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The Last Utopia

Looking back at the New Town at Birchwood

by Susan Fitzpatrick



People's Archive pic by Nigel Hartley, taken with his Pentax K1000 in Birchwood Science Park sometime toward the mid-1980s.

I grew up in Birchwood between 1980 and 1997 and I eventually became a lecturer in Human Geography. In 2015, I found out there was an archive of the Warrington New Town Development Corporation (DC) held by the Local Archive in Chester. Spurred by nosiness and a bit of nostalgia, I spent the next summer looking through this archive. For days at a time I read through resident designation policies, landscape reports, plans for playgrounds (with a futuristic theme to be set in the bunkers of the old Ordnance Factory in what is now Birchwood Forest Park), plans for a new nature reserve, plans for how to encourage new residents to take ownership of the landscape of Birchwood with the help of a new Ranger Service, a leisure 'high street' containing a 1700 seater auditorium; bars; conference suites; a fitness club; a youth club; an advice centre...

In short, the DC archive is a comprehensive record of the hopes and aspirations of the organisation that designed and delivered the new town. It very gradually dawned on me that in 2018 Warrington New Town was going to be 50, because it was officially designated by Central Government in 1968. From there, Warrington Museum & Art Gallery agreed that this anniversary merited a public airing of some of the materials from the DC archive. From there, I realised that the exhibition would need to tell another dimension of the story of the Birchwood, one that came from its residents.

The photos projected in the *People's Archive* in the exhibition are from residents and ex-residents who moved to Birchwood in the 1970s and early 1980s. The story is partly about settling in a place both new to them and new on the map. By the time my parents moved to Birchwood in 1980, generations of British families had made a new start in one of the 31 new towns built in Britain since the New Towns act of 1946.

For me growing up in Birchwood, the design and the newness of the place was very much taken for granted. I didn't think of Warrington as somewhere with a history – it wasn't until one of the High Schools in the town closed and some of its pupils came to Birchwood High that I even considered that people actually had their family roots in Warrington, because all the children I went to school with had family from elsewhere. Also, in Birchwood in the early 1980s virtually every tree was young enough to need to be supported by a wooden post, of similar dimensions to the trunk and secured to the tree with a black rubber belt. As a child I had not considered what purpose these posts served, and taking it for granted that every tree had one of these posts attached, I do remember wondering why older trees did not come with posts with little black belts.

These small things marked out New Towns as different from other places. When I went to an A Level college across town in the late 1990s, I gained my first sense of what Warringtonians thought about the New Town, and its biggest development area of Birchwood, which stood some 5 miles out from the centre of the old town. I gathered that when people talked about Birchwood being 'weird' because 'everything looks the same', that there was a bit of scepticism about an area that had been entirely designed and built in a short space of time, perhaps a sense that such a project was a bit futuristic?

Later on I would learn about how the New Town was representative of a Modernist utopian ethos in planning that did kind of attempt to build the future. But Warrington New Town wasn't typical of the modernist planning which had given us concrete landscapes of some of the earlier new towns, and most of the overspill estates outside Britain's large cities. By the time Birchwood was planned a different set of ideas were beginning to circulate, ideas about homes in green space...

An imagined future

The idea of creating a new residential and business district five miles north east of the town of Warrington, on the site of an enormous World War 2 Ordnance Factory, can probably be dated to sometime in the early 1960s.¹ Warrington was officially designated a 'Partnership' New Town in April 1968. A little later still, focus shifted towards the 'idea' of Birchwood, or the project of making the area an attractive prospect for its imagined future residents and workers.

"I went to University in America, and I had a very good landscape professor... Ian McHarg and he introduced me to the notion of the "Power of the Idea"! In a variety of urban design projects, I have always had this in the back of my head, and in the case of Warrington, it was the landscape."

Hugh Cannings, Former Chief Architect and Planner, Warrington New Town Development Corporation.

Hugh Cannings supported his design team in delivering pioneering ideas for the landscape for Birchwood, of houses in woodland, inspired by the Dutch 'Heempark' (Homes in Parks). There would be play areas made from natural materials, forest parks, wooded glens linking residential areas to amenities, green corridors for vehicles to drive through and the world's first Urban Ranger service.²

A then-recent graduate of the Landscape Design course at the University of Manchester called **Robert Tregay** had written about urban woodland and had visited the Dutch Heemparks of Amsterdam with course tutor Alan Ruff. He had also visited Warrington New Town in its earliest stages as a student and eventually asked David Scott, Chief Landscape Architect at the Corporation for a job.

"It's incredible looking back on it now, how it all works, when I think of the contrast that we have here, the control we have over staff and what they do, but basically, I was given Oakwood! Off you go Tregay, it was June 1975..."

Robert Tregay, former Deputy Landscape Architect, Warrington Development Corporation

Tregay brought his design philosophy, an 'ecological planning approach' to Warrington New Town Development Corporation. It had never been tried in the UK before. **David Scott** has told of how no nursery in this country had anything like the amount of trees that would be required, so the majority of the trees had to be bought and transported from the Netherlands.³

In a document written by Tregay and his colleague Roland Gustavsson in 1983 called *Oakwood's New Landscape*, they discuss creating a sense of place with the landscape design in Birchwood. For the Landscape Architect, this means considering the "hidden network of natural processes" of a site – in other words, its natural history: its soil, hydrology, geomorphology, flora, fauna and the historical management the site had experienced. In a short passage, Tregay gives a sense of what they found on the site after the derelict Ordnance Factory had been partially cleared:

"small but significant areas of semi-natural vegetation were retained, despite the demolition process... several copses and areas of scrub were preserved around the margins. Here vegetation succession was well advanced. On the peat mounds, railway sidings and tips along the southern boundary Betula sp. and Salix sp. dominated. On heavier soils, and on the banks of the blast mounds, Crataegus monogyna scrub formed a patchwork with Rubus fruticosus, ruderal herbaceous species and grasses...A small but most attractive pond to the north of Oakwood survived demolition work intact. Many of these features were incorporated into the new landscape..."

