



Solution to housing problem never happened

Eugene Byrne talks to housing expert Paul Smith, who grew up in Hartcliffe and who has just written a book about how the grand plans for the area in the 1950s failed to materialise.

HARTCLIFFE and Withywood, right? A couple of post-war council estates built on the edges of Bristol just like all the other estates created or expanded around the city in the 1940s and 50s, right?

Not quite. Aside from the fact that they were planned on land which at the time was actually in Somerset, this – let's call it Hartcliffe for short (sorry Withywood) – was intended as, basically a “new town”, a community, a mini-Milton Keynes, if you like.

At the end of the Second World War, Britain's housing problems were huge, and Bristol's were particularly acute. The situation called for a huge house-building programme, and Hartcliffe was to be a big part of Bristol's solution.

Because it was six miles from the centre of Bristol, it had to be self-contained. It would have proper transport connections and all the trappings of a medium-sized town – shops, pubs, primary and secondary schools, parks, churches, sporting facilities, a swimming pool and more. With a projected population of over 25,000, this would be a town about the same size as Bridgwater.

Yet once building work was under way in the early 1950s, Hartcliffe would get very few of those facilities to begin with, and some of them never materialised. Hence the title of Paul Smith's book, *Hartcliffe Betrayed*.

Paul Smith will be well-known to some readers as a former city councillor. In more recent times he was Executive Member of the

council responsible for housing, and he currently works as CEO of a housing association. He's also an alderman.

“It means I can sit in on council meetings if I want to, which I've not taken up, but it does give me free parking at the back of the Council House – which I have taken up.”

So he knows a fair bit about houses, and, having grown up there, he's a natural fit for doing a book about how Hartcliffe was planned and built.

It was a long time in the making, though. As a councillor in the 1990s he would look for mentions of Hartcliffe in the minutes of former council meetings in the members' library. More recently he decided to see if the Bristol Radical History Group would be interested in a book about it after he was asked to give a talk on the subject.

Research in Bristol Archives and from old copies of local newspapers turned up plenty of surprises.

“There was a whole range of facilities for the estate which were planned but never built, so that was what initially stood out, but there's been lots of other things, like for instance the argument over the name.

“It was supposed to be called New Dundry – but old Dundry objected.

“I was also surprised to find it nearly didn't happen ... there was a 59th minute of the 11th hour submission by the air authorities (because of Lulsgate airport) that actually nothing could be built on the estate over about 3ft high. I'd never heard that before.



Paul Smith: “If you're from Hartcliffe, you do sort of wear it as a badge”

“Then there were things I found that nobody seemed to know about. I've not seen in any other publication on the history of Bristol that Hartcliffe was swapped for Portishead and Ham Green in a boundary swap. They'd actually done a boundary realignment so some of Bristol went into Somerset.

“And to start with, it didn't even have a bus service. You had to walk across fields to Bishopsworth to get the bus.”

When the first residents were moving in in the early 1950s, creating a community was challenging because so many people living there often had an hour or more's journey each way to and from their workplaces. The only thing a lot of them wanted to do after getting home from a long day's graft was just fall asleep in front of a warm fire.

Given the chance to go back in time, and given the power, he would have seen to it that Hartcliffe was built according to the original plan, with all the original facilities.

“Though if there was only one thing I could change, I would improve the quality of the housing. A lot of poor quality housing was built, and it didn't actually save much money. If you look at it, the traditionally built houses weren't more expensive than the concrete houses, it's just that they were built quicker, and area's been suffering because of that poor quality housing ever since.”

Much of this was down to national politics. The Labour government elected in 1945 believed

in council houses for all, and the great majority of homes constructed in that period were for local authorities.

All of this changed when the Conservatives were returned to power in 1951. More private housing was now built. The Tories continued the council house-building programme at a stupendous rate, but corners were cut because they didn't share the vision of council housing for all. Council housing was for those who couldn't afford to buy.

“The government took a huge interest in what was built and instructed the council to build high-rises and flats instead of houses, and that was one way of meeting the target. In Hartcliffe there's lots of buildings which you think are a house, but are actually two flats. That's how they met their

target, by building smaller houses and flats.”

“A lot of the things I've written about Hartcliffe could be applied to most of the estates built across the country in the fifties, but I think what's unusual about Hartcliffe is that all the problems happened in one place, the social issues, the boundary issues, the housing quality issues.”

Aside from the first eight months of his life and university, Paul Smith lived in Hartcliffe until his mid-30s, and he went to primary and secondary school there.

“There's a huge pride in people who come from Hartcliffe. When I went to university and people asked me where I was from I'd say ‘I'm from Hartcliffe, which is in Bristol.’ I wouldn't say ‘I'm from Bristol’.

“I think if you're from Hartcliffe you do sort of wear it as a badge ... There are some who look down their noses at it, but there's a lot of solidarity, and growing up on that estate is a really important part of my own personal heritage.”

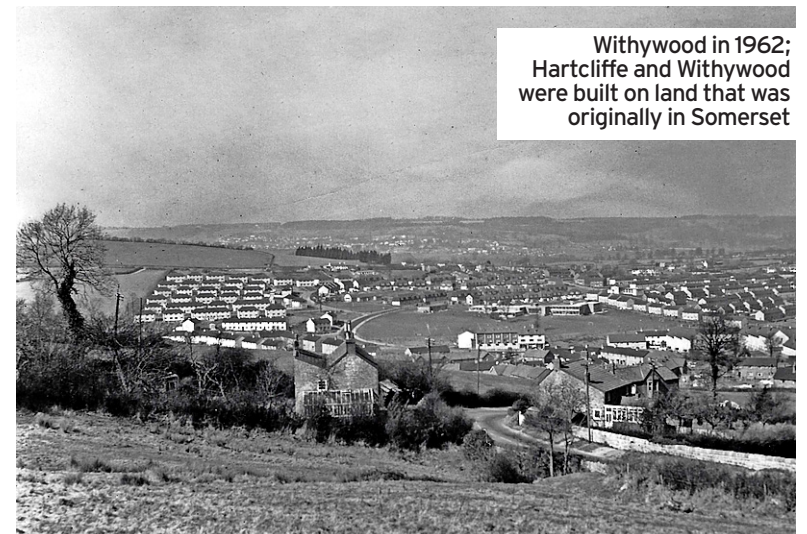
As we've all seen down the decades, various bits of Bristol have been “gentrified” – young folk with aspirations move in, attracted by lower house prices, and soon you get fancy shops, restaurants and pubs – sorry, bars these days – and the other trappings of middle-class urban life. Any signs this will happen in Hartcliffe?

“I think at the moment that it's the cheapest place to buy a house in Bristol, but I don't think it's going to be gentrified because of how far out it is ... It could actually do with a little bit of gentrification, but not too much because you don't want it to lose its soul.”

» *Hartcliffe Betrayed* by Paul Smith is published by Bristol Radical History Group. See www.brh.org.uk for details.



Let down by broken promises. Hartcliffe in the 1970s



Withywood in 1962; Hartcliffe and Withywood were built on land that was originally in Somerset