

The Moorpool Estate, Harborne: **Birmingham's Other Garden Suburb**



An informal Character Appraisal

by

The Moorpool Regeneration Group

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When you enter the Moorpool estate from any direction, by car or on foot, you will immediately notice a change in the urban landscape.

It is as if you were entering a quiet, leafy park in which houses are placed along often curving roads lined with hedges, trees and grass verges. The houses have a general unity of design, yet each is individual and they are set at varying angles to junctions and open space. Most residents look out over a green space either at the rear or the front of their property, sometimes both.



All this is not accidental, but a product of careful planning and design by enlightened builders and urban planners some 100 years ago. Moorpool, its houses, roads and open spaces were designed as an entity, and this is the Moorpool Conservation area that we know today.



THE CONCEPT OF THE MOORPOOL ESTATE

The estate was built according to "Garden Suburb" principles. These were based on the nineteenth-century Arts and Crafts movement, which combined sensitive planning with the aim of social reform. The Garden Suburb also drew on new ideas for the "Garden City" which originated in the "ideal housing provided by a few philanthropic industrialists in northern Britain" such as the "proto-Socialist" Robert Owen, who established housing, educational and leisure facilities for his mill-workers in New Lanark, Central Scotland in the 1810s and 1820s (Cumming and Kaplan 60). Garden Cities were intended to be self-sufficient economic units, and they were a reaction to the back-to-back housing that excluded light, air, and sunshine from urban dwellings. The idea was to allow fresh air and sunshine to enter every house from all sides. This principle was also taken into account in the interior design of houses.

The architects for Garden Cities and Garden Suburbs were invariably well-established and respected as well as innovative. This was the case in Moorpool as in Letchworth. One of the planners of Letchworth Garden City, Barry Parker, considered that the houses should not be "modelled in miniature on the houses of the rich" (Davey 186) with many small rooms. The houses were to be built so that the rooms were "large enough to be healthy, comfortable and habitable" (Cumming and Kaplan 62).

We can see this in Moorpool today, where many of the houses have living rooms running from the front to the rear, allowing sunlight to enter at different times of day. Parker also considered that "if your big room is to be comfortable it *must* have recesses. There is great charm in a room broken up in plan, where that slight feeling of mystery is given to it which arises when you cannot see the whole room from any one point in which you are likely to sit; when there is always something *round the corner*" (Davey 186). Here on Moorpool Estate we often have recesses and arches in our rooms - and although not much could be hiding around our corners they certainly add great charm and character to our rooms.



The creator of the term "Garden City", Ebenezer Howard (1850-1928), insisted that it should relate to its chosen site. We can see this in miniature on the Moorpool with the roads winding around the contours of the gently rolling hills on which the estate was built and how it was centred round the existing pool and large trees.



The Garden Suburbs were intended to improve peoples' physical health and enhance psychological well-being which was being damaged in an urban environment. They were envisaged as housing for a social mixture of people and, given the class assumptions of the time this led to a combination of larger and smaller houses, as we see on this estate. The Garden Suburb was also an attempt to bring some of the best features of country living into the city. Arts and Crafts principles included a desire for the buildings to be in harmony with nature, using local materials and looking to vernacular building.

Construction was to be 'honest' with no facings of materials imitating other materials. Houses were designed with traditional pitched roofs and homely chimneys with integral decorative brickwork

Every house should be individually designed - as every house on Moorpool is slightly different. The design was functional so that windows and doors, for example, fitted their use rather than being showy. The overall effect was "picturesque", avoiding repetitive or symmetrical design. Finally, the Garden Suburb was designed as a whole, that is carefully integrating housing and green spaces, and was not therefore intended to have additional buildings stuck in the middle.



THE HISTORY OF THE MOORPOOL ESTATE

By 1911 there were seventeen Garden Suburbs or Cities in England ranging in size from the Moorpool (53 acres) to Letchworth Garden city (3818 acres). Bournville at 525 acres and Port Sunlight at 350 acres were in-between the two in size. There was great excitement about these schemes. Visitors came from Germany (where a small model village was built in 1911) and interest was shown by Austrians and Russians at the time (Harrison 91-2).

