HOMES FOR HEROES 100

ONE HUNDRED YEARS OF COUNCIL HOUSING IN BRISTOL

By Tony Forbes & Eugene Byrne

Homes For Heroes 100

One Hundred Years of Council Housing in Bristol

On Wednesday June 4 1919, Dr Christopher Addison, who would soon be the government minister in charge of health, arrived in Bristol to look at the city's plans for new housing.

Bristol's council had big plans. It was buying huge amounts of land in different parts of the city for 5,000 new houses, which were expected to cost over £3 million.

Some of the money came from the government in London, some came from Bristol's council itself, some came from the rates (the 1919 equivalent of council tax) and some was borrowed.

You can't say accurately what £3 million in 1919 would be worth now, but it would certainly equal hundreds of millions of pounds. In 1919, a skilled working man in a full-time job was paid £3-£4 a week. Women with jobs usually earned much less.

Addison arrived at Temple Meads station and was met by several important figures in the city, and then taken to the Council House (the council headquarters, which in those days was on Corn Street – the building is now the Registry Office) where he met the Lord Mayor.

They all then went to look at the building site at Hillfields in Fishponds. Later, the minister was driven to Sea Mills and symbolically began work on the site by cutting the first sod; digging into the ground with a spade.

The Lady Mayoress then planted an oak tree and was presented with a bouquet of flowers.

That evening, Addison spoke at a public meeting at the Colston Hall and congratulated Bristol on its new housing plans.

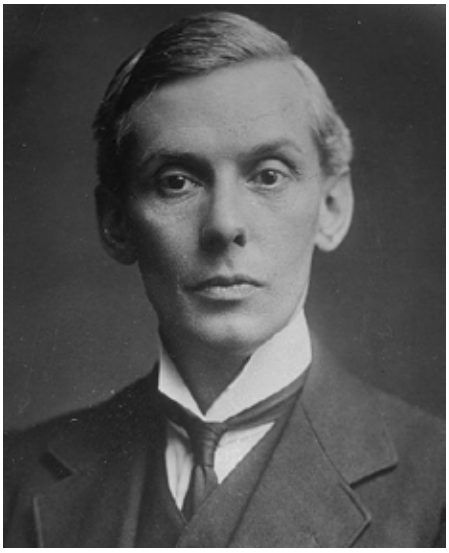
'I have taken care,' he said, 'to see that housing is part of the Health Minister's job, because without decent housing, ladies and gentlemen, no-one can have decent health.'

In the coming years, councils across the country would build houses, and Bristol was among the first to start work.

What Bristol was doing was revolutionary. It was going to provide good quality houses for working people at affordable rents.

Why? Because the First World War had just ended. Hundreds of thousands of Britons had died (and many more had been injured), and almost everyone's lives had been disrupted. Now, for the first time, all men over 21 and around two thirds of women over 30 had the vote. Before this, only men could vote in Parliamentary elections – and only if they owned property or paid a certain amount of rent each year.

Many ordinary, hard-working people were living in awful conditions that they would no longer put up with. Besides, building huge numbers of houses would provide work for a lot of men who had just come out of the army.



Christopher Addison

Prime Minister David Lloyd George had promised 'a country fit for heroes to live in' and now it was time to keep that promise.

Not everyone was impressed. Some complained that some of the first new houses would have parlours.

(Parlour — old-fashioned word for a second large room on the ground floor, separate from the living room, and usually at the front of the house.)

Other people joked at the time (and for years afterwards) that the working classes would have no idea what to do with a bath in the house, so they'd probably keep coal in it.

Slums like this Bristol one in the 1890s were to be replaced with new houses

What is a council?

Councils are the organisations responsible for the day-to-day running of towns, cities or specific geographic areas. A council is controlled by councillors who are elected by voters. It also employs a lot of staff in a wide range of jobs – everything from teachers and librarians to people managing the emptying of rubbish bins.

Bristol is run by Bristol City Council and its elected councillors and mayor. Its headquarters is City Hall – previously known as the Council House – on College Green. There is also a Lord Mayor: a councillor who serves for one year and who is the ceremonial head of the council but has no power.

In 1919, Bristol's council (still often known as 'the corporation') did not have an elected mayor like it does now, but it did have a Lord Mayor, who was more powerful than today.

A NICE LONG WALK


AFTER STROLLING ON A LITTLE FURTHER...
WHAT'S GOING ON OVER THERE?
OH, I HEARD ABOUT THIS. THEY'RE GOING TO BUILD NEW HOUSES. THE LORD MAYOR AND THE OTHER HIGH MUCKY-MUCKS ARE HAVING A CEREMONY. SHALL WE TAKE A LOOK?
MRS BRACEGIRDLE! DID YOU EVER SEE SUCH A THING!
I DID NOT, MRS BOUCHER! THE VERY IDEA OF THE COUNCIL BUILDING HOUSES!
NOT HOUSES! MANSIONS! ALL OF THESE WILL HAVE PARLOURS!
WHY DO THE LOWER ORDERS NEED PARLOURS?
HOME SWEET HOME
I READ THESE NEW HOMES SHALL HAVE GARDENS. AND BATHROOMS.
WHY ON EARTH DO THE WORKING CLASSES NEED A BATHROOM?
PERHAPS WE'LL KEEP OUR FLIPPIN' COAL IN IT!

Victorian Bristol

Nice homes for some – but not for everyone

Bristol is over 1,000 years old, but until the early 1800s it was much smaller. After that, the population started to grow very quickly. By 1900, there were nearly five times more people living in the city than in 1800.

The whole country's population grew. Improvements in farming, railways and shipping meant that food supplies were better. New sewer systems and clean drinking water meant less disease. Fewer babies died, and more people were living into old age.

Bristol also grew because large numbers of people were moving in from elsewhere in England, Wales and Ireland, sometimes other countries, too, to work in the city's factories.

In Victorian times, huge new areas of housing were built on what had once been fields.

(Victorian times — the long period during which Victoria was Queen — from 1837 to 1901.)

Some of Clifton was built in the late 1700s but it kept growing well into the 1800s, because richer Bristolians wanted to live in Clifton's big houses away from the noise, smells and smoke in the middle of town. There were a lot of smells and smoke in Victorian Bristol because of all the factories. Factories and houses all burned coal for heating or to power steam-driven machinery.

Bristol grew especially quickly from the 1860s onwards. Those who had money and didn't fancy Clifton, could have a nice new house in, say, Redland or Cotham.

Most new homes, though, were built for the less wealthy. There were new streets of houses built in Montpelier, St Pauls, Bishopston and Horfield. Huge suburbs of terraced houses grew around factories and workplaces in St Philip's, St Jude's, Easton, Eastville, Bedminster and Totterdown.

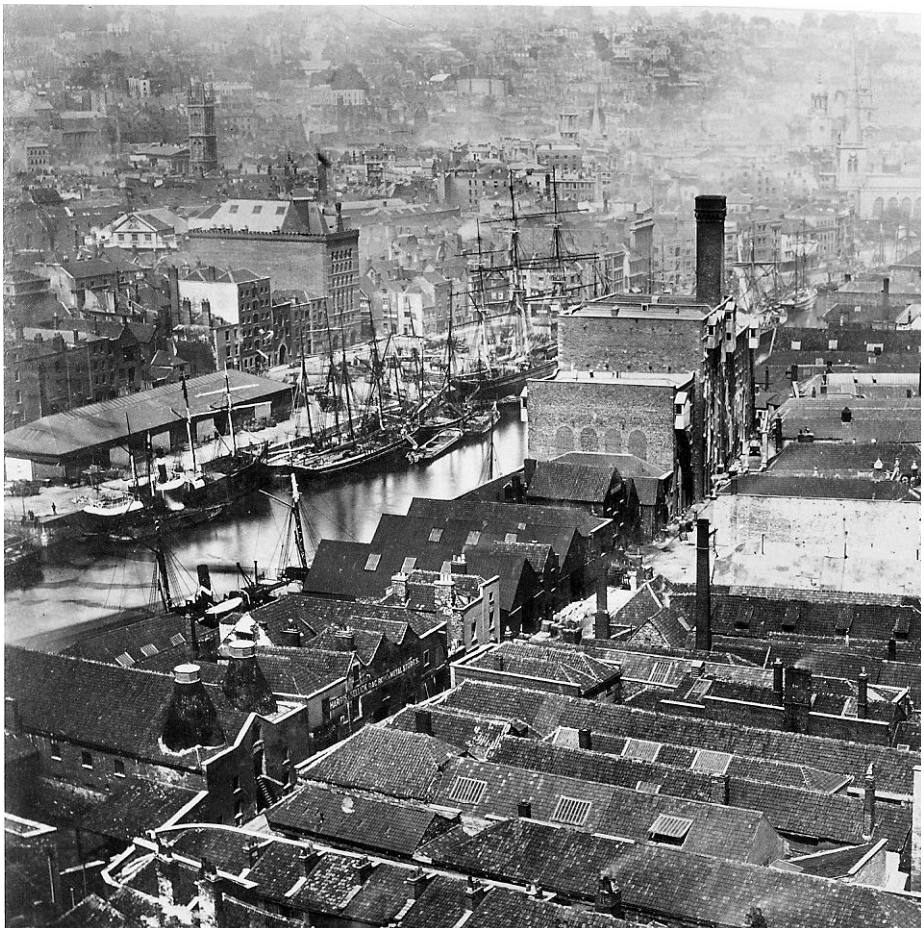
The men running Victorian Bristol did not believe the council should be building houses. It did build a few, but these were mostly for families whose homes had been knocked down to make way for new roads.

