The Origins of the Burnthouse Lane Estate in Exeter

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In 1927, Burnthouse Lane was a narrow country lane surrounded by allotments and farmland, about one-and-a-half miles from Exeter city centre. However, in July of that year, Exeter City Council made plans to compulsorily purchase 36 acres for housing and playing fields.[1] Not only were they going to make a major impact on rehousing the residents from the overcrowded and dilapidated tenements of the West Quarter (the area bounded by South Street, Fore Street and West Street), but Exeter was also going to build its very own garden city estate with wide roads, gardens, shops and churches.[2]

Nearly a century on, the original residents would recognise the look and layout of the estate immediately, with its wide main roads and plain houses, although they might be surprised at the number of cars and buses that now fill the streets. But beyond the physical infrastructure, they might also recognise the sense of community and belonging that has survived the ups and downs of living 'in Siberia', as it was referred to in those early days.[3]

The houses and the overall site (shown in Figure 1 overleaf) were designed by John Bennett, the city council architect. He writes, 'Simplicity and economy have been the keynotes in designing this Estate and the elevations through will be of "Georgian" character.'[4]

Site number one on the right-hand side had 428 dwellings – a mixture of houses and flats – houses with a 'parlour', where the kitchen was separate from the living room, and 'non-parlour', where a single family room doubled as a kitchen and sitting room (although there was a debate about whether the working classes really needed the luxury of a parlour).

The houses were symmetrical, plain and solid with sash windows – a reaction to the 'mock-Tudor' houses that had proliferated in earlier ribbon developments across the country and Victorian

[1] Exeter Housing Committee minutes, 12 July 1927.
[2] Opening of the 2,000th post-war municipal house, Exeter City Council, 1937.
[3] Kath Barber, *A Beloved District*, 1995.
[4] City architect's papers, box 8, 1930.

decoration. They were well-designed and proportioned, and the plain and austere look fitted with the budgets and sensibilities of the rate payers – Exeter wasn't going to be building fancy houses for poor people.

