hundreds of people; a ground-floor flat with damp so thick I used to draw pictures in it with my finger while trying to sleep. Estates where rubbish was left to pile up, and crime, violence or drugs went unchecked. Estates always on the very edge of town and away from most amenities because, after all, where were we going? Not to work. And then, what money would we have to spend even if we could easily get to those amenities?

This is not to say that social housing didn't save us. Certainly, it was better than the B&Bs with communal showers and kitchens, shared with men with severe mental health or addiction problems. Or the private rental properties, where only the worst of the worst were available to those on housing benefit, and where there were actual mushrooms growing from the bathroom carpet, where we were constantly in fear of being evicted and where we received a 'top up' amount from our other meagre benefits for the privilege.

Compared to the alternative, social housing where we knew we would not be evicted, where the housing benefit would suffice, where if something went wrong with our flat we could ask for it to be fixed (even if it might take many months), was a better option by far.

So, I am grateful for those things. The problem is that as I got older I went into the wider world and came to understand how badly we had been failed by those who held the purse and power strings. That utopian dream of decent, affordable housing for all became a dystopian reality. Of course, you're welcome to disagree but then I'll ask you to tell me something, anything, more dystopian than watching 72 social housing tenants die in a tower of flames in the fifth richest city in the world, one that is home to 55 billionaires and more five-star hotels than any other city. Grenfell happened because the residents were poor, ignored and no one gave a shit.

It's easy to say we need more social housing stock, especially at a time when 72 – that number again, just different lives with different concerns and different outcomes – Conservative MPs voted against the 2016 housing bill to make 'rented properties fit for human habitation'.

But not all social housing is created equally. If we are to campaign for more social housing, let it be social housing which is fit for purpose, designed to be a home for a community of happy, productive citizens. Integrate it with the community and amenities, imagine not that the folk living there will be staying home all day watching *Cash In The Attic*, but that they will have jobs to go to, friends and family to see, purses full of cash that they want to spend in the high street. Imagine the children growing up on that estate will become your future politicians, doctors, broadcasters, artists and scientists – so make sure they can get to school safely, that they'll remain physically and mentally healthy, and that they like where they live so much that they will choose to stay and contribute to a community they are grateful for.

Why not ask every architect, policy maker and project planner to pledge to come with their own families and live for six months on the estates they've created. If they won't come, ask them why. Then make them fix it.

Of course, there are examples of council estates where things went very right, where there are generations of communities who have thrived. And where they exist we can learn from the lessons they offer. It's simply about looking at the best examples and then designing estates as though the people who will be housed in them offer the solutions and are not problems to be solved.

Building new social housing isn't a utopian dream: it's about real lives and futures, and about the future of our country.

Kerry Hudson was born in Aberdeen and travelled the length of the country during her childhood. She is an award-winning novelist who has also written for Grazia, Guardian Review, Observer New Review *and* Metro. *In* Lowborn, *her first work of non-fiction, she has revisited the towns she grew up in to try to discover what being poor really means in Britain today.*

Andrew Kelly: Wombourne

I grew up in council houses in Wombourne, a large village in South Staffordshire, around five-and-a-half miles from Wolverhampton. It's a place with a long, proud history from the Domesday Book onwards. Some still prefer the traditional name Wombourn and have been known to vandalise signs with the added 'e'.

There are two main council estates – Giggetty and Bullmeadow – as well as other council housing scattered around. These homes were mostly built by Wolverhampton Council to rehouse people from slum areas. On moving from Northern Ireland, my parents had turned down a grim place near Wolverhampton and hadn't a clue where Wombourne was when offered a property there by a council officer. Thankfully they accepted the offer.

For the first few years we lived in Common Road near to a railway line which was later closed. I still remember the steam trains, watching them from the bridge nearby. We then moved to a larger house – we're a big family – around three-quarters of a mile away in Bull Lane on the Bullmeadow estate.

Bullmeadow was mostly council properties with private housing around the edge. On our street was a green with shops: a butcher, a barber, a sweet shop, a fish and chip shop (later a Chinese takeaway). One owner of the chip shop was a National Front supporter, though the area then was almost exclusively white. (Racist candidates sometimes stood in elections, but got nowhere.) Further up the road was a playground – a miserable one, despite the good games of football we had there. When a slide was eventually installed, one tough family monopolised it by sliding down and then climbing back up again without using the steps. There were two tough families at Bullmeadow but they were kept mostly under control by the community of the village.