The only council housing built before the First World War which is still there today is on Mina Road in St Werburghs.
All the other houses in the city were constructed by private companies, usually small building firms. They were usually bought by rich people who rented them out to tenants (the people who lived in them). Around 90 percent of Bristolians paid rent on their homes; the rest were owned by the people living in them.

Many working people in Bristol lived quite well by the standards of the time, but those in low-paid jobs, the unemployed, single-parent families and those with alcohol problems or disabilities were often very badly off.

The poorest lived in what were called slums; places where people lived in very unhealthy, overcrowded buildings, often alongside rats, mice and insects. These were often homes with only two or three rooms – or maybe even just one. Many of the worst homes were in courts, little groups of old houses that could only be reached through a narrow alleyway. These were mostly in central Bristol.

There were also some very poor tenements (buildings where many people lived together) in the St James and St Jude's areas, over to the east of the city centre.



Bristol's city centre in Victorian times

The population of Bristol

All figures are approximate

1600 – 15,000
1700 – 25,000
1800 – 70,000
1900 – 330,000
1950 – 440,000
2000 – 380,615
2010 – 420,000
2019 – 460,000

Notice how the population actually dropped between 1950 and 2000. This was because from the late 1940s onwards the council started moving people out of the central parts of the city. Also, by the 1970s more people were choosing to live in towns outside Bristol and commuting to work by car, bus or train.

The numbers have gone up dramatically in recent years for many reasons, including more people living in the centre once more (mostly in flats), more babies being born, people moving into Bristol and people living longer lives.

The Victorian slums

The terrible living conditions of Bristol's poorest

Bristol was shocked in the 1880s when local newspaper reporter James 'Jas' Crosby went into the worst slums to write about the lives of the city's poorest people:

'In the courts more towards the middle of St Philip's can be found men who are worn out and [in] some cases dying. The extent of poverty and misery in these homes is beyond description.

'Some of the courts off New Street (in St Jude's) are the worst … Stepping into one of these we find a dingy room with a stone floor, and one bed, on which have been found sleeping the man and his wife and four children, two of whom, a boy and girl of 12 and 14 years, slept with their heads to the foot of the bed.'

Crosby pointed out how filthy these homes were but he didn't just mean the walls were dirty. He meant there was human and animal waste, too.

Many of the little courts of central Bristol, the tenements of east Bristol, and slums in other parts of the city, were breeding-grounds for disease. They did not have proper sewage systems. In many places, a dozen or more people might have to share an outside toilet over a cess-pit – a hole in the ground – which was emptied only occasionally.

These homes rarely had running water, and certainly didn't have gas or electricity supplies. At night, the family might sit around a single oil-burning lamp for light. Heating was from a fire in a grate, if they could afford the coal or wood to burn in it.

These homes were usually owned by landlords who owned other properties, too. For families where money was short and parents had to choose between paying the rent and feeding their children, the rent could not always be paid on time.

For most of these people there was an alternative but, as far as they were concerned, it was something even worse: the workhouse.

People only went into the workhouse if they were absolutely desperate. Workhouses were not meant to be pleasant because it was thought that if they were too comfortable, people would not want to leave them to find a job. Men and women were kept apart, the work was hard and the food was basic.

In late Victorian times, the Bristol workhouses included one on Fishponds Road (now demolished), the Stapleton Workhouse (now Blackberry Hill Hospital) and the Bedminster Union one (now the Farleigh Court office complex in Long Ashton).

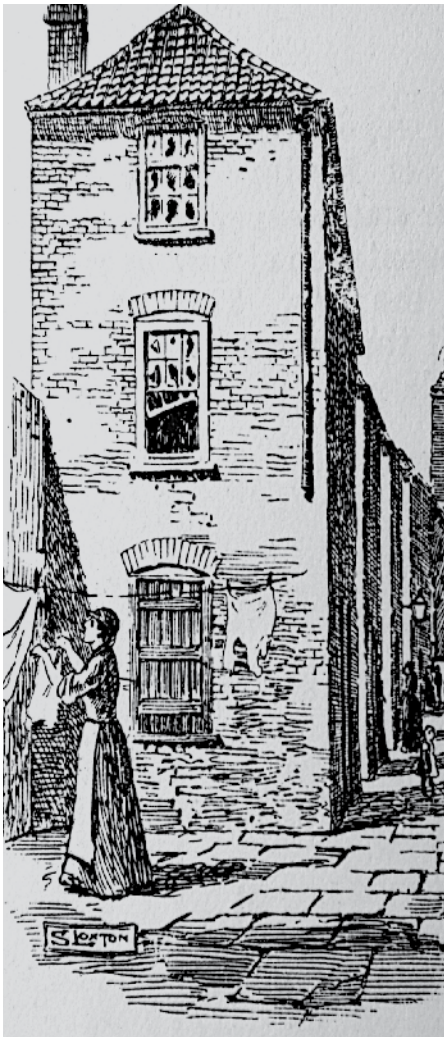


Illustration of Central Court, a Bristol slum, in the early 1900s

The Eastville workhouse on Fishponds Road

The later 1800s saw more and more workers banding together in trade unions to demand better pay and working conditions. The Labour Party, linked to the unions, put forward candidates in local elections and demanded better housing for working people.

Many churches then (as now) felt a duty to help the poor. Some set up missions in poorer areas to carry out welfare work. This could be anything from providing meals to teaching adults to read and write, showing women how to cook, or organising sports, outings and Bible classes.

Many well-off people, especially ladies, would visit the homes of the poor and try to help them. Some were welcomed and respected. Others were seen as interfering busy-bodies, poking their noses in where they were not wanted.

But when the First World War started, many Bristolians were still living in shockingly bad, unhealthy homes.


A SCHOOL PROJECT
1981
FOR YOUR HISTORY HOMEWORK, DAWN?
YES, GREAT-GRANDMA. WE HAVE TO INTERVIEW THE OLDEST PERSON WE KNOW!
WE WERE DESPERATELY POOR WHEN I WAS YOUR AGE. WE HAD A DIRTY TWO-ROOM TENEMENT IN A COURT IN ST JUDE'S. ONE BED FOR ALL OF US, FREEZING IN WINTER.
THERE WERE ABOUT 20 LIVING IN THAT COURT AND WE HAD TWO TOILETS TO SHARE.
IMAGINE THE SMELL IN SUMMER!
PA WAS A LABOURER. SOME WEEKS HE MADE GOOD MONEY, BUT HE DRANK IT ALL.
THEN HE JUST DISAPPEARED. I EXPECT HE DIED IN A GUTTER SOMEWHERE.
MA TOOK IN WASHING. WE'D CHOP UP STICKS TO SELL FIREWOOD.
IN SEASON WE WOULD COLLECT BLACKBERRIES AND SELL THEM DOOR TO DOOR.
SOME CHURCH PEOPLE LIKED TO HELP. AND MA MADE US GO TO SUNDAY SCHOOL FOR THE FREE BREAD AND BUTTER AND TEA.
All things bright and beautiful

EVERY WEEK, ONE OF US WAS INVITED TO TEA WITH ONE OF THE POSH LADIES WHO GAVE MONEY TO THE SUNDAY SCHOOL. SO ONE DAY, MA WASHED MY FACE, BRUSHED MY HAIR AND OFF I WENT ON THE TRAM WITH HER WORDS RINGING IN MY EARS.

