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An Exercise in Gracious Living:

The North East New Towns 1947-1988

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PhD Thesis
Durham University
2007



21 DEC 2007

Abstract

This thesis examines the history of the North East new towns and how local, regional and national policies and events have impacted upon their respective trajectories. The thesis is divided into two parts. The first is concerned with the social, economic and political developments of Aycliffe in South-West Durham, and Peterlee in East Durham, both of which were designated as new towns within a few months of each other in 1948. The second part of the thesis investigates the development of the new towns from 1963 to the dissolution of the towns' development corporation boards in 1988. This is because the economic and industrial priorities of the towns changed following the publication of the Hailsham Report in November 1963. More importantly for the North East region, however, was that in 1963 a further new town was designated at Washington in North-West Durham, which altered the whole dynamic of the region's new town programme.

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The North East New Towns



Part 1

Introduction

This thesis is an analysis of the forces which shaped the housing, industrial and political developments of the three North East new towns of Aycliffe, Peterlee and Washington between 1948 and 1988. It will relate these developments to regional and national policies and events. Unlike much of the prevailing research on new towns, however, which emphasises the importance of nationally-implemented policies on the paths which the towns took, the thesis will demonstrate that local factors contributed just as much to the new towns' developments.

i) The historiographical context

Whilst it has generally been considered that all three new towns have rejuvenated their respective district's social and economic fortunes, how far this has been achieved because decisions made throughout their histories have conformed to strategies formulated for them by government planners is open to debate. Gary Philipson, former general manager of Aycliffe and Peterlee, and Stephen Holley, who occupied a similar position with Washington Development Corporation, both argued in books written during the 1980s that the new towns not only revived the region's industrial, social and environmental outlooks, but also that it was ultimately the shrewd decisions made by the development corporations under the aegis of an enlightened Ministry of Town and Country Planning (and, after 1971, the Department of the Environment) that made such propitious outcomes possible.¹ The methodological problem with this approach, apart from bias in favour of the corporations' actions it inevitably engenders (Philipson, for example, dismissed collaborative contributions with their respective local authorities as 'well-intentioned but misguided recipes for delay'), is that it suffers from the absence of a comparative context. The

¹ G. Philipson, *Aycliffe and Peterlee New Towns 1946-1988: Swords into Ploughshares and Farewell Squalor* (Cambridge, 1988); S. Holley, *Washington: Quicker by Quango, The History of Washington New Town 1964-1983* (Stevenage, 1983).



reader is thus hard pressed to discover how far the development of a particular new town fits into its local, national or even regional circumstances at any given time.²

The development of new towns has also been covered extensively from a sociological perspective. From the late 1950s to the 1970s, much sociological work (especially from a Marxist perspective) consisted of attempts to fit the towns into broad social theories which explained them in terms of their place within the general social and economic order. Hudson and Johnson, for example, argued that the North East new towns were a 'solution to the spatial imbalances within the distribution of industry'. They further claimed that the new town programme was a mechanism in a policy of benign reformism carried out by the state to 'alleviate the social problems created in a social formation dominated by the rationality of private capital'.³ Foley and Heraud, on the other hand, preferred to view the new towns as opportunities to realise certain social ends. Heraud suggested that they were an attempt by the state to change the whole social character of urban class relationships. The towns were therefore an attempt not only to improve the physical conditions of the people who would reside within them; they were also an exercise in raising the moral standing of its inhabitants.⁴ Foley argued that this motivation was a legacy of the original ideas and plans of the garden city movement, an element of which was to introduce the towns' residents to a wider range of social viewpoints. In this regard, the new towns programme was part of the state's broader social agenda to inculcate 'traditional British values' into a section of the British public that had been exposed to the worst excesses of living in large cities and conurbations.⁵

² See also F. Gibberd, *Harlow: The Story of a New Town* (Stevenage, 1980); G. Anstis, *The History of Redditch New Town* (Stevenage, 1985); J. Balchin, *First New Town: An Autobiography of the Stevenage Development Corporation, 1946-1980* (Stevenage, 1980); S. Hustie, L. Fletcher, *Hemel Hempstead: The Story of New Town Development, 1947-1997* (Hemel Hempstead, 1998).

³ R. Hudson and M. R. D. Johnson, 'New Towns in North East England' (NEAS, 1976), p. 3.

⁴ B. J. Heraud, 'Social class and the new towns', *Urban Studies* 5 (1968), p. 33.

⁵ D. L. Foley 'British town planning: one ideology or three', *British Journal of Sociology*, 11 (1960), p. 211.

Social historians have tended to concentrate on the effects moving to the towns had on their new inhabitants. In the 1950s Orlans examined the consequences of adding an entirely new town onto an existing urban settlement, and the consequences it had on the communities of both.⁶ He concluded that political opposition from Stevenage's existing inhabitants precluded government attempts to create balanced communities in the town. Wilmott and Young viewed the towns as essentially malignant forces, which caused the break down of close-knit extended families and local support networks. In this view, traditional working-class families adopted middle-class attitudes and relinquished their old lifestyles which had been based on class solidarity.⁷ Similarly, Mark Abrams argued that the towns were synonymous with the new working classes which, once exposed to the materialistic mores of the middle classes, absorbed and increasingly embraced their materialistic lifestyles. This line of thought has come in for a certain amount of criticism lately, however. Joanna Bourke noted that working-class communities, which appeared at first glance to be socially homogenous neighbourhoods, were for the most part internally fragmented and divided by occupational and status envy.⁸ Moreover, Mark Clapson argued that the break-up of the traditional working class through their migration to new estates and towns was for the most part a force for good, because the mass availability of the motor car, which had coincided with the movement of thousands of families to new towns, acted as an alternative to 'neighbourliness' by enabling these families to enjoy more diverse interests than had been the case when they had lived in one-class communities.⁹

The link between the architectural design and layout of a new town, and the attitudes and behaviour of its inhabitants, has also been explored extensively. In 1945 Lewis Mumford

⁶ H. Orlans, *Stevenage: A Sociological Study of a New Town* (1952), pp. 35-54.

⁷ See, for example, M. Young and P. Wilmott, *Family and Kinship in East London* (Harmondsworth, 1957), p. 132; P. Wilmott and M. Young, *Family and Class in a London Suburb* (1960), p. 78; P. Wilmott, 'Housing density and town design in a new town', *Town Planning Review* (July 1962), p. 116.

⁸ J. Bourke, *Working-Class Cultures in Britain 1890-1960: Gender, Class and Ethnicity* (1994), pp. 138-141.

⁹ M. Clapson, *Invincible Green Suburbs, Brave New Towns: Social Change and Urban Dispersal in Post-War England* (Manchester, 1998), p. 47.

explained how a particular environment moulds the human personality.¹⁰ Osborn and Whittick's analysis focused upon the neighbourhood unit as the means by which the new towns were built, and centred upon the ideological propensity of modern architects to shape citizens through architectural designs.¹¹

Perhaps the most enthusiastic proponent of the methods and approaches espoused by the original new towns planners was Frank Schaffer, who spent many years in charge of the government's New Town Division and in 1965 became secretary of the Commission for the New Towns. He claimed that the installation of a development corporation board containing members carefully chosen from industry and other prominent professions, and headed by a 'first-class chairman', would be sufficient to propel a new town to eventual success.¹²

A different perspective on the progress of the towns came from Gordon Cherry and Meryl Aldridge, the latter famously describing the post-war new town programme as 'more-or-less successful pet projects and a boot hill of failed hunches'.¹³ They both claimed that intermittent but regular changes in government, lack of coordination between the various government departments involved and resultant deviations in planning policy prevented the towns from becoming the successes they might have been. In addition, an overly attentive regard on the part of both the main parties when in government to fluctuations in the economic situation at any given time to the detriment of their planning objectives further hindered corporations' planning objectives.¹⁴ It was usually the welfare of new residents that suffered the most from the vicissitudes of government policy, moreover: as the towns were deprived of funding during economically difficult periods, it was generally the social development facilities that were the first to be axed. This gave rise to a great deal of loneliness and dissatisfaction among many new

¹⁰ L. Mumford, *City Development* (1945), p. 125.

¹¹ F. J. Osborn and A. Whittick, *New Towns: The Answer to Megalopolis* (1969).

¹² F. Schaffer, *The New Town Story*, p. 57. See also E. Sharp, 'The government's role' in H. Evans (ed.), *New Towns: The British Experience* (1972), p. 43.

¹³ M. Aldridge, *The British New Towns: A Programme Without a Policy* (1979), p. 192; G. Cherry, *The Politics of Town Planning* (1982), p. 64.

¹⁴ L. Rodwin, *The British New Towns Policy: Problems and Implications* (Harvard, 1956), p. 5.

town residents which led to a set of symptoms that became commonly known as 'new town blues' syndrome.¹⁵

Whether the new towns were successfully integrated within their particular regions has also been investigated. Some commentators argued that the 1945 -51 Labour government's regional policy, of which the new towns were prominently intertwined, caused more harm than good to post-war recovery. Barnett implicitly denied that the directing of valuable resources to the development areas benefited either the regions or the country as a whole following the war.¹⁶ Moore and his colleagues, however, contended that the government's regional policy initiatives implemented between 1945 and 1960 created sustainable employment opportunities that complemented the Exchequer's fiscal policies rather than inhibited them.¹⁷ Thomas concentrated on the effects the towns had on their surrounding areas. He argued that the towns' success in attracting industry and better housing has been to the detriment of their neighbouring urban areas. He suggested that although the new towns were meant to fit into a regional spatial strategy, their corporations largely concentrated on the growth of their own particular town without much thought for how it would affect neighbouring localities.¹⁸

Most of these approaches, especially those from the 1960s and 1970s, whilst characterised by diverging views on the success or otherwise of the new towns, do have one thing in common: they assume that the progress or impediment of the towns was almost exclusively due to the actions of government or its agents – the development corporations. Therefore, any difficulties that the corporations encountered during a town's development were largely due to lack of coordination at administrative level, which could have been remedied by a more centralised

¹⁵ On the negative effects of a lack of social development officers and facilities in the new towns see G. Brooke Taylor, 'Social problems of new towns', in P. Guentler (ed.), *Community Organisation in Great Britain* (1961), p. 77.

¹⁶ C. Barnett, *The Lost Victory: British Dreams, British Realities 1945-1950* (1995), pp. 328-330; P. Scott, 'British regional policy, 1945-51: a lost opportunity', *Twentieth Century British History* 8 (1997), p. 358.

¹⁷ B. Moore, J. Rhodes, P. Taylor, *The Effects of Government Regional Policy* (1986), p. 9.

¹⁸ R. Thomas, *Aycliffe to Cumbernauld: A Study of Seven New Towns in their Regions* (1969), pp. 35-36.

system and further harmonisation of policy goals.¹⁹ For Schaffer, the solution was to attract more 'experts' armed with information gleaned from the progress of existing new towns to synchronise a town's future evolution.²⁰ Aldridge's concern was that there was a lack of a coordinated research programme at departmental level, a consequence of which was that the corporations were forced to pursue local-level investigations individually with no correlation of the mass of data potentially available to them.²¹ Foley claimed that the solution was to bring the direct knowledge of the town planning profession together with the empirically-tested theory of the social scientist. It appears that contemporary thinking on new urban settlements endorses these concerns. According to the Department for Communities and Local Government, there is very little research-based material relating to the new towns as a whole which is both useful and objective.²² Presumably, the lack of a systematic and coordinated accumulation of 'expert-led' data from the new towns in their entirety has prevented the Department from projecting any lessons learnt onto any new prospective urban strategy. The problem with such approaches, however, is that particular and individual categories are subsumed into generalised classifications. Little latitude or responsibility is given either to the local political, economic or social situation existing in the towns' surrounding areas at any given time or to the agency of local people.

ii) Structure of the thesis

This study will claim otherwise: its central premise is that whilst government and development corporation actions were crucial to the trajectories that the new towns ultimately took, other important factors such as the geographical location of the towns, local opinions, local political

¹⁹ New Towns Committee, *Interim Report* Cmd. 6759 (1946), p. 11. (Hereafter Reith Committee). The Committee recommended that there should be a central advisory committee to provide a central pool of information and experience that could be utilised by the various corporations.

²⁰ Schaffer, *The New Town Story*, p. 65.

²¹ Aldridge, *The British New Towns*, p. 188.

²² Department for Communities and Local Government, *Transferable Lessons from the New Towns* (2006), p. 2.

developments, the state of the local economic situation at any given time, and national and regional developments, which had particular resonance for the three new towns' sub-regions, had just as much influence on the paths they eventually took. Therefore, successfully implemented policies in the new towns occurred almost always when strategies formulated at national level, which were themselves dependent upon economic and political factors, were re-interpreted and implemented at local level, and when geographic, economic, political and social aspects peculiar to the localities involved were taken into account.

The thesis therefore examines the part local developments have played in shaping the paths of the towns. Government directives and circulars are used extensively as sources, as are development corporation annual reports and board meeting minutes. However, a feature of the study is the extensive use of newspaper articles, the writers of which were usually free from and antipathetic to government and corporation influence. The results of various surveys and research projects concerning the region's new towns undertaken by members of Durham University's North East Area Study team during the early 1970s have also proved invaluable in discovering the opinions, attitudes and behaviour of the towns' inhabitants. These sources were very useful in helping to mediate information derived from the corporations, the latter of which was often merely issued for propaganda purposes.

The testing of the study's proposition by the examination of three particular towns rather than new towns in general allows for a more integrated approach: it thus avoids the unnecessary conflation of an individual new town's development with that of all other towns. Moreover, this approach enables each of the towns to be compared to each of the others and, at the same time, show how they were integrated into the local and regional perspective. Aycliffe, Peterlee and Washington, furthermore, in their own individual ways, fit separately into the three general categories of classifying new towns. Aycliffe was first conceived as a way to provide houses for workers who were already travelling to work in the area. Like Corby, it was planned as a new

urban development for an existing working population. Peterlee, on the other hand, like Glenrothes in Scotland, was planned as a central urban centre to accommodate the social, housing, industrial and recreational needs of a number of disparate communities scattered around it. Washington was planned differently from the other two new towns in the sense that, like the London ring new towns, it was originally intended to be the recipient of large numbers of overspill population from nearby conurbations. The study assesses whether or not each new town fulfilled the roles set for them in view of such criteria.

The thesis is divided into two parts. The first three chapters, forming Part 1, are devoted to the origins and development of Aycliffe and Peterlee from 1948 until 1964. The remaining chapters, forming Part 2, consider the development of all three new towns until their respective dissolutions in 1988. The reason for this is that, apart from the fact that Washington was not designated until many years after Aycliffe and Peterlee, government policy and attitudes towards the new towns changed after 1963, most notably with the abandonment of the previously central goal of attempting to achieve socially – and economically – balanced communities within the towns and, following the publication of the Hailsham report in 1963, the re-assertion of the new towns as major industry and employment providers within a regional framework.

The need to consider a history of the new towns based on locally-influenced developments can be seen from the fact that although they were both designated within a few months of each other, the origins of Aycliffe and Peterlee could not have been more divergent. The first chapter assesses how the two new towns originated, and how their different origins affected both their respective sub-regions' local political structures and how, in turn, long-standing social and economic forces within their areas conspired to have a major effect on the courses the two towns would take.

Industrial developments are considered in chapter two. Industrial policy in Britain following the war conformed exactly to the needs and goals of the new towns. The government's professed

aim of achieving full employment ensured that Aycliffe and Peterlee's industrial fortunes dovetailed harmoniously with those of the state. Again, however, political and economic developments peculiar to each of the two sub-regions following the war ensured that the two new towns' industrial paths would be different.

The subject of the third chapter is developments in housing in Aycliffe and Peterlee. Like their attempts to attract industry, both towns' housing policies were also compromised by their respective local circumstances. In Aycliffe, a shortage of labour and building materials immediately following the war almost jeopardised the new town's housing programme altogether. In Peterlee, the ongoing dispute between the corporation and the National Coal Board (NCB) over the amount of coal that was to be extracted beneath the new town's designation area meant that not a single brick had been laid in the town until a full three years after the town was designated. The lack of building in Peterlee even led many people in Easington district to speculate that the new town would not be built at all.

In part two, chapter four, the effect the Hailsham Report had on the region's existing new towns is considered together with an investigation into the origins of Washington new town. The new towns were expected to be at the vanguard of any industrial revitalisation that occurred in the region. However, Washington's designation differed from the mark one new towns inasmuch as the creation of self-contained communities, which was a feature of earlier-designated towns, was abandoned in favour a strategy of coordination between separate urban areas.

Chapter five assesses political developments in the new towns in light of the new challenges faced post-Hailsham. Which bodies should control the towns was never far from people's minds, which usually gave rise to much friction between the corporations and their surrounding local authorities, as did administrative changes to local authority boundaries during the 1970s. The dissolution of the corporations during the 1980s was also the subject of much contention.

Chapter six assesses industrial developments in the towns after 1963, which for the greater part of the decade were very productive. Despite an alarming decline in the region's traditional industries which saw employment drastically reduced, relatively few people lost their jobs in real terms. South-West Durham's significant job losses in mining and train repair workshops prior to the report's publication appeared to signal to local officials that expansion at Aycliffe was one of the few options available to them if it was again going to lead the way industrially. However, few people could have predicted the phenomenal growth in firms attracted to the town's trading estate after 1963. In Peterlee, the Hailsham report was *inter alia* responsible for improvements to the town's surrounding roads, as well as an expansion to its industrial area, which was urgently required if it was to provide the number of jobs to offset expected reductions in employment in the area's mines. The designation of Washington as a centre for industry was most timely, occurring as it did in the midst of the tumultuous industrial developments that arose from the Hailsham Report's publication. Its industrial growth was very impressive nonetheless. Such optimism was threatened during the late 1970s and early 1980s, however, because of concerns at the amount of preferential treatment Washington was receiving at the expense of surrounding local authorities' own industrial programmes. The national economic recession after 1980 also seriously affected all three corporations' attempts to attract industry.

The final chapter assesses how the towns' housing programmes changed after 1963. The region's old dilapidated housing stock had been largely responsible for the resumption in migration from the region during the 1960s. If such a situation was not to continue it was estimated that at least 25,000 houses per year would need to be built in the region. One solution to the problem attempted in the new towns was to erect houses built by industrial methods, which effected a saving in time, building materials and labour. Moreover, there was more of an emphasis upon owner-occupation in the new towns after 1963. However, in a region relatively

devoid of a private housing market, the creation of a demand for owner-occupation in its new towns was one of the corporations' biggest tasks.

The conclusion both reflects upon the issues raised in this introduction, and enquires whether the new towns' trajectories would have been different had alternative government decisions been taken or the towns had had different historical backgrounds. It further questions whether earlier mistakes were learnt and how any new urban initiatives in the region and nationally could learn from the lessons of the new towns.

The Origins of Aycliffe and Peterlee

This chapter will analyse the creation of Aycliffe and Peterlee, both of which were intended to house workers who had contributed to the war effort. The first part describes the desperate conditions in both South-West and East Durham before the war that precipitated the calls for new towns in both districts. The second and third sections will then show, however, that despite the two towns being situated less than 20 miles apart, that they were created within a few months of each other, and in socio-economic terms the communities within their respective sub-regions were very similar, there were incongruities in their geographic location, social and political attitudes, and industrial histories that ensured that the new towns' origins were very unlike.

i) County Durham's pre-war distress

Before the war, Durham's mining villages tended to consist of long, monotonous rows of unmade streets, which were built as quickly, and usually as cheaply as possible. Visitors to the county frequently alluded to a profound absence of a vibrant social life in the villages and towns caused largely by miners and their families living and working in such squalid surroundings.¹ The Hammonds, after a tour of the county in 1917 remarked:

They [mining communities] were not so much towns as barracks: not the refuge of a civilisation but the barracks of an industry. This character was stamped on their form, ways of life, and government. The mediaeval town had reflected the minds of the centuries and the subtle associations of a living society with a history; these towns reflected the violent enterprise of an hour, the single passion that had thrown street on street in a frantic monotony of disorder.²

One of the worst hit areas was South-West Durham. Traditionally the area's pits were some of the most productive and commercially exploited mines in the country.³ During the late 19th

¹ J. B. Priestley, *English Journey* (1934), p. 246.

² J. R. and B. L. Hammond, *The Town Labourer* (1917), p. 160.

³ D. Pocock and R. Norris, *A History of County Durham* (Chichester, 1990), p. 51.

century, its miners had produced more coal and were as highly paid as any in the world.⁴ The thinness of the coal seams in the district, however, and the depths that miners had to dig to extract the coal meant that it became increasingly more expensive to mine in that part of the county.⁵ Consequently, it became the most expensive area to mine in Britain, just at the time when foreign competition was beginning to have a serious effect. As a result, more than 60 per cent of the insured population were unemployed during the 1920s.⁶ As the towns and villages became even more dilapidated, they seemed to reflect the manifest poverty and distress throughout the sub-region. One observer wrote in 1935:

These villages are not such as civilised men should live in. They were ugly and mean from the very beginning and now most of them are outworn. If they are still to be inhabited, large parts of them will need to be rebuilt during the next few decades. Theoretically, the simplest plan is to evacuate the whole territory.⁷

In the eastern part of the county, the years of poverty and neglect were equally debilitating. Mines were sunk much later in Easington district than in the rest of the county, due largely to the 800 feet thick layers of magnesian limestone which lay on top of the coal, making it extremely difficult to access. Technological improvements in the late nineteenth century, which enabled coal to be profitably extracted for the first time, meant that a substantial number of immigrants arrived in the area to work in the newly-established pits, with the population of the district more than trebling between 1870 and 1914.⁸ The scale of inward migration was illustrated by the fact that by 1911, all other districts in County Durham had reached their maximum population levels. In Easington, on the other hand, the population continued to grow until well after 1939.⁹ Although Easington Rural District Council (RDC) built more than 4,000 homes during the inter-war years

⁴ R. A. Chapman, 'Public policy studies: the North East of England', in R. A. Chapman (ed), *Public Policy Studies: The North East of England* (Edinburgh, 1985), p. 2.

⁵ National Coal Board, *Plan For Coal: The National Coal Board's Proposals* (1950), p. 6. (Hereafter NCB).

⁶ W. Hannington, *The Problem of the Distressed Areas* (1937), p. 14.

⁷ T. Sharpe, *A Derelict Area: A Study of the South-West Durham Coalfield* (1935), p. 129.

⁸ In Horden, a mining village in the eastern part of the district the population rose from 2,000 in 1900, to over 10,000 by 1912. By 1939, the colliery was the largest in Britain employing 14,000 men.

⁹ DCRO NT/Pe/3/1/84 Durham County Council (DCC), Future Developments in Easington Rural District, 8 May 1952.

to cater for the influx, by 1939 more than 3,000 of the 20,000 houses in the area were still classified as severely overcrowded:¹⁰ in Easington Colliery alone, there were 2,388 families living in 1,975 households.¹¹ People were so desperate for accommodation that they were prepared to live in workmen's huts, even caves in nearby Castle Eden dene.¹²

East Durham was also handicapped by its geographical isolation. It was often remarked that its mining communities were distrustful of 'outsiders' who, in turn, often regarded the communities as hostile and uncooperative. On visiting Shotton Colliery in the early 1930s, J. B. Priestley observed of the village's inhabitants: 'the first impression of my own that was instantly confirmed was that of the strange isolation of this mining community. Nobody goes to East Durham. The miner lives there in his own little world and hardly meets anybody from outside it'.¹³ Such hostility was particularly heightened and sustained during the late 1920s and early 1930s by the collective experience of unemployment, especially in the west of the district. In Haswell, five miles to the west of Easington, more than 50 per cent of the insured population were out of work during the early 1930s. Furthermore, there was the serious problem of an almost complete lack of employment opportunities for women in the district: only eight per cent of females worked in the area before the war at a time when the national average was more than 38 per cent.

The 1934 Special Areas Act was designed to redress the balance in favour of the distressed areas by encouraging investment and resources into the areas most in need. Two commissioners were appointed to promote a revival in the areas that had suffered the most through industrial blight, one for England and Wales and one for Scotland. For Sir Malcolm Stewart, one of the first commissioners for the Special Areas, the solution was the discouragement of further industry to London and the Midlands, which would, it was hoped, preserve and develop industry in other

¹⁰ DCC, *County Durham Development Plan* (1951), p. 105. Easington district was the fourth most overcrowded rural district in the county during the inter-war years.

¹¹ NT/AP/1/5/2. H. Rankin, *New for Old: The Peterlee Social Survey*, March 1949, p. 3.

¹² R. Ryder, 'Council house building in Co. Durham, 1900-39: the local implementation of national policy', in M. J. Daunton (ed.), *Inter-War Council Housing Policy* (1982), p. 234.

¹³ Priestley, *English Journey*, p. 249.

parts of Britain.¹⁴ It was also hoped that the introduction into the region of more modern light industries would have helped to minimise the North East's reliance upon its traditional industries.¹⁵ However, the only means the commissioners had at first was persuasion: they had no powers to provide financial assistance. It soon became clear, moreover, that few new firms would locate to distressed areas if it was left entirely to market forces.¹⁶ Despite the introduction of various measures to attempt to entice private capital to the Special Areas including the 1936 Special Areas Reconstruction (Agreement) Act, which permitted the Special Areas Reconstruction Association to give financial assistance to firms with a reasonable prospect of success, there was no substantial reversal in the Areas' fortunes and by 1939, a mere 3,100 workers in the region were employed in factories erected through the Special Areas measures.¹⁷

During the war there was a major shift in the coalition government's attitude towards regional policy. At this time considerable intervention by policy makers to ensure that there was no reversion back to the depressed conditions of the 1930s in the region gained cross-party support in parliament.¹⁸ Hugh Dalton, MP for Bishop Auckland in South-West Durham, who was appointed President of the Board of Trade in February 1942, favoured large-scale government intervention to prevent a possible post war slump in the North East region. His proposals, including the implementation of regional policies to maintain full employment, became an accepted part of the government's reconstruction programme as outlined in the 1944 Employment White Paper. It had as its aim 'the promotion of prosperity within the basic

¹⁴ G. McCrone, *Regional Policy in Britain* (1969), p. 95.

¹⁵ Ministry of Labour, *Reports of Investigations* (London, 1936), p. 82.

¹⁶ *The Times*, 26 July 1935.

¹⁷ E. Allen, A. J. Odber and P. J. Bowden, *Development Area Policy in the North East of England* (Newcastle, 1956), p. 3. See, also, *Midland Bank Review* (May 1964). The small amount of Treasury funding for the Special Areas is put into context when one considers that loans amounting to only £750,000 were paid out, whereas the Nuffield Trust, a private body formed for the same purpose provided financial backing to the Areas of nearly £2.25 million.

¹⁸ H. Loebl, *Government Factories and the Origins of British Regional Policy, 1934-48* (Aldershot, 1988), p. 75.

industries of the Development Areas', as well as the 'attraction of a wide range of enterprises to those areas, to diversify their economic base'.¹⁹

Similarly, the Royal Commission on the Distribution of the Industrial Population, published in 1940, demanded a more coordinated approach by government, including the creation of new towns, to relieve the industrial and housing distress in the region, otherwise, it claimed, a national imbalance in population numbers and prosperity would put the nation's well-being in jeopardy:

The disadvantages in many, if not in most of the great industrial concentrations do constitute serious handicaps and even in some respects dangers to the nation's life and development, and definite action should be taken by the government towards remedying them.²⁰

The Board of Trade also became much more heavily involved in all aspects of industrial development. It was henceforth permitted to build factories in the Development Areas and purchase land – if necessary by compulsory purchase – and make loans to individual industrial estate companies to provide industrial premises in the area.²¹ The most important aspect of the new legislation was the attempt to maintain a high and stable level of employment.²² In the North East, unemployment fell from 15.2 per cent in 1939, to 6.1 per cent in 1946.²³

Both Aycliffe and Peterlee were created in the midst of these developments. It was initially intended that both new towns would be part of a regional growth point strategy. The idea to create a new town in the Aycliffe area was first proposed in 1946. The area was considered suitable for construction not only because of the acute industrial distress experienced in the sub-region during the inter-war years, but also because of the large distances many workers were having to travel to work in the Royal Ordnance Factory (ROF), which had been established to provide armaments for the war effort. In East Durham, meanwhile, the idea for a

¹⁹ Ministry of Reconstruction, *White Paper on Employment Policy*, Cmd 6527 (1944), pp. 2-3. (Hereafter White Paper).