The estate was obviously a meadow at one point. One of the streets was called, wonderfully, Billy Bun's Lane. Some say there was once a well-known travelling salesman called William Bun; others that Billy Bun's bakers was

there. In true Wombourn(e) fashion, sometimes Bun became Bunn, though this was often vandalised too.

The streets had few cars then and there was space to play: endless French cricket, Kick the Can, football. We even ran round the green 26 times imitating the marathon runners we'd seen on television. We had time to play, too. There were few concerns about being abducted, and we were left to ourselves. There was even time to be bored. There was a library where I was introduced to the work of Jules Verne, though I don't remember reading much as a child, which is odd given that I do little else now.

Nearby was Pickerel's Hill where many a happy time was spent on rope swings and imaginary battles. (I was once called 'Brains' by others for suggesting we use a stick to push nettles aside as we walked down it.) We had a brook to walk along and play in – the brook provides, perhaps, the original village name Wombrook. And there was a quarry where we walked to school, often on dangerous ledges. I hated that place, though, having failed to prevent classmates killing the frogs that had gone there to spawn. The last time I saw this area it had become a private housing site, like our poor playground.

Our house was large, though I had to share a bedroom for a while with three brothers. We had a garden which dad turned into an allotment with a hen house (the eggs were very popular in the street) and fecund runner-bean plants, which were boiled, frozen and then eaten through the year – after that glut, I now much prefer broad beans.

The garden at the Kelly family's home, Bull Lane, Wombourne, with its hen house and vegetable plots (photo by the author's brother, John Kelly).

The local schools were good and we walked there every day. I was not a model pupil until I got to the sixth form where kindly teachers turned the modest skills I had into enough qualifications – just barely enough – to get into university. One school report described me as 'a spirited if somewhat limited performer on the recorder' which is a better review than I deserved as I could play only the first few notes of 'Three Blind Mice'.

I was not regarded as sixth-form material at first. I was originally in one of the top classes but had subsequently been demoted to lower-ability ones as I wasted my time. I was useless at mathematics; my languages were poor and I had little interest in most other things, except history, commerce and geology. I'm not sure where I was destined, but I'm sure few people had much confidence that it would be anywhere good.

I was lucky. We had to do a mock exam in 1976 to decide whether we did CSEs or O levels. This was the previous year's exam. While filing something for the teacher I saw a copy of the English paper. Well-prepared, I gave such good answers – especially to one question about comics – that I was told I was O level standard. I probably needed some good fortune by this stage and this gave me the chance. It wasn't quite cheating – to my way of thinking – and it meant I could go into the sixth form in 1977. Once I got there, I worked hard. I still failed to get many qualifications and survived maths by guessing the answers. However, I did well in economics due to much extra work and thanks to a teacher who marked the many previous A-level questions I attempted in my own time.

Like many people who grew up in council housing there was an ever-present embarrassment about this, though it may have been more about how I felt than how others saw me. I lied about the type of house I lived in. I said we were one of the early pioneers of Right-to-Buy and we planned to buy it. I didn't then, and don't now, object to Right-to-Buy, even the heavily discounted sale price, and my parents took advantage of this later – as did many families in the village. What was wrong was the failure to reinvest the proceeds into new council housing and the refusal to invest properly in public housing by all governments in recent decades.

I remember always feeling poor, especially when the annual school cruise was announced and there was no chance I could go. In gym, white pumps were compulsory and we couldn't afford them; black pumps were not allowed and we were told to go barefoot instead. I pretended it was a matter of choice: I was, I said, strengthening my feet. Thankfully we did not need school meals as you had to queue up separately for these if your parents were poor (and I had runner beans to look forward to at home). I hated the post-Christmas essay when we had to say what we were given and I made up imaginary gifts and money. I was mocked by a child in another council-house family for having someone else's cooker – they had seen my dad and one of my brothers carrying it round to our house. We were as guilty as others, though: residents of Bullmeadow looked down on those living on the Giggetty estate.