The Great War

The government has to deliver on its promises

The First World War from 1914 to 1918 – also known as the Great War – was the first war in British history in which almost everyone had to play their part.

Men from their late teens into middle-age served in the armed forces or worked in industries vital to the war effort, such as making weapons and munitions, or in farming, transport and shipping.

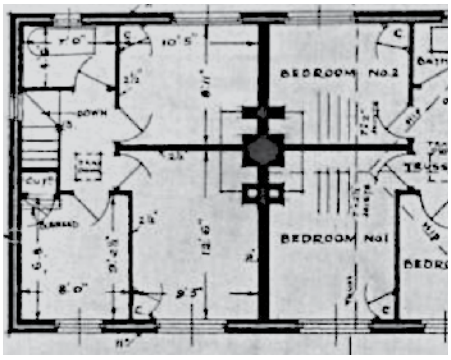
Women stepped into jobs that had previously only been for men, working in factories and offices and everywhere else. Some even managed to join the police; Bristol had some of the first female patrol officers and detectives in the world.

Around 55,000 men from Bristol served in the forces, and about 6,000 were killed, mostly fighting in the trenches in France and Belgium. Many who were not killed returned with life-changing injuries.

The sacrifices made in the war had led to all men and (some) women getting the vote, while many also joined trade unions to call for better conditions. Ordinary people now had real power.

One of the first things Lloyd George's government had to deal with at the end of the war was housing. Everyone knew there was a problem, and the government set up a special committee headed by the Liberal MP and architect Sir John Tudor Walters (1868-1933) to look at the problem. The Tudor Walters Report, published in 1918, made recommendations as to how future housing should be built.

* Family houses should have three bedrooms, at least two of them big enough for a double bed.



* Houses should have access to plenty of sunlight, even in winter, by being evenly spread out. The report said that at most there should be 12 houses per acre in towns. (One acre=0.4 hectares)

* They should have indoor bathrooms and toilets.

* All should have kitchens (usually called sculleries in early plans) for cooking meals. This might sound obvious, but people living in the worst slums often did their cooking over an open fire.

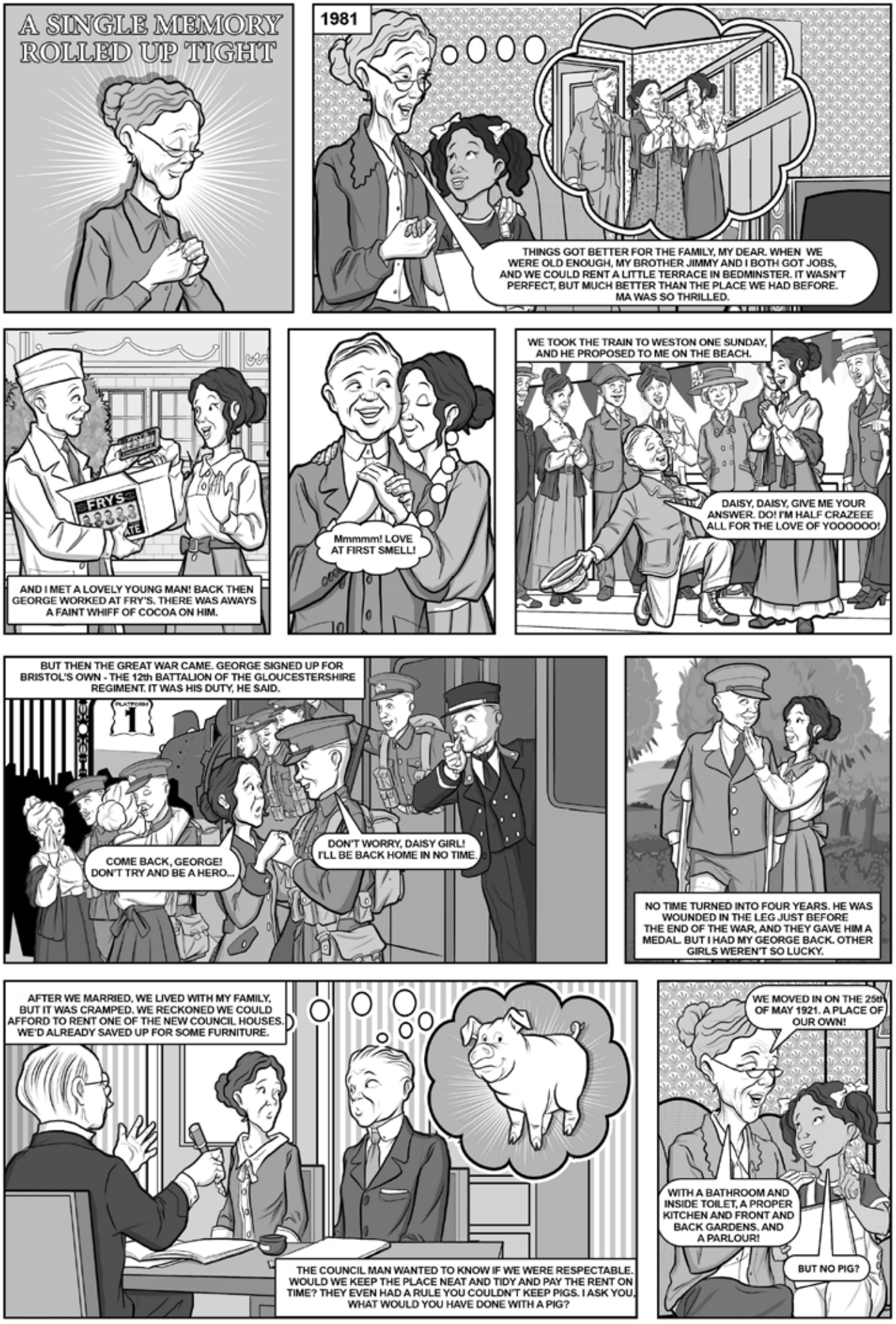
These 'Tudor Walters Standards' influenced the Housing and Town Planning Act of 1919. Also known as the Addison Act (because of the Health Minister), it made local councils find out how many houses they needed to replace the slums in their areas. It also provided money for new house-building.

Bristol's council estimated that 8,000 new houses were needed to deal with the problem fully, but for now it planned to build 5,000. They would not be sold; the council would rent them out, becoming the city's biggest landlord.

The houses would be in a number of different designs, with two, three or four bedrooms, and often a parlour, too.

Work started on the initial four estates in 1919-1920. These were at Hillfields (Fishponds), Knowle, Shirehampton and Sea Mills. The first houses to be finished were at Hillfields, with the earliest tenants moving into homes on the corner of Thicket Avenue and Briar Way in June 1920. The first homes in Sea Mills were ready soon afterwards.

British machine gun crew, 1917. People demanded better lives after the hardships and sacrifices of the First World War.