²⁰ *Royal Commission on the Distribution of the Industrial Population*, Cmd 6153 (1940), p. 195. (Hereafter Barlow Report).

²¹ Board of Trade, *Distribution of Industry Act* (1945), p. 1.

²² McCrone, *Regional Policy*, p. 106.

²³ DCRO DC/ERRU/I North East Development Association (NEDA), *The Northern Region* (Newcastle, 1950), p. 65.

new town had first been propounded by C. W. Clarke, an architect working for Easington RDC, who argued that a new town in the district represented the chance of a better future for the area's miners.

ii) The war and the creation of Durham's new towns

There is no doubt that South-West Durham directly benefited from rearmament. In 1939, an area of 867 acres near Aycliffe village was selected as a site for the ordnance factory. The land had the advantage of being flat, stable and was of low agricultural value and, most importantly, it had excellent rail and road access, the latter due to its proximity to the Great North Road. The area was also sparsely populated – an important consideration when the site was selected in view of the hazardous nature of ordnance production. At its peak, the ROF employed more than 16,000 workers in nearly a thousand factory units. Almost 10,000 of the workers were women, moreover, an especially important consideration for wartime planners in South-West Durham, as a characteristic of the depressed areas in the inter-war years was a scarcity of employment for women.

The 1944 Employment White Paper indicated that some of Britain's munitions factories no longer required for ordnance production could be released for civilian use after the war. The government announced in 1945 that the Aycliffe site was being considered as a site for a major industrial initiative. By that time, the ordnance factory had been converted into a government industrial estate. It was anticipated that after the war firms would be eager to expand as quickly as possible to meet the pent-up public demand for consumer goods; the ordnance site would, it was hoped, be well placed to take advantage of this increased demand. A major drawback, however, was the lack of housing accommodation for factory workers. In 1946 almost all the 6,000 employees at the Aycliffe complex travelled from outside the district, some from up to 30 miles away. It was almost inevitable that some form of urban development near the industrial location

would be necessary if the project was to go ahead. After a meeting between Silkin and the district's local authorities on 12 February 1947, it was announced that Britain's seventh new town was to be built at Aycliffe, the first to be built outside of the 'London Ring' of new towns, and the first town to be designated without decentralisation as its main focus.²⁴

Proposals to create a new town in East Durham had been made as early as 1938 by Easington District Council surveyor, C. W. Clarke. He was a keen follower of the ideas of Ebenezer Howard and F. J. Osborn. Born and raised in the heart of the East Durham coalfield at Wingate Colliery, he had a life-long empathy with miners' traditions and ways of life. 'The miner to me', Clarke wrote in 1963, 'plays with his cards up. There is no slyness about them. I thought: They deserve something better'.²⁵ In 1940 he argued that it was irrational to add new houses to villages where the colliery had a short life and that any post-war construction in the area ought to involve a central focal point for housing on a large scale, to serve several villages rather than the sporadic building of houses in each village, which had hitherto been the council's strategy.²⁶ At that time, however, his proposals were considered too politically risky and were duly 'guillotined' by a small group of senior district councillors.²⁷

By 1943 the political climate had changed. The government requested local authorities to propose building plans for post-war reconstruction, providing an opportunity for Clarke to re-introduce his ideas.²⁸ He claimed that the erection of a new town, as well as remedying the district's lack of amenities and poor, overcrowded housing conditions, would also provide for the first time the recreational, cultural and shopping facilities needed to give a greater degree of cohesion and self-sufficiency to people in East Durham.²⁹

²⁴ NA BT/177/1 The Clearance and Redevelopment of the ROF at Aycliffe, 3 Feb 1948.

²⁵ *Northern Echo*, 20 July 1963. (Hereafter NE).

²⁶ C. W. Clarke, *Farewell Squalor: A New Town and Proposals for the Development of the Easington Rural District* (Easington, 1946), p. 33.

²⁷ *Sunderland Echo*, 25 May 1960. (Hereafter SE).

²⁸ DCRO RD/Ea 23 Easington Rural District Council (ERDC), Housing Committee Minutes, 29 June 1943. (Hereafter HCM).

²⁹ DCRO RD/Ea 87 ERDC, Minutes, 12 May 1946.

Clarke's proposals consequently gained the full support of the district council, as well as the miners themselves.³⁰ In August 1943 the council's clerk declared that:

The scheme could prove the solution to the whole of the council's post-war programme and, drastic though it may seem at the outset, particularly in what would appear to be the elimination of parochial ideas, I am convinced that if it was launched and brought to an accomplished fact then those who were fortunate enough to reap its benefits would look back and shower blessings upon their benefactors, who had the foresight and courage to take such a step in the interests of housing progress.³¹

The miners had gained support and respect for their contribution toward the war effort: there was a feeling that something should be done to recognise their endeavours. A local newspaper stated that for generations Durham's coal had been a major factor in the nation's industrial prosperity, and that 'no county has given more of its sons in the wars to preserve our island heritage; and no county has a greater claim to some of the better things in life'.³² A Miners' Charter of 1946, furthermore, argued for 'the building of new towns and villages of a high standard and situated at places calculated to enable miners to have increased opportunities for social facilities ... accompanied by the provision of adequate services at reasonable rates'.³³ A new town in the area would thus be an opportunity for miners to attain such facilities whilst, at the same time, enjoying a more healthy existence in pleasant surroundings.

In 1946 Clarke's proposals also gained the support of Silkin and the Labour government, which became increasingly receptive to the idea of a new town in East Durham, if only to retain the political allegiance of the largest rural district in the country.³⁴ Visiting the area in 1946, Silkin saw for himself the desperate housing shortage and squalid conditions. He concluded that the district did have a special claim for a new town in that it 'offered an outstanding opportunity for breaking with the unhappy tradition that miners and their families should be obliged to live in ugly overcrowded villages clustered around the pitheads, out of contact with people in other walks

³⁰ Of course, most council members were or had been miners themselves.

³¹ RD/Ea 45 ERDC, Minutes, 5 Aug 1943.

³² *Evening Chronicle*, 3 Aug 1948.

³³ DCRO Min/12 National Executive Committee of the National Union of Miners (NUM), 1946.

³⁴ See, for example, Rankin, *New Town for Old*, p. 6.

of life, and even for the most part with workers in other industries'.³⁵ Accordingly, in February 1947 he announced the creation of the ninth town to be built under the 1946 New Towns Act. The council subsequently agreed on 24 March that the new town should be developed under the aegis of a development corporation, rather than the council itself assuming the role of operative agency.³⁶ This seemed the most expeditious solution for several reasons: first, the erection of a whole new settlement would have been beyond the council's financial or administrative competence.³⁷ Council members also assumed that they would have a significant input into running the corporation. The Ministry of Town and Country Planning's regional controller, Max Tetlow, had explained to the council on 12 March that, although the new town could be built best by a body of developers responsible for the whole, the body would be selected as far as possible locally, 'but with possibly a few outsiders in it in order to bring points of interest which the local people might not have'.³⁸ In May he claimed that the regional office wanted to find out what the local authority wanted, and then to give it all assistance possible in helping to carry it out.³⁹ Silkin's request that the council nominate members well qualified to serve on the advisory committee seemed to reassure those councillors who remained unconvinced about a government-directed new town.⁴⁰

The announcement in August 1947 that a new town was to be built in Easington district generated great excitement among East Durham's communities and their local officials. J. P. McMann, chairman of the district council, proclaimed that this was 'undoubtedly the most important day in the whole history of Easington rural district, its inhabitants and their elected representatives'.⁴¹ Of all the new towns so far designated in Britain, East Durham's was the first to be championed by local people, and not imposed on it by government diktat. Even the name of

³⁵ RD/Ea/19 ERDC, Minutes, 12 Sept 1946.

³⁶ RD/Ea/25 ERDC, HCM, 24 Aug 1947.

³⁷ RD/Ea/109 ERDC, HCM, 12 April 1948.

³⁸ RD/Ea/25 Meeting between the Regional Controller and ERDC, 12 March 1947.

³⁹ RD/Ea/86 ERDC, Minutes, 5 May 1947.

⁴⁰ RD/Ea/87 ERDC, Minutes, 16 Oct 1947.

⁴¹ RD/Ea/25 ERDC, HCM, 27 Aug 1947.

the new town recognised the achievements of a local man who seemed to embody the people he represented. Peter Lee had spent most of his life fighting for miners' causes, and been the first socialist chairman of any county council. When he died in 1935 it was said that the whole of Easington district came to a halt.

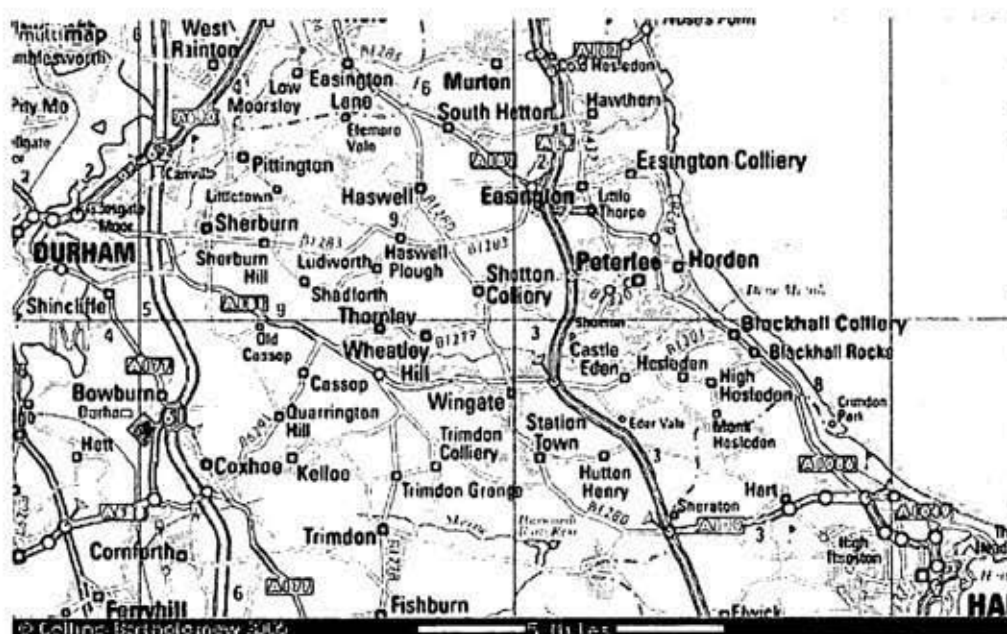


Fig. 1: Easington District

Silkin, for his part, initially did much to foster harmonious relations with East Durham's local authorities. In January 1948 he said that the new town's purpose was 'to give the miner a better, fuller and richer life, and to see that he did not continue in his present isolation but become part of the wider community'.⁴² Such congeniality was short-lived, however. It was perhaps inevitable that the creation of a new town would cause some friction between government-sponsored institutions and local authorities. Since the Town and Country Planning Act (1932) local authorities had been largely responsible for planning their own local environment.⁴³ After the war, however, planning proposals and the building of new towns, which included the suspension of

⁴² NT/Pe/3/1/307 Easington New Town Advisory Committee, Minutes, 17 March 1948.

⁴³ H. W. E. Davis, 'Continuity and change: the evolution of the British planning system, 1947-97', *Town Planning Review* 69 (1998), p. 136.

local authority by-laws and road building, were subject to direct sanction by government-imposed institutions, thus abrogating local-authority input into planning policy decisions.⁴⁴

Even so, hostile relations between Silkin and Easington councillors developed to such an extent that less than a year after the announcement of the new town, the corporation and the council severed all communication with each other with Prime Minister Attlee feeling compelled to order an investigation into the dispute.⁴⁵ The announcement in April 1948 of the people who would form the new town's inaugural development corporation board signalled the beginning of hostilities. Silkin's appointment of Dr Monica Felton, a former Reith Committee member and London County Council councillor, as chairman of the board was not welcomed by the district council. She was abrasive and dogmatic; and although she served in the job for under two years, she dominated the board to such an extent that two of its members resigned, while managing to alienate the whole of the district council.⁴⁶ Furthermore, despite Reith's recommendations on representation in the towns, of eight people named on the board only one was a district council nomination, and only two members could be described as being local in any shape or form.⁴⁷ Contrary to the council's assumption, the new town advisory committee was, it seemed, not to be represented by local officials after all, but by 'captains of industry' and other assorted 'experts'.⁴⁸

Problems between the Minister and the district and county councils were also not confined to the first corporation board appointments.⁴⁹ When Harry Lee (the only district council nomination), and Sir Meyers Wyndham, resigned from the board in August 1948 (allegedly because of their unwillingness to work with Felton), although Silkin had promised to consider Gordon Henderson, the leader of the Labour group on the district council, he proposed instead to appoint Thomas

⁴⁴ Reith Committee, *2nd Interim Report*, p. 20.

⁴⁵ *NE*, 15 March 1949.

⁴⁶ RD/Ea/87 ERDC, Minutes, 14 Oct 1948.

⁴⁷ RD/Ea/26 ERDC, HCM, 19 April 1948.

⁴⁸ *Durham Chronicle*, 11 June 1948.

⁴⁹ DCRO CC/A57/1/2 DCC, Planning Committee, 15 Oct 1948. For the most part the county council was united with the district council in its opposition to Silkin's appointments, especially ones that were from outside of the geographical county.

Haworth, chief accountant to the Port of London Authority and Frank Douglas-Nicholson, Managing Director of Vaux Breweries and former Conservative candidate for Spennymoor in South-West Durham.⁵⁰ No further district council nominees were appointed. In 1949 after council nominations had been ignored for the third time, Henderson protested that there were people in County Durham whose knowledge and ability were equal to that of any of the persons acceptable to Silkin whom, he claimed, was deliberately flouting the council's wishes:

The minister is acting under a spirit of autocracy which the council as democrats hoped would not be allowed to function for much longer. It is difficult to understand an individual who has been reared in the traditions of the Labour Party acting in such a manner ... The proposed appointments are an affront to the council and to all the individual members of the Labour Party in the county of Durham.⁵¹

Despite these initial problems, a joint consultative committee was established between the corporation and the council to determine housing policy and allocation; but it did not lead to more harmonious relations. Felton, despite opposition from councillors, insisted that a new parish in Peterlee should be formed as soon as possible in order that the new town's residents might be 'on the map'.⁵² The district councillors, however, accused Felton of empire building, and attempting to sever the town from the rest of the district.⁵³ Councillors also complained that they were prevented from reading the corporation's minutes, even though the council was prepared to allow the corporation access to its minutes.⁵⁴ Felton denied that the board was being deliberately obdurate or secretive. Rather it was a question of procedure: reciprocity was not permitted under the New Towns Act because development corporations were not elected bodies and were answerable only to the Minister, unlike district councils, which were answerable to their constituents. Sensitive information about issues such as land policy, which affected the actions of other development corporations, was regularly discussed at corporation meetings, and could not

⁵⁰ *Yorkshire Post*, 29 Aug 1948.

⁵¹ RD/Ea/26 ERDC, HCM, 18 Aug 1949.

⁵² RD/Ea/87 ERDC, Minutes, 18 Oct 1948.

⁵³ NT/Pe/3/1/258 Peterlee New Town Joint Advisory Committee Correspondence, 18 Oct 1948.

⁵⁴ RD/Ea/87 ERDC, HCM, 14 Oct 1948.

be made publicly available for fear of jeopardising other projects.⁵⁵ Henderson observed that if this was the case, there was no point in having a joint committee at all. T. Barnes, a member of the council's housing committee was more forthright:

It should not be forgotten that this new town was sponsored by the council and handed over to the corporation. The way that the corporation is behaving is totally undemocratic. Of the two groups, one is private and confidential and the other is open. Unless things change, the council will have to review its whole position.⁵⁶

Matters between the two parties reached breaking point when in January 1949 the council requested a meeting with the corporation to resolve their problems, but the corporation flatly refused.⁵⁷ The council reacted by demanding to meet with Silkin in person.⁵⁸ As it transpired, the Minister had already arranged to visit the new town in October 1949, and so agreed to meet with the council during the visit – but only as long as the meeting was in private. This was unacceptable to the council: it demanded that any meetings with the Minister should be held in open session because, as one councillor claimed, 'the local community had a right to know just what was going on in regards to developments in the new town'.⁵⁹ Silkin would not be swayed, however, claiming that matters between himself and the council needed to be 'thrashed out', and this could only be done in private. This was still unacceptable to the council. Henderson stated that 'it appeared that the minister is not prepared to make any overtures to heal the breaches of the past, or any possibility of healing them in the future'. On 1 September 1949, a council motion stated clearly its outrage at the minister's stance:

The council view with grave concern the changed attitude of the minister, and that it be stated that they were prepared to meet the minister and the corporation in full council and in open session at any time and in any place. This attitude had to be adopted in view of certain rumours circulating throughout the district with regard to the complacency of the council regarding the development of Peterlee. The council still believed in the new town but they were not getting tangible results, and they and the public were entitled to know in

⁵⁵ NT/Pe/3/1/258 Peterlee New Town Joint Advisory Committee Correspondence, 19 Jan 1949.

⁵⁶ RD/Ea/87 ERDC, Minutes, 18 Oct 1948.

⁵⁷ NT/Pe/3/1/336 Peterlee Development Corporation (PDC), Board Minutes, 16 Feb 1949. (Hereafter BM)

⁵⁸ RD/Ea/25 ERDC, Minutes, 25 Jan 1949.

⁵⁹ RD /Ea/88 ERDC, Minutes, 25 March 1949.

which way they were going to affect their immediate lives and the lives of future generations.⁶⁰

The Minister still refused to meet the council unless it was in private. In December, following appeals by Easington MP, Emanuel Shinwell, the council reluctantly agreed to the Minister meeting the Labour group on the council only. However, this prompted opposition parties to accuse the Labour group of being as secretive as the corporation. C. McFarlane, prospective Conservative parliamentary candidate for Easington, took the opportunity to equate the closed meeting with the actions of communist governments:

Socialism is becoming communism just as surely as a tadpole becomes a frog. We had an example of the communist technique when the Minister of Town and Country Planning met a Labour party caucus of Easington RDC in secret but refused to meet the whole council in public because he dare not defend in public the waste that will result from his optimism in pressing on with the Peterlee New Town scheme.⁶¹

Meanwhile, at a meeting attended by Felton in July 1948, Wheatley Hill county councillor E. F. Peart demanded to know why during the 1946 local elections not one candidate, irrespective of party, had even mentioned the unveiling of a new town in the area, or why none of the members of the corporation were subject to the will of the electors, as were the unpaid councillors who had previously built thousands of houses in the area. 'It savours and smells of totalitarianism', he declared, 'of which we hear from other parts of the world'.⁶² The undemocratic implications of the new town project were also strongly emphasised by E. H. R. Freeman, from the National Farmers' Union. At the new town's public inquiry, he claimed that:

not one citizen in this new town will own a brick of his own home, for every house will be owned by the government or the local authority. Every tenant will be under the absolute control of the development corporation ... I suggest that the new town should not be named Peterlee, but St. Petersburg.⁶³

If Peterlee's inauguration was characterised by local enthusiasm followed by hostility, Aycliffe's start was almost the complete opposite. Unlike Peterlee, the impetus for the new town

⁶⁰ RD/Ea/26 ERDC, Minutes, 1 Sept 1949.

⁶¹ NE, 13 Dec 1949.

⁶² NE, 2 July 1948.

⁶³ *Northern Daily Mail*, 21 Jan 1948. (Hereafter NDM).

came from central government rather than local pressure. Initially its designation was firmly opposed by the district's local authorities, who viewed it as a 'cuckoo in the nest', some even claiming that the new town would end up as no more than a glorified suburb of Darlington.⁶⁴ But animosity turned out to be short-lived, and over the next two-to-three years, the new town became fully endorsed by the area's communities.

This was partly because of the appointment of Lord Beveridge as the development corporation's first chairman in March 1948. He had gained much respect and support during the war as author of the Report on Social Insurance and Allied Services. Moreover, he viewed the new town project as a way of engaging with the housing dilemmas affecting the nation after the war.⁶⁵ In contrast to Peterlee, the members appointed to the first development corporation board were largely local people divided roughly equally between the major parties, and fairly representative of the three separate local authorities adjoining the designated area: the rural district councils of Darlington and Sedgefield, and the urban council of Shildon.

Despite the very real post-war social and economic difficulties the corporation set itself the task of not merely building housing accommodation for the 6,000 workers employed on the trading estate, but the far more ambitious task of creating a new and carefully planned community. Beveridge was adamant that Aycliffe would not resemble the downtrodden and overcrowded slum conditions he had witnessed in London. He was equally anxious that the new town should not be like inter-war ribbon developments, where a town's inhabitants spent much of their working days travelling to and from their places of employment with little time for leisure and relaxation. In his own experience of living in London, he calculated that he had spent at least two years travelling to and from work 'generally as a strap-hanger on a rather inefficient underground'.⁶⁶ So much travelling time had created an obstacle to family life for the worker; community life had also suffered, as it was difficult to cultivate the growth of civic pride in

⁶⁴ *NE*, 10 Jan 1948.

⁶⁵ DCRO NT/AP/6/1/1 Lord Beveridge's Correspondence, 8 May 1947.

⁶⁶ *Northern Despatch*, 13 Jan 1948.

suburbs where a large section of its inhabitants were spending their free time on buses or trains. If the corporation realised its ambitions, the town could also set standards and provide a model for new types of urban settlements because in contrast to the earlier 'London ring' new towns, which had been handicapped by having to expand old townships, the new town at Aycliffe was starting from scratch.⁶⁷ Apart from a few old scattered farm buildings, the site was much as it had been 200 years previously. At Aycliffe, he therefore virtually had a blank page on which to experiment, and to undertake a new departure in social development.

It was this latter issue that Beveridge found most appealing about the Aycliffe project. In January 1950 he told an audience of invited guests in Aycliffe that 'the new town idea consists of trying to think out in advance the development of a new town as a whole, so as to avoid the waste, the disorder and the needlessly uncomfortable living that have arisen through the haphazard growth of many old towns'.⁶⁸ There was to be nothing haphazard about Newton Aycliffe; everything to do with the new town would be meticulously planned. In 1949 Beveridge told local councillors: 'We have set out to try to make a perfect town, a town in which every man, and above all, every housewife, will want to live – a town of beauty and happiness and community spirit'.⁶⁹ One of the distinctive features of Newton Aycliffe was that it should be a 'housewife's paradise'. 'It wasn't enough to have a Lord Shaftsbury to improve conditions in the factories', he told a group of reporters in 1950, 'we want a Lord Shaftsbury of the home to improve the conditions of the housewife'.⁷⁰ As well as a 40-hour week for homemakers, Beveridge proposed that the town was erected in such a manner that each house was less than ten minute's walk from the nearest shops, thereby reducing housewives' shopping trips. Several nurseries would be provided in the town to look after the children whilst their mothers were at the shops. Also, each group of houses would be furnished with communal laundries, electronically fitted and equipped

⁶⁷ *The Observer*, 7 Nov 1948.

⁶⁸ *NDM*, 20 Jan 1950.

⁶⁹ *NE*, 1 Feb 1949.

⁷⁰ *NE*, 6 March 1950.

with drying rooms; outside the laundries, drying greens surrounded by trees was to be a feature of the town.⁷¹

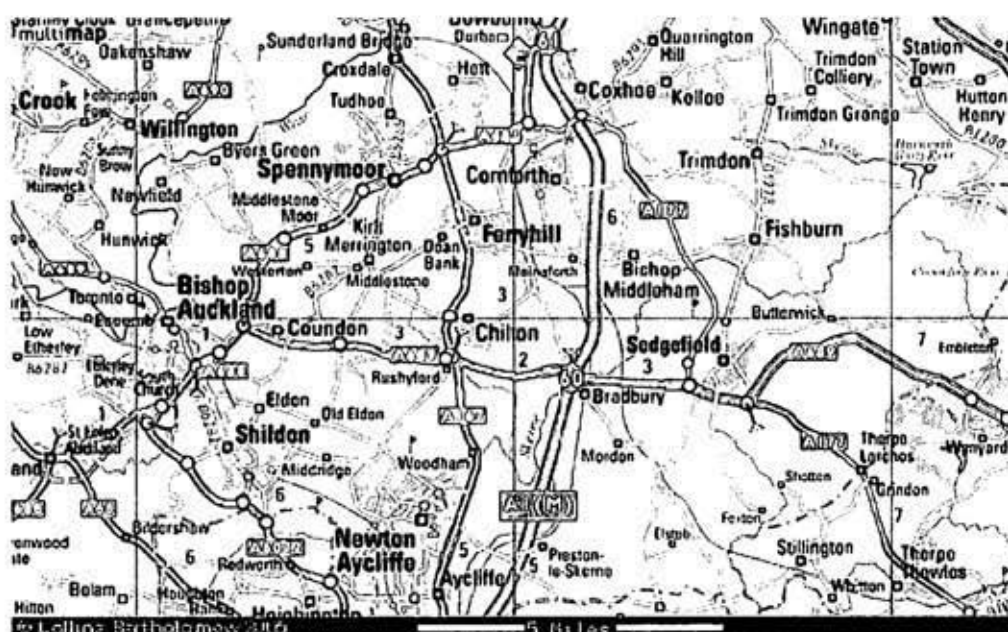


Fig. 2: South-West Durham

In April 1949 Beveridge proclaimed: 'We are planning to make Aycliffe a town which will combine the advantages of country and urban surroundings'. The town was to be built around the 'village green' concept, with houses and streets bordering communal green spaces, all within separate though related wards, and further divided into precincts. Each precinct would contain about 110 dwellings and approximately 450 people.⁷² 'We have set out to make a town which will be like a group of related villages', Beveridge wrote in 1949, 'so that each section of our population will be a community of itself, yet conscious of being part of a larger community'.⁷³ Moreover, the various communities within each sector of the town would not resemble older towns where more affluent households lived in a west end, whilst an east end contained the town's poorer elements. In Aycliffe, all classes would inhabit the same spaces around the village green. But, more importantly, the various classes residing around the village green mixed together.

⁷¹ ADC, 1950 AR, p. 5.

⁷² DCRO NT/AP/7/3/1 *The Newtonian*, (October 1950).

⁷³ *Northern Despatch*, 2 May 1949.

There was, however, a major problem, which threatened for a time to jeopardise the board's planning objectives. This was not, as at Peterlee, hostility between the development corporation and local authorities, but simply the designated area's geographical position. Prior to designation, the Ministry had earmarked two separate sites for possible development: one to the north of Aycliffe trading estate, the other to the south near the village of Heighington. The latter site had the advantages of being virtually uninhabited, and controlled by only one local authority. However, it was also adjacent to a working dolomite quarry, with the risk of housing foundations being shaken by explosions from the quarry. Moreover, the site was considered by some officials to be too close to Darlington, which may have encouraged population movements and trade from the county borough.⁷⁴ The northern site was devoid of these potential hazards, but it was within the jurisdiction of three separate local authorities, which made the coordination and provision of services, and the setting of rates a potentially much more complicated procedure.⁷⁵

Nevertheless, the northern site was chosen. In November 1950 the corporation sent a letter to Darlington, Shildon and Sedgefield councils, enquiring whether some arrangement agreeable to all three was possible.⁷⁶ In some ways, Darlington had the best claim to the town: it had already re-organised and developed its services to cope with the additional responsibilities involved with having the new town in its area.⁷⁷ However, from the very beginning of negotiations it was evident that an arrangement would be very difficult to achieve. At their first meeting in January 1951, all three local authorities claimed jurisdiction of the new town. Following negotiations between Darlington and Sedgefield councils, the latter yielded,⁷⁸ and then supported Darlington's claim to sole responsibility, but on the proviso that its representation on the new town's board was

⁷⁴ NA BT/177/1 The Clearance and Redevelopment of the ROF at Aycliffe, 16 Oct 1946.