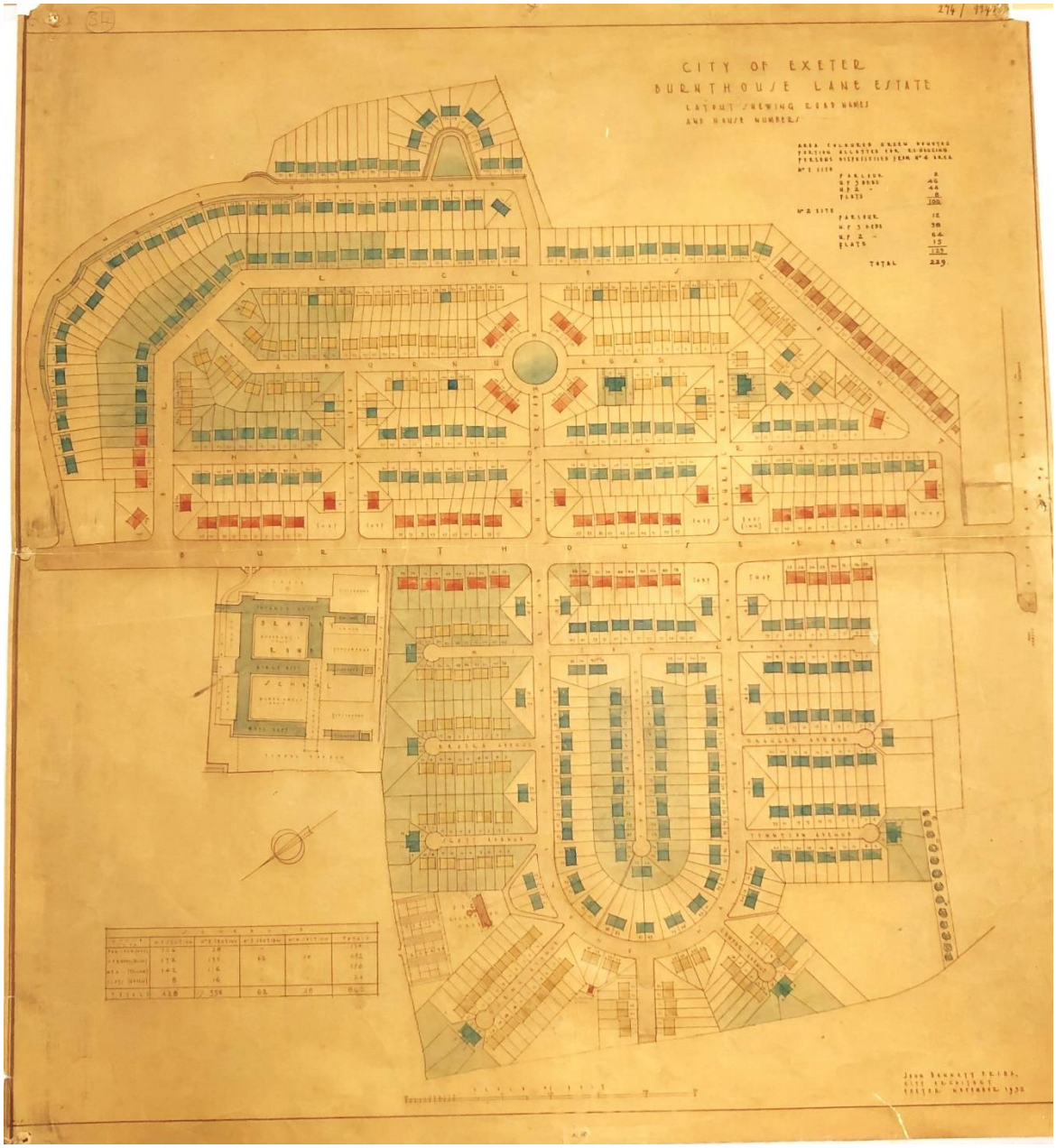

Figure 1: The final layout of the Burnthouse Lane estate[5]

The streets were named after trees, in keeping with the idea of a garden estate. By late 1929, residents from the West Quarter were being allocated to the houses reserved for them on the estate: two- and three-bedroomed non-parlour houses. Mr C. with his wife and four children moved to a three-bed non-parlour on Lilac Road. He was recorded as having a weekly income of £1 15s, so the

[5] Burnthouse Lane estate layout, Exeter City Architect's Office, © 2024 Royal Albert Memorial Museum & Art Gallery, Exeter City Council.

rent of 10s 6d would have been significant. Mr F. also was allocated a three-bed non-parlour house on Hawthorn Road, moving in with his wife and fifteen children. The new houses would not solve the problem of overcrowding for the larger families.

Council records detail incomes and rents, and comment on cleanliness and habits for the families who were to be rehoused. Couples were declined properties if they were unmarried, despite having lived together for more than 20 years. Single people were asked to share with another single person or a small family. Letters show people asking how they could get a tenancy. A single woman who had been caring for her now-deceased father had been living in the same accommodation for 40 years, where her only means of heating and cooking was an oil lamp, as the chimney had been demolished. She earned 25s minus insurance with the university in Gandy Street – too little to afford to rent privately. Others refused offers of tenancies because the rents were too high – many families were paying rents as low as 2s or 3s per week in the West Quarter, or they had jobs in the city that started at 5 or 6 a.m. and were unable to get to work in time. Swops were negotiated and lodgings with others were offered and accepted.[6]

Minutes of the Housing Committee from 1932 show that the council was able to subsidise rents provided that homes were used for the rehousing of persons displaced from 'unhealthy areas', and the West Quarter tenants qualified for these subsidies if their total incomes were very low.[7]

Living in Siberia

Complaints about the estate were voiced early on. Philip Brooks, a future Labour councillor who lived at Briar Crescent, spoke at a public meeting in November 1929, complaining about the conditions of roads, pavements and lighting. He stated that they were unfinished, with the result that the tenants had been 'floundering around in mud and water, tripping over manholes and kerbstones'.[8] He remarked that the tenants could not afford dustbins out of their low wages and that, as a consequence, uncovered boxes were being used, which was a source of danger for the community at large and the immediate family in particular, with the problem of ashes and flies getting into the houses and contaminating foods.

[6] ECA Town Clerk's papers Group H, B12/222, 1930.
[7] Housing Committee, October 1932.
[8] *Express & Echo*, 28 November 1929.

It is hard to imagine what it might have been like to move out to Burnthouse Lane. In the West Quarter, families lived cheek by jowl; several families sharing washing facilities and WCs in damp, dilapidated, and bug- and rat-infested premises. Many had extended families and friends close by, with shops, work and whatever entertainment or occupation Exeter had to offer on the doorstep. Space, kitchens and bathrooms must have been a welcome relief for many moving into the new houses, but it might not have compensated for all the other changes and losses that came about. The roads were wide and all the houses had gardens, but as Kath Barber commented: 'the tedious straight main line [of Burnthouse Lane] and the parallel Hawthorn, Chestnut, and Briar Crescents, suggest that the planners had very little imagination and little eye for anything more pleasant.'[9]

Undoubtedly, some families moved there along with neighbours, so longstanding friendships and/or disputes would continue in new surroundings. Travelling to work and school was an issue for many, and there were requests for rescheduling buses and improving services. The Match Factory suspension bridge near Trews Weir was constructed in 1935. It was paid for by Willey's Foundry to provide a crossing for those on the new estate at Burnthouse Lane to be able to walk to work in their foundry.[10] Until then, workers would have had to go down to Butts Ferry on Exeter Quay or even to Exe Bridge to cross the river.