A SINGLE MEMORY ROLLED UP TIGHT
1981
THINGS GOT BETTER FOR THE FAMILY, MY DEAR. WHEN WE WERE OLD ENOUGH, MY BROTHER JIMMY AND I BOTH GOT JOBS, AND WE COULD RENT A LITTLE TERRACE IN BEDMINSTER. IT WASN'T PERFECT, BUT MUCH BETTER THAN THE PLACE WE HAD BEFORE. MA WAS SO THRILLED.
FRY'S
AND I MET A LOVELY YOUNG MAN! BACK THEN GEORGE WORKED AT FRY'S. THERE WAS AWAYS A FAINT WHIFF OF COCOA ON HIM.
Mmmmm! LOVE AT FIRST SMELL!
WE TOOK THE TRAIN TO WESTON ONE SUNDAY, AND HE PROPOSED TO ME ON THE BEACH.
DAISY, DAISY, GIVE ME YOUR ANSWER. DO! I'M HALF CRAZEEE ALL FOR THE LOVE OF YOOOOOO!
BUT THEN THE GREAT WAR CAME. GEORGE SIGNED UP FOR BRISTOL'S OWN - THE 12th BATTALION OF THE GLOUCESTERSHIRE REGIMENT. IT WAS HIS DUTY, HE SAID.
PLATFORM 1
COME BACK, GEORGE! DON'T TRY AND BE A HERO...
DON'T WORRY, DAISY GIRL! I'LL BE BACK HOME IN NO TIME.
NO TIME TURNED INTO FOUR YEARS. HE WAS WOUNDED IN THE LEG JUST BEFORE THE END OF THE WAR, AND THEY GAVE HIM A MEDAL. BUT I HAD MY GEORGE BACK. OTHER GIRLS WEREN'T SO LUCKY.
AFTER WE MARRIED, WE LIVED WITH MY FAMILY, BUT IT WAS CRAMPED. WE RECKONED WE COULD AFFORD TO RENT ONE OF THE NEW COUNCIL HOUSES. WE'D ALREADY SAVED UP FOR SOME FURNITURE.
THE COUNCIL MAN WANTED TO KNOW IF WE WERE RESPECTABLE. WOULD WE KEEP THE PLACE NEAT AND TIDY AND PAY THE RENT ON TIME? THEY EVEN HAD A RULE YOU COULDN'T KEEP PIGS. I ASK YOU, WHAT WOULD YOU HAVE DONE WITH A PIG?
WE MOVED IN ON THE 25th OF MAY 1921. A PLACE OF OUR OWN!
WITH A BATHROOM AND INSIDE TOILET, A PROPER KITCHEN AND FRONT AND BACK GARDENS. AND A PARLOUR!
BUT NO PIG?


NEITHER US NOR THE NEIGHBOURS KNEW MUCH ABOUT GARDENING. SO THE MEN STARTED A CLUB TO SWAP TIPS AND SEEDS AND SUCH. GEORGE GREW VEG IN THE BACK GARDEN, FLOWERS AT THE FRONT.


WE HAD THREE KIDDIES. WE ALREADY HAD ARTHUR, THEN CAME JOE, THEN YOUR GRANDMA DORIS.


MONEY WAS ALWAYS TIGHT, BUT WE GOT BY.
THE KIDS WERE ALWAYS WELL-DRESSED, AND WE HAD PLENTY TO EAT. BUT TOO MANY OF GEORGE'S CARROTS FOR MY LIKING.


GOOD TIMES DON'T LAST ANY MORE THAN BAD TIMES DO. WE HAD ANOTHER WAR. BOTH MY BOYS HAD ALWAYS BEEN MAD ABOUT PLANES, AND BOTH WENT INTO THE RAF.


GEORGE HAD TO DO HIS BIT ALL OVER AGAIN. HE WAS A SERGEANT IN THE HOME GUARD. AND HE WAS A FIRE-WATCHER, TOO. I OFTEN DIDN'T SEE HIM FOR DAYS ON END.


ARTHUR WAS KILLED OVER GERMANY IN 1943.
POST OFFICE TELEGRAM
IMMEDIATE MR AND MRS BELL
FROM AIR MINISTRY KINGSWAY
DEEPLY REGRET TO INFORM YOU THAT YOUR SON FT/L ARTHUR BELL IS NOW REPORTED TO
HAVE LOST HIS LIFE AS THE RESULT OF AIR OPERATIONS ON SEPTEMBER 5 TH 1943
- THE AIR COUNCIL EXPRESS THEIR PROFOUND SYMPATHY -
LETTER CONFIRMING THIS TELEGRAM GIVING
ALL AVAILABLE DETAILS FOLLOWS - SECRETARY OF STATE AIR MINISTRY= 8/DD A/ 15


JOE CAME BACK, THANK GOD. HIM AND RITA HAD MARRIED IN '44 AND THEY WERE GIVEN A PRE-FAB. THEY LOVED IT! ALMOST HAD TO BE DRAGGED OUT WHEN THEY GOT A PROPER COUNCIL HOUSE YEARS LATER.


DORIS MARRIED YOUR GRANDFATHER NORMAN IN JUNE '46, BUT THEY COULDN'T GET A HOUSE.
A REALLY GOOD-LOOKING GLAMOROUS COUPLE THEY WERE!


FROM OUR FIRST DAY IN THIS HOUSE UNTIL THE DAY THE WAR STARTED WAS THE HAPPIEST TIME OF MY LIFE.


I KEEP THOSE DAYS IN MY HEART, ROLLED UP TIGHT IN A SINGLE MEMORY. DORIS HELPING ME, AND MY BOYS AND THEIR DAD MESSING AROUND IN THE GARDEN.

Between the wars

Thousands of new homes for ‘respectable’ tenants

Houses with inside toilets, bathrooms, parlours and gardens were very desirable. So the rents for Bristol’s first post-war council houses were set quite high.

Anyone applying to get a house had to be interviewed by a council official, who would want to know if they could afford the rent. Applicants had to promise to be respectable tenants, to look after the garden, not to run a business from home and not take in lodgers. There was a long list of do’s and don’ts to agree to.

The houses from 1919 and the early 1920s were of a high quality and most are still standing (and lived in) today. But they were expensive to build, and the government money was cut off long before Bristol had finished the 5,000 houses it planned.

More funding became available in the mid-1920s, and new council homes would be built in Bristol every year until the start of the Second World War in 1939.

From the mid-1920s, more houses sprung up on the first estates, and work would later begin on new estates at Horfield, Bedminster Down, St Anne’s, St George (Speedwell), Southmead and Knowle.

There were smaller schemes, too, like the development at Eugene Street (near the Bristol Royal Infirmary) for people who had been moved out of slums.

Homes from the later 1920s and 1930s tended to be smaller and without parlours – but more people could afford the rents to live in them.

However, building thousands of houses, even small ones, was expensive, and the council experimented with new building methods.

Some of the biggest building costs were bricks and the wages for skilled brick-layers, so the council tried building houses of steel and concrete instead in Sea Mills (these were called Dorlonco houses).

Other houses in Sea Mills and Horfield were also made of concrete (Parkinson Houses). These lasted well enough, but not as well as regular brick-built homes. Many had to have major repairs in the early 2000s and some had to be demolished.

A Sea Mills kitchen, 1930s

Mr T.A. Edgell of Hartcliffe and his prize-winning garden, 1954 (Bristol Reference Library B14100)

The growth of the suburbs

Between 1919 and 1939 more than THIRTY THOUSAND houses were built in Bristol. Some were council houses, some were private homes, and most were built on greenfield sites away from the city centre.

Everyone who could afford it wanted to live in these bright new modern suburbs, and the homes brought about huge changes in the life of the city. Such as:

• The professional housewife. Because many estates were far from workplaces, working-class women had fewer opportunities to find jobs and many now became full-time home-makers. Once all women had the vote after 1928, politicians (mostly men) paid much more attention to stay-at-home mums by talking about all the things they would do for ‘the housewife’.

• Commuting. Those living on new private or council estates usually had to travel further to work and, between the wars, there was a huge rise in car ownership in Bristol. Even more people bought bicycles and motorcycles. Public transport shifted from trams running on fixed rails to motor-bus services, where routes could be more easily changed.

• Gardening as a hobby. Council tenancy agreements said that tenants had to keep their front gardens neat and tidy, and many grew vegetables in their back gardens. On most estates, gardening clubs were set up so members could share knowledge and swap seeds and cuttings. By the 1930s, many estates had annual flower shows with contests for the best flowers, fruit and veg.

• Smaller families. Suburban homes were healthier. Fewer children and babies died of disease or accidents, and couples tended to have smaller families. Families who lived in the suburbs often deliberately had fewer children so that they could afford to keep up their new lifestyle.

• Better exam grades. With more families living in bigger homes, there was always somewhere that children could do their school homework in peace and quiet.

Another World War

Meeting a desperate housing shortage

Between 1919 and 1939, Bristol City Council built 15,000 homes on nine main estates and some smaller sites.

Nearly all had three bedrooms and about a quarter of them had parlours. It was a great achievement and it improved countless lives.

All house-building stopped in 1939 when the Second World War broke out. Once again, huge numbers of people went into the armed forces, and once again those not in uniform had to work to help the war effort – anywhere from arms and munitions factories (in Bristol many were involved in making aircraft) to working on the land to produce food.