Andrew Kelly on Bull Lane with his eldest niece, Clare Kelly, early 1980s (John Kelly).

We lived in a wealthy village and by comparison we *were* poor. But I can't remember ever wanting for anything, even if I was embarrassed sometimes how we got it, like the cooker. We were the first house to have a colour TV (this came from my recently departed grandmother); my father was fortunate enough to win a share in a football pools syndicate and that year we got new bikes. In some ways, on reflection, we were ahead of our time: jumble-sale clothes then, charity-shop clothes now; plastic shoes then, Crocs now; the back-garden hen house was celebrated later in *The Good Life* – and keeping hens and growing food, even runner beans, meant we were ahead of Tom and Barbara and the contemporary environmental movement. What this upbringing did leave me with was a fear of poverty, a determination never to go back to those days and – after a spending spree in my twenties – a nervousness about spending money.

My family have gone on to do good things, develop and sustain careers, build families, have more wealth than my parents could ever have dreamed about. (My father told me he did dream about money. One time he kept seeing gold bars floating by him but he had to put his hands into piles of sewage to reach them.) This is a huge shift from the life I lived decades earlier: feeling poor and knowing the stigma of living in council housing.

But how true is this impression I have of what life was like then? I was contacted recently by an old school friend. She had attended a reunion with other sixth-form colleagues and said they were wondering what had happened to me. We met up – the next big reunion was some months away – and spent a happy time reminiscing. She showed me some photos from that period. To my amazement I was part of a group, and a valued member of the group at that.

I remember being in the school plays – my lamentable performances as Billy Liar's father, counsel for the plaintiff in *Trial by Jury* and the publican in *My Fair Lady*, all presented in Wolverhampton accents – but I didn't appreciate that my colleagues valued me and never imagined that some from that group would want to talk to me again. I hadn't achieved what I thought I would – that was to be a politician (I had been the Labour Party candidate in the school mock election and got a swing towards Labour in the year of Margaret Thatcher's victory – I still lost) but I was staggered to hear that they always thought I would make it and go on to great things. I don't think I have, but I've done better than I thought I would 40 years ago.

I now see that in many ways I have had – so far – a fortunate life and it was the start I got that made it all happen. What I disdained at the time, what I hid as far as I could, is, looking back, what counted: secure housing at an affordable rent in a place that was a community. There was much else – a stable family; a permanent job for my father at Goodyear; a mother who could mostly stay at home to look after seven children. There was schooling which helped me, often despite myself, to make progress. And there was the chance to go to university when I only had three O levels and two A levels, to face no tuition fees, to get a grant, to sign on in the summer (and get paid to deliver the post at Christmas). With the breaking of the 1945 social contract and the removal of the ladder that helped me and other working-class people climb to higher things, this is a chance that others do not get. This is a disgrace. In the year of the centenary of the council estate there are once again council houses being built. This is a small but necessary step forward in the transformation of life, education and work that people in the twenty-first century need.

Andrew Kelly is director of Bristol Cultural Development Partnership, Festival of Ideas and Festival of the Future City. He has published several books including some on film history.

Further Information/

You can find out more about the Homes for Heroes 100 programme on the Festival of Ideas website.
www.ideasfestival.co.uk/themes/homes-for-heroes-100

We hope you enjoy reading *Homes for Heroes 100: Council Estate Memories*. To help us plan future projects and to provide data requested by our funders, please complete the online feedback survey.

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You can also post comments on our Facebook page

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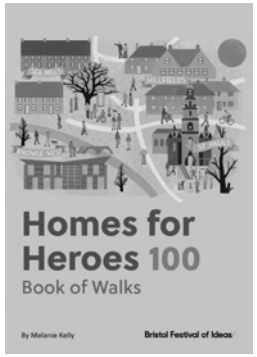
Look out for copies for our other Homes for Heroes 100 publications: the comic-book history of one hundred years of council housing in Bristol and the book of walks.



Thanks to the support of Bristol City Council and the National Lottery Heritage Fund, this book is being given away free of charge.

This collection has been commissioned for the Homes for Heroes 100 programme, which marks the centenary of the Housing Act 1919. The essays have been written by people who have lived in council housing, some of whom will be speaking at the Festival of the Future City in Bristol (16-19 October 2019).

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