By the middle of 1930, 395 houses had been completed, but the need for further housing meant that the area designated as playing fields was given over for another 350 houses and a school. This was followed by a further 632 three-bedroomed houses on Chestnut Avenue. Bradley Rowe School was not completed until 1932, so the children would have had to get to their schools by walking or bus in those early years.

Kath Barber, who moved in during 1933 wrote in her memoir:

> Burnthouse Lane seemed to be in the country, a mile from the centre with no shops and … for a long time while in the process of developing had almost nothing except houses and fields, so cold and bleak people said, especially in winter, it was just like Siberia.

[9] Kath Barber, *A Beloved District*, 1995.
[10] 'Trews Weir Suspension Bridge', *Exeter Memories*, http://www.exetermemories.co.uk/em/_bridges/trewsweir.php, 13 April 2009 [accessed 12 July 2024].

Everyday Life

In the city architect's papers, 1931, John Bennett said: 'A shopping centre has not been planned but instead seven sites for shops have been sold for development by private enterprise. All these are corner sites in prominent positions.'[11] Shop sites were provided but were not developed in the first few years; even a letter box was a temporary measure until the establishment of a sub-post office. When suitable premises were available, the Housing Committee made demands about design and style, and even refused permission for a chemist's shop.[12]

Clare Maudling reflected on the notion from that era that having shops might lower the tone because middle-class people had deliveries – not corner shops.[13] So, the new residents would have walked to the shops in Heavitree or dealt with the tradesmen providing their essentials in those early days – by horse and cart to begin with and later on by motor van – milkmen, bakers, ice cream sellers and mobile shops. Mr Freestone recalls milk ladled out into jugs,[14] but the milkman might call twice a day – there were no refrigerators in those days (space for refrigerators appears in designs for more housing from 1945).[15] Mobile tradesmen were certainly still active in the 1940s and by this time included Breton onion men, according to Glyn Short in his recollection of growing up on Burnthouse Lane during the 1940s.[16]

In the early years of the 1930s, Kath Barber comments that many people walked to town to follow leisure pursuits such as the Boys' Brigade and Scouts, St. John's Ambulance, and the Territorial Army or Sunday schools. Requests were received from different committees and organisations for halls on the new estate for a variety of purposes including the need for a child welfare centre, a Sunday school and a hall for the Juvenile Organisation Council, which ran boys' clubs among other activities. It was therefore decided to consider the possibility of a site for joint use, and a hut was erected at the rear of Shakespeare Road.[17] The Burnthouse Lane Mission Hall, a two-storey tin hut next to Bradley Rowe School, was built and opened in 1932. The Mission's origins were in the Exe Island Mission Hall. The best-remembered Missioners were Mr and Mrs Pankhurst – he was known

[11] City Architect's papers, box 8, 1931.
[12] Exeter Housing Committee, 3 December 1934.
[13] Personal communication.
[14] In Kath Barber, *A Beloved District*, 1995.
[15] City Architect's Papers, Box 13, Wonford No 1 site.
[16] 'Burnthouse Lane in the 1940s – Glyn Short', *Exeter Memories*, http://www.exetermemories.co.uk/em/_story/story_91.php [accessed 12 July 2024].
[17] City Architect's papers, box 8, 1931.

as Uncle Harry or more frequently as 'Skip'. Activities included the Boys' and Girls' Brigade, youth clubs, sewing classes, as well as social events at different times of the year.

Farthing Breakfasts had been provided in the Exe Island Mission Hall, started by Mr and Mrs Davey, residents of Exeter. Children were given a mug of cocoa and a bread roll or bun spread with margarine and jam at the cost of a farthing, and all donations made covered the costs over and above a farthing. Farthing Breakfasts had continued on the new estate, and in 1936, the *Western Times* reported that there were an increasing number of children attending breakfasts – during the 1935–36 season, it had doubled to 20,293 in the Burnthouse Lane area. At the morning of the meeting of the Exeter Farthing Breakfast Fund, more than 200 breakfasts were served. Grocery tickets and boot tickets were also distributed.[18]

There was also discussion in the council about the erection of a temporary hall adjoining the Mission Hall, which would provide facilities for recreation, infant welfare, Sunday school and any other social services that might be needed until the Civic Centre was built. This was sanctioned in 1935.[19] The building of a Civic Centre was still being discussed in 1945,[20] and although areas had been earmarked for amenities, the pressure to build more houses resulted in the layout as it is now.