Bristol was also hit hard by air raids, which would kill a total of 1,299 people and injure many more. The worst raids were in the winter of 1940-1941 when bombs destroyed factories, offices, shops, schools, churches and historic buildings across the city. They also ruined about 3,200 houses and many more were badly damaged.

At the war's end in 1945, Bristol's housing shortage was worse than it had been in 1918. Not only had homes been lost in the bombing, but no new ones had been built during the war. There were also shortages of building materials and skilled builders, and now lots of young men and women who had been in the forces were coming home and starting families.

In 1945, the government launched a massive programme of council house-building, with thousands planned for Bristol. But they couldn't be built fast enough. So in August 1946, with over 26,000 people on Bristol's housing waiting list, some people took matters into their own hands.

Although the war was over, there were plenty of disused military areas around Bristol – army barracks, prisoner-of-war camps and air defence sites, which had been built to protect the city against bombing raids. All were now empty but had huts that could be lived in.

That summer, people across the country took over these sites and turned the huts into temporary homes. Squatting (taking over an empty building you do not own) happened at several places in Bristol.

These squatters were respectable people who were happy to pay rent – so the ex-army huts became official council houses.

Many of the families living in the huts were still there a few years later, though by 1950 most had been moved to proper council houses.

Union Street on fire after bombing, November 1940

The morning after a raid, city centre

A Bristol AIROH pre-fab (Bristol Archives 40307/1/75)

Pre-fabs

Pre-fabricated bungalows – pre-fabs – were one solution to Britain's housing shortage after the Second World War. These were houses made in factories to be assembled and bolted together on site.

In the 1940s, about 2,700 pre-fabs were erected around Bristol, usually on little estates of their own. The biggest was at Ashton Vale.

The Bristol Aeroplane Company at Filton made many of these for use across the country. Pre-fabs, including the Bristol AIROH design, were popular. They had modern heating, gas and electricity, and each had a garden. For a young couple, a pre-fab seemed like a palace.

Pre-fabs were only designed to last ten years, but many tenants loved them so much that they refused to leave when they were offered 'real' houses. They were usually still perfectly good long after ten years had passed. In 2005, SIXTY YEARS after the first ones were put up, more than 300 pre-fabs in Bristol were still being lived in.

All have now gone, although some were replaced with small bungalows looking like updated versions of the original pre-fabs.


TUESDAY AUGUST 13, 1946
GOOD JOB YOU COULD BORROW THIS CAR FROM YOUR PAL, NORMAN!
STOP
IT'S IN THE PAPER. PEOPLE ARE TAKING OVER ALL THE EMPTY ARMY CAMPS AROUND TOWN!
INSIDE...
YOU CANNOT MOVE HERE, THIS IS GOVERNMENT PROPERTY.
WE CAN AND WE SHALL. IT'S NOT A CRIMINAL OFFENCE.
THESE HUTS ARE EMPTY, THE WAR IS OVER, THERE'S A HOUSING SHORTAGE AND WE'RE HAPPY TO PAY RENT.
SO UNLESS YOU'VE GOT A HOUSE FOR US, THIS IS WHERE WE'RE LIVING FOR NOW.
BUT...
I SPENT FOUR YEARS FIGHTING IN THE WESTERN DESERT AND ITALY.
STOP
SO IF YOU THINK HE'S AFRAID OF A TOWN HALL PIPSQUEAK LIKE YOU, YOU'VE GOT ANOTHER THINK COMING!
WE HAVE A BED, A TABLE AND A STOVE. THAT'S ALL THE ESSENTIALS.
IT'D BE NICE TO HAVE A CLOTHES LINE, MIND.
I'VE GOT AN IDEA. GEORGE! GET YOUR SAW.
STOP
STOP
"AND THEY SHALL BEAT THEIR SWORDS INTO PLOUGH-SHARES, AND THEIR SPEARS INTO PRUNING HOOKS: NATION SHALL NOT LIFT UP SWORD AGAINST NATION, NEITHER SHALL THEY LEARN WAR ANYMORE."

Bristol gets bigger – and bigger

New communities spring up around the city's edges

Despite problems finding building materials and skilled workers, Bristol City Council managed to build more than 1,000 new council houses by the end of 1947.

In the coming years, Bristol would have one of the most successful house construction programmes in the whole country. Between 1945 and 1955, the number of council homes in Bristol doubled. By 1955, more than 40 families were moving into a brand-new council house somewhere in the city each week.

1960s council flat living room (Bristol Archives 40826 HSG 63 1)

These houses were desperately needed. The building schemes before the Second World War had not cleared all of Bristol's slums, and the war had only made things worse. A report for the council's Housing Committee in 1952 found that 10,000 homes in Bristol were completely unfit to live in, while another 25,000 were inadequate.

To speed things up, Bristol built some houses that used new techniques similar to those used for building pre-fabs, but for houses meant to last much longer.

The most important of these were pre-cast reinforced concrete houses (known as PRCs), which used factory-made concrete parts instead of bricks. In the 1940s and 1950s, around 7,500 of them were built in Bristol to various different designs from different companies.

The first houses to be built after the Second World War were in places like Southmead, Lockleaze, Lawrence Weston, Henbury and Oldbury Court. They were really little self-contained towns.

The biggest growth was in the Hartcliffe, Stockwood and Withywood areas, where building work started in the early 1950s. Big chunks of the land that these estates were built on had been in the county of Somerset, but Bristol got permission from the government's Boundary Commission to expand its borders southwards.

So council housing after the war led to Bristol literally growing in size.

In the mid-1940s, council staff had drawn up a master-plan for the city, and one of its main ideas was that people should no longer live in central Bristol in large numbers. At that time, central Bristol was still an area with a lot of smoke, pollution and industry (as well as shops and offices). In 1945, many people still lived there in slums which had only grown worse because of the war.

But the council did build some new homes in the more central districts. There were new flats in the area around St Mary Redcliffe church, for instance, in the 1950s. In 1954, Canynge House, one of Bristol's earliest blocks of council flats, was officially opened. This was a radical new development in its time: it had a system to provide heating and hot water for all the residents and there was a crèche, storerooms for residents' prams and bicycles, a doctor's surgery and a laundry.

Between the 1950s and 1970s, Bristol City Council built a lot of flats as well as houses. At that time, high-rise blocks were being built all over the country; they were considered fashionable as they looked clean and modern. Councils liked them because they could be built relatively cheaply, and large numbers of people could be housed on top of a comparatively small area of land. The government often supplied more money for high-rise blocks than for houses.

At 15 storeys high, Barton House in Barton Hill was the tallest block of flats outside London when it opened in 1958. There were also high-rises in other places, such as at Kingsdown, Lawrence Hill, Lawrence Weston and St Jude's.

The Lord Mayor of Bristol takes tea with residents of new Barton Hill flats (Bristol Archives 40826/HSG/44/18)

Of the 10,000 new homes provided in Hartcliffe and Withywood, two-thirds were houses and the rest were flats in a mix of low and high-rise blocks.

The 1950s would also see council homes being built that were especially for older people for the first time. The first of these was Port Elizabeth House in Southmead, which is still there. Sheltered housing for older people was also built from the 1960s; these were schemes where there was a warden on hand to help look after people's homes and to deal with any emergencies.

More sheltered housing followed in the 1970s and 1980s. Many people who had moved into council houses in previous times had seen their children grow up and leave home and were now living alone or in couples. Encouraging older people to move into newer and more suitable homes freed up family-sized houses for younger people. It was found that many older Bristolians rather liked living in high-rise blocks, so some blocks would be put aside and fitted out especially for them.

By the late 1970s, Bristol still did not have enough houses but the problem was no longer so serious.

At that point, Bristol's council owned nearly 50,000 houses, flats and pre-fabs. Nearly half of all the people in the city lived in a council-owned home.

But not for much longer.

Building upwards as well as outwards

Houses for some, high-rise flats for others

Building council homes across the country cost a great deal of money, which meant it was always a very important political issue. Council housing was a subject of argument and debate for much of the twentieth century.

The first council houses in Bristol (and elsewhere) were good-quality family homes that only well-off working people could afford to rent.