⁷⁵ NA CAB/124/880 Ministry of Town and Country Planning, Proposed Site for New Town at Aycliffe, 20 Sept 1946. (Hereafter Min TC/P)

⁷⁶ DCRO UD/SH/34 Shildon Urban District Council (UDC), Minutes, 13 Dec 1950.

⁷⁷ *Northern Despatch*, 5 June 1951.

⁷⁸ DCRO RD/Da/12 Darlington RDC, Minutes, 19 Feb 1951.

retained, which was accepted by the corporation.⁷⁹ However, this arrangement was firmly rejected by Shildon UDC, which resolutely maintained its sole claim on the new town.

In 1952 more than four years after the development corporation had first applied for unitary local authority involvement in the new town, no agreement between the three councils had been achieved. On 11 October 1952, Durham County Council did finally exercise its powers when it found in favour of Darlington RDC. But the problem did not end with this decision. Over the next few years, the corporation repeatedly needed to procure county council assistance for services, because Darlington RDC refused or were unable to provide.

iii) The size of the towns and the nation's need for coal

The other area attracting controversy was the potential size of the town, of which all three local authorities were in total agreement. When Silkin visited South-West Durham in March 1946 to discuss the possibility of a new town, he only secured the consent of local officials on the understanding that the peacetime industrial estate on the designated site was not allowed to exceed the 6,000 workers already employed there, and that the population of the town was limited to 10,000.⁸⁰ The reasons for such stubborn determination by the local authorities were quite clear: any potential expansion of Aycliffe would necessarily mean an under-utilisation of their own public services, as well as the possibility of the new town luring away industry and population from their own neighbouring urban areas.⁸¹ However, the corporation denied any attempts to appropriate industry or population from neighbouring towns and villages. The master plan stated that: 'Newton Aycliffe does not seek to usurp the functions of old-established centres in the area. Nor is it intended that the town should draw away the lifeblood from the older and larger towns ... It is for this reason that the corporation is in full agreement that the town should be limited to a

⁷⁹ DCRO RD/Se/37 Sedgefield RDC, Minutes, 31 March 1951.

⁸⁰ HLG/107/217 The Expansion of Newton Aycliffe: Proposed Future Population, 17 Nov 1949.

⁸¹ DCRO RD/Se/33 Sedgefield RDC, Minutes, 21 April 1950.

population of 10,000'.⁸² At the same time, however, it was apparent to some government officials that limiting Aycliffe to this size might have some deleterious consequences for the town in the future.

Furthermore, the smaller the town, the harder it would be to create a socially and economically balanced population. The Reith Committee stated that 'in a very small town it is unlikely that a balanced community representative of all income and social groups can be secured'.⁸³ Achieving a socially-balanced community in Newton Aycliffe was one of the primary goals for Beveridge and the corporation board, moreover.

There was the additional concern that limiting the population to 10,000 might deter potential industrialists. It had long been a concern in the sub-region that if industry was not forthcoming, then further movements of population would be almost inevitable, especially as existing heavy industry in the area was declining rapidly. In early 1949 the Ministry of Town and Country Planning estimated that even if no additional enterprises were attracted to the new town's trading estate, it would need a town of over 15,000 inhabitants to meet the anticipated future demand for male labour by firms already established there. The 1949 North East Development Area Plan was likewise forceful in its recommendation that radical steps were needed to prevent further depopulation. One proposal was a gradual re-grouping of population at Aycliffe as uneconomic pits closed, and coal mining was concentrated in more economic mines. The report therefore recommended that the population target for the new town should be raised from 10,000 to 23,000:

It is preferable to attract these people to Aycliffe, rather than attempt to keep them in such centres as Crook and Tow Law where prospects for new industry are doubtful. Aycliffe, on the other hand, with its good road and rail facilities, pleasant surroundings, flat land with ample space for expansion off the coalfields, should attract any amount of new industry once housing accommodation is available.⁸⁴

Decisions on the scale of basic services as well as the layout of roads and educational facilities within the town were also imminent. It was crucial for the corporation and the taxpayer that costs

⁸² HLG/107/217 The Expansion of Newton Aycliffe: Proposed Future Population, 17 Nov 1949.

⁸³ Reith Committee, *Final Report*, p. 7.

⁸⁴ North East Area Outline Plan, *Interim Confidential Edition*, (1949), p. 181.

relating to schools and roads should be consistent with what would be provided, not just at that time but for future generations.⁸⁵ Beveridge, for one, was explicit at a May 1949 press conference that the smaller population target agreed between the corporation and the area's local authorities would become untenable in the future:

We have been told to build for a town for 10,000, but we know there is a plan in evidence for a larger town for up to 20,000. Up to the present, we have been able to go ahead without the worrying, but later that uncertainty will become troublesome and we shall have to get a decision.⁸⁶

This was not welcome news for the local authorities, or the NCB. In November 1949 the latter expressed its concern about the 'awkward effect expansion may have in hindering the ready transfer of surplus miners to other coalfields'. It was worried that any expansion at Aycliffe may have deterred potential mine workers from remaining in the industry.⁸⁷ It need not have worried, however. During a visit to Aycliffe in November, Silkin appeared to contradict Beveridge by scotching any rumours that the new town was to be expanded. He felt that the case had 'not been made that there was a definite need for a town of 20,000', and that much more research was needed into the ultimate labour requirement on the trading estate before he would be tempted to change his decision.⁸⁸ In February 1950, though, research by the Ministry seemed to indicate that expansion at Aycliffe was indeed desirable. Based on future employment requirements on the trading estate, the Ministry concluded that a town of 20,000 was the only way to secure the sub-region's industrial prospects.⁸⁹ In March Silkin made it clear to Beveridge that there could be no public announcement about the Ministry's plans, nor any discussion with the area's local authorities.⁹⁰ However, in June, the Minister altered his opinion: he directed the Ministry's regional controller, Brigadier Sydenham (he replaced Max Tetlow in 1949) to hold a meeting with

⁸⁵ Aycliffe Development Corporation (ADC), *1949 Annual Report* (March 1949), p. 7. (Hereafter AR).

⁸⁶ *Northern Despatch*, 2 May 1949.

⁸⁷ HLG/107/217 J. H. Waddell (TC/P) to Brigadier Sydenham (Regional Controller TC/P), 18 Nov 1949.

⁸⁸ HLG/107/217 Report on Minister of Town and Country Planning's Visit to Aycliffe, 17 Nov 1949.

⁸⁹ HLG/107/217 The Expansion of Newton Aycliffe: Proposed Future Population, 6 Feb 1950.

⁹⁰ HLG/107/217 Waddell to Sydenham, 29 March 1950.

the local authorities concerned 'to ascertain what sort of reaction there would be if the proposal for expansion at Aycliffe was put to them'. Silkin was adamant, however, that the corporation should not be represented at the meeting.⁹¹

At the meeting in July 1950 it was clear that the local authorities would not countenance any proposals to expand at Aycliffe. One councillor from Bishop Auckland reminded Sydenham of Silkin's promise in 1947 that no more than 6,000 workers would be allowed on the town's trading estate, of whom 2,500 would live in the town whilst the remainder travelled. He further argued that there were still vacant sites on trading estates at Bishop Auckland, Shildon and Crook to which industrialists could be directed. Any increase at Aycliffe, he claimed, would be 'tantamount to us giving a pint of blood to increase the strength of Newton Aycliffe'.⁹² Darlington RDC's representative argued that rather than build new factories at Aycliffe, they should be scattered over the area's existing estates, thereby negating the need to extend the new town. 'Of all the times to start building a new Jerusalem' he added, 'this is the least advantageous'.⁹³ Perhaps decisively, the county council, despite support from its chairman, Alderman Cunningham, also opposed any plans to increase the town's population.⁹⁴

For Sydenham though, expansion at Aycliffe was needed for several reasons. More than 3,300 people on the estate travelled more than seven miles each day to work at Aycliffe, which meant a substantial portion of their pay went on travelling expenses. Furthermore, many of the towns in the sub-region were in coal mining areas, and were unappealing to prospective industrialists. Aycliffe was, he added, one of the few areas in the district free from subsidence, and therefore a desired choice for most firms wishing to locate in the sub-region.⁹⁵ Despite further protests from the local authorities in the months following the meeting, expansion at Aycliffe was firmly put on

⁹¹ HLG/107/217 Waddell to Sydenham, 28 June 1950.

⁹² HLG/107/217 Meeting between the Regional Controller of the Ministry TC/P and South-West Durham local authorities, 28 July 1950.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ DCRO CC/A57/1/3 DCC, Planning Committee, 24 Nov 1950.

⁹⁵ HLG/107/217 Meeting between Ministry TC/P Regional Controller and South-West Durham local authorities, 28 July 1950.

the agenda. In October 1951, the corporation received a strictly confidential letter from the Ministry requesting a revised master plan which could accommodate as large a population as possible within the town's existing designated area, if this was found necessary at a future date.⁹⁶

In East Durham, there was little evidence of the acrimony between government and local authority officials over the size of the new town that was experienced in Aycliffe. Although the Reith Committee had originally recommended that Peterlee should have a population of 80,000, it was generally recognised by most people with an involvement in the new town that this was unattainable in a district containing only 82,000 people. Government officials and the area's local authorities therefore agreed upon a more viable target of 30,000. All the same, although the projected population target was more than halved, it was still in accordance with Reith's recommendations regarding the achievement of balanced communities in the towns. This was an important consideration, especially in Easington, where there was much concern about the area's single-class mining communities. At the new town advisory committee's first meeting in 1947, Silkin declared:

It is definitely anti-social that people of one-income group should be segregated together, merely able to discuss the events of the pit. It created a particular type of psychology, which we want to get away from. It is essential that miners should have the opportunity of mixing with people of other occupations and income level. Each would enrich the life and experience of the other.⁹⁷

There was a major obstacle to the agreed size of the new town, however – a problem so serious that it threatened to stop its creation altogether. Beneath the designated area lay 33 million tons of coal which, if sterilised, might jeopardise the livelihood of thousands of miners living in the area.

The corporation had always been aware that coal extraction would play a major role in determining the town's physical structure, including the number of its residents, roads, types of buildings and aesthetic character. By January 1948, however, there was little mention of any potential problems. In February, though, the corporation learnt that the Ministry's regional office,

⁹⁶ NT/Ay/3/1/4 ADC, BM, 25 Oct 1951.

⁹⁷ DCRO NT/Pe/3/1/112 Peterlee New Town Inaugural Advisory Committee Meeting, 27 Aug 1947.

in its negotiations with the NCB before the new town's designation, had accepted certain limitations on development about which, until then, the corporation had known nothing. In May 1948 although the Coal Board still expressed reservations about the feasibility of building anywhere in Easington district due to the potential risk of subsidence, it provisionally agreed to sterilise about 1.75 million tons of coal in the north-east corner of the designated area, as long as strongly reinforced foundations were used during building. In June it cleared 146 acres of land adjacent to Horden for immediate development; this was followed in July by the county council's approval of the proposed development. In a report to the county planning committee, the county council chairman, H. Bates, foresaw no intractable problems to the new town proceeding satisfactorily:

Following upon discussions with the Ministry of Town and Country Planning and the National Coal Board, agreement has now been reached with the latter that where necessary to secure stability, coal will be sterilised so as to develop the first section of the Easington new town, and steps will be taken to co-relate the mining and surface development in the two future units.⁹⁸

It thus appeared that everything was going to plan. In August 1948 the corporation announced that it had managed to attain the services of the internationally-renowned architect, Berthold Lubetkin. A Russian by birth, he had been responsible for building some of the most innovative buildings in Spain, Germany and the Netherlands as well as in post-war Britain, including the new Finsbury Park health complex.⁹⁹ On arriving in the area, he triumphantly announced that Peterlee was going to be the 'mining capital of the world'.¹⁰⁰ In November 1948 the corporation revealed that a brick-laying ceremony was to be held in March 1949 to commemorate the building of the first house at Thorntree Gill, in the south east corner of the designated area.¹⁰¹

⁹⁸ DCRO NT/Pe/2/1/23 DCC, Report of County Planning Committee, July 11 1948.

⁹⁹ *News Chronicle*, 10 May 1948.

¹⁰⁰ PDC, 1949 AR, p. 115.

¹⁰¹ NT/Pe/1/1/1 PDC, BM, 7 Nov 1948.



Fig. 3: Lubetkin's original design for Peterlee.

Only a week before the brick-laying ceremony was to take place, however, a call from Silkin's office ordered that no building could be permitted to take place in the designated area until further notice.¹⁰² It transpired that Frank Dixon, the NCB's mining estates manager, had made it clear that it not only intended to extract most of the coal from the new town site, but because of its earlier arrangement with the Ministry felt that it had effective veto over any building that would interfere with its operations.¹⁰³ It was so sure of its precedence within the designated area that it did not even bother sending a representative to the new town's public enquiry in 1948.¹⁰⁴ In effect, any development plans were entirely dependent on the NCB's uncoordinated extraction programme.¹⁰⁵ It gradually became apparent to the corporation that if the town was to be built as the NCB required, it would house only 18,000 people and take more than 35 years to complete. This would necessarily have entailed a very slow transfer of people from existing villages in the area and a slow build up of shopping, social and cultural facilities.¹⁰⁶ Once he learned of the agreement, Silkin ordered a halt to construction.¹⁰⁷ He considered that the concessions that the regional office had made to the Coal Board were far too dear a price to pay. In March 1949 he

¹⁰² NA COAL/29/41 A. Johnston (Cabinet Office) to L. F. Murphy (Fuel and Power), 23 July 1949.

¹⁰³ NT/PE/3/1/600 PDC, Report by the Architect Planner, 14 Jan 1949.

¹⁰⁴ NA COAL/37/41 H. Gaitskell (Minister of Fuel and Power) to Silkin, 24 Dec 1948.

¹⁰⁵ NA POWE/37/193 Ministry of Works, Report on Peterlee's Development, 25 Sept 1948.

¹⁰⁶ NA COAL/29/41 NCB to Sir Lawrence Watkinson (Fuel and Power), 11 Aug 1949.

¹⁰⁷ NT/Pe/3/1/600 PDC, Future Organisation of Peterlee, 14 Jan 1949.

referred the matter to the Lord President's Committee. Further consultation and analysis followed and in July the Committee found in favour of the corporation.¹⁰⁸ The NCB was ordered to make available a portion of land for immediate development for the proposed town centre, as well as 440 acres of land in the south-east corner and more than 100 acres on the western part of the designated area for housing developments.¹⁰⁹

During 1949, however, the economy started to experience severe difficulties. The NCB was therefore able to gain much influential support in government because of the nation's desperate need for coal to aid reconstruction.¹¹⁰ The Lord President's decision was referred back to Cabinet and, following interventions from Shinwell, as well as local miners' lodges, the earlier decision was reversed. Shinwell, who, at the time was also Minister of Energy, had repeatedly warned of the dangers to the national economy of a diminution of coal production.¹¹¹ At the same time, both Horden and Shotton miners' lodges warned of the very real dangers of redundancies at their pits if the coal was allowed to be sterilised. Horden lodge stated that £92,700 had already been spent on opening and developing the mine in the village, and since 1939 it had produced nearly 3,000 tons of coal per day, which was necessary to ensure that Horden remained a viable economic concern. The lodge estimated that 169 men would immediately be made redundant should the sterilisation programme take place, with the possibility that only 22 would be re-employed in the future.¹¹²

The net result was that over the next two years progress on the new town was effectively stymied. Lubetkin resigned in April 1950 claiming that the NCB's demands were so restrictive as to make his plans for the new town virtually impossible. He further argued that, without a clear understanding of how much sterilisation of land the NCB were willing to concede, no master plan could be drawn up. It would take a further year before any building took place at Peterlee.

¹⁰⁸ NA POWE/37/193 Min TC/P, Regional Working Party on Peterlee New Town, 16 Sept 1949.

¹⁰⁹ NT/Pe/1/4/1 PDC, General Manager's Report, 31 Aug 1949. (Hereafter GMR).

¹¹⁰ See, for example, Rodwin, *The British New Towns Policy*, p. 47.

¹¹¹ *SE*, 1 May 1948.

¹¹² RD/Ea/25 ERDC, Minutes, 25 Jan 1949.

iv) The new towns: initial differences and similarities

In many respects, the origins of Newton Aycliffe and Peterlee were very similar. The two Durham new towns were the first to be built in England outside of the 'London Ring' new towns. The latter were built primarily to ease metropolitan over-population and, in addition, were appended to existing townships. This was not the case with Aycliffe or Peterlee: both were built on land unencumbered by existing communities, and created chiefly to relieve the economic and social distress in their respective areas rather than acting as de-population centres.

Also of significance was that they had similar political situations to cope with. Both towns had high-ranking government ministers in their immediate vicinity. Hugh Dalton, MP for Bishop Auckland, and also Chancellor of the Exchequer in Attlee's Government, was instrumental in the decision to erect the new town to the north of the ROF site rather than the south-west. He also intervened in the decision to allow the ROF to be one of the two munitions sites in the country to be converted into peacetime use. Shinwell was also very influential in Peterlee's early years. His support for the miners in their fight against Peterlee Development Corporation in 1948 effectively stopped the corporation's building plans in its tracks, therefore ensuring that the nation's need for coal became a priority over local building decisions.

Despite the similarities, however, there were also crucial differences, which would ensure that the social and economic trajectories of both towns would be very different for many years to come. When Aycliffe's corporation board was established, its membership included local officials from each of the new town's surrounding villages. In contrast, Peterlee's board were mostly executives and assorted experts from outside the area, most of them with only tenuous connections to the region. A possible reason for such reluctance on the part of government ministers to appoint local nominations to the corporation board in Peterlee was that they believed local people could not be trusted to successfully plan and administer a whole new town.

Finally, although the size of both new towns was considerably reduced from what the corporations originally envisaged, the reasons for such cuts in land and population targets were quite different. In Aycliffe's case, local authorities were initially vehemently opposed to the new town being established at all, and very keen to prevent the proposed population exceeding 10,000. Neighbouring local authorities were also adamant that their own populations and industries should not be attracted to the new town, thus causing an under-use of their own services and amenities. In East Durham, on the other hand, the new town had largely been the idea of the local district council and, initially, it was very supportive. The major problem in the district was that the prospective town lay on top of more than 30 million tons of coal, which would have to be either sterilised to enable the new town to be built, or mined and so prevent mining jobs in the area being jeopardised.

The next two chapters will show how such similarities and contrasts between their origins affected the developments of both towns over the ensuing fifteen years. In particular, the chapters will explore how industry and housing policies in the towns were formulated and administered, and how local communities in the two districts reacted to them.

Industry in Aycliffe and Peterlee, 1947 – 1963

This chapter will analyse industrial developments in Aycliffe and Peterlee from their respective inceptions until 1963. The first section outlines the national and local industrial context in which the two development corporations operated. The second part then assesses the success of the towns' attempts to attract industry. Geographically, Aycliffe, because of its proximity to wartime munitions factories and the A1(M) motorway, was able to forge ahead as an industrial centre. The exigencies of war also ensured that Easington district, with its vast amount of coal, was well-placed to capitalise on any post-war developments. Official thought after the war, however, was that there needed to be more diversification of industry. The creation of Peterlee therefore occurred at an opportune time as the new town was expected to be the repository of new industry arriving in the area. The third part of the chapter goes on to show how Aycliffe's remarkable industrial expansion continued unabated into the 1950s. Peterlee, meanwhile, was heavily constrained by the nation's need to produce coal which took precedence over the attraction of industry in the town. Part four investigates the reasons for the industrial malaise in both towns during the mid-1950s. Aycliffe's impressive rise as an industrial centre was brought to a halt, first through acute manpower shortages on the town's trading estate, and then by local government intransigence in refusing to allow the town's target population to be increased. Peterlee's lack of industry, meanwhile, continued to cause frustration in the district. By 1955, only two textile factories were established in the town, which together employed less than a thousand workers. After 1956, however, a sudden slump in the demand for coal necessitated a revision of the new town's reason for being. The final part of the chapter describes how both towns suffered during the late 1950s, when the Board of Trade reversed its policy on prioritising the new towns and turned instead to directing industry to areas with high unemployment.

i) National industrial developments and the new towns

Despite their initial difficulties, in one crucial respect – the provision of industry – both Aycliffe and Peterlee could not have been created at a more opportune time. Both were established at a time when the government's responsibility and powers to control the level of economic activity came to be properly accepted.¹ The Reith Report also insisted that if a new town was to become a self-sufficient and socially balanced community, it was essential that a wide variety of employment should be provided as soon as possible for a large proportion of its adult population.² Furthermore, because both towns were within the North East Development Area, which was intended to ensure that the region received a much greater share of industrial provision than before the war, there was much reason for confidence in both South-West and East Durham that their industrial problems were a thing of the past.

The wartime coalition government signalled its intentions to create a more equitable national industrial policy in 1944, with its White Paper on Employment, in which a vigorous policy of increased public expenditure was to be implemented, aimed at maintaining the aggregate level of demand in order to secure full employment.³ Also, in order that a recession in any one particular area would not necessarily adversely affect the whole, it recommended that a variety of new enterprises be attracted to the Development Areas, partly in order that their economic bases would become more diversified. It was hoped that the wider the range of industries attracted to a district, the greater the choice of occupations for individual workers.

The White Paper was followed in 1945 by the Distribution of Industry Act, which enabled the government to secure a proper distribution of industry over the country as a

¹ K. O. Morgan, *The People's Peace: British History 1945-1990* (Oxford, 1990), ch. 1.

² Reith Committee, *Second Interim Report*, p. 8.

³ *White Paper*, p. 1.

whole by stimulating the industrial and social development of areas at special danger of unemployment. Through the Act, which Dalton, the President of the Board of Trade, described as 'the most powerful lever which the government has at its disposal with regard to the future location of industry',⁴ new factories and extensions of existing firms were prohibited in Greater London and the Midlands. Instead, new firms wishing to erect industrial buildings with floor space exceeding 3,000 square feet were required to apply for a licence to the Board of Trade, which hoped that by regulating the geographical location of industry it would thereby force a greater rate of industrial growth in areas of high unemployment.⁵ Industrial Development Certificates, introduced by the Town and Country Planning Act (1947), also made it compulsory for new industrial developments of more than 5,000 square feet to obtain a Board Of Trade certificate before planning permission could be granted.

A result of these measures was that between 1945 and 1947 the Development Areas, despite containing a sixth of the insured working population in Britain, received some 50 per cent of new industrial building. In the North East region, which secured a larger proportion of new floor space than any other Development Area, more than 214 firms were persuaded to re-locate, whilst the average unemployment rate fell from 13.6 per cent to less than three per cent.⁶ As early as May 1947 a review of employment conditions in the northern region under the Distribution of Industry Act, stated that the region's insured population had risen to 909,924, an increase of five per cent since 1939, compared with an average increase of only 1.6 per cent nationally.⁷

⁴ *House of Commons Debates*, 400, c. 1379, 7 June 1944 (Hereafter HC Debs)

⁵ HLG/84/17 New Towns Committee: Minutes Papers and Report, 15 Nov 1945.

⁶ DCRO DC/EDRU/1 North East Development Association (NEDA), *The Northern Region: A Review of Employment Needs in Northumberland, Durham and the North Riding* (Newcastle, 1950), p. 9.

⁷ *Ibid*, p. 12.

In early 1947, however, the economy began to experience severe difficulties.⁸ Balance of payments problems, made worse by the severe winter of 1947, and the scale of government overseas expenditure and foreign investment, triggered a financial crisis.⁹ Moreover, a further financial emergency caused ostensibly by the United States government's insistence on the Treasury accepting the convertibility of Sterling as a condition of its 1946 loan to the United Kingdom, exacerbated what was already becoming a severe test for the Treasury. What resulted was a dramatic run on the pound: by the end of June, Britain had lost more than \$1890 million, or more than half of the \$3750 million loan lent to it by the United States.¹⁰ The only solution to the difficulties, it seemed, was for Britain's resources to be directed to projects that would dramatically increase its exports, while at the same time reducing its imports.¹¹ As many of the firms whose products would earn or save dollars were situated outside the Development Areas, they thus received priority.

A major industrial casualty was the capital construction plans initiated in 1945, especially the Development Areas programme. Figure 4 shows the number of firms that were directed to the Areas between 1945 and 1960. Between 1945 and 1947, at the height of the government support for the Distribution of Industry's recommendations, 62.4 per cent of new industry was directed to the areas, in contrast to Greater London where new industrial building was limited to 5.3 per cent of the total for Great Britain as a whole.¹² By 1949, however, raw materials became more plentiful. At the same time, there was less pressure exerted on businessmen to become established in less prosperous areas of the country. The Board of Trade therefore had less influence on firms re-deploying to the

⁸ See, for example, C. Barnett, *The Lost Victory: British Dreams, British Realities* (1995), p. 77.

⁹ J. Tomlinson, *Democratic Socialism and Economic Policy: The Attlee Years, 1945-51* (Cambridge, 1997), p. 54.

¹⁰ A. Cairncross, *Years of Recovery: British Economic Policy 1941-51* (1985), pp. 123-134

¹¹ H. Pelling, *The Labour Governments, 1944-1951* (1984), p. 173.

¹² Board of Trade, *1948 Distribution of Industry Act* (Cmd. 7540), p. 25.

Development Areas. Figure 4 illustrates how companies wishing to locate in the South and the Midlands continued to do so with few restraints.¹³ A consequence was that only six new firms with an estimated employment capacity of 845 received the Board of Trade's approval to relocate to the Development Areas.¹⁴ By 1949, and especially following the devaluation of the pound in September, the Areas were obtaining fewer approvals in relation to their insured population than the rest of the country.¹⁵ They never again recovered their preferential position of 1945-47 and for the next ten years Development Area policy was largely held in abeyance.

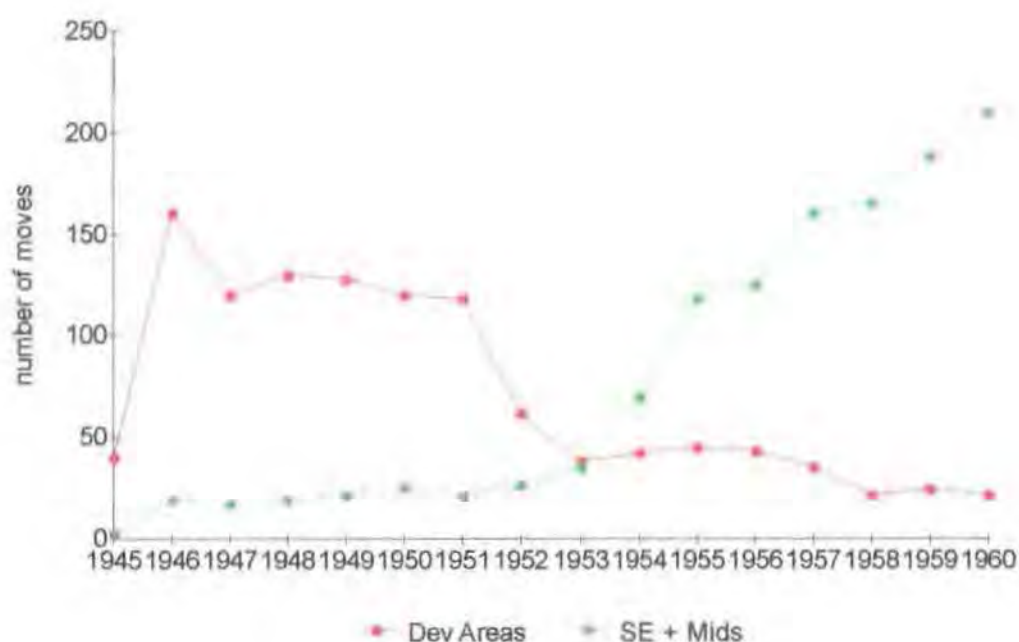


Fig. 4: The number of moves to Development Areas, 1945-60.

