Bury’s first council houses

Part 1: Bolton Road

In 1907 there was a “housing famine” in Bury according to the Bury socialist society and the Bury branch of the Christian socialist union, and they both urged the Council to build. A housing committee had been established in 1907 but The Council's initial response was that the town clerk inform the secretaries of the societies that “this Committee do not think it desirable for the municipality to undertake the housing of its citizens”. However by March 1908 the committee had changed its mind and identified two possible sites: six acres on Bolton Road, opposite Wellington Barracks and a site at Woodhill Road and rough plans were prepared. Lord Derby agreed to let the council have the Bolton Road site at a reduced ground rent, provided that there were between 20 and 25 houses per acre. The Woodhill Road site, along with many other identified sites, was not proceeded with.

The original plan for Bolton Road was for four roomed cottages. However the Bury and District Free Church Council suggested that larger houses were needed. The Housing committee visited Chamber Hall, Bolton in July 1908 to look at even smaller cottages “planned after the style of the old Bury cottage but they are smaller in dimensions and have neither the stone base or string course along the front”. However by December, the council’s plans included a variety of sizes of house, from one bedroom to three large bedrooms, with proposed rents between 3/6 and 5/6. After receiving a tender from James Byrom Ltd of Woolfold in April 1909, an application for a loan was submitted to the Local government board for the purchase of the land and the formation of streets. At the suggestion of the Bury Housing and Town Planning Association (two of whose five members were vicars) an exhibition of possible designs was arranged. The association criticised the scheme, stating that there was a need for larger houses, that too much land was devoted to streets, and there was no need for the proposed bungalows. The plan was again revised to accommodate these comments.

Then the long negotiations with the Local Government Board about finance began. The Board did not think the scheme would be self-financing and suggested that more houses be built. By April 1910 a revised scheme was prepared with 124 dwellings rather than the original 108. The central open space was dropped, although it was later reinstated. By October four different plans were being discussed of up to 175 houses. The decision was made to go for semi-detached houses with rents from 4/2 to 6/2 and application was made to the Local Government Board for a loan of £31,000. This was reduced to 124 in Jan 1911. In April, builders (not architects) were asked to submit designs for the houses. There were disagreements about the paving for the streets (Bury wanted to use granite setts rather than tarmacadam) and over the central open space. Bury also required a back street 20ft wide which no other councils required.

In May 1911, work started. Different contractors worked on different house type; James Ramsden of Walmersley built the type “A” house and was presumably responsible for its design. There were many problems at the site. The subsoil was found to be mainly ashpit refuse so this had to be removed at additional cost. By July all the houses were completed to roof level. Six months were allowed in the contracts for completion, but progress was slowed by a shortage of bricks, non-delivery of materials due to a rail strike and poor weather. The road to Florence Nightingale hospital was used for construction traffic and was made almost impassible at times.

By December 1911, the housing committee was considering who would occupy the buildings. Messrs Milne Brother and Hoyle of Egyptian Mill offered to take 30 of the houses for their workers but the committee refused. They did however agree to allow the police to use one of the houses. There was no such thing as a waiting list at the time so the council advertised for tenants in the local paper. No houses were permitted to be used as shops.

In October 1912 the council planted a circle of trees, 24 feet in diameter, in the central square (there is no trace of this now) and in January 1913, the committee was discussing such matters as fitting clothes rails at the request of tenants and planting privet hedges.

By June, there were already problems with some of the tenants. A tenant was refused permission to keep poultry. and there were problems of “youths using the square as a cycling track”. William Jones of 7 Powell Street was using his house “in connection with his trade as a dairyman” and other tenants were damaging the privet hedges or allowing their gardens to become unkempt. In response to this the Council set up a best-kept garden contest with separate prizes of £1, 10s and 5s for the best kept front and rear gardens. The winner of the front garden contest for three years running was Arthur Cheketts of 9 Powell Street. In January 1917, the garden competition was replaced by prizes for the best crops of vegetables and potatoes organised by the Vegetable and potato competition sub-committee. There were six rules compiled by the committee such as “an area of nine square yards of potatoes will be lifted and weighed in the presence of one or more members of the Committee”. There were seventeen entries and the winner was S Rhodes [address] with 50 ½ lbs. However in 1918 there were only ten entries and the committee decided not to award prizes.