Michael Harrison in his book *Bournville: Model Village to Garden Suburb* describes the beginning of the Moorpool Estate:

Birmingham people began to call for a city to be ringed with estates like Bournville. A local co-partnership scheme, promoted by Harborne Tenants Limited, was begun in 1906. Supported by J. S. Nettlefold¹ and designed by Martin and Martin, the Moorpool estate was another attractive low-density scheme. Its curvilinear layout diverged from the standard grid pattern, although the estate roads were built to bye-law standards. The houses were constructed largely of brick and tile, although some were pebble-dashed to provide variety and protection. As at Bournville and the contemporaneous Bournville Tenants scheme, natural features were retained (in this case the pool and trees) and recreational facilities were provided. Gardens and allotments were prominent features on this estate too. (89).

Capital was provided by the issue of shares. All tenants were required to hold at least two shares and there were limits on the number of shares an individual could hold. It was a co-partnership scheme with the tenants being joint owners with outside capitalists (Harrison 90).

¹ John Sutton Nettlefold was a member of the Guest Keen Nettlefold (GKN) family.

The architects for the Moorpool Estate, Martin and Martin, were already well-established in Birmingham. William Martin had worked here and had later formed a practice with J.H. Chamberlain in 1864 (Victorian Society). William's son Frederick Martin joined the firm some time after Chamberlain died in 1883. The firm's works included many public buildings, police stations, baths, libraries and 41 boarding schools, Spring Hill Library, Birmingham School of Art, St John the Evangelist, Sparkhill, and the Moorpool Estate. Frederick Martin's most famous building was perhaps the former Telephone Exchange Building in Edmund St.



Moorpool Avenue circa 1910²



Designed in 1896 by Frederick Martin, 17/19 Newhall Street is a red brick and terracotta Grade 1 listed building on the corner of Edmund Street in the city centre of Birmingham.

Harborne Tenants Limited, under the chairmanship of Councillor J. S. Nettlefold, was formally established on the 25 June 1907, at a meeting in the Harborne Institute, "to promote the erection, co-operative ownership and administration of houses" on 54 acres of undulating land (HTL 8, 11, 13). In a booklet published in 1908 it set out the advantages to the tenant members of co-operative ownership which included: "he³ gets this house with a small garden attached in a neighbourhood where there is plenty of fresh air; and the house itself is one with some individuality, in which the tenant can take pride, instead of being, as is too often the case now, an insignificant unit in an interminable row of jerry-built ugliness"(HTL 8). The first ceremonial sod on the future estate was dug by Mrs J.S. Nettlefold on 26 October 1907, with building starting on 1 January 1908. At the opening ceremony Dr. Gore declared, "There must be better houses,

more air, more gardens, and more open spaces for playgrounds for children" while Mrs Nettlefold said she "hoped they were inaugurating a community of healthy, happy homes ... they would build houses, well laid out, with nice spaces, grass and trees" (HTL 18, 19).

The first completed house was opened by Henry Vivian, M.P. on 24 May 1908 (Clarke 38-39). Construction work was finished by 1912-13. The Institute for Historical Research (British History Online) notes that the estate "consisted of about 500 houses and was laid out on garden-city lines at fewer than ten houses to the acre⁴. Nevertheless the planning and financial direction were so competent that the self-contained cottages could be let for as little as 5s. a week".

The Estate then continued to be managed successfully by Harborne Tenants until 1996 when it was bought by The Bradford Property Trust (BPT). As a result the whole ethos of management inevitably changed.

Most of the tenants had owned only a few shares as certain groups and individuals accumulated larger share holdings so the tenants had little say in the decision to sell. BPT had by then some 6000 homes to rent but put itself up for sale in 2000. Subsequently BPT was bought by its smaller competitor, Grainger, which has since grown rapidly from its North-Eastern base where it had been founded in Newcastle in 1912 (Lawson 1-3). Grainger has become the owner of the largest quoted residential property portfolio in the UK (as well as having property in Germany) and by 2005-06 had a total of £1.5 billion in assets (Grainger Trust 1). The Moorpool is therefore just a tiny part of Grainger's concerns. This situation has a number of potentially damaging implications for the future of the Estate. In particular, the continued selling of the remaining rented property will alter the socio-economic balance on the Estate. Furthermore an important economic base for the maintenance of the communal areas of the Estate will be lost.

² http://www.birmingham.gov.uk/GenerateContent?CONTENT_ITEM_ID=23740&CONTENT_ITEM_TYPE=0&MENU_ID=260

³ This is 1908. Whilst the men got the houses, Mrs Nettlefold added that "they will not be homes unless the women keep them, and keep them as they should be kept" (HTL 19).