When money became tight between the wars, council houses tended to become smaller because Conservative governments thought that councils should only provide houses for the less well-off, or for poor people who had been moved out of slums.

In 1945, the new Labour government wanted to build homes for all. The Minister of Health, Aneurin Bevan, who was also in charge of housing, said he wanted a country where people from all walks of life had homes provided by councils, and a place where 'the doctor, the grocer, the butcher and the farm labourer all lived in the same street'.

In the 1950s, when the Conservatives were back in power, they built massive numbers of council houses, but these were mostly smaller than before because the Conservatives believed that everyone who could afford it would want to buy their own home, and council houses were for the large numbers of people who could not.

New flats at Redcliff, early 1960s (Bristol Archives 40826/HSG/66)

A sense of community

Moving tens of thousands of Bristolians from slums into decent homes was the great success story of twentieth-century Bristol. But there had been problems, too.

The big new estates were a long way from the city centre, so people often had to travel a long way to work. By the 1970s, as more families could afford cars, this led to traffic problems.

On a lot of estates, the council was so desperate to meet the need for houses that the other facilities – like schools and shops – often only came later. The first people moving into Hartcliffe in 1951 found roads and pavements had not yet been made.

Often, families being re-housed on the new estates missed old friends and neighbours and the sense of community that they had had in their previous homes. If you lived in a damp old Victorian house with dry rot, an outside toilet and no electricity, you could still have friendly and helpful neighbours.

Not everyone considered their street to be a slum at all. When the council was demolishing old streets in Lawrence Hill, Barton Hill and St Philip's, forcing people to move, some residents were angry because they thought of themselves as respectable, hard-working people, not the sort who lived in slums.

Over time, of course, most people got used to their new neighbourhoods, made friends with their neighbours and became very proud of their communities.

Some Bristol houses

Different types from different times

Houses in Bristol come in all shapes and sizes. Here are just a few of the types of homes — private houses, council houses and ex-council houses — you can spot around Bristol. It's nowhere near all the different kinds ...

Victorian villa

The bigger Victorian houses for the well-off middle classes were usually built of stone and often have lots of decorative touches. These were the homes of extended families: parents, children, a grandparent or two and sometimes unmarried adult relatives. They often had attic rooms for live-in female servants (very grand houses had male servants, too). They were expensive to buy and still are; the biggest are now usually split into flats or offices.

Victorian terrace

Thousands of these were built in Bristol, mostly between 1860 and the early 1900s. It was cheaper and easier to build terraces – long lines of joined-together houses – than just building single stand-alone (detached) homes. The smallest and cheapest – houses with two rooms on each floor – were often badly built and did not have inside toilets. But there were also bigger terraced homes for better-off working people.

Inter war suburban semi

Huge numbers of houses were built in 1930s Bristol for private buyers. Most were semi-detached three-bedroom properties that were similar to parlour council houses. Builders would usually add features to make them look better than the council's rented homes, such as entrance porches, bay windows, pebble-dashed walls and/or leaded-glass windows. For those who could afford them, there were bigger semis, such as the mock-Tudor style with half-timbering and herringbone brickwork.

Early parlour council house

The most desirable council houses built from 1919 onwards had parlours – that extra room on the ground floor was seen as an important status symbol by many people. Almost 2,000 of those built in Bristol were the WDB5 type designed by Bristol architect Benjamin Wakefield. These were semi-detached – a single building of two separate houses – and came with three good-size bedrooms. Some WDB5s even had bay windows at the front.

Inter-war non-parlour council house

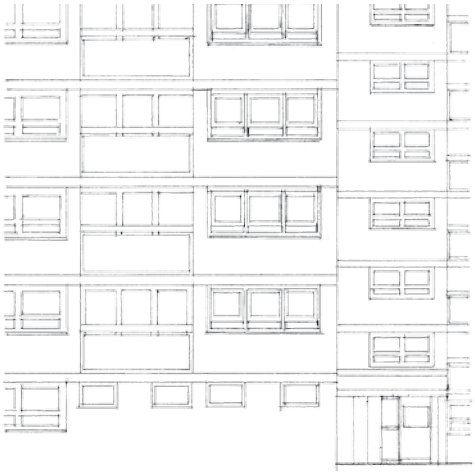
In the later 1920s and during the 1930s, most of the council houses built in Bristol did not have parlours, but instead just a kitchen and living room on the ground floor and three bedrooms and a bathroom upstairs. This design (MGD2) was common on many Bristol estates in the 1920s and 1930s, but you can also find thousands around Bristol that are very similar to it that were built after 1945 as well.

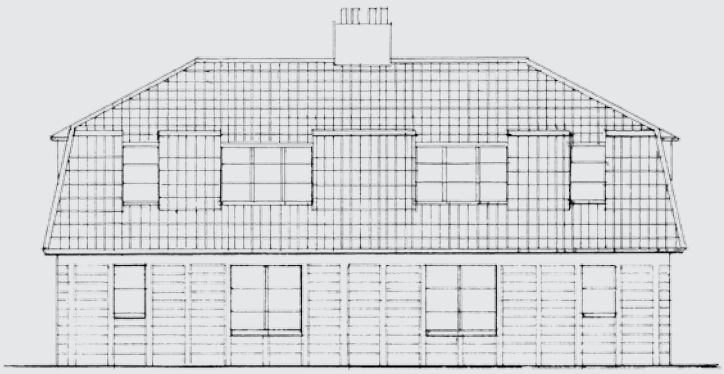
Short council terrace

Before and after the Second World War, many council houses were built in short terraces of four houses. You can still see plenty of these around Bristol. Many had a passageway in the centre for the people living in the middle two houses to get to their back doors (many of these now have gates). These were non-parlour houses but with quite big living rooms. The design for the first houses of this type came from Heathman & Blacker, a Bristol firm in which one of the two partners, Eveline Dew Blacker, was Bristol's first female architect.

Council flats

Bristol City Council built 69 blocks of between six and 17 storeys from the 1950s to 1970s and most are still there (the tallest is Twinnell House, Lawrence Hill). They were popular with many tenants because you got a lot of room for your rent money. Although they were not ideal for families with young children, older people liked them (as long as the lifts were working). One Bristol block, Whitemead House (Duckmoor Road, near Ashton Gate Stadium), was used in the 1980s in the BBC comedy series *Only Fools and Horses* to represent Nelson Mandela House, a fictional block of flats in London.





Cornish PRC

All through the history of council housing, councils have experimented with new ways of building in order to save money. After the Second World War, Bristol and other towns tried a number of new designs, including ones in which parts were made in factories to be assembled on site. The 1940s' pre-fabs were one example, but there were other designs intended to last more than ten years. So in Bristol, you can still see plenty of Cornish PRC houses from the 1940s-1960s, which were partly made from pre-cast concrete (PRC) slabs. The first houses in Hartcliffe, built in 1951, were Cornish units.

The Right to Buy

From the 1980s, people could buy the homes they once rented

Bristol council houses being painted in the 1950s

By the late 1970s, Bristol's housing problems were no longer serious and the council was building fewer flats and houses than before, though it was busy maintaining and repairing the council homes that already existed. But everyone thought the council would carry on building because new houses were always needed.

In 1980, the Conservative government of Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher introduced what was called the 'Right to Buy' (RTB). Council tenants who had previously rented their homes now had the option to buy them, usually far more cheaply than buying a privately-owned house of the same size and quality.

Councils had always been allowed to sell their houses. Bristol had sold lots over the years, but it had always built more than it sold and it didn't have to sell any if it didn't want to. But now councils had to sell their houses if tenants wanted to buy them.

RTB caused a lot of arguments. Some thought tenants should be allowed to buy their homes after living in them and paying rent on them for a long time.

Others said the houses belonged to the council and should be kept for renting out to those who needed homes but couldn't afford to buy one.

Others said that it was fair to sell the houses, but not so cheaply. If you lived in a house that you rented off a private landlord, you wouldn't expect them to sell you the house cheaply, would you?

The argument raged on, but thousands of people in Bristol and elsewhere started buying their council houses. Many people thought that the chance to buy their home, especially if it was a good-quality house, was too good an opportunity to miss.