Added to this, the economy experienced severe difficulties after 1955, culminating in a balance of payments crisis in 1956. Although strict remedial measures were implemented by the Treasury, including a tight credit squeeze on new capital ventures and a rise in the bank rate to seven per cent, the economy continued to flounder over the next few years.

¹³ G. McCrone, *Regional Policy in Britain* (1969), p. 112.

¹⁴ DCRO DC/EDRU/1 NEDA, *The Northern Region*, p. 22.

¹⁵ *Economic survey for 1950*, Cmd 7915, p. 31.

After 1956 the situation deteriorated further when the demand for coal, both nationally and abroad, slumped dramatically, which had a disastrous effect on employment prospects in both Aycliffe and Peterlee.

ii) Post-war industrial promise

In Aycliffe, the industrial outlook after the war was very encouraging. During the war, unemployment had virtually ceased to exist in South-West Durham. Unlike most other areas, Aycliffe already had an industrial estate – the wartime Royal Ordnance Factory buildings. This was a particularly valuable asset because at the end of the war the three major difficulties for firms wishing to become established or extend their business operations were access to premises, as well as the availability of labour and raw materials.



Fig. 5: Churchill following a visit to Aycliffe ROF in 1943.

The decision to allow the ex-munitions factories at Aycliffe to be converted to peacetime use meant that 13 million square feet of adaptable floor space became available almost immediately.¹⁶ Moreover, whilst the Board of Trade had overall responsibility for the

¹⁶ NA BT/177/1 The Clearance and Redevelopment of the ROF at Aycliffe, 3 Feb 1948.

estate, it leased the site to individual industries on a basis that fitted in with plans for the distribution of industry in the region. Forty of Aycliffe's firms, including plastics manufacturers and light engineering companies, diverted their products to overseas markets. The success or otherwise of the estate was thus bound up with the fortunes of the nation's export drive.¹⁷ The government decision in 1947 to build a new town also ensured that there would be a readily available workforce for the site. A national shortage of raw materials, moreover, enabled the government to have a major influence over the location of new industry, which worked to Aycliffe's advantage. The new town thus presented an abundance of industrial possibilities after the war. Within 18 months nearly 60 firms employing 3,000 workers took advantage of the site's potential.¹⁸ For some commentators, Aycliffe and South-West Durham as a whole were an object lesson in how to counteract the effects of mine closures and provide, in their place, a thriving working community.¹⁹

The war also proliferated employment opportunities in East Durham, to such an extent that the area's pits were worked to full capacity. The conflict generated a huge demand for ships, armaments and domestic power, goods for which coalmining was instrumental in creating. Moreover, the pits were kept fully employed after 1945 in order to help satisfy the nation's considerable post-war demand for capital goods. However, there was a desire among national politicians and local officials that to accord with the 1944 White Paper, the district should not be solely dependent upon one industry.²⁰ Too much emphasis on regional specialisation, as had occurred in the North East, had incurred a high cost during the depression; there was thus a need to diversify the region's industrial structure.²¹ At a meeting in August 1947, to discuss the creation of a new town at Peterlee, Silkin told Easington's councillors:

¹⁷ *Municipal Journal*, 20 Jan 1950.

¹⁸ NT/Ay/1/1/2 ADC, BM, 9 May 1949.

¹⁹ DCRO DC/EDRU/1 NEDA, *The Northern Region*, p. 25.

²⁰ *White Paper*, pp. 10-11.

²¹ *Ibid*, p. 11.

Whilst coalmining is and clearly will remain for some time the dominant industry in the district, the need will sooner or later arise for additional industries, and this would be most effectively met by associating new industry with the new town.²²

It was also felt that the attraction of assorted light industries to Peterlee would bring new consumer goods industries catering for the home market to the area, which would make it less vulnerable to cyclical depression whilst also increasing the hitherto negligible employment opportunities for the area's female population. Such measures, it was hoped, would also help facilitate the creation of a more balanced community than existed in the area before the war.

On these points, Easington RDC was in full agreement with the Minister. Councillors considered that the importance of the industrial component of the Peterlee scheme had national as well as local significance. McCann told Silkin in August 1947 that a suitable industrial area had already been earmarked in the council's plans, and that it was imperative for the scheme to commence with the least possible delay.²³

Such confidence about the industrial prospects of the new town was short-lived, however. The post-war boom ended abruptly in late 1947, a result of which was that potential industrial developments at Peterlee were badly affected. In March 1947 Felton had gained assurances from Silkin that the corporation would be able to develop its own industrial estate, with the corporation itself providing the bulk of industry on the estate under the aegis of the Ministry of Town and Country Planning.²⁴ There were further grounds for optimism when Tetlow told the district council that new industry providing jobs for men and women was required despite the need for coal, if for no other reason than to strengthen the district's social and economic structure:

You have the richest coal and modern mining, but on the other hand, mere coal getting is not in itself a full and complete life for a community ... the Government

²² RD/Ea/24 ERDC, Minutes, 27 Aug 1947.

²³ Ibid

²⁴ NT/Pe/3/1/307 Easington New Town Advisory Committee, Minutes, 16 Dec 1947.

should help you to set up a society which has, as its primary basis, getting coal, but has also other industry to help coal out in a difficult period.²⁵

However, in November 1947 the corporation lost control of the estate to the Board of Trade. At first sight, this ought to have been to the corporation's benefit: compared to the Ministry of Town and County Planning, it was the senior Ministry in cabinet and administered the government's industrial policy.²⁶ Its priority at the time, however, was the encouragement of exports rather than the interests of the new town.²⁷ As the extraction of coal was one of Britain's major export-producing industries it would countenance no industrial development at Peterlee that would compete with the area's primary industry. Tetlow, in a reversal of his earlier stance, spelt this out to the corporation on 17 November, when he said that 'no allowance has been made for an industrial estate at the new town, as it is unlikely that there will be any industrial development on the site'.²⁸

The events of late 1947 also had a detrimental effect on the development of industry at Aycliffe. After its initial successes in attracting industry during the town's first 18 months, the Board of Trade began to experience difficulties in persuading firms to relocate to the area. This was partly because much of the dollar-saving type of industry was already situated outside of the Development Areas, so that when increased production was urgently needed for exports, firms were allowed to build on existing sites located outside the Areas in order to save time, labour and money. Besides, many newer firms on Aycliffe's estate could only receive permission to locate there if they too could prove that they could make a contribution to the export drive or to defence: they were therefore just as sensitive to the effects of the trade cycle as the older basic industries in the region. At the same time, many of the firms persuaded by the government to establish factories at Aycliffe were either branches of larger firms or transfers to the area and were quick to curtail operations once

²⁵ RD/Ea/87 ERDC, Minutes 12 March 1947.

²⁶ L. Rodwin, *The British New Towns Policy*, p. 58.

²⁷ *Economic Survey for 1947*, Cmd 7048, p. 11.

²⁸ NT/Pe/3/1/307 Easington New Town Advisory Committee, Minutes, 17 Nov 1947.

the financial situation worsened. Between 1948 and 1958, 40 main factories and 168 branch factories were established in the North East Development Area as a whole, but only seven of the main factories closed compared to 40 of the branches.²⁹ It also quickly became apparent to potential occupiers of the old ordinance buildings that many were completely unsuitable for civilian manufacture. A large number were without office and toilet accommodation: more than half of the 1,000 buildings were condemned for this reason. Of the remaining buildings that could feasibly be converted for civilian use, many had to be structurally altered or rebuilt.³⁰

There was one compensation. The poor quality of the buildings was reflected in the lower rents charged by the Board of Trade: many companies that were considered too risky to qualify for government assistance were attracted to Aycliffe for this reason. This was counterbalanced by the fact that the inferior conditions on the site tended to attract disproportionately smaller units, with firms of fewer than 50 workers being the norm on the estate after 1945. Many of these experienced severe hardship during the financial difficulties of late 1947, and consequently nine businesses either folded or re-located their operations back to their original bases in the following three years. This was true of many of the government-directed textile firms that located to Aycliffe, that were primarily stop-gap solutions to problems of overfull order books after the war.

iii) Peterlee constrained: Aycliffe a 'Star in the north of England'

Despite these early setbacks, both Aycliffe and Peterlee Development Corporations expected that once the financial crises of 1947-49 had abated there would be renewed effort on the part of government to influence firms to relocate to their respective areas. Certainly, in its annual report of 1949, Peterlee Development Corporation expressed the

²⁹ DCRO EDU/6 NEDA, *An Inquiry into Means of Promoting Industrial Development in the North East* (Newcastle, 1960), p. 35.

³⁰ DCRO NT/AP/1/5/36 J. Sylph, *Aycliffe Trading Estate* (Newcastle, 1958).

hope that once its housing dispute with the NCB was settled, an early start would be made in attracting a few firms to the new town, preferably at the same time as the first houses were being built, so that its industrial and housing programmes could be coordinated.³¹

However, powerful forces militated against such a development, not least from government agencies. Perhaps the most telling influence on the corporation's industrial plans was the publication in 1950 of *The Plan for Coal*, the NCB's strategy for reconstructing the coal industry and halting its long-term decline. It proposed a balanced programme of capital development designed to 'increase output, improve productivity and reduce costs, by employing men and money where they [can] produce the best results'.³² The main objective was to reduce capital investment and manpower in areas where much of the best coal had been exhausted and prospects for large-scale developments were poor, such as in West Durham.³³ Instead, it planned to concentrate its main operations on areas where larger, more accessible reserves existed, such as in East Durham. The area's pits also produced special types of coal such as anthracites, dry steam, coking and gas coals, which were much in demand by domestic users and industry.³⁴ A major consequence was that the extra investment in the area's pits of an expected £34 million between 1950 and 1965, entailed not only a 23 per cent increase in the amount of coal expected to be produced (from 13 million tons to 16 million tons per year), but also the employment of most of the existing insured men in the district, and the attraction of a large number of additional recruits from outside the area, including many from West Durham.³⁵ In order to achieve its objectives, the NCB vigorously opposed the location of any firms in East Durham that competed with the mines for labour.³⁶

³¹ PDC, 1948 AR, p. 112.

³² NCB, *Plan for Coal*. (1950), p. 1.

³³ *North East Area Development Plan*, p. 2.

³⁴ *Ibid*, p.4.

³⁵ DCC, *Development Plan* (1951), p. 36.

³⁶ *Durham Chronicle*, 19 Aug 1949.

The NCB's plans corresponded fully with the government's aims of achieving full employment in the region. Industry was to be directed to persistent unemployment 'blackspots', such as Wearside, Hartlepool, which at 5.3 per cent had the highest unemployment rate in the region, and West Durham, where 21,000 mining jobs were expected to be lost during the following ten years, rather than to East Durham, which had the lowest male unemployment rate in the region; and where the dilemma was not to find employment for men but on the contrary, to find additional labour. It was therefore felt that the introduction of male-employing industries into Peterlee, in up-to-date factories offering good wages would inevitably attract men away from the mines with possibly disastrous consequences for coal production, even though, as the corporation argued, wages at any factory established at Peterlee would have been lower than in coal mining. When local officials and businessmen from Hartlepool also objected in 1949 about the introduction of alternative industry in East Durham, it seemed to add weight to the Coal Board's position. In a paper, 'The probable repercussions of industry in the Hartlepoons', supporters argued that Hartlepool's existing trading estate would be sufficient for the employment needs of East Durham.³⁷ Moreover, planners, such as Pepler and Macfarlane, also concurred with the NCB's objectives, that no appreciable volume of alternative industry should be deliberately introduced into East Durham:

In areas of stable mining where little diminution of employment is anticipated (particularly East Durham and Northumberland) male employment should be concentrated on mining, and other industry that would compete with mining for available labour should not be introduced. Hence, in the main, such industry should be restricted to female-employing concerns.³⁸

These reports were naturally a huge setback for Peterlee Development Corporation and its aims of making the new town the area's primary industrial centre. Of the corporation's principal objectives, the provision of industry was considered to be of the greatest

³⁷ DCRO NT/Pe/2/3/9 PDC, Summary of the Results of Social, Economic and Physical Surveys (1950), p. 24.

³⁸ *North East Area Development Plan*, p. 34.

significance. In its 1950 annual report, it argued that in view of the distinct possibilities of redundancies at the area's pits over the following 20 to 30 years because of future mechanical developments in the mines, it seemed only prudent to introduce alternative industries at an early date to prepare for this eventuality. It was also common knowledge that coal mining was subject to trade fluctuations and that with the exhaustion of the coal seams, recruitment to the mines would in time decrease.³⁹ The corporation also agreed with the White Paper's conclusions that an area that contained one single industry only was often liable to acute unemployment because its industrial structure was too narrowly based. The Coal Board's plans were also in complete violation of the Reith Report's recommendations which stated that if the new towns were to become socially balanced communities a variety of employment was needed on their industrial estates.⁴⁰

Also of much concern to both the corporation and district council was the fear of a resumption of the migration of many of the district's younger and most enterprising inhabitants, which A. V. Williams described as the 'most melancholy feature of the pre-war years in the area'.⁴¹ It was clear, however, that it was the district's women who suffered most from a lack of jobs in the area.⁴² It even seemed for a while, though, that the Board of Trade's attempts to attain full employment in the region would mean that female-employing jobs would be prevented from coming to the area, and instead, they would be directed to Hartlepool. The Board of Trade reasoned that, to comply with the full employment recommendations of the Distribution of Industry Acts, if an abundance of female-employing industry was located to Hartlepool's trading estates, the surplus of both that sub-region's and East Durham's insured female population could be accommodated at Hartlepool; the surplus of Hartlepool's male workers could then travel to Teesside's

³⁹ PDC, *Master Plan Report* (1952), p. 14.

⁴⁰ Reith Committee, *2nd Interim Report*, p. 8.

⁴¹ *Auckland Chronicle*, 6 Jan 1955.

⁴² Clarke, *Farewell Squalor*, p. 53.

burgeoning ICI plant, which required more than 15,000 additional workers.⁴³ The Board of Trade's strategy therefore negated the demand for male-employing industry in East Durham, as no surplus of male employees existed in the area, while also diminishing the need for female-employing industry in the area, as a profusion of job opportunities would be created for women at Hartlepool's new estates.

There were anomalies to the strategy, however. First, it was at variance with the White Paper's recommendations, which had specifically stated that whilst population location and the installation of new industry could be mutually beneficial and that a willing workforce could be located in areas suitable for new industry, the workforce ought not to have to travel excessively long journeys to their places of employment.⁴⁴ The Hartlepool trading estates, which along with Tyneside already contained the largest number of women in employment in the region,⁴⁵ were, in fact, more than twelve miles from some parts of East Durham, which was felt by many women to be too far to travel to work, especially considering the notoriously unreliable public transport system in the area. A 1948 survey discovered that less than 75 women in the district actually travelled to work in Hartlepool. In 1951, however, about 1,100 women in East Durham said that they would take up work if it were provided locally.⁴⁶ Furthermore, a corporation study in 1950 argued that an absence of jobs for females was a significant cause of poverty in the area:

The strong tradition that miners' wives do not go out to work seems to be a result of the lack of job opportunities rather than its cause. The county needs the work these women can do, and the district needs the wages they can earn. Underemployment of women was always a contributory cause of poverty in mining areas.⁴⁷

⁴³ DCRO DC/EDRU/1 NEDA, *The Northern Region*, p.26.

⁴⁴ *White Paper*, p. 20.

⁴⁵ DCRO DC/EDRU/1 NEDA, *The Northern Region*, p.9.

⁴⁶ DCRO NT/Pe/2/3/9 PDC, Summary of the Results of Social, Economic and Physical Surveys (1950), p. 10.

⁴⁷ *Ibid*, p. 12.

The protests led to a compromise between the corporation and the Board of Trade, whereby the corporation was allowed to plan for female-employing industry, and a limited amount of employment for males not involved with mining.⁴⁸

In many respects, Aycliffe's industrial plight was almost a mirror image of Peterlee's. The early 1950s were some of the most prosperous years in South-West Durham's history. The vice-chairman of Aycliffe Development Corporation, W. N. Davis, epitomised the burgeoning confidence in the area when in 1948, at the opening of Bakelite Ltd, a firm manufacturing plastic resin, he commented that the new town and its trading estate were going to be a 'star in the north of England'.⁴⁹ His prescience was not misplaced: during the early 1950s the new town was often held up by planners and politicians as an exemplar of what could be achieved in a previously run down area when resources were optimally directed and managed. In all, the 60 firms located to Aycliffe over the following five years, added more than 2,000 workers on the estate. In March 1952, Peter Thorneycroft, the President of the Board of Trade, reported to the House of Commons that apart from a 19,000 square feet unit, which had been allocated but not occupied, there was no factory space vacant on the trading estate.⁵⁰

Equally satisfying was the composition of the firms. At the time of the new town's designation it was anticipated that the bulk of the labour required would be for women in textile and related factories.⁵¹ In 1952 the opposite was true: more than two thirds of the workers employed on the estate were male, and the demand was for more and more male workers.⁵² Whilst in East Durham more than 87 per cent of males were still employed in coalmining during the early 1950s, in the south-western part of the county the corresponding figure was less than 41 per cent. In some respects, the new town actually

⁴⁸ PDC, *Peterlee Master Plan and Report* (1952), p. 9.

⁴⁹ *Northern Despatch*, 20 July 1948.

⁵⁰ *HC Debs*, 498, c. 88, 24 March 1952.

⁵¹ HLG/107/217 Sydenham to E. L. Elliot (TC/P), 6 Dec 1949.

⁵² North East Trading Estates, *Industrial Estates in the North East* (Newcastle, 1952), p. 6.

gained from the country's economic problems. Unlike at Peterlee there were no minerals of any value beneath the town or its trading estate, and therefore no analogous disputes with competing government agencies for workers in the area. As the Aycliffe site already possessed many sought-after premises, furthermore, the Board of Trade could direct export-producing firms to the area more easily than to other areas devoid of available factory space. By 1950 more than 3,500 jobs were created in South-West Durham, with more than 4,000 more approved by the Board of Trade and ready to be established in the area. Of equal importance to the district was the variety of the firms being attracted, which enabled it to be at the vanguard of modern, forward-thinking industrial production. By 1955 a large proportion of men in the area were working in the manufacturing of vehicles, aircraft production, electrical manufacture or engineering.

iv) Problems: Aycliffe's size, opposition to industry in Peterlee

Despite such optimism in South-West Durham there was one major problem which, if not promptly addressed, threatened to jeopardise Aycliffe's position as an industrial centre in the area, and even cast the future of the new town itself in doubt. This was the new town's 10,000-population target, agreed by Silkin and the district's local authorities in 1947.

As more and more industrial enterprises were attracted to the trading estate after 1949, it became increasingly apparent to the Ministry of Town and Country Planning and the corporation that the 10,000 population target figure was too low and, according to Grenfell Baines, the town's chief architect and planner, would most likely result in an 'enormous discrepancy between the number of workers required for the trading estate and those available'.⁵³ In December 1949 Sydenham claimed that he was becoming concerned that the growing number of male workers on the trading estate would necessitate an increase in

⁵³ ADC, *Master Plan Report* (December, 1948), p. 8.

Aycliffe's population to at least 13,500.⁵⁴ At the same time, the corporation complained that several firms on the trading estate were having difficulty in recruiting and retaining labour owing to a shortage in housing accommodation. In its 1950 annual report, the corporation was in no doubt that the ultimate population target had left it in a wholly invidious position with regards to the attraction of industry and employment:

There are doubts in our minds as to whether the plans we are making for building a town of 10,000 will not be largely abortive ... We are proceeding on our original terms of reference but are endeavouring to provide sufficient flexibility in our planning so as to enable any subsequent increase in size to be absorbed within the general pattern of our layout.⁵⁵

The North East Area Development Plan also explicitly stated that a population increase at Aycliffe was necessary in order that, as local pits closed and miners were made redundant, they could be re-settled in the new town where jobs in modern industrial premises would be provided. The plan's authors' reasoning was partly due to their realisation that the sub-region's mining areas were largely incapable of solving employment concerns. 'To make the mining villages in West Durham really habitable', they declared, 'would cost a great deal of money and would be a disservice to the inhabitants, as it would tend to anchor them where, either now or before long, they would have no prospect of earning their livelihood'.⁵⁶ They therefore recommended that due to the manpower shortage in some parts of the area, West Durham's surplus population should be required to move to other parts of the region where industrial prospects were brighter.⁵⁷ In addition, they suggested that the originally contemplated population of 10,000 at Aycliffe should be increased to 23,000 to provide for the prospective redundant mining population of South-West Durham, mostly from the Tow Law and Crook areas.⁵⁸ There were problems with this strategy though. In November 1949 an official from the

⁵⁴ HLG/107/217 Sydenham to Elliott, 20 Dec 1949.

⁵⁵ ADC, 1950 AR, p. 7.

⁵⁶ *North East Area Development Plan*, p. 62.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 63.

⁵⁸ NT/Ay/3/1/36 ADC, Newton Aycliffe Master Plan Correspondence (1950), pp. 62-63.

Ministry informed Sydenham of the NCB's unease about the awkward effect expansion at Aycliffe may have in hindering the ready transfer of miners to other coalfields.⁵⁹

Sydenham dismissed such concerns as a chimera, however, stating that at the very most the Ministry was contemplating housing some 400 miners in Aycliffe from the Shildon and Ferryhill pits. He did state, though, that the very existence of the trading estate at Aycliffe would attract redundant miners from South-West Durham; and that it was always intended that this should be the case, since the NCB could not possibly have given the majority of them employment anywhere else in the county in any case.⁶⁰

However, at the Newcastle meeting in July 1950, there was almost total unanimity among district council officials that the population target for the new town should not be increased. Darlington Development Corporation's main concern was that Aycliffe's trading estate, if allowed to grow, would exacerbate the district's already serious labour shortage by attracting workers from Darlington's factories at a time when it was desperately trying to attract and retain its own workers. Both Darlington and Sedgefield District Councils, moreover, questioned the validity of making Aycliffe the area's industrial centre: both were in agreement that the area may have been better served if industries were provided in other parts of South-West Durham in sufficient quantities to maintain the existing communities in the district. A further argument made by Darlington RDC was that as the majority of workers expected to be employed on the trading estate at Aycliffe were women, and so, therefore, not the main household breadwinners, it would largely diminish the necessity to increase the population target for the new town substantially, as the primary breadwinner in the household would be working elsewhere in the district.⁶¹ The outcome was that no agreement was reached between the local authorities and the Ministry,

⁵⁹ HLG/107/217 Waddell to Sydenham, 18 Nov 1949.

⁶⁰ HLG/107/217 Sydenham to Waddell, 23 Nov 1949.

⁶¹ DCRO DC/EDRU/15 NEDA, *The North East Coast: A Survey of Industrial Facilities* (Newcastle, 1949), p.128.

and so the corporation was instructed to continue working towards a population of 10,000 for Aycliffe.⁶²

Further developments during the early 1950s, however, dictated that the decision taken in July 1950 had to be reviewed, probably the most important of which was the worsening labour shortages on the town's trading estate. By 1952 as the new town rapidly approached its 10,000 population target, nearly all the firms on the estate were complaining of a lack of suitable labour, and difficulties in retaining what workers were available. At this time, South-West Durham experienced a far greater shortage of skilled and semi-skilled male workers than any other district in the region.⁶³ This was partly because despite a large number of skilled operatives being out of work in persistent unemployment blackspots, such as Wearside and Hartlepool, there was not at the time a coordinated approach at regional level to assist in their moving to areas such as South-West Durham. In 1954 the North East Development Association, in an apparent reversal of its own industrial policy since the war, which had emphasised the movement of employment to areas of high unemployment,⁶⁴ now claimed that concerted efforts to facilitate a greater amount of labour mobility in the region were necessary if the growth of new industry was to continue:

The salient fact which emerges from the consideration of labour supply and demand in the North East is that the region does not at present seem to be making the most of its employment opportunities. At a time when jobs in some parts of the region are relatively scarce, a number of industries in other parts of the region are unable to obtain the labour they require. Whilst the attraction and expansion of new industry must remain the main means of dealing with the region's unemployment problems, it is clear that this problem will not be completely solved without a greater degree of labour mobility within the area.⁶⁵

Also of much concern among the corporation and government officials was the fear that unless the housing situation was resolved quickly, trading estates and industrial sites in

⁶² DCRO NT/Ay/3/1/39 Min TC/P, Report on Newton Aycliffe Master Plan (May, 1950).

⁶³ E Allen, A. J. Odber, P. J. Bowden, *Development Area Policy in the North East of England* (Newcastle, 1957), p. 24.

⁶⁴ DCRO DC/EDRU/1 NEDA, *The Northern Region* (Newcastle, 1951), p. 23.

⁶⁵ DCRO DC/EDRU/3 NEDA, *The Northern Region* (Newcastle, 1954), p.23.

other parts of the region might lure South-West Durham's workers to their areas. It was common knowledge at the time that the new ICI plants at Wilton and Billingham were offering skilled workers attractive financial inducements to re-locate to Teesside. The problem was potentially so serious as to lead one commentator to claim in 1949 that 'if Aycliffe's trading estate has to compete with some equally grandiose developments already proposed in the North East which may have the advantage of a large pool of labour close at hand, Newton Aycliffe may be a ghost town 30 years hence'.⁶⁶

The area's planners were also finding that suitable places in which to locate industry in South-West Durham other than at Aycliffe were becoming virtually impossible to find.⁶⁷ The 1944 White Paper had maintained that 'there may be some small and isolated villages, especially in mining areas which, owing to permanent changes in industrial conditions, offer no hope of sound economic revival',⁶⁸ which implied that some labour movement within areas would be necessary, and that not every depressed village in a district could be assisted. The County Development Plan, moreover, claimed that it would be overly optimistic to hope that sufficient new employment would be attracted to Aycliffe's surrounding villages, and was unequivocal in its assessment that if major unemployment and hardship were to be avoided 'the movement of workers and their families to new centres of employment must be facilitated'.⁶⁹

However, despite the plan recommending that Aycliffe would act as a barrier to increased movement of population from the county, it stopped short of recommending that its population should be extended. The county planning officer intimated that following the county council's stance on the matter in 1950, an increase in Aycliffe's population was too

⁶⁶ *Manchester Guardian*, 3 May 1949.

⁶⁷ HLG/107/74 North East Development Plan: Correspondence with Planning Consultants (1951).

⁶⁸ *White Paper*, p. 13.