⁴ Estimated at 9 per acre (Steve Beauchampe 2)

PROTECTING AND ENHANCING THE MOORPOOL ESTATE

The Moorpool Estate was designated as a Conservation area on 30 July 1970. Since then and especially in recent years, some private owners set about "improving" their properties, for example by building porches, removing hedges, installing picture windows and modern doors, taking down chimneys and constructing some inappropriate extensions. Thus, whilst these private properties look - and are - in excellent condition and repair they have been altered in such a way as to be out of character with the Arts and Crafts style and in many ways have failed to "enhance the character and appearance of the designated area" as conservation areas are supposed to do (PAS 2). Some hedges have been removed and gardens replaced with car parking areas. The onus of enforcing any covenants aimed at protecting the estate seems to have rested largely with the Estate owner and their failure to enforce covenants has contributed to the undermining of its character.

Such activities began to seriously erode the original nature of the area, so that in December 2006, following initial discussions between the City Council, Gisela Stuart MP, Grainger, The Moorpool Residents' Association and The Harborne Society, a large meeting of the residents was held which strongly supported the adoption of the Article 4(2) of The General Permitted Development Order 1995.

This action demonstrated the residents' commitment to maintaining the character and ethos of the Estate. The order included a schedule of normally permitted development which now needed permission from the Council. This provides additional protection so that, for example, for changes to doors, gates, fences, or the painting of the exterior of the house, permission needs to be sought. All trees within the area are included in a Tree Preservation Order. All front and side elevations visible from the street are included and the rears of 50-84 Moorpool Avenue which overlook the Pool and the Bowling Green.



The Moor Pool



The Bowling Green

As shown by the survey carried out by the Moorpool Regeneration Group (See MRG website www.moorpool.org.uk), most residents believed that this would provide additional protection for the area and prevent the building of new housing on the open spaces of the estate.

The estate as an entity is of great architectural interest but in addition, five buildings have been listed as Grade II as shown on Birmingham City Council's *Schedule of Nationally Listed Buildings of Historic Interest*⁵. There is a second list of buildings which are listed by the local authority and may be a building, structure or feature which, whilst not listed by the Secretary of State, the Council feels to be an important part of Birmingham's heritage due to its architectural, historic or archaeological significance. The Moorpool's Grade II listed buildings are however of national importance and are:

- The Moorpool Hall, listed in 1982 and described as "a symmetrical composition closing the vista down North Gate" (description provided on untitled document provided by BCC from original national listing, page 112)
- The Harborne Tenants' Estate Office (Ibid 113)
- Numbers 25, 26, 26A and 27 on The Circle and again described as "A symmetrical composition terminating the vista down Moor Pool Avenue" (Ibid 112)
- The two sets of flats on Ravenhurst Road numbers 108-122, (even) and numbers 124-134 (even) located on either side of the entrance to the Valley Site.



Entrances to the Hall

The Estate Offices



The Circle: Numbers 25, 26, 26A and 27

⁵ http://www.birmingham.gov.uk/GenerateContent?CONTENT_ITEM_ID=3226&CONTENT_ITEM_TYPE=0&MENU_ID=12378&EXPAND=1676 and click on pdf file at base of page.

The latter are placed opposite the Ravenhurst end of Park Edge, again providing a vista down the road. "In the projecting bays [are] the recessed and arched entrances to the flats, those on the ground floor slightly below pavement level [they are in fact considerably below pavement level], those on the upper floors reached by bridges supported on exposed steel joints" (ibid 375). The bridges have been replaced in recent years in a sympathetic manner by the landlord probably at the insistence of the local authority (the original planning application that was made was not in keeping with an Arts and Crafts style and objections had been raised by local residents). This building is arguably one of the most unique buildings on the estate if not in Birmingham.



Part of 124-134, Ravenhurst Rd



108-122, Ravenhurst Road

Apart from the existing five listed buildings it may be that the local authority should consider the listing of some other buildings as exemplars of domestic architecture in a garden city. The general descriptions above confirm yet again the way in which the estate was built as a whole with vistas at the end of roads being part of the design.

OPEN SPACES, CLUBS AND SOCIETIES

As conceived by the original planners and architects, the estate was built with a relatively low density of housing, with many open spaces and recreational facilities provided. Even for the small blocks of flats, such as the listed ones on Ravenhurst Road, every flat was provided with a garden at the rear. Green verges with trees line each road. The larger open areas are the retained Pool, the Bowling Green, the Spinney, open green spaces with trees in areas like East Pathway, the numerous sets of allotment gardens, and even an orchard.