Had councils been able to carry on building, there would be fewer housing problems today but the government took some of the money from house sales, and forced councils to spend most of their share on reducing their debts. So councils were left with little money with which to build new homes. By the mid-1980s, council house building in Bristol had almost come to a halt.

Around this time, 'council house' took on a negative meaning in many people's minds. As some saw it, council houses were for the poor – or at any rate, for those not well-off enough to buy their own houses. Council houses came to be considered inferior.

The term 'council estate' often conjured up images of places with a lot of problems: anti-social families, gangs, out-of-control young people, drugs, unemployment, poor health and so on.

Some stories about council estate problems were exaggerated or wrong. Some newspapers and TV programmes painted council estates as awful places and encouraged people who owned their houses to look down their noses at those who did not.

These days, the term 'council estate' is not used as much. On most of Bristol's estates, you will now find a mix of owner-occupied homes (usually council houses that have been bought), and social housing (homes let at affordable rents by the council or by housing associations).

(Housing association — a private company that lets out houses and flats at rents that people can afford and which uses its profits to build new homes and maintain existing ones.)

In the last 20 years, the city's population has increased by almost 100,000 people and not enough homes have been built for all of them.

You only have to walk around town to see people sleeping in doorways. But it is not just those who have to sleep rough who are without a proper home. Homeless people who can stay with friends or relatives, or sleep on someone's couch for a few days at a time are still homeless.


A GOOD INNINGS
I CAN'T BELIEVE SHE'S GONE, GRANFER NORMAN.
NEITHER CAN I. WE ALL THOUGHT SHE'D GO ON FOR EVER.
GEORGE BELL
JULY 12 1894
MARCH 29 1970
DAISY BELL
JUNE 4 1895
APRIL 10 1986
RIP
WE'LL HAVE TO EMPTY THE HOUSE NOW. ALL THOSE MEMORIES...
YES, LOVE. BUT THEY'RE HAPPY MEMORIES, AREN'T THEY? SHE HAD A GOOD INNINGS.
WONDER WHY SHE NEVER BOUGHT THE HOUSE OFF THE COUNCIL? SHE COULD HAVE - AND AT A GOOD PRICE.
SHE TOLD ME SHE DIDN'T WANT TO, DAD.
I DON'T HOLD WITH THIS RIGHT-TO-BUY BUSINESS. IF PEOPLE WANT TO BUY THEIR HOUSES, GOOD LUCK TO THEM, BUT IT'S NOT FOR ME.
BUT I CAN'T HAVE YOU LOT FALLING OUT OVER MY WILL!
WHEN YOUR GREAT-GRANDFATHER AND I WERE STARTING OUT, THE COUNCIL GAVE US A REAL HOME.
AND WHEN I'M GONE, THE FAMILY THAT LIVES HERE AFTER ME WILL HAVE A REAL HOME, TOO.
AND IF THEY DON'T TREAT THE PLACE PROPERLY AND LOOK AFTER GEORGE'S HEDGE, I SHALL HAUNT THEM!
MONEY MEANS NOTHING COMPARED TO A LOVING FAMILY AND HOME.
GEORGE BELL
JULY 12 1894
MARCH 29 1970
DAISY BELL
JUNE 4 1895
APRIL 10 1986
RIP

Bristol is building once more

The big challenges Bristol is facing

For many years, Bristol's council built no houses at all. Most new homes built since the 1980s have been constructed by private companies to be sold or to be rented out by private landlords and housing associations.

In the last few years, though, the council has started building again. In 2019, the council aims to provide 200 new homes.

This is nowhere near enough for the city's fast-growing population, so the council is encouraging private developers, housing associations and even community groups to build as well. Its target is for an average 2,000 new homes a year, and of these at least 800 must be for renting out at affordable rates.

Part of the problem is that while Bristol's population is going up, the amount of land available to build on is never going to increase.

In recent years Bristol's citizens and politicians have been arguing a lot about housing and where to put it. There is usually not much argument about building on a brownfield site – an area which has been built on before – or turning old industrial buildings and warehouses into apartments.

Plans to build on greenfield sites – areas which have never been built on before – will usually lead to protests. Nobody likes losing green space that can be used for growing food or for recreation and leisure.

The other big debate is about building upwards. If there's not enough land, then why not build more high-rise blocks that can house lots of people in flats on a relatively small land area?

But high-rise buildings are not cheap and not everyone wants to live in them. Many Bristolians are also worried that if you build lots of tall buildings, particularly in the middle of the city, Bristol will lose its historic character: one of the things that makes people want to live here in the first place.

The housing shortage is connected to other problems. Bristol has major issues around air pollution and traffic congestion because so many people work in the city centre but live in outlying towns and villages, or live somewhere within Bristol that's a long way from their workplace. Many think they have to drive cars to work because the public transport system (trains and buses) is not good enough.

You might have fewer cars on the roads (and less pollution) if motorists had to pay to drive into town (congestion charging), and/or if they spent more time working from home, and/or if people lived closer to their places of work, and/or if many more of us travel by bicycle, and/or if the trains and buses were better... If we need less space for roads and car parks, we would have more space for homes.

These are all important discussions to have about the future of our great city. But the story of a century of housing in Bristol tells us that in the past we successfully dealt with a problem and made sure that everyone had a better life. With energy, imagination, money and Bristol's famous creativity, we can certainly solve the problems of the twenty-first century.

Bristol City Council's Housing Development Team is building some homes around the city.

Among those built recently are some on former garage sites in north Bristol.

These modern buildings are extremely eco-friendly, with high levels of insulation and triple-glazing.

The award-winning development at Challender Court in Henbury also has a solar-powered communal system for heating and hot water.

(Picture: Emmett Russell Architects)

Who owns, and who rents?

At the moment there are:

*** About 200,000 homes (including flats) in Bristol**

*** Just over half of these are owner-occupied; those living in them own them, or are buying them with a loan or mortgage**

*** About 29% are rented from private landlords (some of these are council houses sold under RTB)**

*** About a fifth are rented from the council or from housing associations**

*** Bristol City Council still owns about 27,000 homes, mostly flats.**

Find out more

Your neighbourhood and your home have stories waiting to be discovered!

Eight easy projects

1. Find out about your neighbourhood
The quickest way to historic information about your neighbourhood is to use the Know Your Place Bristol website at maps.bristol.gov.uk/kyp

Compare what the area looked like using new and old maps and click on the different checkboxes on the right to call up information, photos and more. If you live in a council house or ex-council house built between 1919 and 1939 it can probably show you the original house plan.

2. Find out if your street was ever in the news
The British Newspaper Archive (www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk) has loads of old UK newspapers. You have to pay to use it, but can access it free at computers in your local library – you will need a Bristol library card and your PIN.

So far, it has no Bristol papers after 1950, but if your road was around before then, you should find some mentions of it. You might even get something back if you search for your actual address.

3. Find out who lived in your house
If you live in a fairly old house, ask at the Bristol Central Library to be shown where the street directories are kept. These are big books giving the names of people living at every address in Bristol.

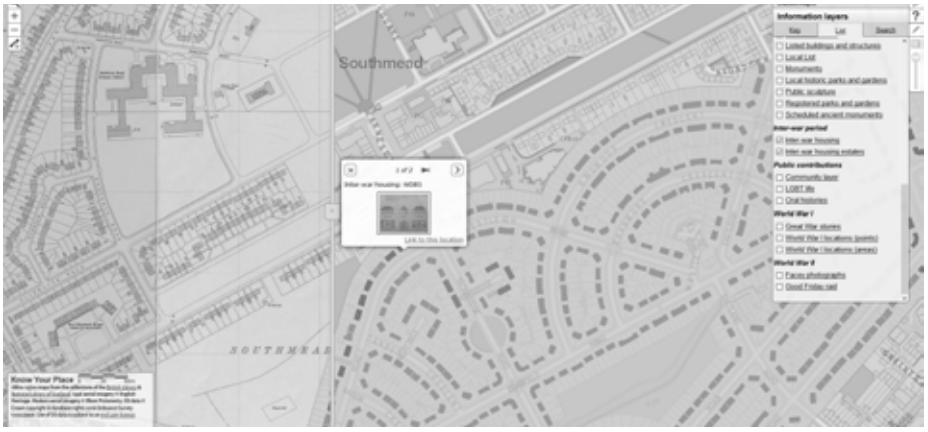
4. Find out more about them
Bristol library computers and the computers at the Bristol Archives search-room give you free access to use Ancestry.com, a website with family history information. You can use it at home, too, but you'll have to pay.