In May 1918, the committee inspected 144 houses on the estate and found 41 gardens “in an unsatisfactory state” It was stated that 26 of these belonged to serving soldiers, or invalids, and four “working all hours on munitions”.

Local architects were invited to submit designs for the second phase of the development. These were R Hall, J Hopkinson, J D Mould and H Thompson. However in February 1914, it was reported that the “plans submitted by Messrs Gorse & Co be accepted”. The council then applied for the necessary £4,892 funding. In April, further extensions to the Bolton Road scheme were considered and by May the funding had been secured. Phase 2 was completed in early 1916.

There is no discussion in the Housing committee minutes about the naming of the streets but they are presumably named, due to the proximity to Wellington Barracks, after contemporary military figures: Redvers Buller (1839-1908) was commander in chief of the British army in the Second Boer war; the Duke of Connaught (1850-1942) became Governor general of Canada; Lord Kitchener (1850-1916) of "Your country needs you" fame and Powell street probably refers to Lord Baden Powell (1857-1941).

The area is still known as Garden City and the Medical officer of health had in 1907 suggested that "there is an opportunity of development on garden city lines". As early as 1905 the Borough engineer had been to the influential exhibition of cottages at Letchworth Garden City . Garden cities began as new settlements but by 1910 the concepts were being applied to existing settlements as "garden suburbs". The Bolton Road houses show some characteristics of the Arts and Crafts influenced garden city style such as low density and attractive wide street with trees, half-timbering in the gables and the use of roughcast and contrasting brickwork and terracotta,

Part 2: Walmersley

In 1914, following a petition by the ratepayers of Walmersley and Baldingstone, the council was considering a further scheme of 100 houses in blocks of nine, also on land to be purchased from Lord Derby based on a new road to be called Baldingstone Avenue. This scheme was submitted for Local government board funding in 1917 when the committee was also looking at a site in Brandlesholme Road on land purchased from Lord Derby.

By March 1914 four schemes had been prepared for Walmersley. By September the scheme comprised 15 pairs of semis and 84 houses and builders and architects were invited to "compete as in the previous scheme". However in October, Lord Derby's agent said that less land might be available due to a "certain area being required for the erection of a school". In 1917 it was considered "not practical to proceed unless considerable financial support from the Local Government board were afforded". Obviously the war had an impact but by 1919, 100 houses were to be erected and the Housing committee was considering using concrete after visiting a scheme in West Derby, Liverpool which used the new "winget" concrete block system rather than brick.

In 1920, 92 houses were approved by the Housing Commissioner. It was decided that facing rather than common bricks be used and that brick not be used for the sills. Building stated in 1920. The "Fire-Grates sub-committee" specified that "Home Pride" or "Unity" fire grates be used but that only one bedroom in each house was to have a fireplace. By May 1920, progress was slow due to a coal shortage which reduced the supply of bricks. The contractor was the Bury House Building Company which optimistically said it could erect a further 108 houses by July 1922. In September 1921 the street names of Palatine Drive and Central Drive were agreed but no reasons given for the choice. 92 houses were ready for allocation by September 1921. Rents were 9sh to

11sh, quite a bit more than at Bolton Road. This was probably due to 1919 “Homes fit for heroes” Housing Act which specified a higher internal and external standard for council houses.

In 1922 there were delays due to lack of painters and the period for completion was extended to beyond July 1923. There were problems with rats and with dry rot. On May 24th, the Bury House Building Company went into liquidation.

The 1923 Housing Act had made subsidies of £100 per house available for private house building and the Council approved many schemes under it; by 1928, 650 Bury homes had been built using it. The Housing committee minutes list all of these houses enabling precise dating of these buildings . The Council built no more houses until the late 1920s when Hornby Street and Grange Road were developed. In April 1930, the Council built houses for sale on surplus land of the Walmersley scheme; it was completed in January 1931; an unusual use of Housing Act subsidies.

In 1919 and 1920 the Housing committee had been looking at many sites: Ainsworth Road, Fishpool, Brandlesholme Road (near the Old Duke), Hornby Street, Tenterden Street, Jericho, Seedfield, Chesham Crescent, Brighton Street, Fairfield Brow, the site of Militia Barracks on Bolton Road and Goschen [sic]. Many of these projects were later built.

Source: Bury Housing committee minutes, 1907-1930