The Salvation Army also had a presence on the estate, acquiring wasteland on the corner of Chestnut Avenue in 1936. They held services in a marquee and had a particular impact for a number of local boys who went to the Exeter Temple to learn to play music, and who were presented with their own instruments. The Salvation Army band, with these young men, played at open-air services every Saturday night.

Attempts at planting trees and shrubs on the estate met with mixed success. There are references over the years to the removal of planting by a small percentage of the residents – 70 shrubs, 8 trees and a hedge of golden privet were spirited away,[21] lawns appeared at the same time as turf disappeared from the playing fields,[22] and trees were cut down by the locals during the VJ celebrations.[23]

[18] *Western Times*, 27 November 1936.
[19] City Architect's papers, Box 5, Hall, Burnthouse Lane.
[20] City Architect's papers, Box 13, Wonford Scheme general correspondence.
[21] Exeter Housing Committee Minutes, 26 April 1932.
[22] City Architect's Papers, Box 7, Burnthouse Lane, 1930.
[23] ECA City Architect's papers, Box 7, 3 September 1945.

The programme from the 1937 Coronation festivities gives a flavour of the social activities that were established by this time. There was a processional march with the Salvation Army band, the Boys' Brigade, Boy Scouts, Girl Guides, Sunday schools, church organisations, political organisations, the Wonford Youth Movement and 'citizens of the area'. The 'King and Queen, Mayor and Mayoress of Wonford' arrived in state. This was followed by a fancy dress parade and sports programme for all ages, finishing with a bonfire and fireworks.

The Second World War

1939 saw the outbreak of the Second World War, and by 1940 the area suffered its first damage and casualties. Residents had different ways of protecting themselves from bombings; families had a steel plate to cover a table for shelter, some had Anderson shelters in their gardens, while others sheltered under the stairs.[24] A bombproof concrete shelter was built between The Dolphin and Holly Road, but Mr Freestone writes, 'Of course with a strict blackout, enforced vehicles had only very dim lights and one evening a bus misjudged or didn't see the shelter and crashed into it, causing a number of people to be injured.'

A civil defence post was set up in Shakespeare Road with warden's posts on street corners with fire watchers looking out for incendiary bombs. The Blitz in 1942 caused damage and destruction with houses destroyed in Shakespeare Road and the Chestnut Avenue area, with people injured and one person killed. Young men and women served in the armed forces. Kenneth Glover from Shakespeare Road served on HMS Exeter during the encounter with the Graf Spee, being injured by shrapnel but welcomed back at the Guildhall as a hero.[25]

Mr Freestone writes about evacuees arriving from London looking lost and bewildered at first but settling into the routine of Burnthouse Lane and forging firm friendships. The Mission covered as extra classrooms for the evacuees, as well as a safe place for residents bombed out of their homes. Canadians billeted nearby in Nissan huts and Americans at Topsham Barracks (now Wyvern Barracks) were welcomed by the residents. Tom Doble writes that for the Americans:

> Many were grateful for some[one] to do their washing and ironing. They in turn were generous with gifts of nutty for the children (which were on the sweet ration) a favourite request to the soldiers was "got any gum chum".[26]

[24] Sheila Bricknell in Kath Barber, *A Beloved District*, 1995.
[25] *Express and Echo*, 18 May 1940.
[26] Tom Doble, *1939–1945: The Effects of the War on Wonford*.

Mr Freestone recalls that prior to D-Day and when there was an air raid, the American vehicles and tanks would be moved from the barracks and parked on the Burnthouse Lane estate. Many of the American soldiers made friends with local girls, with a number marrying and moving to the States. German POWs were later held at the Nissan huts, but then post-war were employed building council houses in Rifford Road because of the lack of local labour, with some deciding to stay in the area.

Continuity and Change

Olwen Foggin[27] writes about growing up in Burnthouse Lane during the 1950s. She recalls the freedom of living there, still with fields and hardly any cars but people being picked up to be taken to work by employer-provided transport – for example to Exminster Hospital – in contrast to today with cars predominating. In particular, she talked about the sense of community in the estate, with neighbours sharing resources such as vegetables or eggs, or supporting each other at times of stress or hardship. Families and neighbours stayed on the estate for generations, and if they had to move away, they would often choose to move back to Burnthouse Lane, given the chance.