⁶⁹ DCC, *County Development Plan*, p.49.

delicate to discuss at that time, and it was 'quite impossible to reopen the question'.⁷⁰ In May 1953 the Ministry confirmed this when it ordered that the 10,000 target should remain in place.⁷¹

By 1955, however, it was increasingly apparent that government efforts to inject economic growth into West and South-West Durham by building factories only in areas of relatively high unemployment were largely insufficient to prevent future unemployment and outward migration. In January 1955 J. Saddler Forster, chairman of North East Trading Estates, appealed to South-West Durham's local authorities to leave no stones unturned towards assisting the growth of industry which had been attracted through the new town's prominent role in the sub-region.⁷²

The county council itself became more active in attracting new industry into the district after November 1955, when licences for building factories were abolished. An industrial bureau was established in the county planning department, and in consultation with the Board of Trade, the NCB and the area's local authorities, possible places in the district to locate incoming industry were explored. In November representatives from the county council visited five new towns in the south of England which were unable to accept all the industrial applications they received, in an attempt to persuade firms to relocate to County Durham. It became even more apparent from comments passed on to the council by the firms that did visit the area, however, that suitable sites on the more densely populated coalfield suitable for their purposes were virtually non-existent.⁷³ The county council's planning officer was forthright in his judgment that the older mining areas in the sub-region were entirely incompatible with the requirements of modern industry, and that only Aycliffe could meet incoming industrialists' needs:

⁷⁰ DCRO NT/Ay/1/1/7 Geenty to Thomas, 9 April 1951.

⁷¹ NT/Ay/1/1/16 ADC, BM, 7 May 1953.

⁷² *Evening Gazette*, 18 Jan 1955.

⁷³ *Evening Gazette*, 1 Nov 1955.

While there should be no relaxation of efforts to persuade industrialists into the coalfield areas ... the county council should give its particular attention to industrial development off the coalfield. The major obstacle is, of course, the labour supply. One area of the county has the labour but not the attractive sites; the other has the attractive sites but no labour. A natural flow of labour to the more attractive sites seems to be the only real solution.⁷⁴

He therefore recommended an increase of Aycliffe's proposed population to 15,000. He added that this increase would not necessarily be detrimental to other areas on the coalfield; industrialists could still move there if they wished. However, in the new strategy, Aycliffe would attract development which might otherwise not take place in the county.⁷⁵

By now, however, it was not only a lack of appropriate sites in the district influencing the council's changed attitude towards Aycliffe: national events were also having an impact. During the year, there was a marked deterioration in West Durham's employment situation. The contraction in coal mining in the sub-region, which led to 4,000 jobs being lost in 1956 alone, convinced the county council that drastic action was required to prevent further deterioration. In July 1957 the government concurred with the county council's decision that Newton Aycliffe should have an ultimate population of 15,000.⁷⁶

Although in East Durham the prospective size of the new town did not attract the intense opposition as in South-West Durham, nevertheless controversy over the locating of industry was very much evident. Along with the NCB, the county council and significant local officials in Easington were completely averse to Peterlee becoming the major industrial centre in the area. The problem stemmed from the fact that in 1946, prior to Peterlee's designation, the Board of Trade had earmarked two sites at Station Town and Thornley Crossings, to the south and west of the proposed new town as possible locations for light industries. The decision was held in abeyance, however, because of Peterlee's impending designation. The situation was exacerbated by the protracted dispute between

⁷⁴ NT/Ay/1/1/25 ADC, GMR, 25 Aug 1955.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ NT/AY/1/1/22 ADC, BM, 25 July 1957.

the corporation, and the Board of Trade and the NCB over the amount of industry (if any at all) that should be introduced into the new town. An additional problem was that the proposed industrial site at Peterlee was susceptible to subsidence and devoid of rail access, which effectively precluded the possibility of heavy industry being situated there. Because of these difficulties, the Pepler/MacFarlane Report and the county council recommended that the Station Town and Thornley Crossings industrial estates, with potential employment capacities of 1,000 and 2,000 respectively, should be established as the main industrial areas in Easington district, to absorb surplus labour in the area and accommodate light industries requiring rail access.⁷⁷ Despite the report's recommendations, however, and in spite of the fact that light industries had been established in other parts of the county after the war, the Board of Trade steadfastly refused to sanction industrial development anywhere in Easington district, with the result that no factory was established in the area between 1948 and 1950.

In May 1950 a conference was held at Wheatley Hill to discuss the area's lack of industrial opportunities. Peart was adamant that Peterlee was the principal cause of their difficulties:

Up to 1947, Easington Council was making every effort to get light industries, but now because of this change in policy the villages are being left behind. But whether Peterlee goes ahead or not the villages were first in the queue for industry. Why should we take second place to a town that hasn't even a house built?⁷⁸

There was also much disquiet about how the lack of industrial provision in the area was contributing to a resumption of outward migration. During the inter-war period, it was estimated that some six per cent of Easington district's population left the area. In addition,

⁷⁷ *North East Area Development Plan*, p.52; DCRO CC/A57/1/3 DCC, Planning Committee, 8 Jan 1950.

⁷⁸ *Durham Chronicle*, 26 May 1950.

69 per cent of the 130,000 migrants from the North East during the inter-war years were 30 years old or younger, large numbers of them citing a lack of job opportunities.⁷⁹

However, in August 1950 the district council received a letter from Shinwell stating that following discussions with Dalton, he did not hold any hope that factories would be established in Easington district in the near future. Dalton had suggested that employment opportunities being created at Dragonville, in Durham, should accommodate workers from the district. This was wholly unacceptable to Easington's councillors. One argued that already as many as 17 busloads of workers from the district already had to find work outside the area. Dalton's apparent insouciance regarding the plight of Easington's workers was also noted by Peart. He claimed that Dalton 'had looked after his own constituency of Bishop Auckland where there were 21 factories. Yet in Easington, the largest rural district in the country, not a single industry had been established'. Moreover, Peart had not forgotten a speech Dalton had made in November 1945, in which he claimed that 'the broad principle behind the government's policy is that we should take the work to the people and not the people to the work'.⁸⁰ At that time Dalton had warned of the 'danger of drawing labour away from areas where it was surplus through having too few trading estates'.⁸¹ And yet, according to Peart, the Peterlee proposals would undoubtedly have had the effect of increasing travel, in direct contradiction to Labour party policy.⁸²

At a further conference at Wheatley Hill, on 16 December 1950 the county planning officer stated that the county council would recommend that Peterlee should receive the bulk of industry in the area but, following the Pepler/Macfarlane recommendations, any industry requiring rail access could be accommodated at Thornley Crossings and Station

⁷⁹ R. Middleton, 'Unemployment in the North East during the inter-war period', in R. A. Chapman (ed), *Public Policy Studies: The North East of England* (Edinburgh, 1985), p.32.

⁸⁰ HLG/84/17 The New Towns Committee: Minutes, Papers and Report, 15 Nov 1945.

⁸¹ *HC Debs*, 414, c. 1054, 16 Oct 1945.

⁸² *NE*, 10 Oct 1949.

Town. In all, it was estimated that 3000 jobs could be created at the two sites. The 1951 County Development Plan further reinforced this change:

Two difficulties remain. It is not known whether the [Peterlee] site will be sufficiently stable to take buildings for large male-employing industries, and, in addition, it lacks rail access. It has therefore been felt wiser at this stage to provide sufficient land in the district outside of Peterlee to meet the industrial needs of the area.⁸³

This compromise, while welcomed by the district's councils, was not acceptable to the corporation. It claimed that the creation of job opportunities outside the designated area on such a scale would effectively negate Peterlee's primary functions. A further problem was that the town was intended to draw its labour from three surrounding labour exchanges, two of which were to the west of the town and very close to Station Town and Thornley, which meant that Peterlee would have to compete for its male labour with these two other sites.⁸⁴ This would obviously have placed the corporation in an invidious position in terms of its industrial remit.⁸⁵ A. V. Williams, in an address to Durham Architectural Society in 1955, summed up the problems:

In a declining coalfield, the movement of population towards new centres for living where new industry can be established is the major problem confronting the county of Durham. When one is looking to a generation ahead in the field of economic and social development the need to correlate the timing and siting of homes and work is paramount; the alternative is a dreary acceptance of long journeys to work or even worse, a surrender to the idea of migration.⁸⁶

A compromise was reached in 1952, largely through the interventions of successive Ministers of Housing and Local Government, whereby Peterlee would receive the bulk of new industry directed to the area, while Station Town and Thornley Crossings would be provided with a limited amount of industry. The new town's case was further enhanced in March 1954, when the Ministry requested the county council to delete the proposed industrial site at Thornley Crossings – which the corporation considered was just as

⁸³ HLG/107/74. North East Development Plan: Correspondence with Planning Consultants (1951).

⁸⁴ DCRO NT/Pe/3/1/309 PDC, Meeting with Durham County Planning Officer, 30 May 1951.

⁸⁵ *HC Debs*, 515, c. 1694, 16 May 1953.

⁸⁶ *Auckland Chronicle*, 6 Jan 1955.

unstable as the Peterlee site ⁸⁷ – from the County Development Plan altogether, ostensibly because the Ministry could not justify the loss of prime industrial land that would result from the site being given approval.⁸⁸

After six years of campaigning, it seemed to the corporation that at last the Board of Trade was taking Peterlee seriously as an industrial centre. ‘The new town has gone a long way towards fulfilling the bright hopes of its sponsors’, Williams remarked in December 1954, ‘no effort will be spared by the corporation to attract fresh industrial capital, and it is hoped that before the year ends more factory building will have commenced’.⁸⁹

Burgeoning confidence was further accentuated by two separate, but related, economic developments. The first was the Board of Trade’s abolition of its industrial building licence system in 1955. This effectively allowed firms to re-locate to where labour was available. In addition, it announced in September 1954 that, because of its success in dramatically ameliorating the unemployment situation at Sunderland and Hartlepool, both areas would cease to receive the preferential treatment that they had since 1948.

At Aycliffe, too, the mid-1950s were a time of much optimism. The town’s trading estate continued to grow, with more and more new firms established there, and existing companies expanding on a regular basis. The composition of the new firms also gave the corporation much cause for satisfaction. The numbers of people in chemical and electrical industries increased by over 40 per cent between 1948 and 1958, which reflected changes occurring in the North East region as a whole, so much so that NEDA described these industries as the region’s new basic industries.⁹⁰ In addition, between 1953 and 1958 the average earnings of male manual workers in manufacturing industry in the sub-region rose

⁸⁷ DCRO NT/Pe/3/1/311 Williams to G. L. Barber (Ministry of Local Government and Planning), 20 Aug 1951.

⁸⁸ RD/Ea/27 ERDC, Minutes, 25 March 1954.

⁸⁹ NDM, 31 Dec 1954.

⁹⁰ DCRO DC/EDRU/4 NEDA, *The Northern Region* (Newcastle, 1958), p. 10.

more rapidly than in the country as a whole. Following the government's support for the extension of the new town, in its annual report of 1958 the corporation declared that it:

always held the belief that the need to provide for the mobility of labour necessary to support the steady expansion of the industrial estate, and to reinforce capital invested from public funds in both the industrial estate and the new town, would eventually compel the growth of the town beyond the initial target population of 10,000.⁹¹

Moreover, even though the corporation continued to have no control over the quantity and composition of the firms locating to the trading estate, in 1955 it announced that the estate was second only to Team Valley in size, and that the numbers employed on the estate continued to increase year by year.⁹² The opening in 1956 of a new public highway costing over £200,000, linking the town with the industrial estate, also greatly enhanced Aycliffe's industrial prospects.⁹³ It seemed that with its population target anomalies behind it, and the trading estate continuing to flourish, the corporation could confidently plan for the coming decades, safe in the knowledge that Aycliffe's future as a major industrial centre in the region was assured. Williams, for one, was sure that with prospective firms wishing to relocate to the North East, the attractiveness of both County Durham new towns and the close proximity to employment of workers residing in the towns was the primary reason for the willingness of industrialists to locate in the region:

In both new towns there is already evidence to show that the prospecting industrialist discovers an inducement where his capital is reinforced by the capital already invested in housing, education and commerce, and that he readily accepts the arguments of the added profitability which accompanies the greater output reached by workers who are not exhausted by the travel to work.⁹⁴

But such optimism was short-lived: for both new towns the next few years were some of the most difficult in their short histories. The first major setback was that the national economy began to falter, due to inflationary pressures on the national economy and

⁹¹ ADC, 1958 AR, p. 4.

⁹² ADC, 1955 AR, p. 5.

⁹³ DCRO NT/AP/1/5/36 Sylph, *Aycliffe Industrial Estate*.

⁹⁴ *Auckland Chronicle*, 6 Jan 1955.

balance-of-payments problems.⁹⁵ As occurred in the inter-war period, deflationary policies implemented after 1955 disproportionately affected the region's economy, still heavily dependent as it was on its basic export-driven industries of mining, shipbuilding and heavy engineering. When capital restrictions were needed to curb inflation, furthermore, again the Development Areas were hit the hardest, as they relied the most on government assistance.

If Williams had anticipated that the Board of Trade's changed attitude to Peterlee signalled the onset of its industrial expansion, the national economy's slowdown ensured that he was mistaken. Three years expired before another firm became established in the new town.⁹⁶ The Board of Trade considered that the economic problems in the older, industrial areas of the county were more pressing; and also because it was satisfied with the amount of industry that existed in Peterlee already. In all, the two firms on the estate employed about 800 workers, of whom over 600 were teenage girls and young married women. This was roughly the number that the Board of Trade had originally planned for in 1950. It was noticeable, however, that, despite refusals to further prioritise Hartlepool for industry, it continued to grow as a centre for female employment. In 1956 with a figure of 30 per cent of the insured population it was the largest provider of female jobs in the entire region, whilst East Durham, with only 14.7 per cent of similar employment, was the smallest.⁹⁷

If the Board of Trade was content with this state of affairs, Peterlee Development Corporation was not. East Durham was one of only four districts in the whole of the region that actually had fewer workers in the mid-1950s than it had in 1939.⁹⁸ Williams was adamant that if the success of the new town was to be assured, it was essential that more

⁹⁵ DCRO EDU/6 NEDA, *An Inquiry*, p. 35.

⁹⁶ *HC Debs*, 546, c. 1257, 22 Nov 1955.

⁹⁷ DCRO DC/EDU/3 NEDA, *The Northern Region* (Newcastle, 1956), p.8.

⁹⁸ DCRO DC/EDU/3 NEDA, *The Northern Region* (Newcastle, 1954), p.8.

light industries similar to those already established in the town should be attracted.⁹⁹ He was also convinced that the NCB's assessment into prospective mining redundancies was overly optimistic, and that jobs for men would be urgently required in Peterlee to combat the worst effects of male unemployment.¹⁰⁰

Along with the downturn in the national economy, the other major cause of the region's difficulties was the sudden contraction in the coal industry after 1956, which was so unexpected that not even some of Europe's and the North East's most eminent political and economic analysts had anticipated it. In 1956 an official European Community report stated that there would be an ever-increasing demand for fuel and power and a continuing shortage of coal.¹⁰¹ A Development Area Policy document in 1957, moreover, suggested that although the coal industry would eventually experience a reduction in demand due to its vulnerability to the vagaries of world trade, as well as susceptibility to competition from other forms of energy, this would not occur for at least 20 years or so.¹⁰² At the same time, up to 1956, the coal mining industry in the North East reflected the NCB's view that there would be an ever-increasing demand for fuel and power, and a continuing shortage of coal. The Coal Board still held to its 1950 assessment that a maximum of 1,700 miners would be made redundant between 1958 and 1971.¹⁰³ In the medium-to-long term, therefore, the coal industry's future seemed assured.¹⁰⁴

This was not the way things transpired. Less than six years after the Development Area's report was published, the demand for coal had diminished to such an extent that by 1963 only 124 active collieries remained in the North East compared to more than 200

⁹⁹ PDC, 1956 AR, p. 327.

¹⁰⁰ DCRO NT/AP/1/5/32 A. V. Williams, *The Social and Economic Contribution of the North East New towns* (1954).

¹⁰¹ OEEC, *Europe's Growing Needs of Energy: How Can They Be Met?* (May 1956), p. 4.

¹⁰² Allen et al, *Development Area Policy*, p. 88.

¹⁰³ NCB, *Investing in Coal* (1956), pp. 8-12.

¹⁰⁴ P. J. Bowden, 'Problems and policies in the North East of England', in T. Wilson (ed.), *Papers on Regional Development* (Oxford, 1965), p. 20.

immediately before the war. The pit closure programme between 1958 and 1963 resulted in the loss of more than 40,000 mining jobs in the region, leading to unemployment in some parts of the North East reaching over ten per cent. In East Durham, a consequence of this was that in 1959 the NCB was forced to revise its redundancy projections for the area: the expected number of redundancies between 1958 and 1971 dramatically increased to nearly 4,000.¹⁰⁵

All this had major implications for Peterlee. In 1950, when the Coal Board opposed the introduction of male-employing industry to the new town, the corporation maintained that 4,950 jobs for males would be needed by 1971. In 1958, however, the whole discourse on employment in Peterlee had changed: the corporation now contended that a minimum of 7,680 jobs for males would be required by 1971, and 12,890 by 1980. In its 1958 annual report the corporation stated that unless the county's whole economy was to be jeopardised again 'new industries must be established to provide the alternative employment for the increasing number of mineworkers who will become redundant in the near future'.¹⁰⁶

In March 1958 Shinwell asked Sir David Eccles, the President of the Board of Trade, why it was that Peterlee had fewer industrial undertakings than any other new town in the country.¹⁰⁷ The action appeared to work because in September 1958, the Ministry finally granted permission for the corporation to build factories for let, financed by Treasury loans through the provision of the New Towns Act. For Williams, this was the semi-autonomous control for which the corporation had been striving for since its inception. On hearing of the news, he exclaimed: 'at last the corporation is master in its own house'.¹⁰⁸ And it was true that under the new arrangement, Peterlee's industrial estate would no longer be one of many in the North East controlled by the Board of Trade. Within weeks of the decision,

¹⁰⁵ NCB, *Revised Plan For Coal* (1959), p. 19.

¹⁰⁶ PDC, *1950 AR*, p.15.

¹⁰⁷ *HC Debs*, 601, c. 28, 12 March 1958.

¹⁰⁸ DCRO NT/Pe/3/1/311 PDC, Williams to Dobie, 11 Sept 1958.

moreover, the corporation had received an enquiry from a firm wishing to occupy a 70,000 square feet corporation-built factory to produce insulated building material¹⁰⁹ In November, Eccles went further when he stated in parliament that 'some further diversification of industry in the area would be welcome. I am therefore encouraging new industry to go to those parts of the North East which need it'.¹¹⁰

That said there were drawbacks to the scheme. Although the corporation would henceforth be able to build factories, it would still have only a limited ability to attract specific firms; and despite Reith's recommendation that corporations should be allowed to build factories in advance of specific lettings,¹¹¹ because of expenditure cuts which had seen North East Trading Estate's capital budget reduced to thirteen per cent of its 1947 expenditure, approval for advance factories was still withheld at Peterlee. Despite the government admitting in 1948 that 'firms responded better when aware that premises were or about to be under construction in which production could be started without delay',¹¹² firms wishing to locate to Peterlee would still have to accept long delays whilst their factory was being built. Furthermore, the loans for factory building arranged through the Treasury at prevailing high interest rates were expensive to the corporation, especially when compared with the comparatively low costs of industrial provision under the previous arrangements of having subsidised factories built for them by the Board of Trade's agents.

v) The Local Employment Act: not the solution

The corporation did have some cause for optimism when in 1960 the government passed the Local Employment Act, which allowed employment exchanges to be scheduled or de-scheduled according to the rate of employment in an area at any given time. This

¹⁰⁹ *SE*, 25 Sept 1958.

¹¹⁰ *HC Debs*, 596, c.77, 28 Nov 1958.

¹¹¹ Reith Committee, *2nd Interim Report*, p. 11.

¹¹² *1948 Distribution of Industry Act*, p. 17.

legislation effectively replaced the 1945 Distribution of Industry Act, and to all intents and purposes abandoned the Development Areas as targets of government assistance. The Act's central premise was to introduce greater flexibility into official government aid so that it could be switched quickly to places where it was most needed.¹¹³ In effect, therefore, it was no longer possible to speak of development policy as applying to the whole region, but rather to 'any locality in which a high rate of unemployment exists or is to be expected and is likely to persist'.¹¹⁴ Peterlee initially gained from the legislation because in 1961 the unemployment rate at Horden, within Peterlee's labour exchange area, reached more than 4.5 per cent, thus making the surrounding area eligible for special assistance. However, this advantage was short-lived. Colliery closures and economic recession throughout the North East during the ensuing months, resulted in the region's unemployment rate rising to its highest level since the fuel crisis of 1947, and brought development district status to almost every employment exchange area in the region, thus negating any benefit Peterlee had accrued from the legislation.

Yet, when it seemed as if the economic situation in the area could not get much worse, in June 1962 the NCB announced the imminent closure of Wingate Colliery, three miles south west of Peterlee, with the loss of nearly a thousand jobs (over 90 per cent of male jobs in the village). Wingate was not alone, moreover: since the war coal mining had declined to such an extent that less than 14 per cent of the region's insured population was working in the mines compared to over 21 per cent in 1939. It was thus clear to many local officials that immediate action was needed to avoid a social catastrophe on the scale of the inter-war years. Shinwell, when addressing the district council in August 1962, suggested that a programme of public works and housing schemes could relieve some unemployment

¹¹³ *Midland Bank Review* (May 1964), p. 5.

¹¹⁴ DCRO DC/EDRU/5 NEDA, *The Northern Region* (Newcastle, 1961), p. 5.

in the district, but it was obvious to many of the councillors present that more substantive action was needed, including a meeting with representatives of the Board of Trade:

In view of the serious unemployment situation in the district, the Board of Trade be requested to receive a deputation from the council at the earliest possible date to discuss the fact that, despite the Board's powers under the Local Employment Act, there has been a complete failure to attract new industries into the area, and to fully consider what possible action could be taken to attract any form of industry into the district particularly of a type which could offer employment for redundant miners and juveniles.¹¹⁵

Despite this, by the end of 1962 only four factories, employing 1,093 workers in total, of which only 290 were men, were sited within Peterlee's designated area.¹¹⁶ At the same time, unemployment in the area continued to rise, reaching eleven per cent in November 1962.

In Aycliffe after years of sustained progress, the late 1950s were also a period of industrial uncertainty. In 1955 the Board of Trade's regional controller informed the House of Commons Select Committee on Estimates that there was to be less development of Aycliffe's trading estate, principally because it was considered that unemployment had been combated in South-West Durham. Instead, West Durham was to be prioritised, where a rapid closure of pits had led to excessively high pockets of unemployment, despite the area being relatively remote and less attractive for industrial purposes than South-West Durham. Moreover, the national credit squeeze during the mid-1950s, along with the Board of Trade's refusal to provide new factories on Aycliffe's trading estate, had the effect of slowing down industrial expansion at the new town. It was unfortunate that this development occurred just at the time when a number of factories were closing on the estate.

In some ways, Aycliffe's emergence as major industrial centre during the early 1950s had been an illusion. Despite the establishment of firms such as Bakelite, which employed

¹¹⁵ RD/Ea/33 ERDC, Minutes, 28 Aug 1962.

¹¹⁶ PDC, 1962 AR, p. 324.

more than 2,000 workers, the majority of business concerns on the trading estate were much smaller firms employing less than 50. The decline in the textile industry from 1953 was acutely felt at Aycliffe. A number were branches of firms based outside the region (most of them from Yorkshire), and were quick to shut down their operations during the mid-1950s financial difficulties.¹¹⁷ In all, of the twelve branch factories attached to the textile industry at Aycliffe after 1948, ten had ceased to operate by 1956. At the same time, the government began to target certain areas in an attempt to make economies in its expenditure. The Development Areas in particular were viewed by the Treasury as being unreasonably wasteful and an unnecessary drain on the national economy. Loans to government-funded agencies were temporarily halted which, at Aycliffe, had the result of arresting the trading estate's expansion, dependent as it was on Board of Trade initiatives.

In 1956 the corporation attempted to remedy its position, principally through a request to the Board of Trade that it should be granted the power to acquire land adjoining the trading estate in order to 'prevent the slowing down of industrial expansion'. As well as being in accord with the county council's policy of encouraging maximum expansion of both industry and housing at Aycliffe, it would also have permitted the corporation some control over its industrial objectives.¹¹⁸ In March Williams was unambiguous in his assessment that the situation at Aycliffe was due in no small way to the corporation's lack of control of the trading estate and the Board of Trade's reluctance to pursue a coherent industrial programme in the new town:

It is the responsibility, of course, of North East Trading Estates to provide industry at Aycliffe, but the hesitation of the Board of Trade in financing the provision of new factories on the trading estate has restricted the growth of industry at Aycliffe and adversely affected the county council's policy of encouraging a natural flow of labour from the redundant coalfields to Aycliffe, one of the few points in the county where inter-related industrial and housing expansion are taking place. To offset any diminution of industrial expansion caused by any change in the Board of Trade's

¹¹⁷ DCRO ED RU/6 NEDA, *An Inquiry*, p. 11.

¹¹⁸ ADC, 1956 AR, p. 6.

policy, the corporation suggests that it should be given the power to acquire from the BoT land on the trading estate and develop it for industrial purposes.¹¹⁹

The request was rejected, however, after protests from Board of Trade officials, who were unwilling to relinquish one of its most prized assets in the region, especially if it meant that thereafter the new town would be under the aegis of another government-controlled body – the Ministry of Housing and Local Government.

Furthermore, despite rising unemployment in the area, which had had almost quadrupled from 1.6 per cent in 1957 to 4.6 per cent in 1959, due largely to the slump in the coal industry after 1957, the Conservative government remained reluctant to prioritise Aycliffe as the district's major industrial centre. In February 1959 the prospect of further industrial development in the new town was discussed in Parliament, when Sedgefield MP, Joseph Slater, asked Eccles about the possibility of establishing new factories on the estate to help provide alternative employment for an increasing number of mineworkers being made redundant, and to rejuvenate the sub-region's industrial situation in general.¹²⁰

Members of Aycliffe Trader's Association were perturbed to discover, however, that Aycliffe was not one of the places marked down for expansion under the 1960 Local Employment measures. The secretary of the Association told a meeting of Darlington and District Employment Committee in February 1960 that the inference was that any money available would go to the likes of Bishop Auckland or Shildon.¹²¹ The Association's fears appeared to be confirmed in 1961, when a Ministry of Housing and Local Government official, in an almost complete reversal of government policy during the preceding ten years, stated that 'it is more important that as much effort be put into making South-West Durham attractive rather than only making Newton Aycliffe attractive'.¹²²

¹¹⁹ NT/Ay/1/1/21 ADC, BM, 12 April 1956.

¹²⁰ *HC Debs*, 601, c. 1442, 30 Feb 1959.

¹²¹ *Evening Gazette* 17 Feb 1960.

¹²² Bowden, 'Newton Aycliffe', p. 180.

Furthermore, the administrative de-scheduling of the more prosperous parts of the Development Areas, which was given legislative force by the 1960 Act, empowered the Board Of Trade to list any localities with a high or potentially high level of unemployment as development districts. As Aycliffe was not considered sufficiently disadvantaged at this time, the Board of Trade argued (fallaciously according to the corporation),¹²³ that the growth of industry on Aycliffe's trading estate would result only in the attraction of labour from other areas, which was a situation that was incompatible with the Local Employment legislation. Instead aid and resources were directed to West Durham, which persistently had a much worse record of unemployment than South-West Durham. However, as McCrone claimed, the 1960 Act's emphasis on the unemployment percentage of a local employment exchange area meant that the worst areas (such as West Durham) were often the ones with the least chance of development, yet these were given the greatest priority.¹²⁴

vi) The towns cannot escape their pasts

In industrial terms, Peterlee was always destined to be the poor relation to Aycliffe. The latter's proximity to the region's major arterial road A1(M), the fact that there were no mineral deposits beneath the town and the ready availability of industrial space courtesy of the ROF buildings, ensured that it was an optimal location for prospective firms following the war.

Peterlee had very little to offer in comparison. The roads leading to and from Easington district were in a very poor condition, which made transporting goods very difficult. More importantly, the designation area lay above millions of tons of high-quality coal – a much valued commodity following the war, not least to assist in Britain's export drive. The

¹²³ See for example DCRO NT/Ay/1/1/23 Williams to Ministry of Housing and Local Government, 5 Feb 1963.