Allotments on the Valley site



Interlinking these areas are numerous paths which run along behind many houses so that residents of the estate can walk around the estate by many different routes all of this adding to a sense of common "ownership" of the whole estate. As well as this residents were provided with a range of facilities which are still very much in use today.



Paths leading to allotments and open spaces

In 2006 Steve Beauchampe (2) described the sporting facilities as follows:

Two tennis clubs, an enchanting bowling green, a rifle range (used by the Home Guard during World War II), a billiard hall ... where the chalk is lowered on pulleys placed above the tables and, naturally, a pool, where the Moorpool Fishing Club catch carp, tench, roach, perch and bream ... Yet ... none is as unique, or indeed as curious, as that which sits under Moorpool Hall (home of the Moorpool Players amateur dramatics group). The skittle alley of Moorpool Skittles Club, opened in 1913 ... is one of only two that I know left in Birmingham and, moreover, the only one left in Britain known to feature both a flat alley and a crowned one.

Today the hall itself is used by a great range of different people: ballet classes, the Harborne Orchestra (and other orchestras have used it for rehearsals), Barn dances and children's parties, political associations, '40s nights, the BBC (occasionally) and as a polling station in local and general elections. It is used for regular meetings by the Fishing, Rifle, Skittle, Bowling, Snooker and the two Tennis clubs. The Moorpool Players meet, rehearse and perform in the hall and the Moorpool Allotment Association also has its meetings there.



Part of "The Spinney"

During recent years there have been a number of developments which have been most unfortunate for the estate. Most seriously, many of the garage courts originally provided by Harborne Tenants as car ownership expanded have fallen into a poor state of repair. This was the result of the lack of maintenance by BPT and Grainger and over the last few years assisted by the inevitable minor vandalism that dereliction attracts. Allotments have not been let and some of these have become overgrown. Although the shops on The Circle have continued to flourish under new management and still provides a useful focus point at the centre of the estate, the invaluable Post Office was closed. The old red telephone kiosk was also removed from The Circle.

However, just as it was conceived a hundred years ago, the estate is still the home for a varied community of residents of all ages pursuing a range of occupations and activities and including both tenants renting their properties and owner-occupiers. With recent developments both older residents who have lived on the estate for many years and newly arrived younger couples and families have all united, working together to help preserve it.



Allotment between Northgate/Highbrow

CONCLUSION

Birmingham City Council, in designating the Moorpool Estate as a Conservation area and providing the further protection enabled by the 4(2) directive, has recognised the unique character of the estate. Designed by an eminent Victorian/Edwardian architect, and following the principles of the Arts and Crafts Movement, it has provided nearly 500 carefully designed homes for a diverse community set in a green Garden Suburb, well-supplied with open spaces, garages, allotments and sporting facilities. The ideas that were behind the garden city movement in 1907 have many resonances with today's "Green Agenda" such as the need for wildlife corridors and the increased national priority given to allotments. It is clear that the sporting and recreational facilities are well used today and greatly appreciated not only by residents of the estate but by the wider community. As envisaged by the founders, the residents of the estate remain a socially varied group. There is a strong community spirit as shown in the large numbers attending the meetings of the Moorpool Residents' Association and the recent meetings organised by Grainger.

Although a number of allotments are currently overgrown, the recent survey of residents' views has shown that there is considerable demand for these, which would be taken up as soon as Grainger agree to start renting them again⁶. It is imperative that this unique area is not threatened by any large-scale housing planning applications such as the one proposed by Grainger. In addition, the eventual selling of all currently rented accommodation, as planned by Grainger, will irrevocably alter the social balance on the estate and again negate the intentions of the enlightened builders some 100 years ago. This will also remove a significant source of regular income intended for estate maintenance

It would be a great loss to Birmingham City and to Harborne if this area were to be irretrievably damaged by such development: the residents of the estate along with the City Council need to urgently explore ways in which the existing facilities and the general character of the Garden Suburb can be preserved for another 100 years.

⁶ One allotment has recently been let by Grainger on the Northgate/Park Edge allotment area.



Leaving the Estate: no longer quite so green

This report was prepared for the Moorpool Regeneration Group by Igor Cusack and Tricia Cusack

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