The area had a strong identity of community but also a reputation as the rough part of Exeter, which had followed on from the West Quarter. However, Ken Rogers, chairman of the Exeter and District Crime Prevention Panel, expressed the view that 'council estates get tarred with the same brush as being home to crime, when the majority of the people living there are law-abiding. They want crime to be reduced and most of them support the police.'

Equally, individuals could be too easily labelled:

> I have heard of people from Burnthouse Lane who have written down their address when applying for a job and then the employer will not take them on because they live in that area. What an indictment of our society that is.[28]

This theme is echoed by Olwen Foggin in that she experienced the lack of expectation and opportunities available to others. She was educated for factory work and her experience was that library books were kept locked in cupboards. While the book cupboards have been consigned to

[27] Olwen Foggin, personal communication.
[28] *Express & Echo*, 2 February 1996.

history, she still feels that opportunities are lacking and there continues to be a mindset and prejudice about people brought up on the estate.

The majority of residents who were moved out of the West Quarter to the Burnthouse Lane estate were living in poverty with unstable employment, casual labour and low wages. The legacy of poverty remains, even to this day. The economic problems that people faced in the West Quarter moved with them and were never tackled at a governmental level. Any improvements brought about by changes in social policy over the decades have been undermined by changes in attitude and changes of government, so big council estates continue as areas of deprivation.[29]

Better Health 1990, a report on the health of people living in Exeter Health District, found that many people in the Wonford locality were disadvantaged on a whole series of measures and had the highest percentage of residents in social classes IV and V – semi-skilled manual and unskilled jobs; the highest percentage of children in one-parent families; and the highest percentage of deaths under one year per 1,000 births in social classes IV and V and accidental deaths in children aged one to fifteen. Unskilled manual workers were over twice as likely to die before reaching normal retiring age compared to professional workers. A more recent report by Wellbeing Exeter continued to identify Burnthouse Lane as an area of deprivation for all indicators except crime. [30]

What has changed in the nearly 100 years since Burnthouse Lane was first built? It would appear that the families who first moved in would immediately recognise the estate – the layout has not changed – although more houses and flats have been built, pre- and post-Second World War and even as recently as 2018. It was described as stark with 'a tedious straight main lane'.[31] Although the wide main roads have the addition of planters and traffic-calming measures, more greenery seems to have done little to 'soften' the design. Since the events of the last two years with the impact of Covid-19 on people's lives, there has been the introduction of cycle routes and the closure of side roads to cars. Some residents regard this in a poor light as this has concentrated the now heavy traffic on to specific roads.

Externally, most houses have changed little, despite the fact that over 50 per cent are now privately owned since Margaret Thatcher's 1980s 'Right to Buy' scheme – perhaps a testament to their design and build. One of the features of the original estate was that all the houses had front and

[29] Clare Maudling, personal communication.
[30] Wellbeing Exeter, www.wellbeingexeter.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/Wonford-Neighbourhood-profile-FINAL.pdf [accessed 12 July 2024].
[31] Kath Barber, *A Beloved District*, 1995.

back gardens. Back gardens were used for growing vegetables or keeping chickens. Kath Barber writes about coming up with the idea of a competition for the best front garden, but over time this dropped away because of lack of interest or time. For some car owners, the front garden has now been converted for parking, but many people still lovingly maintain these spaces.

The theme that recurs from the 1920s to the present time is of generosity of spirit and practical generosity. Burnthouse Lane people are known for being the first to reach into their wallets for charity.[32] They offer help, for example, providing somewhere for a midwife to park a car arriving to help with a home birth, then being given fish and chips afterwards![33] When Olwen Foggin's daughter suffered a personal loss, local residents raised £2,000 over a weekend to send her and her husband on a holiday to recuperate. One man got to know local residents when he stopped to help a boy with his bike; the following time he cycled through, he was recognised and asked for help, then he soon became 'the bike man'. He was also a Speedway fan and would take a blank videotape, look for a house with a Sky dish, knock on the door and ask if they would video the Speedway meeting for him – people would just say yes![34]

The attitude towards the area might be best summed up by this quote from the Wellbeing Exeter report:

> Many long-term residents are proud to say they are 'Laners'. Generations of families, born and subsequently housed in Wonford, would not want to live anywhere else; one resident commented: 'If I won the lottery I'd have to build a house in Ludwell Valley or knock two houses together.'[35]

[32] Mary Lambert, personal communication.
[33] Trisha Owen, personal communication.
[34] Clare Maudling, personal communication.
[35] Wellbeing Exeter, www.wellbeingexeter.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/Wonford-Neighbourhood-profile-FINAL.pdf [accessed 12 July 2024].