5. See what Bristol Archives has on your street
See if there are any documents or photos relating to your street at Bristol Archives by checking their online catalogue at archives.bristol.gov.uk

6. Build your own model AIROH pre-fab
Download the PDF at https://tinyurl.com/y4mpm6s6 and follow the instructions.

7. Visit St Fagans National Museum of History
This huge museum of everyday life in Wales has whole houses from different periods, and some are very similar to those that Bristolians lived in in previous times. There is even a fully furnished post-war Bristol AIROH pre-fab that you can look around. St Fagans is near Cardiff (CF5 6XB) and entry is free – see museum.wales/stfagans/

8. Visit Blaise Castle House museum
A museum of everyday life in Bristol past; clothes, toys, household things (even historic toilets). Go with an older person and have a bet as to how many times they tell you how awful things were when they were your age... For details and opening times, see www.bristolmuseums.org.uk/blaise-castle-house-museum



Advanced research

Bristol's libraries and Bristol Archives will help you with more advanced research projects. Library and Archives staff are always helpful if you explain what you're looking for.

The libraries have books (of course) as well as computer access to huge amounts of information you won't find by just using Google. Some online information can be accessed from home if you have a library card. For details, see www.bristol.gov.uk/libraries-archives/library-online-resources

Bristol Central Library on College Green has rare books, pamphlets, local newspapers (on microfilm) and other printed material.

Bristol Archives (at B Bond Warehouse, Smeaton Road Bristol BS1 6XN – entrance via the Create Centre) has miles of shelves with documents and records relating to Bristol from medieval times to the present and it's open to everyone free of charge. Details at www.bristolmuseums.org.uk/bristol-archives

Some websites

Bristol Then and Now Facebook group has loads of old photos of Bristol, and if you have any questions about your area, members might well know the answer. www.facebook.com/groups/bristolthenandnow/

Sea Mills 100 is a community-led celebration of a century of housing in Sea Mills.
seamills100.co.uk

Local Learning has information on community projects exploring the history of the Hillfields and Southmead estates. www.locallearning.org.uk

Bristol Homes for Heroes is a story map with words, photos and audio about Bristol council housing up to 1939.
https://tinyurl.com/y442cv6m

Reading

Most of these are not suitable for very young readers. All should be available via local libraries.

100 Years of Council Housing in Bristol by Peter Malpass and Jennie Walmsley (UWE Faculty of the Built Environment, 2005)

People's Housing in Bristol 1870-1939 by Madge Dresser, published in *Bristol's Other History* (Bristol Broadsides, 1983)
Short account of Bristol housing before the Second World War with lots of great stories.

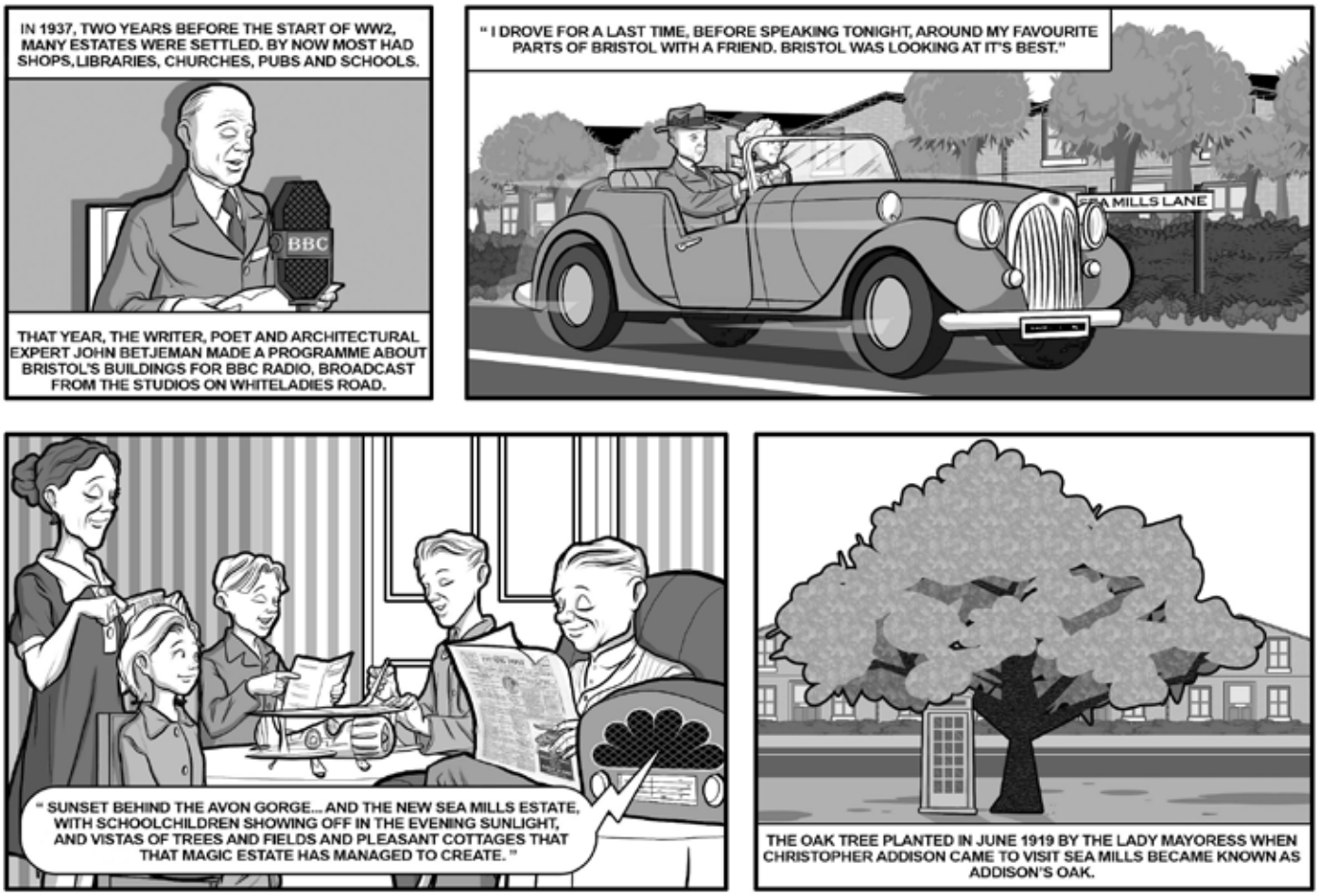
The Homes of the Bristol Poor by James Crosby (William Lewis & Son, Bristol, 1884)
The pioneering Victorian journalist's description of Bristol's worst housing in the 1880s. Download free from https://tinyurl.com/y8yu2cyb

Estates: An Intimate History by Lynsey Hanley (Granta Books, 2012)
One woman's memories of growing up on a Midlands council estate, combined with a history of social housing in the UK.

Municipal Dreams: The Rise and Fall of Council Housing by John Boughton (Verso Books, 2018)
Excellent history of social housing in Britain. There is also a Municipal Dreams blog at municipaldreams.wordpress.com

Tracing the History of Your House by Nick Barratt (National Archives, 2006)

Suburban Style: The British Home 1840-1960 by Helena Barrett and John Phillips (Little, Brown & Co, 1993)



We hope you enjoy reading this comic. Please send us your feedback. There's an online survey at www.surveymonkey.co.uk/r/J5SWMWS and you can also post comments on our Facebook page www.facebook.com/homesforheroes100.

We look forward to hearing from you.

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www.ideasfestival.co.uk/themes/homes-for-heroes-100
#HomesForHeroes100

Thanks to the support of Bristol City Council and the National Lottery Heritage Fund, this comic is being distributed FREE to the people of Bristol.

Vanessa reads under Addison's Oak, June 2019

Denis Broe, John O'Neil and Gran Broe, Machin Close, Henbury, 1959

May '53 - pre-fabs decorated for the Queen's coronation

Getting ready for the Coronation street party, Novers Park 1953

Ambleside Avenue Jubilee party, 1977

Hartcliffe, March 1988

Sharing memories of Southmead

Published by Bristol Cultural Development Partnership