¹²⁴ McCrone, *Regional Policy*, p. 125.

importance of coal in the area, in fact, affected all attempts to attract industry to Peterlee and, by 1963, less than 1,500 workers were employed in the town.

As the 1950s progressed, however, Aycliffe's extremely impressive industrial record was somewhat tainted by the government's unwillingness to direct industry to the town and local authority intransigence in opposing attempts to allow its population to grow beyond the target figure agreed in 1946. This had serious consequences for the corporation. The resultant shortage of manpower on the trading estate seriously retarded attempts to establish Aycliffe as the central point for industry in the sub-region. Part 2 of the study will show how both towns' early industrial fortunes and the reasons for their problems affected the industrial trajectories of both towns right up to the dissolutions of the corporations in 1988.

Housing in Aycliffe and Peterlee, 1947-63

This chapter investigates housing developments in Aycliffe and Peterlee between 1947 and 1963. Part one examines the post-war national housing framework in which the corporations had to develop their housing programmes. The second part shows how, immediately following the war, labour and building material shortages in Aycliffe and the ongoing dispute with the National Coal Board in Peterlee prevented both corporations from initially carrying out their house-building functions. Only an innovative method of constructing houses in Aycliffe and compromises between the corporation and various interested bodies in the Peterlee area ensured that building took place at all in the towns. Part three analyses how the national economic situation, as well as the shifting preferences of the corporations, helped to shape the design of the new towns' houses and flats as well as delineate the aesthetic construction of both towns. Part four will examine how rent policies implemented by the corporations determined the sorts of people who could afford to live in the towns, and how this affected the government's aim of creating socially balanced communities. The final part of the chapter considers both corporations' attempts to create new communities that most closely resembled those of older towns.

i) National post-war housing developments

'For the first time in history', Bevan stated in January 1946, 'an attempt is being made to make housing a first priority in a time of scarcity'.¹ Following the war, however, labour and materials were in short supply. The Labour government thus faced a major dilemma: an alarming decrease and deterioration in the country's housing stock with scarce building supplies to help remedy it, coupled with a population growth of about a million since the First World War. The government estimated that 750,000 new dwellings would need to be built to provide separate accommodation

¹ *SE*, 15 Jan 1946.

for all the households who required it.² Following the war, moreover, people's expectations were much higher. Full employment engendered a determination among the working population that it was not prepared to accept the kind of housing conditions that had prevailed before the war.³

In order to encourage local authorities and new town development corporations to build to a high standard on a large scale, the government's 1949 Housing Act trebled the value of subsidies compared to 1939.⁴ Upon taking power in 1951, the Conservative government raised the standard rate of subsidy from the £16.10 per annum fixed by the Labour government, to £26.10 as a means to stimulate an even higher level of production. It appeared to work because in the first three months of 1952, 53,609 houses were completed – a 22 per cent rise on the first three months of the previous year.⁵

However, cuts to housing subsidies after 1955, were clearly designed to encourage local councils and new towns to build for the less well off; private developers were left to cater for general housing needs.⁶ It was clear, therefore, that henceforth subsidised public housing aimed at the better off workers who were more able to pay full economic rents would not be tolerated.⁷ In the more prosperous new towns, which contained an inordinate number of such workers, the effect was to dramatically increase the rents of corporation-built houses for many families. These measures had a disproportionately damaging effect in both Aycliffe and Peterlee, where relatively low wages on the towns' industrial estates were the norm.⁸ The overall effect was hardship for many households in both towns.

² M. Foot, *Aneurin Bevan 1945-1960* (1975), p. 64.

³ Morgan, *The People's Peace*, p. 6.

⁴ N. McCrae, *A Nation of Council Tenantry?* (1958), p. 1.

⁵ *Sunday Times*, 4 May 1952.

⁶ The Co-operative Society, *Housing: A Co-operative Approach* (1959), p. 12.

⁷ P. Weiler, 'The Conservatives' search for a middle way in housing, 1951-64', *20th Century British History*, 14 (2003), p. 360.

⁸ ADC, *1951 AR*, p. 9.

ii) Post-war housing difficulties

As soon as Aycliffe Development Corporation was formed in July 1947, Silkin declared that an early start to its house-building programme was essential to meet the demand from workers on the trading estate. The only matter for debate was whether a number of key workers should be catered for as soon as possible via the rapid erection of aluminium houses, or that a more circumspect approach should be adopted, whereby houses built in the traditional manner should be erected.⁹ The latter approach fitted into the corporation's designs for a village-green style of housing development and would have set the aesthetic tone for the town: it would also have avoided the problematic demolition of the aluminium houses at a later date.¹⁰ Ultimately, however, the retention of scarce key workers was the corporation's main priority and time was of an essence. Already in 1947 many workers on the estate were beginning to seek employment in other areas where they could be guaranteed a house. It was for this reason that the corporation sent an application to the Ministry for permission to erect a number of aluminium houses in the Clarence Farm area of the town.

In October 1947 the corporation was allocated 41 such houses which, in the event, was a sizeable quantity and a testament to the urgency of Aycliffe's housing needs, considering that the Ministry had only allocated 64 aluminium houses to all of Britain's new towns combined. However, procuring its quota of houses turned out to be the easy part of the corporation's initial undertakings: its biggest dilemma was finding a workforce to erect the houses – not a straightforward task when craftsmen of all types were in short supply. In 1946 the Reith Committee had warned that whilst there might be the nucleus of some building labour available in an area, there was rarely such a surplus as to be of material help in a rapid large-scale housing project needed in the creation of a new town.¹¹ Nevertheless, the corporation was given

⁹ ADC, 1948 AR, p. 11.

¹⁰ NT/Ay/1/1/1 ADC, BM, 1 Aug 1947.

¹¹ Reith Committee, *Interim Report*, p. 7.

assurances by the Ministry of Health that up to 1,000 men from employment exchanges in South-West Durham would be made available, and that once building work was commenced, it would not suffer from a lack of building materials.¹² Although this was very welcome news to the corporation, in Aycliffe's neighbouring districts the Ministry's assurances were greeted with less cheer. Building projects in the region were almost brought to a standstill during 1947 and early 1948, due to an acute shortage of cement, to the extent that the Ministry of Health in Newcastle was forced to allocate a certain number of tons for each contract. In Shildon, a chronic lack of building supplies, especially roofing tiles and cement, had led to complaints that existing housing projects in the town were unable to be completed.¹³ Also, Darlington RDC protested that it was finding it extremely difficult to attract the services of skilled labour in sufficient numbers to complete its existing allocation of 250 houses: the building of a whole new town of 10,000 people with the amount of labour and materials associated with such an undertaking could only have exacerbated an already critical situation. As a result, Aycliffe was only able to obtain a quarter of the men and building materials that it had been guaranteed by the Ministry.¹⁴

The corporation was therefore forced to sanction the importation of labour with the concomitant expense of travelling and subsistence allowances which, along with a steep rise in the price of building materials, increased its estimated building costs threefold. Despite attractive inducements, however, only a fraction of the men needed for the initial contracts applied. In 1949 the corporation conceded that 'the labour problem is so acute that we now realise that if we are to complete the task within the time we have set ourselves we will have to take action, possibly by housing workpeople on or near the site'.¹⁵ It was even prepared to offer a house to anyone who was willing to build a 'home for their neighbour'.¹⁶ But still only a small number of the workers

¹² NA CAB/124/880 Town and Country Planning: Development of New Towns, 1 Feb 1947.

¹³ DCRO UD/Sh/31 Shildon UDC, Minutes, 3 May 1948.

¹⁴ NT/Ay/1/1/1 ADC, BM, 1 Nov 1948.

¹⁵ *NE*, 27 Oct 1949.

¹⁶ *Daily Mail*, 8 Feb 1950.

required for the first contracts applied; and these were not of a sufficiently high standard to increase output considerably.¹⁷

If Beveridge thought that the situation could not get any worse, he was mistaken. The corporation was further exasperated during the next year when an unusually bad winter, together with housing contractors displaying extreme lethargy in executing contracts awarded to them, combined to ensure that only 99 of the 511 houses allocated to the corporation were completed, which meant nearly £9,000 in lost rents.¹⁸ For Beveridge, it was a sad indictment of building operations in Britain during the post-war years:

What we are learning is that much more goes into the making of a town than just an idea ... but it is an awful business putting ideas into practice in post-war Britain. I wish we could get back into the way of doing things as quickly as possible instead of as slowly as possible.¹⁹

It was in light of these troublesome circumstances that the corporation announced in May 1951 that its direct labour department, which had previously been employed merely in an ancillary capacity, would henceforth have responsibility for house-building. The Reith Committee had provisionally encouraged the establishment of a works department in the new towns, but only for a part of building works. Major construction work was still expected to be performed by contract builders.²⁰ This was certainly normal practice for the majority of local authorities before the war: less than ten per cent employed a direct labour department for major construction works.²¹ The hope at Aycliffe, however, was that an attractive bonus scheme, combined with continuity of work, would ensure that a better standard of craftsman was attracted and so be able to compete with private contractors. In addition, building by direct labour would mean a saving in cost

¹⁷ NT/Ay/1/1/2 ADC, BM, 2 May 1949.

¹⁸ ADC, 1951 AR, p. 9.

¹⁹ *Darlington and Stockton Times*, 30 April 1949.

²⁰ The Reith Committee, *Final Report*, p. 60.

²¹ DCRO NT/Pe/3/1/109 Report on the Question of Setting Up A Direct Labour Organisation in the New Towns, 30 Oct 1948.

roughly equivalent to the amount of profit that a private contractor might be expected to obtain in completing projects.²²



Fig. 6: Flats constructed in Aycliffe by the corporation's direct labour dept.

Even so, the corporation could not have anticipated the remarkable impact it would have on housing development in the town. Within weeks the department was successful in obtaining four contracts for the erection of 224 houses in the Woodham Burn area; and within a year almost 45 per cent of building work was by direct labour, which prompted the corporation in 1952 to make an application to the Ministry to expand the department to 500 workers.²³ Furthermore, it began to attract favourable notices throughout the country. G. S. Lingren, the Minister of Town and Country Planning's parliamentary secretary, following a visit to the new town in September 1951, remarked that he had been extremely impressed by the department's 'quality of workmanship and progress', and how direct labour contracts had been 'completed much quicker and at no extra cost than if carried out by a private contractor'.²⁴ Over the next three-to-four years, because of its success, the corporation continued to build at a far more prolific rate, and in 1954 it even

²² Ibid.

²³ NT/Ay/1/1/7 ADC, BM, 21 Feb 1952.

²⁴ *Evening Gazette*, 19 Sept 1951.

exceeded its housing target by 90 dwellings. In 1955 the corporation built its two thousandth house less than two years after building its one thousandth.



Fig. 7: Beveridge presenting a house key at Aycliffe in 1951.

In Peterlee, early attempts at providing houses were far less successful. Although both new towns were designated within months of each other, by September 1950 not a single brick had been laid in Peterlee.²⁵ Labour party politicians in Haswell even began to canvass residents, tired of waiting to be re-housed in the new town, whether or not they were in favour of Peterlee still being built, or if houses ought to be built in its surrounding villages.²⁶ One Haswell man, who was living in a 200-year old tumbledown house claimed: 'Peterlee is a grand idea, but if it's a choice between Peterlee and new houses quickly, I'd say, lets have the new houses'.²⁷ Councillor Purcell

²⁵ *NE*, 23 Sept 1949.

²⁶ *NE*, 5 April 1950.

²⁷ *NE*, 3 April 1950.

from the district council was more forthright about the urgency of rapid construction in the district:

We of the district council are in the position of being faced with one of the worst housing situations in the country. In the past twelve months, we had 1,000 young people married while only 150 houses were built. It does not need me to explain the tension that exists as to how our housing problems can be solved.²⁸

Unexpectedly, however, three developments occurred at roughly the same time, which finally provided some hope that a start could be made.

The first was the resignation of Lubetkin in October 1950. He was undoubtedly one of the foremost architects of his day, and his grandiose designs for the new town included many innovations hitherto unheard of in the North East, which would have made Peterlee an aesthetically unique place to live. Lubetkin's problem, however, was that the austere post-war conditions, compounded by the national financial crises of 1947-48, virtually rendered many of his schemes untenable. Despite the pressing need in East Durham to provide coal to aid the nation's export drive, Lubetkin steadfastly refused to accept that his plans would have to be compromised in any way, which unquestionably contributed to the impasse between the corporation and the NCB between 1948 and 1950. His resignation in late 1950, therefore, removed a major obstacle to the re-opening of negotiations between the two bodies. To cement their new found friendly relations, over the next few years, when naming streets in the town, the corporation went to great lengths to ensure that many of them were named after outstanding leaders of the mining movement. Robson Avenue, on the Eden Hill estate, was named after John Robson, who served as president of Durham Miners' Association after the First World War, while Burt Close was named after Thomas Burt, the Northumberland Miners' secretary for nearly 50 years and one of the first miners' MPs.²⁹

²⁸ *Durham Chronicle*, 26 May 1950.

²⁹ D. Temple, *Above and Below the Limestone: The Pits and People of Easington District* (Newcastle, 1998), p. 33.

The corporation had further reason for optimism in late 1950 when the NCB tentatively agreed to some of the corporation's demands over the amount of coal to be sterilised. The Coal Board agreed to work to the 'two-seam' rule in the area to the east of the proposed town centre and would endeavour to accelerate the programme of extraction, which would allow the corporation to begin its building operations immediately.³⁰ In return, the corporation consented to refrain from interfering with the NCB's activities in that area. It also agreed to provide structural precautions in the areas it was developing, including the erection of houses in pairs on strongly reinforced concrete foundations to lessen the risk of subsidence.³¹

There was one other development in late 1950, which offered some hope within the district that houses would be built soon: a campaign by Easington RDC to get government aid to relieve East Durham's housing distress. Since Peterlee's designation in 1948 the town's nearby villages had been allocated a mere 96 houses per year, a number far short of what C. W. Clarke had declared was needed in a district with one of Britain's worst housing problems. The council was also well aware that Sir Stafford Cripps had stated that the government's aim was to permit local authorities throughout the country to build 200,000 houses a year which, according to one local councillor, meant that East Durham should have been allocated at least 400 houses.

For its part, the corporation was anxious that the council's campaign to get houses built in the district should be encouraged – but in Peterlee rather than in nearby villages. It argued that while the council was justified in its protests, building outside the designated area would have the effect of seriously jeopardising the whole new town project:

The target of 500 houses per annum has been decided upon as the least figure which will effectively deal with the housing shortage in the area. Delay in the matter will encourage building in the surrounding villages and dissipate the resources which are imperative to the success of the project.³²

³⁰ PDC, 1951 AR, p. 225.

³¹ NA POWE/37/193 Ministry of Works, Report on Peterlee's Development (1950).

³² PDC, *Peterlee Master Plan and Report*, p. 20.

The appeal appeared to work because in May 1950, the Ministry finally gave permission for house building to proceed in the south-eastern section of the new town. On 23 September 1950 Hugh Dalton laid the first brick in Peterlee; and whilst no one on the corporation believed that the ceremony which accompanied it would signal the end of its troubles, there was a hope that as a symbolic gesture it would lay the foundations in the public mind as well as on the ground.

Fig. 8: Peterlee's first brick.

Once building operations were commenced, one of the primary concerns was to minimise the effects of subsidence. In order to countenance this very real hazard in a dynamic mining area, buildings were erected upon a 'concrete raft', anything from six to twelve inches in thickness, the object of which was to prevent damage from horizontal movements of the ground which could occur with subsidence. 'The effect of subsidence now will be rather like a ripple of water underneath a raft at sea', the corporation's chief engineer confidently claimed, 'the house mounted on its raft or rafts will ride the subsidence in the same way'.³³ They were so effective that despite concerns from some experts that even such considerable preventative measures would still be insufficient to guard against subsidence, up until 1958, of 2,800 houses completed, only 28 had been affected by minor subsidence with total costs of a mere £450.³⁴ In view of the complexity of surface development on an active coalfield, the corporation, perhaps justifiably,

considered that such a small amount of damage spoke highly of the effectiveness of its initial safeguards.³⁵



Fig. 9: Early Peterlee houses built in pairs to reduce the risks from subsidence.

By the mid-1950s, although the earlier uncertainties about housing still caused resentment within Easington district, to a large extent the idea of housing in Peterlee was beginning to appear a far more attractive proposition. In one respect, the delays in getting started on its housing programme worked to Peterlee's benefit. In contrast to Aycliffe, the corporation avoided commencing its house-building programme amid the national economic crisis of 1947-48; there would almost certainly have been less labour and materials available to build houses within the new town if construction had started earlier.

However, there was one negative aspect to the delay. At the May 1951 general election the Labour government was replaced by the Conservatives, which were considerably less committed to the new town programme. Although the Conservative party came to power pledging to build 100,000 more houses per year than Labour, it envisaged that the bulk of them would be provided in existing towns rather than in new towns. Also, in order to effect this it was clear that economies

³⁵ PDC, 1958 AR, p. 315.

would have to be made, which inevitably meant that housing design and standards would suffer. In what became known as 'people's houses', the size of newly-built houses were restricted to no more than 900 square feet for a three-bedroom house and limited to the bare essentials in amenities in order that the highest possible numbers of houses built with limited building resources could be achieved. It did mean a saving of around £159 per house, however, which meant that ten houses could be built instead of nine previously.³⁶

In Peterlee, the Ministry was perturbed by the high cost of construction at Thorntree Gill, which it considered was appreciably above the average for the area.³⁷ The corporation's preferment for one-sided development along the southern road of the estate was also questioned: the Ministry claimed double-development appeared to be a more economical method of building, as more houses could ultimately be built with only a slight increase in overall costs. The corporation argued, however, that it would be impossible to provide two-sided development on the estate, as there was a ten-foot difference in levels between one side of the road and the other. Also, work on roads and sewers were so far advanced that it would have been extremely difficult and expensive to add new houses to the existing street. In the end, the Ministry agreed that the estate could remain with the number of houses first envisaged in 1950, but that future developments should accord with the government's housing strategy.³⁸

The corporation was further disturbed in January 1952 when the government announced that it wanted local authorities to take a more active role in the house-building drive, principally by implementing their own programmes. A letter to this effect from the Minister of Housing, Harold Macmillan, was sent to all district councils in the country, including Easington.³⁹ Perhaps understandably, Easington RDC took this as a signal that it could resume its own housing programme. It contended that Peterlee's future housing programme was bound to be fragmentary

³⁶ Schaffer, *The New Town Story*, p. 103.

³⁷ *NDM*, 22 July 1950.

³⁸ NT/Pe/1/1/1 PDC, BM, 13 March 1950.

³⁹ RD/Ea/28 ERDC, Minutes, 31 Jan 1952.

due to the NCB's coal extraction programme. In the meantime, it argued, there was an urgent need to build houses in the district.

However, in February 1952, W. Geenty, the county council's planning officer, explained that any decision that Easington may take regarding housing must have Durham County Council approval. Also, that apart from a small allocation of houses in villages not in close proximity to Peterlee, there should be no appreciable building by the district. On the other hand, he did suggest that if the corporation was in agreement, the council could build within Peterlee's designated area in order to relieve some of the housing distress. Such an invitation was utterly intolerable to the corporation, however. In a sharp rebuke to Geenty, Williams questioned 'What useful purpose would be served by the council building in the new town? It cannot build there any cheaper'.⁴⁰ He pointed out that the proposition would only add to the difficulties of labour availability as well as result in a differential in rents between the two bodies. Besides, despite its earlier housing problems, the corporation contended that it could maintain a vigorous rate of building in the town, and so provide sufficient housing stock to satisfy the district's need. To a large extent, Williams was correct. In its peak year of 1954 the corporation built 604 houses – 104 more than its target, and as figure 10 shows more than 100 more than Aycliffe Development Corporation. As was the case with Aycliffe, it appeared as though Peterlee would be able to achieve its target population well within the time it had set itself.

However, the confidence that had been generated within both new towns was to dissipate somewhat after 1955, largely as a result of the Treasury's restrictions on capital expenditure which, in Aycliffe, were manifested in a 38 per cent reduction in house construction for 1956. A consequence of this was that the number of houses built during the year fell by 66 per cent compared to the previous two years.⁴¹ This was particularly unfortunate because, as Figure 10 illustrates, as well as being forced to postpone new schemes, the Treasury's request occurred just

⁴⁰ NT/Pe/3/1/336 PDC, BM, 4 June 1953.

⁴¹ NT/Ay/1/1/19 ADC, BM, 22 March 1956.

when the Ministry granted permission for an increase Aycliffe's population target.⁴² In 1956 the corporation claimed that its restricted house-building programme was 'hardly sufficient to meet the present demand for housing accommodation from those employed on the trading estate and other industries servicing the estate and the new town'.⁴³

Housing Completions 1948-1963

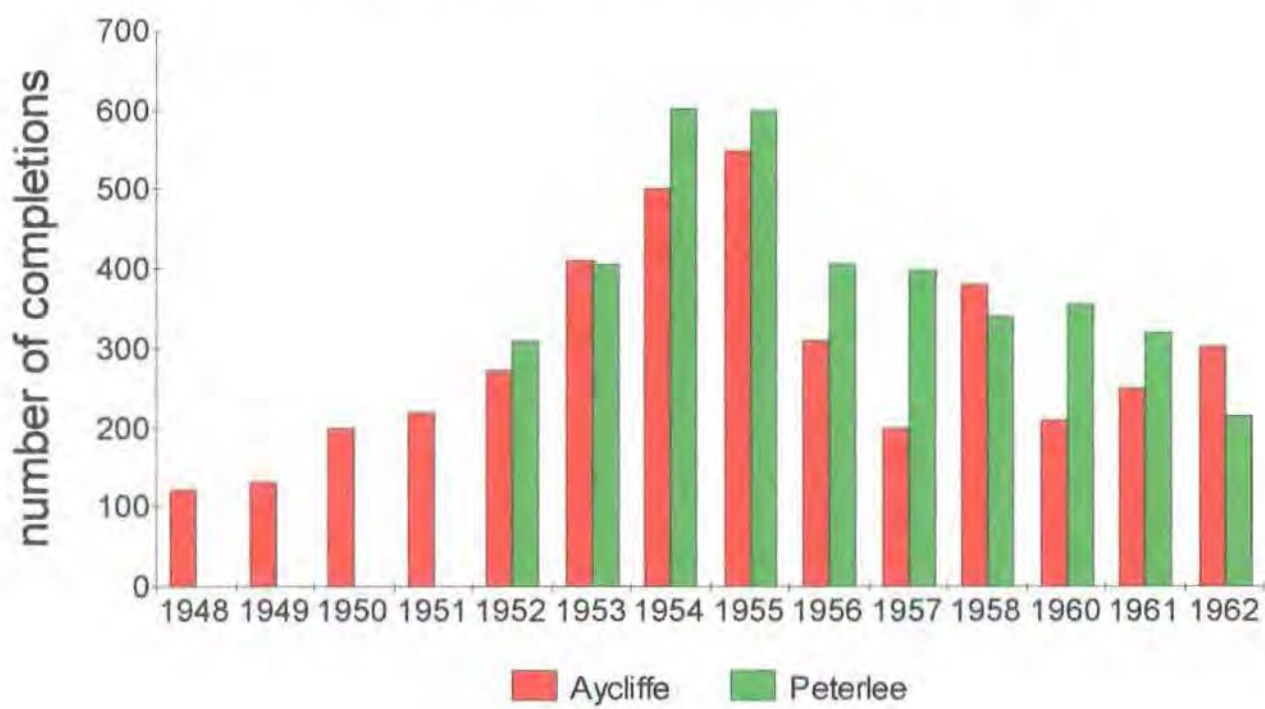


Fig. 10: Housing completions in Aycliffe and Peterlee, 1948-63

It would take until the early 1960s before the corporation could resume its previous rate of house building. In 1961 it claimed that it was barely meeting the demand for housing, and had, therefore, been compelled to 'discourage applications for houses from those coming within the lower priority groups which cannot now be satisfied'. It had also 'removed to a reserve list many of those applications in those groups on the waiting list who do not wish to withdraw their

⁴² NT/Ay/1/1/21 ADC, BM, 12 April 1956.

⁴³ ADC, 1956 AR, p. 8

applications'.⁴⁴ Even with such restrictions, the corporation reported that there were still nearly 1,500 outstanding applications on the housing list.

iii) 'Be never afraid of experimentation'

When compiling its report it was clear that the Reith Committee was concerned not only with the building of houses in the new towns, but also with their design and the environment in which they were to be sited. It stated that those responsible for the new towns 'must never be afraid of experimentation, even if that involves occasional mistakes'.⁴⁵ Similarly, Herbert Morrison, speaking on behalf of the government, claimed that he did not want all the new towns to be of a pattern. Rather, the government welcomed 'experiment and a bold approach'.⁴⁶ In both Aycliffe and Peterlee, the planners laid great emphasis on the provision of ample spaces, including parks and spacious play areas for children, which was in stark contrast to Durham's old mining towns and villages with their long rows of tightly packed colliery houses. Aycliffe Development Corporation stated that its professed mission was to wage a war against 'architectural monotony'.⁴⁷ The layout of houses was arranged to provide for 'concentrated building and open spaces intermingling in a pattern closely allied to Durham villages in contrast to the even character of suburban housing estates'.⁴⁸

In Peterlee, by 1955 the corporation had experimented with more than 50 different types of dwelling. One particular housing development consisting of six two-bedroom detached houses of extra quality and an unconventional design on the Chapel Hill estate was believed to be unique in the whole of the region. The corporation's chief architect asserted: 'we have been trying to design and build a detached house for the average man-in-the-street, which is well above usual council

⁴⁴ ADC, 1961 AR, p. 8.

⁴⁵ Reith Committee, *Final Report*, p. 6.

⁴⁶ *Sussex Daily News*, 7 Oct 1948.

⁴⁷ *Evening Chronicle*, 19 Nov 1953.

⁴⁸ ADC, 1948 AR, p. 9.

house standards. Even though their rents are a little higher than the rest of our housing stock, there have been more applications than houses being built'.⁴⁹ The corporation claimed, furthermore, that a fireplace would be incorporated into most of the new houses built in the new town 'which does everything but light itself'.⁵⁰

Aycliffe Development Corporation had also given much thought to ensuring that the town's inhabitants were provided with the wherewithal to minimise excessive domestic drudgery. With Beveridge as chairman this was not surprising considering how much time he had devoted during the war to easing the workload of working people, especially women. In 1949 Beveridge told a meeting of local councillors: 'we have set out to try to make a perfect town, a town in which every man, and above all, every housewife, will want to live – a town of beauty and happiness and community spirit'.⁵¹ Thus, the superior ways of living that the new town would provide, and a concern for the needs of women, especially those who stayed at home and looked after the family, were to be inextricably linked. One of the distinctive features of Aycliffe, according to Beveridge, was that it should be a "housewives' paradise". 'It wasn't enough to have a Lord Shaftsbury to improve conditions in the factories', he told a group of reporters in 1950, 'we want a Lord Shaftsbury of the home to improve the conditions of the housewife'.⁵²

To increase her leisure hours, Beveridge proposed that the introduction of a 40-hour week for homemakers should be an important objective for the new town's planners. Moreover, Aycliffe was to be erected in such a manner that each house was less than ten minutes walk from the nearest shops, thereby reducing the time housewives would need to spend acquiring their day-to-day purchases. A nursery would be provided in each precinct to look after the children whilst their mothers were at the shops. Indeed, the town's designers and architects had been explicitly instructed to put mothers and children first. John R. James, senior research officer at the Ministry

⁴⁹ *NDM*, 16 Oct 1953.

⁵⁰ *Sunday Sun*, 30 July 1950.

⁵¹ *NE*, 20 Sept 1949.