(Tregay and Gustavsson 1983: 7)



Land prepared for Development Corporation housing in Oakwood, mid 1970s.

New lives in a place without history

An important principle of the ecological design approach then, was to work with these “surviving” elements in establishing the planting and in creating an overall sense of continuity. Which provides something of a juxtaposition to the experience of those moving to Birchwood as it was welcoming its first residents. In the experience of moving house, some sense of a new beginning is inevitable, but when you move to a place that had only just been ‘created’, that feeling becomes more intense still. Neighbours were strangers to begin with, although some residents talk of moving at the same time as some of their old neighbours from Salford. For most, the sight of the many saplings, unfinished roads, not yet built, or half-way built shopping centre and train station was a reminder that they had moved somewhere without a history. Reading Tregay’s report on the landscape suggests it was only the plant life that had historical roots in the area.

An early planning document, the *District Plan for Birchwood* published in 1973 suggests a target residential population of 20,000. However the area would never house this amount; the figure was revised down after the political climate of successive Governments from the mid-1970s turned away from building New Towns and towards regenerating cities. By the early 1980s, Michael Heseltine (then Minister for the Environment under Margaret Thatcher) turned the Development Corporation into a delivery mechanism for selective urban regeneration of key sites such as the Docklands of London and Liverpool, consigning the notion that the state should and could deliver public housing on a large scale to the archives and museum collections of Britain’s regions...

The first residents of Development Corporation-built housing in Birchwood moved in in 1976 (although residents in private housing in Locking Stumps moved in earlier than this). Meaning that just eight years since the ceremonial gavel signalled the official designation⁴, the 2.7 square miles that would become Birchwood underwent a most impressive transformation. In the course of researching Birchwood, I have interviewed a few residents who moved to the area at this early stage. To those who were young enough, the area was a giant playground. There were the beginnings of the green spaces, but there was also the remains of the Ordnance factory. One former resident who moved from Greater Manchester as a young teenager said a group of them found a “life size” Dalek made out of wood in an abandoned block of the Ordnance Factory; another resident described finding old cigarette cards and the odd grenade in the land that would eventually be bounded as the nature reserve, Risley Moss. Such tales differ from the rationality of the District Plan published in 1973 and give rise to the idea that Birchwood has become meaningful in many different ways to the many different people who have made it their home.



People's Archive pictures: *(left)* an early Birchwood Carnival donated by Jane Hewertson; *(right)* "Nelson's Quarterdeck" football team, donated by Steve Hall

The People's Archive

Birchwood exists both as an imagined place and as a lived reality. I began this research by assuming it was the designers and architects of the Development Corporation who did most of the imagining. Planning for a future community they would never know. But when I asked residents to donate their old photographs of life in early Birchwood – (which has been collated for the exhibition as *The People's Archive* and is being projected onto the wall of the exhibition space) I began to see that these images allow a glimpse of how residents imagined the place. The images also allow those of us who have no recollection of this era of early Birchwood, to imagine the place anew. For example one image shows an early Birchwood carnival parading down the main roads of Locking Stumps and Oakwood, others show young families unpacking their belongings in an unfamiliar landscape. In other images there is a railway station half built and resembling a stop in a frontier town in the American West. In another, a young amateur photographer captures the grandeur and glamour of a modernist office block by night.

One resident of Birchwood who has been instrumental in collating some of the *People's Archive photographs* is Nick Jackson. As an able photographer, Nick provided some updated images to those taken by Development Corporation photographers in the late 1970s and early 1980s – these are included in the People's Archive. They tell a story of a landscape left to grow, not always as the landscapers of the Development Corporation would have wished!



(left) Rutherford House on Birchwood Science Park circa 1978; (right) Photo taken from similar view today

As was the case with all UK New Towns, Warrington's Development Corporation was only ever intended to deliver and manage the new town for its first couple of decades. The management of Birchwood's landscape was ultimately handed over to Warrington Borough Council. Its budgets and priorities were understandably different to those of the Development Corporation, an organisation with the singular purpose of raising land and asset values of the development areas under their control. The urban forest of Birchwood has been left to mature in ways that have left some residents regretful that there hasn't been the close management required to bring out the layers and ultimately the beauty of the woodland landscape.

To other residents however, and to the many students of Landscape Design and Architecture who regularly visit Birchwood with their courses, there is a sense that this is a fascinating, living testament to a bygone era of house building guided by some utopian, radical and precocious planning and design principles.

For more information, photographs and analysis from the *Days of the New Town* project, you can visit:

www.daysofthenewtown.wordpress.com and
www.facebook.com/daysofthenewtown

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References

1. The Birchwood site was first proposed for a New Town in 1963. See page 7 Birchwood District Area Plan published by the Warrington New Town Development Corporation in 1973.
2. Interview with Ian Grimshaw, Formerly a Ranger with the Development Corporation, later co-founder and Director of Warrington based Landscape architect firm TEP. 8th May 2018
3. Interview with David Scott, Chief Landscape Architect with the Development Corporation. 30th April 2018
4. Yes, there is a ceremonial gavel, there is a reference to it on Chester Local Archive's website. The gavel lies in a salt mine somewhere in South Cheshire along with the rest of the Warrington and Runcorn New Town Development Corporation archive.

Days of the New Town Birchwood at 50

Warrington Museum & Art Gallery
30 June - 15 September 2018