⁵² *NE*, 6 March 1950.

of Housing and Local Government stated: 'Many of the homes of today seem to have been constructed for adult males. They have not been built for the children or mothers. If there is nowhere for the children to play their mothers become harassed'.⁵³ At Aycliffe, amenities including playgrounds and nurseries were to be built within easy reach of all houses. Each group, moreover, was to be furnished with communal laundries, electronically fitted and equipped with drying rooms; outside the laundries, drying greens surrounded by trees were to feature in every precinct.⁵⁴

In 1948 Beveridge announced the corporation's most ambitious plan to date to facilitate comfortable living, when he stated that the corporation intended to provide each house in Aycliffe with steam-heated radiators and constant hot water for domestic use by way of a central boiler system which, it hoped, would put an end to the need for coal fires.⁵⁵ The scheme would also, according to Oscar Faber and Partners, heating systems specialists, save labour in the lighting and tendering of fires and lead to drier houses with an abundant supply of hot water.⁵⁶ Fortunately, there already existed a boiler house on the trading estate capable of such an undertaking which the Board of Trade was willing to sell.⁵⁷ In November 1948, an approach was made to Silkin to approve a district heating scheme to cover the whole of the new town. The corporation was subsequently informed, however, that in order to secure the heating system, it would need to promote a private bill in Parliament.⁵⁸ This it did, but in the meantime, dissenting forces attempted to undermine the proposals.

In January 1950 Durham County Council publicly declared its opposition to the Bill, stating that the scheme would inevitably involve the breaking up of streets in order to lay pipes and other

⁵³ *Northern Despatch*, 31 May 1951.

⁵⁴ NT/Ay/1/1/2 ADC, BM, 7 Nov 1949.

⁵⁵ ADC, *Master Plan and Report*, p. 11.

⁵⁶ HLG/90/188 Oscar Faber to J. L. Moore (senior clerk to ADC), 24 March 1948.

⁵⁷ HLG/90/188 Beveridge to Dame Evelyn Sharpe (T/CP) 1 Nov 1948.

⁵⁸ NT/Ay/1/1/1 ADC, BM, 17 Jan 1949.

apparatus.⁵⁹ Then, on 21 January, Darlington Town Council voted unanimously to oppose the Bill, citing potential adverse affects on local businesses, most notably the coal trade.⁶⁰ It even appeared as if some of the potential recipients were unconvinced of its possible benefits. One resident remarked: 'It will certainly lighten the work to have no fires to bother about, but even if it means more work a coal fire is more cheerful and home-like than this district heating idea is'.⁶¹ Perhaps the final nail in the coffin for the corporation's plans came when it approached the Board Of Trade about purchasing the boiler house. An independent assessor had valued it at no more than £24,000, which would have allowed the corporation to charge seven shillings and sixpence per week for heating a three-bedroom house – a price not considered overly expensive. However, when the corporation approached the Board of Trade it demanded £42,000 for the boiler system, which would have meant a substantially higher weekly charge.⁶² Even though the Bill was successfully steered through Parliament, in June 1950 the corporation announced that it was reluctantly abandoning its district heating proposals. The Ministry argued that even had the corporation been able to offer heating more cheaply, the low population density at Aycliffe would have undoubtedly militated against the future success of the scheme. It did conclude, however, that the scheme did have merits and that it would like to see such an experiment attempted in a new town some time in the future.⁶³ This was of little comfort to the corporation. In its annual report for 1951, it expressed its unalloyed displeasure at the abandonment of what it claimed was an opportunity to rid South-West Durham and the rest of the county of its grimy and squalid conditions, and at the same time help to preserve the nation's natural resources:

National interests demand the fullest possible conservation of the country's reserves of coal, its most precious raw material. For that reason, and for health and cleanliness, the district heating of towns will one day become a national policy. We are, therefore, most

⁵⁹ NT/Ay/1/1/2 ADC, BM, 9 Jan 1950.

⁶⁰ *NE*, 21 Jan 1950.

⁶¹ *Sunday Despatch*, 8 May 1949.

⁶² NT/Ay/1/1/1 ADC, BM, 6 Dec 1948.

⁶³ NT/Ay/1/1/4 ADC, BM, 19 June 1950.

disappointed that ways and means could not have been found to permit us to go ahead with our experiment for the benefit of posterity.⁶⁴

To add to its woes, many houses in the new town had been prepared for district heating on the assumption that the scheme would be approved. These had to be extensively modified at much more extra cost to provide for other forms of heating.⁶⁵ Moreover, as well as having to pay Faber for work carried out on the heating scheme, the corporation was also left with a substantial amount of tubing of varying lengths and diameters, as well as the boiler and chimney stack.⁶⁶

The corporation was dealt a further blow when in 1950 the Ministry refused permission for the communal laundries. The capital cuts of the late 1940s, as well as the chronic shortage of building materials after the war, were undoubtedly contributory factors.⁶⁷ Even so, there did not appear to be a great deal of enthusiasm for the laundries among Aycliffe's residents. In a survey conducted by the corporation, most women claimed that they would prefer to do their ironing and washing in their own home rather than in communal facilities. Not to be deterred, Beveridge still resolved that something should be done to relieve the housewife's washday drudgery. So, as an alternative to the communal laundries, the corporation decided to make provision in each house for an electric washing machine, a drying cabinet and a boiler on simple hire terms.⁶⁸ It appeared that this time Beveridge's ideas were commensurate with the wishes of Aycliffe's communities; of 120 families approached, more than 90 claimed that they would be interested in acquiring the washing amenities. As before, however, the scheme did not run as smoothly as hoped.

Unfortunately, soon after the scheme was launched in 1949, Sterling was devalued; a consequence was that interest rates rose sharply from 3 per cent to 4.5 per cent which necessitated a 20 per cent increase in hire charges for the equipment, with a subsequent fall in demand for all

⁶⁴ ADC, 1951 AR, p. 13.

⁶⁵ NT/Ay/1/1/7 ADC, BM, 23 March 1951. A contract with the Norris Warming Co was brokered on the assumption that the company's heating system would be connected to the district heating scheme. When it became known that the scheme was to be abandoned, it cost £2,225 to modify the heating system to fit in with new proposals.

⁶⁶ NT/Ay/1/1/4 ADC, BM, 13 July 1950.

⁶⁷ ADC, 1950 AR, p. 13.

⁶⁸ NT/Ay/1/1/2 ADC, BM, 26 Sept 1950.

electrical goods except for electric cookers.⁶⁹ Even so, the scheme still caused a great deal of resentment among local traders. R. C. Luck, from the Darlington Chamber of Trade, argued that the scheme was both initially funded and continued to be subsidised by public money, and so created 'unfair competition of a particularly objectionable kind, not only to laundries in the district, but also to all shopkeepers who are stocking or trying to sell these machines on normal retail terms or hire purchase'.⁷⁰

Relations between the corporation and the Ministry were further strained when in 1949 the latter requested an increase in the density of houses in the new town.⁷¹ In order to affect an economy in the cost per house, as well as to minimise the area of additional land needed for development, instead of the 6,100 people to be housed in each of the town's three wards as originally planned, a population of 8,000 was expected to be the norm in each ward.⁷² A way had thus been found to increase the population of the town without having to encroach on other authorities' land.⁷³ In 1954 against the corporation's wishes,⁷⁴ the Ministry ordered that henceforth housing precincts were to contain fourteen houses per acre, and not the eight per acre the corporation originally planned for in its village green strategy.⁷⁵ For the editor of the *Newtonian*, the town's own monthly newspaper, this was tantamount to a complete subversion of the town's original ideals:

The village green community is being replaced by elongated terraces in rows upon rows like barracks, with no privacy, no refinement and very little green to break them up. Altogether there seems to be no intention whatever of carrying out the original scheme ... The cost to the tenant does not matter so far as the new town is concerned. Live there if you will but it will cost you more and more to live closer and closer together until you are huddled together like the ant heaps of towns which are, and remain, eternal blots on the landscape.⁷⁶

⁶⁹ ADC, 1952 AR, p. 19.

⁷⁰ *Evening Gazette*, 11 Oct 1950.

⁷¹ See, for example, HLG/107/217 Sydenham to Ministry T/CP 6 Dec 1949. Sydenham claimed that by tightening the densities, Aycliffe's designated area could easily be made to accommodate a population of 13,500.

⁷² ADC, 1950 AR, p. 8.

⁷³ *Yorkshire Post*, 8 Sept 1952.

⁷⁴ NT/Ay1/1/17 ADC, BM, 2 Dec 1954.

⁷⁵ ADC, 1954 AR, p. 7.

⁷⁶ DCRO NT/AP/1/1/2 *The Newtonian* (October 1955).

There was more reason for optimism in 1958, when the Ministry announced that the new town's population target was to be increased. It had long been a grievance of the corporation that its architectural prowess had been constrained by the low population figure. The revised population target meant that the corporation now had the opportunity to furnish the more varied architectural features in Aycliffe that other new town corporations had been able to provide.

In Peterlee, even though the quality of workmanship of the early housing projects had attracted much acclaim, the town's architectural attractiveness was received less enthusiastically; some commentators describing it as unadventurous, even nondescript.⁷⁷ In some respects, housing design issues were beyond the corporation's control. The correlation of house construction and the extraction of coal inevitably demanded that the former would be less enterprising than building programmes in other areas free from restrictions prevalent in Peterlee.⁷⁸ Nevertheless, apart from the problems connected with a universal low-density development of detached and semi-detached housing that would have made it impossible to achieve a compact and economically viable town in the time allocated,⁷⁹ the aesthetically unimaginative character of the town's early estates, with their houses built to unpopular pre-war designs, was causing some consternation, not least within the corporation itself.⁸⁰ Williams, for one could not contain his dismay at the 'sprawling red-bricked streets of the five year old town'. He decided 'enough was enough'.⁸¹

In September 1954 the corporation resolved that the south-west section of the designated area, recently passed fit to be developed by the NCB, would be characterised by a more modern approach to architectural features and housing design. To effect this, in 1955 the corporation took

⁷⁷ Philipson, *Swords*, p. 100.

⁷⁸ NA POWE/37/193 Report on Peterlee Development by Ministry of Works (1950). H. V. Hill, for example, the Chief Engineer at the Ministry of Works had explicitly stipulated that the type of building ought to be governed by a cautious approach to development and that site conditions might frequently necessitate the adoption of less ambitious forms of building.

⁷⁹ DCRO NT/Pe/3/1/315 PDC, Report of the Deputy Architect, 27 April 1950.

⁸⁰ R. J. A. Gazzard, 'New town initiatives in the North East of England', in Chapman (ed), *Public Policy Studies*, p. 86.

⁸¹ *The Observer*, 1 May 1968.

the unprecedented step of appointing Victor Pasmore, a professor of fine arts at Newcastle University, as coordinator of the project. His remit, as he saw it, was to join with the corporation's architects to create a new Peterlee: an urban environment which was at once more integrated, more dynamic and more stimulating.⁸² *The Times* would later describe Pasmore's involvement in the Peterlee project as a 'fruitful form of collaboration':

The utilisation for architectural purposes not simply of the painter's skill with a brush on the wall, but of his eye trained in manipulating form and colour and in appreciating their influence on one another.⁸³

And from the outset of his involvement, it was clear that Pasmore's highly innovative re-design of the town's housing in a more modern architectural style would become the prototype for the remainder of the new town.⁸⁴ In the Passfield Way estate, to emphasise the area's mining tradition, Pasmore replaced the ubiquitous traditional red-bricked houses with highly innovative black-bricked dwellings, and sharpened the overall effect with white wooden panelling. Also, in order to emphasise the cubic concept of the total architectural form, he replaced the existing pitch roofs with a flat one, and adopted a rectangular road pattern equivalent to the cubic formation of the housing.⁸⁵ The corporation proclaimed such designs as modern houses for modern people, whilst, at the same time, stressing that the function of the houses were places to live in and not merely an architectural effect.

⁸² DCRO NT/AP/1/5/35 V. Pasmore, *Report into the Artist's Approach to Urban Design Problems* (June 1955), p. 1.

⁸³ *The Times*, 24 Feb 1961.

⁸⁴ *NDM*, 2 Sept 1958.

⁸⁵ DCRO NT/AP/1/5/35 Pasmore, *Report*, p. 8.



Fig. 11: Pasmore-designed flat-roofed houses in the south-west area of Peterlee.

But whilst innovative housing designs were a feature of the south-west estates, Williams also emphasised that a vital part of Pasmore's commission was the special attention to the relationship between housing and the area's natural landscape. Therefore, in response to an idea of Williams, in the Sunny Blunts estate, Pasmore built a lake at the point of contact between the estate and the valley which forms one of the spurs of Castle Eden dene. Since the dene's stream and the valley cut into the precincts of the housing, the lake came to form a natural focus for the whole neighbourhood. To increase the dramatic emphasis of the lake, Pasmore erected an architectonic feature in the form of a full-scale sculpture, two storeys high, bridging the lake at a point where the main footpaths converge. Large enough to dominate the lake, the sculpture, according to Pasmore, formed 'a single composite work of art which, by virtue of its unique image, [gives] to the neighbourhood not only a focal centre, but also an identity which is essentially qualitative and psychological'.



Fig. 12: Pasmore's Pavilion

In his report to the corporation, Pasmore claimed that the overall effect of his designs was to create 'a series of clearly defined housing communities related to each other in form and scale so as to make a total environment, which is both rationally practical and emotionally stimulating'.⁸⁶

Williams, who was obviously delighted with Pasmore's contribution in the south-west area claimed:

This is the type of planning and housing design that housewives have been admiring in glossy magazines. We are providing an expensive looking design in a setting most people would envy and for which they would pay large sums of money. Now we are doing it for everybody.⁸⁷

However, it was clear that not everybody in East Durham was as enthusiastic as Williams and Pasmore. For one thing, the houses were costly to maintain.⁸⁸ In 1958 the corporation, despite some members of the board expressing their reservations, secured the services of Milton Hindle Ltd, a building firm from Preston to erect 800 Pasmore-designed houses and a school. The firm submitted the lowest tender and assured the corporation that it could comfortably manage the

⁸⁶ DCRO NT/AP/1/5/35 Pasmore, *Report*, p. 5.

⁸⁷ *SE*, 23 May 1958.

⁸⁸ Peterlee Parish Council (PPC), Minutes, 17 Oct 1960.



contract. In truth, however, from the outset, it was over-burdened with contracts and had over-extended itself, and in October 1960 went into voluntary liquidation, with debts of over £600,000, having built only 350 of the houses and only partly erected the school.⁸⁹ Shinwell called for a government enquiry into the whole debacle, whilst mismanagement on the corporation's behalf was also alleged.⁹⁰

Following a particularly heavy rainstorm in 1961, many of the Hindle-built houses began to leak, despite remedial work being carried out on them shortly after their erection. Their flat roofs and wood panelling also proved completely unsuitable for the rigours of a North East winter. Despite C. W. Clarke's declaration in 1947, that 'no jerry builders would be allowed in Peterlee', it seemed that its houses were the worst of any new town in the country. Malcolm MacEwan, chief information officer of the Royal Institute of British Architects, expressed his amazement at the 'fading, streaked, weather grimed and tawdry facades' of the Hindle-built houses, adding that, 'lines that ought to be straight run up and down like the waves of the seas, and concrete beams are visibly deflected'.⁹¹ *The Northern Echo* described them as 'brave and imaginative in their general design but wretched and shabby in their details and practical execution'. The district council's housing committee chairman was even less complementary. 'We are pulling down condemned pit houses which are better than these wooden shambles', he stated in 1959.⁹²

iv) Rents: a deciding factor in who lived in the new towns

Though Aycliffe and Peterlee's housing programmes were distinct in their overall implementation, one issue that provoked similar controversy in both new towns was the question of rent. In 1948 A. W. Thomas, Aycliffe Development Corporation's general manager claimed that the corporation proposed to provide houses at rents comparable with those being charged by

⁸⁹ Hindle was found guilty of obtaining cheques for over £40,000 from a finance company in 1965 and imprisoned for five years. See, for example, *NE*, 9 May 1965; *SE*, 12 Oct 1965.

⁹⁰ *HC Debs*, 632, c. 1057-1058, 14 Dec 1960.

⁹¹ *NE*, 1 Dec 1962.

⁹² *Daily Express*, 20 Nov 1959.

neighbouring local authorities.⁹³ It was inevitable, however, that new town residents would be faced with higher weekly rent charges than their counterparts in local authority-controlled houses. Local councils were able to effect a reduction in the level of rents for post-war houses by establishing rent equilibrium funds through their ownership of pre-war houses erected at lower cost. In addition, under the 1936 Housing Act, councils with a stock of existing housing could 'lump together' the various subsidies of all the separate housing acts. They could also avoid charging full rents by simply increasing local rates to offset some of the deficits.

In its early years a development corporation did not own such a comparable stock of additional housing. As a non-rating organisation, nor could it rely on local rates as a cushion against some of the deficits within its housing stock. Corporations, moreover, despite receiving Exchequer subsidies plus Ministry grants equal to the subsidies provided by local authorities, were hindered by their inability, unlike local councils, to raise short-term loans at lower rates on the open market to finance their housing programmes. Instead, they were compelled to borrow exclusively from the Exchequer at fixed rates, which were usually much higher than could be obtained on the open market. The financial commitment involved in housing had also increased enormously over a relatively short period of time. In Darlington, in 1920 the total outstanding capital expenditure on housing was £1,625; by 1940, it had risen to £474,000; by 1955, it was somewhere in the region of £3 million.⁹⁴ Such a development obviously worked to the great disadvantage of Aycliffe and Peterlee corporations, which only had recently-built housing stock under their control.

In Peterlee, the corporation's financial disadvantage was compounded by the fact that nearly half of the new town's potential residents were either tenants of colliery houses, and so did not pay rent, or owned their own homes.⁹⁵ A 1948 district council survey discovered that of those tenants that did pay rent, 49 per cent were paying between ten and twelve shillings per week,

⁹³ *The Builder*, 31 Dec 1948.

⁹⁴ *Evening Gazette*, 29 Sept 1955.

⁹⁵ DCRO NT/AP/1/5/114 PDC, Social and Economic Research, p. 12.

whilst less than five per cent were paying more than 15 shillings.⁹⁶ When compared to a standard three-bedroom house in Thorntree Gill, where the weekly rent was expected to be 23 shillings, it was clear that the differential in rent between what the corporation could charge and what the majority of existing council house tenants were actually paying was such that only a small minority of the latter would be able to afford to live in the new town, even if they wanted to.⁹⁷ Such an eventuality was not lost on A. V. Williams, who was concerned that the new town's higher rent charges threatened to have a negative effect on attempts to make Peterlee socially balanced and financially viable.⁹⁸ In 1952 he claimed that 'not least of the problems with which the new town is faced is the difficulty, after the initial demand has been met, of inducing a public long used to nominal rents to accept the higher rentals which a new town corporation must charge in order to secure an economic return on its capital outlay'.⁹⁹

To its surprise, however, when the corporation conducted its own investigations into the housing situation in the area, it found that people in Easington district may have been more willing to move to the new town than it had first realised. Of the many residents who owned their own homes – which at 22 per cent was unusually high for a predominantly working class area – a large proportion only did so because they were unable to obtain a better-quality house anywhere else.¹⁰⁰ Often, owner-occupiers in the district resided in the most downtrodden streets with the fewest amenities in close proximity to the mines. Many were the first to apply to live in the new town once building got underway. The desire for a better house among many miners' families, moreover, ensured that nearly half who were entitled to a colliery house in 1950 turned down the offer.¹⁰¹ Also, miners' wages had increased dramatically since before the war, which had not been reflected in a comparable increase in the amount they paid in rent. In 1935 the average weekly

⁹⁶ NT/Pe/1/4/1 PDC, GMR, 30 Oct 1948.

⁹⁷ *NE*, 6 Dec 1951.

⁹⁸ DCRO NT/Pe/3/1/111 Procedure and Information under the New Towns Act 1946, 6 Oct 1948.

⁹⁹ *Birmingham Post*, 10 March 1952.

¹⁰⁰ DCRO NT/AP/1/5/114 PDC, Social and Economic Research, p. 24.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid*, p. 28.

wage for miners in the area was 45 shillings, whilst their average rent charge was seven shillings and ten pence. In 1948 average wages in the mines had risen to nearly 146 shillings whilst, on average, miners were paying less than twelve shillings on rent. Mining families were therefore spending a great deal more of their income on rent as a percentage of their wages before the war than immediately after it. Williams concluded from this that the higher rents charged in the new town ought not to have been a deterrence to large sections of the district's population moving to Peterlee, especially considering the extra amenities and the healthier lifestyle which the new town would provide

The corporation's optimism appeared to be justified as once houses began to be erected after 1951 the demand for them far exceeded the speed with which they could be built.¹⁰² It was also evident, however, that the chronic shortage of accommodation in the district contributed to the demand, even if it meant that people had to forego many amenities, even necessities.¹⁰³ Recently removed board member, Major Nicholson, claimed that the superior houses in the town were to blame for the hardship experienced among the town's residents: 'The houses being put up by the corporation have far too many trimmings. It is no use building a Utopia for people to live in if they have to starve themselves to pay the rent'.¹⁰⁴ In 1953 it was suggested that the high rents in Peterlee, even though they were the lowest being charged of any new town in the country,¹⁰⁵ were creating poverty of such a magnitude that should not be tolerated in a civilised society, so much so that the new town was earning the unwanted sobriquet of 'Hungry Hill'.¹⁰⁶

Rent issues were also very much in evidence in Aycliffe. The steep rise in building costs and subsistence demands from builders travelling to the town led to the corporation imposing several rent increases in only a few years. By 1953 the average rent for a two-bedroom house in Aycliffe was 30 shillings per week – more than ten shillings higher than the average rent for a three-

¹⁰² PDC, *Master Plan*, p. 15.

¹⁰³ PDC, *1951 AR*, p. 231.

¹⁰⁴ *Sunday Sun*, 4 Feb 1951.

¹⁰⁵ *Financial Times*, 3 Nov 1953.

¹⁰⁶ *NDM*, 27 Aug 1953.

bedroom house in nearby villages. For its part, the corporation recognised that whilst employment opportunities in the town were continuing to grow, the general level of wages paid to workers on the estate remained low; as a result, the high rents charged in the new town were within the means of only the most affluent workers.¹⁰⁷

In 1952 Newton Aycliffe Tenants' Association unanimously decided to request a meeting with the corporation to discuss the situation. 'We are not proposing to make a wild banshee about everything that happens', the association's chairman claimed, 'but we do think that we are entitled to know why our rents are so high'.¹⁰⁸ In April 1952 during a debate in the House of Commons, J. Slater, the Labour MP for Sedgefield, appealed for government assistance in Aycliffe where, he claimed, 'rents have become almost impossible'. He added that rents were being charged 'which were unaffordable to many of the workers with families living in the town'.¹⁰⁹

To the annoyance of the tenants' association, however, the corporation refused to meet its representatives, claiming that it was not corporation policy to disclose the figures upon which rents were charged in the town. This was wholly unsatisfactory to A. Beecroft, the tenant association's chairman. 'It is one more illustration of the grave danger which exists when a non-elected body has absolute control of rents,' he complained after the corporation rejected the association's third request for a meeting. For district councillor, J. Vickers, the problem was not so much the corporation but the government departments controlling it. 'The development corporation is the instrument of the Tory party in the same way as it was in the office of the Labour government', he argued in 1956 following a further substantial rent increase in the town.¹¹⁰ It was true that the post-war Labour government had implemented a policy of 'cheap money' for local authorities with the interest rate never higher than three per cent. Since the

¹⁰⁷ Aldridge, *British New Towns*, p. 45.

¹⁰⁸ *Northern Despatch*, 18 Jan 1952.

¹⁰⁹ *HC Debs*, 498, c. 1298, 31 March 1952.

¹¹⁰ *Northern Despatch* 7 April 1956.

Conservatives had taken office, there had been ten changes in the interest rate – all upwards. In effect, this meant that on a £1,700 house, the government subsidised it to the extent of 9s 6d on the one hand, taking back 26s 5d in interest rates with the other.¹¹¹

There was a similar air of enmity between the corporation and the town's tenants in Peterlee, when in September 1953 a one shilling and two pence rent increase was imposed to cover the maintenance of grass verges and open spaces, without the corporation first consulting the town's residents. In an almost unanimous act of defiance, the residents, supported by Shinwell and Peterlee Labour party,¹¹² claimed that when the rent man called to collect the extra amount they would refuse to pay. In response, in January 1954 the corporation began court proceedings against the residents, with some families from Thorntree Gill being ordered to pay more than 18 shillings arrears or face eviction.¹¹³

To achieve some sort of rent equilibrium, both corporations considered building a proportion of houses of superior size and design, with extra amenities, for letting at full economic rents to those prepared to pay.¹¹⁴ This way, higher earners would be able to subsidise the rents paid by tenants with lower incomes. A major problem, however, was that, during the towns' early years there were insufficient numbers of higher income earners prepared to move to the towns to make the scheme worthwhile.¹¹⁵

An alternative suggestion was to erect a large proportion of smaller houses, with less furnishings and amenities, which lower wage earners could afford. In Aycliffe, many narrow-front houses were built, specially designed to economise on the cost of construction and site development.¹¹⁶ The corporation claimed that such houses were popular as they were

¹¹¹ P. Malpas and A. Murie, *Housing Policy and Practice* (Basingstoke, 1987), p. 66.

¹¹² *NDM*, 30 Nov 1953.

¹¹³ *NE*, 14 Jan 1954.

¹¹⁴ NT/Pe/1/1/1 PDC, BM, 6 Oct 1948.

¹¹⁵ Hudson and Johnson, 'New Towns', p. 109.

¹¹⁶ ADC, 1955 AR, p. 4.

comparatively cheap to rent. The schemes had their detractors, however.¹¹⁷ It was a contention among some commentators that the erection of large numbers of inferior houses, specifically for low wage earners, directly violated the original aims of the new town movement. The Reith Committee had explicitly stated that if all houses in a town were built to minimum standards, the town would be 'stamped as a one-class town' and would be difficult to redress later.¹¹⁸ Similarly, in 1955, Lewis Burt, a resident of Haswell, argued: 'to build a special section of [Peterlee] for those who cannot pay the rent now being charged would mean the introduction of 'castes' and 'untouchables', and would be a direct contradiction to the very motives and ideals which inspired its birth'.¹¹⁹ At the same time, as one district councillor contended, the suggestion that smaller houses be provided for the lower-paid workers was antipathetic to the whole ethos of the council's and the Labour party's housing policy, which ensured as far as possible that bigger houses were allocated to those that needed them most: many of the poorer tenants therefore needed the larger types of house because they had larger families.¹²⁰

Furthermore, despite such efforts to stabilise rents in the new towns, both corporations found that due to the apparently inexorable increase in the price of labour and materials, house building costs continued to rise during the 1950s, which largely negated any well-meaning attempts to keep rents at a manageable level.¹²¹ In 1955 Aycliffe Development Corporation stated that rents in the new town were reaching such a high level that only a complete divergence from its initial housing policy objectives would ensure that the town remained financially viable:

We have now reached the limit to which standards can be reduced or density increased, and no further relief can be anticipated from further economies in that direction ... An appreciable increase in rents of houses completed in future is therefore unavoidable, and will further widen the disparity between rents of earlier built houses and those of later construction.¹²²

¹¹⁷ RD/Ea/27 ERDC, Minutes, 12 June 1950.

¹¹⁸ Reith Committee, *Interim Report*, p. 10.

¹¹⁹ *Auckland Chronicle*, 6 Jan 1955.

¹²⁰ *Auckland Chronicle*, 25 May 1950.

¹²¹ NT/Pe/3/1/109 PDC, GMR, 25 April 1951.

¹²² ADC, 1955 AR, p. 5.

More bad news was to follow when in April 1955 the Exchequer imposed an increase in the rate of interest charged on its advances whilst, at the same time, reduced the amount of contributions paid to the new towns as part of the government's restrictions on capital expenditure.¹²³

A major effect was that both corporations found it increasingly unprofitable to build standard houses and, even with the aid of Exchequer contributions, to let them at an economic rent within the means of prospective tenants. In 1956 Aycliffe Development Corporation contended that if the building of houses was not to cease altogether it would need to keep rents of future houses down to a reasonable level.¹²⁴ One way to do this was by a system of 'rent pooling'. Since its inception in 1947 the corporation had protested against the anomalous situation whereby corporations were compelled to act within the control exercised by the Rent and Mortgage Interest Restrictions Acts, and so, were unable to increase the standard rents of its houses.¹²⁵ This prevented the corporation from pooling rents and charging pro rata according to the size and situation of a house, with the unsatisfactory result that the standard rent for houses erected when building costs were appreciably lower was less than the more contemporary houses. In 1950 Beveridge protested that as houses were about three times as much to build as they were before the war, some help was urgently needed to maintain rents at a level where working people could afford them.¹²⁶ One way was to pool all rents for standard houses and then fix new rents according to the current value of the accommodation; in so doing, the corporation provided a surplus from existing housing stock sufficient to maintain the same level of rents for all houses. In 1957 the corporation gained permission to try such a 'pooling scheme', and as a result of the scheme, allied to the 'prosecution of its sound and consistent rent policy', it claimed it was

¹²³ ADC, 1955 AR, p. 7.

¹²⁴ ADC, 1956 AR, p. 9.

¹²⁵ ADC, 1951 AR, p. 11.

¹²⁶ *Sunday Sun*, 5 March 1950.

freezing rent increases in the town for three years; and in the same year was able to generate a small surplus in its housing revenue account.¹²⁷

Furthermore, by 1957 Aycliffe's residents appeared more readily disposed to pay the dearer rents charged than they had previously been. According to the corporation, this was in no small part due to its sensible rent policy along with the provision of a steadily increasing array of amenities in the new town. 'It is possible to see the shape of Newton Aycliffe', the corporation wrote in its 1957 annual report:

and to sense the growing happiness and contentment of its people who appear to have accepted the belief that it is worthwhile to allocate a larger slice of their weekly income for a modern home in pleasant surroundings ... It is clear that the tenant of a modern and subsidised house enjoys a very good deal indeed, and the corporation's policy has been to promote and establish this conception.¹²⁸

v) A lack of social balance

One major effect of the rent increases was the reluctance of people from nearby villages to reside in the towns. This in turn had consequences for the creation of socially balanced communities. The Dudley Report had identified the major failing of housing during the inter-war period as the growth of single-class housing estates such as had occurred at Becontree.¹²⁹ The National Council of Social Service stated that a likely consequence of the prevalence of one-class estates (as seemed to be occurring in Peterlee), was that the town would contain very few people with experience of social leadership; as a result it would be difficult to build up satisfactory communities in such towns. It therefore recommended that 'every planning scheme should aim at producing one or more neighbourhoods, each fitting into the town to which it belongs, and each

¹²⁷ ADC, 1957 AR, p. 5.

¹²⁸ ADC, 1957 AR, p. 6.

¹²⁹ A. Homer, 'Planned communities: the social objectives of the British new towns, 1946-1965', in L. Black (ed), *Consensus or Coercion? The State, The People and Social Cohesion in Post-war Britain* (2000), p. 127.

containing a socially balanced population'.¹³⁰ The hope was that once the different social classes had become integrated any tensions between them would dissipate.

The strategy in Aycliffe (initially at least) was that the social composition of each ward would certainly not be left to chance. Like the new town planners within the Ministry of Town and Country Planning, Beveridge was most insistent that there should be a blend of income groups in each ward and that the wealthier and the less well-off groups should not be segregated, as had been the case in many old towns and cities. Silkin, too, stated that he was very concerned not merely to get different classes living together 'but to get them actually mixing together. Unless they do mix freely in their leisure and recreation the whole purpose of a mixed community disappears'.¹³¹ 'I am most anxious', he stated in 1945,

that the planning should be such that the different income groups should not be separated. No doubt they may enjoy common recreational facilities, and take part in amateur theatricals, or each play their part in a health centre or a community centre. But when they leave to go home I do not want the better off people to go to the right and the less well off to go to the left. I want them to ask each other 'are you going my way'?¹³²

In Aycliffe, the corporation appointed the renowned professor of sociology at Liverpool University, Dennis Chapman, to help oversee tenant selection policy. Chapman, who described himself as a consultant to the planning consultants, considered that planning had been handicapped by an almost complete lack of scientific information about the influence of the urban environment upon social behaviour,¹³³ and that the building of Aycliffe was to be judged not only by its architectural features, but also by how far the corporation was able to promote the maximum interfusion of social relations.¹³⁴ If this was done correctly, he contended, the growth of common pride and community spirit would naturally ensue.¹³⁵

¹³⁰ The National Council of Social Service, *The Size and Structure of a Town* (1943), pp. 57-59.

¹³¹ Silkin, quoted in Heraud, 'Social class', p. 35.

¹³² *HC Debs*, 422, c. 1089-90, 8 May 1946.

¹³³ *The Builder*, 7 Oct 1949.

¹³⁴ *NE*, 2 Feb 1949.

¹³⁵ Clive Taylor and Alan Townsend, 'The sense of place' as evidenced in North East England', *Urban Studies* 13 (1976), pp. 133-134.

In many ways, Chapman's ideas were commensurate with Ebenezer Howard's notions of harmonious relations in the garden cities.¹³⁶ Like Howard, Chapman recognised that the establishment of new communities was more than a process of following architectural plans: it involved large numbers of people resettled in new and unfamiliar environments, which involved questions about the formation and maintenance of social structures. 'The well-developed community sense which is the most striking feature of life in small mining communities', Chapman wrote in 1949, 'is at once the greatest asset and greatest challenge to the builders of the new town'.¹³⁷ However, in contrast to Silkin and the Ministry's planners, he was averse to the idea of indiscriminately placing people from different income groups side-by-side in the same street. As he observed: 'There is no use in putting a man whose interests are breeding whippets next to a man whose hobby is growing chrysanthemums'.¹³⁸ Rather, he claimed, people aspired to live in houses and streets with other like-minded people, usually those who held similar types of occupations as themselves. To facilitate this in Aycliffe, higher income groups were clustered in sub-units of between 100 and 300 families within each neighbourhood, which were large enough for the people living in them to have their own social life and yet small enough to allow for their integration with other members of the community.¹³⁹ It was also noted that the co-existence of groups of such size tended to allow for the emergence of natural leaders. In this respect, it was thought that the employment of a high proportion of skilled workers and technicians on the trading estate would likely contribute a considerable middle class element, which was essential if the social and cultural life of the town was to be assured.¹⁴⁰ Once the balanced character of the population was established, it was claimed, it would then be relatively easy to maintain it.¹⁴¹

¹³⁶ See, for example, E. Howard, *Tomorrow: A Peaceful Path to Real Reform* (1898), p. 102.

¹³⁷ ADC, *Master Plan*, p. 12.

¹³⁸ *Northern Despatch*, 1 Sept 1949.

¹³⁹ ADC, 1951 AR, p. 9.

¹⁴⁰ ADC, 1950 AR, p. 16.

¹⁴¹ Reith Committee, *Interim Report*, p. 10.

Not everyone was convinced with Chapman's approach though. Grenfell Baines, Aycliffe's architect/planner for one remained unconvinced of the effectiveness of his department's arrangement with Chapman. 'Designing a town from a sociological perspective', he wrote in 1949, 'has had its effects upon the views of both designers and sociologists ... It is most essential that we have more 'interpreters' who can link the social scientist's work to that of the planner'.¹⁴² Hudson and Johnson, meanwhile, claimed that it was naïve of the corporation to assume that, simply by providing areas of grass incorporated into pseudo village greens, it would lead to the reproduction of the 'close texture of social contacts seen in [Durham] pit villages'.¹⁴³ Furthermore, L. E. White asked whether planning as a science was able to respond to the challenges set by the creation of entirely new communities. 'Few of us are ever convinced that the delicate balance of human relationships can be scientifically analysed and reduced to statistical tables', he wrote in 1951.¹⁴⁴

Within a year of the first house being built in Aycliffe, moreover, it seemed as though the town's first residents were discovering ways and means to avoid being housed within close proximity to other residents they did not want to live near. In March 1949 the president of the community association complained that key workers who had already been allocated a house in one part of the town were applying for houses in other areas of the town to avoid being housed next to lesser-qualified manual workers. 'We want a thoroughly mixed community', he said, 'not just key workers on one side [of the town] and the rest of the workers on the other'.¹⁴⁵ In 1952 the corporation was informed by the Ministry that it had been wrong in mixing the income groups too

¹⁴² *The Builder*, 14 Oct 1949.

¹⁴³ Hudson and Johnson, 'New Towns', p. 312.

¹⁴⁴ L. E. White, *New Towns: Their Challenge and Opportunity* (1951), p. 34.

¹⁴⁵ *Darlington and Stockton Times*, 5 March 1949. In 1954, to discourage tenants from moving from one house to another the corporation introduced a policy whereby residents must have had at least one year's residence in the town before an application could be considered. See, also, NT/Ay/1/1/17 ADC, BM, 23 Sept 1954.

freely, and that a suitable but separate site ought to be found to build upper-income groups,¹⁴⁶ primarily in order that 'their values are maintained'.¹⁴⁷

In Peterlee, the challenges of creating socially balanced communities were even greater than in Aycliffe. By 1952 there was still a mere five per cent of the occupational middle class residing in the whole of Easington district, which prompted the corporation to declare that 'the problem of bringing the means of social and economic activity to enrich and diversify what has hitherto been a one-class, one-trade community is for the corporation its greatest task'.¹⁴⁸ However, despite much discussion on how to attract such people to the town, including the erection of a percentage of houses in each estate for professional and managerial classes,¹⁴⁹ it was felt that the predominance of mining in the district was largely responsible for them not wishing to settle there.¹⁵⁰

The corporation also had an additional problem to contend with: a reluctance of many of the people that were intended to move to the town to do so. In spite of assurances from the district council that it and the majority of people in the district supported the idea of a new town it was clear that many were actually averse to the idea of moving to Peterlee. A councillor from Wheatley Hill declared that many families did not like the idea of being uprooted from their villages and 'planted' in a new town.¹⁵¹ Although such sentiments were not uncommon, Pepler and MacFarlane recommended that at least 40 per cent of the district's population should be transferred to Peterlee.¹⁵² In 1951 Durham County Council went a step further when it asserted that the county's population needed to be gathered more closely around the expected future centres of employment. New patterns of settlements would therefore be needed to link up with the

¹⁴⁶ DCRO NT/Ay/3/1/39 ADC, Thomas to Baines, 31 March 1952.

¹⁴⁷ NT/Ay/1/1/7 ADC, BM, 8 Jan 1952.

¹⁴⁸ PDC, *Master Plan*, p. 10.

¹⁴⁹ DCRO NT/Pe/3/1/111 PDC, Procedure Information, 6 Oct 1948.

¹⁵⁰ PDC, 1948 AR, p. 111.

¹⁵¹ *Sunday Sun*, 21 May 1950.

¹⁵² *North East Area Development Plan*, p. 19.

new distribution of industry and employment.¹⁵³ To ensure as far as possible that capital was invested in the right places, it was decided that villages surrounding Peterlee were to be placed within one of four categories depending upon each village's capability of successfully adapting to the changed emphasis on employment. Those villages in category C and D were to receive very few resources; as houses were demolished their occupants were expected to move to Peterlee. 'Indeed the very reason for the existence of some of these small and isolated places will disappear completely', the county council wrote in the 1951 Development Report:

and new development and re-development in some of the better-placed settlements will not only be better adjusted to the future pattern of employment opportunities, but will offer better living conditions than ever before to many of the inhabitants of the county. It is the wise policy to pursue, and it is most important that the cold facts should not be ignored for sentimental or parochial reasons¹⁵⁴

In 1955 the county council ordered a coordinated programme of demolition of slum property in the villages and allowed re-development only where essential to maintain a reasonable village shape. It also prevented Easington RDC from building the 500 houses per year that it had requested, and instead down-graded it to 150 houses per year (half of its pre-war allocation), whilst at the same time prohibiting building in any great numbers in Peterlee's surrounding villages.¹⁵⁵ The district council protested, however, that considering that the waiting list for people to be re-housed in Peterlee was 3,600, it ought to have a much greater input into the provision of housing. In effect, it seemed that the district council was requesting that it revert to building in the villages, whilst leaving the new town to try to attract people from outside the area.¹⁵⁶ This was unacceptable to the county council, however. Eventually, a compromise was reached, whereby of the 10,000 people who were expected to require accommodation over the following four-to- five years, the corporation would provide houses for about half of them and the district council would provide accommodation for the remainder.

¹⁵³ DCC, *County Development Plan* (1951), p. 3.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid*, p. 3.

¹⁵⁵ RD/Ea/30 ERDC, Minutes, 15 Dec 1955.

¹⁵⁶ J. F. F. Robinson, 'Peterlee: A Study of New Town Development' (Unpublished Ph.D Thesis, 1977) p. 8.

However, the dearer rents charged in the new town and the proximity to the mines and attachment for many people to their local village, combined to contribute to wholesale opposition to any forced movement. At a November 1954 public meeting in Haswell, the village's representative on the district council claimed that the county council's plan to re-house people from Haswell in Peterlee was a retrograde step: 'We are still living in a democratic country', he stated, 'If people want to go to Peterlee let them go but people from Haswell are not going to be forced to live in Peterlee against their wishes'.¹⁵⁷ In February 1956 Hesledon Parish Council sent a letter protesting against forced transfer which contained signatures from almost the whole of the village's population.¹⁵⁸ The county council would not be deterred though: the need for a balanced population in the new town outweighed the villagers' attachment to their villages, it seemed. In April 1957 Hesledon councillors were informed by the county council that as the village was a 'no development' category village, of its 1,280 population, 880 were likely to be re-housed in Peterlee.¹⁵⁹ For Geenty, the idea of the new town and the inevitable movement of population, as well as the increased rents in the new town, had been fully accepted by the district council at the time of Peterlee's inception. Opposition to movements to the town could only have the effect of seriously retarding its further development:

It was always realised that some readjustment would have to take place in the villages, but this was accepted as inevitable if the venture is to be successful and as many people are to reap greater and lasting benefit of the full range of facilities which Peterlee will provide ... To relax the principle now might create a precedent which would seriously prejudice its success as a new town before the advantages are fully appreciated.¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁷ *NDM*, 22 Nov 1954.

¹⁵⁸ *NDM*, 17 Feb 1956.

¹⁵⁹ *NDM*, 30 April 1957.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid*



Fig. 13: 1959 South Hetton protest

Nevertheless, a public inquiry was held in September 1960 at which there was unbridled hostility from many of the villages to forced movements to the new town. Residents from South Hetton alone contributed 195 objections. They claimed that if the 58 per cent of the village's population who were expected to move to Peterlee was allowed to proceed, it would have reduced its population by more than 20 per cent. There was no way under such circumstances that the village would be able to continue adequately in these circumstances. Such sentiments appeared to have a persuasive effect at the public inquiry. The Ministry of Housing and Local Government's inspector stated that he recognised the need to re-examine the earlier proposals, 'taking into account the distance from Peterlee, the places of employment of the workers whose houses are likely to be demolished and any special circumstances which may tie the families concerned to a particular area'.¹⁶¹ He therefore recommended that additional housing was to be allowed in the

¹⁶¹ *NDM*, 12 Sept 1960.

villages: in all, the numbers to be re-housed there was increased from 51 per cent to 65 per cent, leaving a maximum of about 3,600 people to be moved to Peterlee.

Despite protestations, there was evidence that secretly the corporation was not overly perturbed about the decision. Some of its officers had long harboured misgivings about the standard of tenant that the new town was receiving from the villages and the disruptive effect they were having on the rest of the town. In 1964 the corporation's chief housing officer revealed in a letter to Easington RDC the full extent of the corporation's concerns:

I can confirm that we are fully prepared to offer accommodation to all families occupying slum clearance property providing, on inspection, these families are of a reasonable standard ... By this it is not intended that the corporation take the cream of all tenants and expect the council to re-house the unsatisfactory ones, but some of the applicants who have been interviewed by this department as prospective tenants in the new town are quite beyond the pale. From past experience, it is obvious that if such tenants were placed in Peterlee, within a very short time they would either voluntarily move back to a slum area, or be evicted by the corporation leaving, I might add, a house in a dreadful state of disrepair.¹⁶²

A problem common to both towns' attempts to create balanced communities and attract newcomers, moreover, was their distinct lack of facilities and amenities, the provision of which might have gone a long way to assuage the concerns of the towns' new inhabitants and made it easier for them to settle there.¹⁶³ The Reith Committee recommended that the provision of cinemas, theatres and community halls in the towns was to be foremost in the minds of the towns' planners, as such amenities had an important influence on the town's social and cultural development.¹⁶⁴ In Aycliffe, the possibility of a theatre to seat 600 people, with a restaurant, exhibition room, rehearsal room and an arts centre was proposed.¹⁶⁵ In reality, however, development corporations had not only very little powers but also little finance to erect such facilities.¹⁶⁶ In this respect, they were at a great disadvantage compared to local authorities. The latter could bear expenses for facilities through its general rate fund. Corporations had no funds

¹⁶² DCRO NT/Pe/1/1/5 PDC, Chief Housing Officer to clerk of Easington RDC, 10 March 1964.

¹⁶³ Rodwin, *The British New Towns Policy*, p. 54.

¹⁶⁴ Reith Committee, *Interim Report*, p. 44.

¹⁶⁵ NT/Ay/1/1/4 ADC, BM, 18 Sept 1950.

¹⁶⁶ Schaffer, *The New Town Story*, pp. 162-163.

from which to meet these expenses other than from housing rents.¹⁶⁷ Until the Department of Education's Recreation and Physical Training Act (1955), the county council also had no capital resources with which to build community assets in the new towns.¹⁶⁸ The government's capital expenditure cuts after 1955 prevented the provision of amenities further.¹⁶⁹ Private developers were also unwilling to provide them, at least until the towns' populations grew sufficiently to make them financially viable.¹⁷⁰

During a town's embryonic stages it was therefore largely left to voluntary organisations to provide what little entertainment there was in the towns.¹⁷¹ Despite vigorous attempts by voluntary organisations in Aycliffe to inculcate a sense of community, they were hampered at every turn by the lack of facilities and equipment. In 1952 the only communal building at all in the town was a small community centre in an ex-cow byre, which was totally inadequate for the many activities which residents wished to take part in.¹⁷² For the chairman of the community association, unless adequate provision of communal facilities was made, Aycliffe could not hope to be the socially balanced town it aspired to be. 'The need has become urgent and imperative', he wrote in a letter to the corporation, 'If the town is to gain and have its own character, the people living within the town precincts must not be driven outside the town immediately they wish to do something other than live, eat and sleep'.¹⁷³ For Beveridge, the lack of communal and recreational facilities was just another example of how lack of finance and bureaucratic intransigence had thwarted the corporation's attempts at making the town the perfect place for its citizens to live in:

One after another, ambitious schemes for making the perfect town fell by the way or are delayed. At Newton Aycliffe we hoped to make a smokeless town with district heating, but

¹⁶⁷ DCRO NT/Ay/3/1/39 ADC, Master Plan Correspondence (1949).

¹⁶⁸ DCRO NT/AP/1/5/32 A. V. Williams, *The New Towns of County Durham: Their Economic and Social Contribution* (1955).

¹⁶⁹ NT/Ay/1/1/4 ADC, BM, 24 Feb 1956.

¹⁷⁰ Philipson, *Swords*, p. 136.

¹⁷¹ DCRO NT/Ay/3/1/39 ADC, Master Plan Correspondence (1949).

¹⁷² ADC, 1952 AR, p. 14.

¹⁷³ ADC, 1953 AR, p. 12.

we found the costs so high that we could not make it a compulsory addition to the rent of every person in the town. We wanted to build a good theatre for community drama but the cost was frightening. We thought of a first-class hotel, but we find ourselves reduced to a public house with no rooms for anything but drinking.¹⁷⁴

For many new residents, such a lack of amenities and recreational facilities, notwithstanding having to live away from their original surroundings, and in conditions associated with a major building programme, led to a preponderance of psychological and emotional problems among the towns' populations in what became known as the 'new town blues' syndrome. The Bishop of Durham was sure that it was due to the creation of communities where people had been drawn from a wide area – they had no common bond, no roots, no history on which to found a community, with the result that many people did not even know their neighbours: 'They are strangers and they go on being strangers; they are rather lonely because there is no common life'.¹⁷⁵ Attempts were made to integrate new arrivals into the towns' social and recreational activities. From 1955 the community association ensured that all new tenants in Peterlee were welcomed at parties at the community centre. At one such meeting in 1956, the chairman of the association hoped that all new arrivals would find 'not only lovely clean buildings, but a clean, forward striving spirit among the people themselves'.¹⁷⁶ Had they known about the animosity between the various sections of the community groups, however, they would not have considered the town the harmonious and friendly place it had been portrayed.

From the time of its creation, the community association in Peterlee was riven with disputes, arguments, accusations and counter-accusations. In 1952 the local press described the making of a 'private war' in Peterlee when the corporation launched its own community association, when the town's residents had already organised a tenants' association 'to look after the townspeople's problems and social activities'. For one tenant association member, the corporation's proposals were evidence that it wanted control over his association: 'It seems strange that they should

¹⁷⁴ W. Beveridge, *New Towns and the Case for Them* (1952), pp. 10-11.

¹⁷⁵ *NDM*, 17 Dec 1953.

¹⁷⁶ *NDM*, 13 April 1956.

launch their proposals just after we have made known our claims a few days before this meeting'.¹⁷⁷ In 1953, moreover, a fierce dispute between the Horticultural Society and the Gardeners' Society over which organisation should hold a garden show threatened to split the community association into factions, prompting one tenants' association official to argue that unless the situation was resolved there would be 'two of every organisation in Peterlee, with everyone fighting against each other'.¹⁷⁸ In December 1955 Reverend Beevers, chairman of the community association, protested about how different sections of the association were constantly at 'each other's throats': 'These individuals, in a quest for their own power and doubtful glory, are destroying unity among us, and give to outsiders the impression that we are a town full of enemies and backbiters'.¹⁷⁹

Such difficulties were undoubtedly exacerbated by the lack of balance among the age groups. In Aycliffe, of the families occupying the first 305 houses, which amounted to 996 people in total, 333 of them were children under 16 years of age; 182 were aged under four. Indeed, Aycliffe's very young population and consequent high birth rate was highlighted by the fact that in 1954 the rate was 61.2 per thousand compared to 17.3 per thousand in the county as a whole.¹⁸⁰ It was thus apparent that the earliest immigrants to the towns were generally young married couples with very young families.

Although not unforeseen by the new towns' planners, it undoubtedly caused problems, not least of which was the provision of schools. In Peterlee, the master plan specified that schools would have to be planned ahead of needs to accommodate the disproportionate number of children expected.¹⁸¹ However, in both Aycliffe and Peterlee, despite knowledge of an impending influx of young couples and their offspring, very little was done to provide satisfactory space. The corporation maintained that schools were to be planned in relation to residential areas, primarily

¹⁷⁷ *NE*, 18 Dec 1952.

¹⁷⁸ *NE*, 4 Dec 1953.

¹⁷⁹ *NDM*, 20 Dec 1955.

¹⁸⁰ DCRO F/22 1961 *Census (County Durham)*, p. 3.

¹⁸¹ PDC, *Master Plan*, p. 37.

to minimise the danger of small children being forced to cross busy roads.¹⁸² Yet a full six years after Peterlee was designated not a single school had been built; a number of children were travelling to Horden to primary schools with grammar school children travelling more than eight miles to Hartlepool.¹⁸³ It was a similar story in Aycliffe where until the mid-1950s the only school in the new town was a portion of a corporation-built flat.¹⁸⁴

The age imbalance was further illustrated by the fact that in both towns less than two per cent of the population were retired pensioners.¹⁸⁵ Aycliffe Development Corporation was concerned that unless some older migrants with adolescent or grown-up families could be attracted there would be few people to act as guiding examples to the younger residents.¹⁸⁶ 'There are hardly any grandmothers at Newton Aycliffe', Beveridge told a group of newspaper reporters in 1951, 'I would like to see, on a large scale, the arrival of more grandparents, and not just at weekends'.¹⁸⁷ In 1954 the corporation agreed to allocate houses to relatives of the town's residents. This had the dual purpose of encouraging younger families to settle more quickly and to assume full citizenship of the town by depriving them of the need to visit parents in what they would always look upon as their 'home town'.¹⁸⁸ By 1960, however, despite a waiting list of more than 120 in the town, a mere four per cent of houses specially designed for aged persons had been built.¹⁸⁹

A further obstacle to the creation of balance communities was that a large proportion of the working population, once they arrived in the towns began to be perceived as emulating the manners and lifestyles of the middle classes. For some commentators this was evidence that the new towns were models of the 'embourgeoisement' process: working-class households, once they had fled their former environments were adopting character traits long associated with the middle

¹⁸² Ibid p. 23.

¹⁸³ PDC, 1954 AR, p. 347.

¹⁸⁴ NT/Ay/1/1/6 ADC, BM, 30 April 1951.

¹⁸⁵ ADC, 1953 AR, p. 6.

¹⁸⁶ DCRO NT/AP/7/3/1 *The Newtonian* (November 1952).

¹⁸⁷ *Durham Chronicle*, 16 June 1951.

¹⁸⁸ ADC, 1954 AR, p. 8.

¹⁸⁹ ADC, 1960 AR, p. 8.

classes.¹⁹⁰ Hudson and Johnson claimed that the modern lifestyles associated with the new towns attracted the type of person who was more suited to the consumerist, self-interested way of life than were their former neighbours who were content to remain in older villages.¹⁹¹ Recently, however, such a prognosis has been questioned. Clapson pointed to the fact that working-class men still generally frequented clubs rather than pubs upon arriving in the towns.¹⁹² The political persuasion of working-class people living in the new towns did not alter to any great extent, moreover, even after they had been residing in the towns for many years.¹⁹³ In Peterlee, a Conservative party candidate has never won a council seat to this day.

vi) Similarities and contrasts in housing

Both Aycliffe and Peterlee's early housing programmes were similar in that both corporations encountered difficulties in attracting building labour and materials following the war. Following Lubetkin's departure from Peterlee in 1950, moreover, both towns' housing estates were designed by the same architect, which explains the generic similarity between their early housing. The tenants of both towns were also averse to paying the much higher rents charged compared to what they had been paying in nearby villages. For the first 15 years of their existence, both towns also contained an extremely youthful demographic, which impacted on attempts to create balanced communities.

There were subtle but significant dissimilarities, however, that ensured that the towns' housing programmes and the people who inhabited the towns were distinct in character. In Aycliffe the proposed population target figure agreed to by Silkin and South-West Durham's local authorities informed nearly every decision the corporation made with regards to housing: the village green

¹⁹⁰ Heraud, 'Social Class', p. 53.

¹⁹¹ Hudson and Johnson, 'New Towns', p. 311

¹⁹² Clapson, *Invincible*, pp. 180-184.

¹⁹³ *Ibid*, pp. 202-203

layout of the town; the district heating scheme; the density of the housing estates – they were all affected by the low population figure.

The overarching problem in Peterlee was that the extraction of coal took precedence over housing requirements. In 1955 Williams remarked that other new towns' housing programmes had been a cakewalk compared to Peterlee's. Not only had the corporation to contend with creating housing estates above an active coalfield, it soon became clear that many of Peterlee's potential inhabitants were unequivocal in their determination not to move to the town.

