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Stevenage

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This document is an extract from Chapter 5. Stevenage

Stevenage

Silkin's New Towns

Between 1946 and 1950 Lewis Silkin, the first Labour minister of town and country planning, had designated no fewer than 13 New Towns.¹ He had also secured the designation of the fourteenth, though the actual legal formalities did not occur until shortly after he left office at the 1950 general election. By any standards this was a remarkable achievement, quite unparalleled on the peaceful path or any variants of it before or since. This and the next chapter will focus on the Hertfordshire New Towns, which owe their existence to him, and Chapter 7 will give a briefer discussion of the other New Towns. However, we begin by outlining his complete programme in order to make fuller sense of what will shortly follow.

As shown in the last chapter, the Abercrombie Greater London Plan proposed eight new 'satellite towns' to serve Greater London. Eight New Towns were duly designated by Silkin during 1946–9, though only two were at the actual locations the Abercrombie team had selected. The programme began in one of the locations his planning team had selected at Stevenage in November 1946 and other New Towns followed in quick succession. Crawley, Hemel Hempstead and Harlow (the latter being the other 'Abercrombie location') were designated in January, February and March 1947. Hatfield and Welwyn Garden City then followed in March 1948, Basildon in January 1949 and Bracknell in June of the same year. A further six were designated in other parts of Britain. In Scotland East Kilbride and Glenrothes were designated in May 1947 and June 1948. In County Durham Newton Aycliffe was designated in April 1947 and Peterlee in March 1948. Cwmbran then followed in south Wales in November 1949 and Corby in Northamptonshire in April 1950.

These bald facts about how the programme unfolded inevitably give the story a sense of orderliness that was rarely apparent when viewed at closer quarters. In fact, the New Towns programme opened at Stevenage with a public relations disaster so serious that it could have destroyed the whole programme before it

had even begun. This was despite over a year's work that ought, perhaps, to have better prepared the ground. Well before the 1945 election, the wartime coalition government's minister of town and country planning (W.S. Morrison) began actively examining the satellite-town locations recommended by Abercrombie in the 1944 Greater London Plan. From autumn 1944 Morrison's civil servants, chiefly Samuel Beaufoy, started consultations with local officials about the Plan's various proposals.²

Making Stevenage's master plan

Stevenage soon emerged during 1945 as the front-runner of Abercrombie's proposed satellite towns for early action. Seeking to advance the idea (even though the appropriate instrument for their development was as yet undecided), it was agreed within the ministry to prepare a master plan for such a town at Stevenage. It did not become the official master plan (in slightly modified form) until 1950 but was in nearly all essentials devised in 1945–6. Beaufoy originally wanted Thomas Sharp, pre-war scourge of the garden city movement but now a well-respected private planning consultant, to prepare the plan and had approached him informally in February 1945. Beaufoy's colleagues were, however, unhappy with making such decisions this way and the Treasury refused to sanction the funds to hire a consultant.³ Instead an internal ministry team was set to work in July 1945. In the absence of New Town powers (not to be available for another year), legal authority for government to plan a New Town came from an obscure clause, never previously used, of the 1932 Town and Country Planning Act. Though regarded as legally rather dubious, the ministry considered it gave sufficient authority to allow the minister at least to initiate the development of a garden city.

The ministry planning team was led by the 37-year-old head of the ministry's planning technique section, Gordon Stephenson (Figure 5.1), mentioned in the last chapter in connection with his wartime work in progressing what became the New Towns programme.⁴ He was a University of Liverpool-trained architect who, after graduation, had studied at the Institut d'Urbanisme in Paris in 1930–32, simultaneously becoming the first Briton to work in the atelier of the iconic modernist architect and planner Le Corbusier. Also one of the first British planners to visit the Soviet Union (for a two-month period in 1934), he studied city planning in 1936–8 at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in the United States. No other British planner at that time, certainly of his age, had such widely based experience of his subject. His colleagues, including two other Liverpool architect-planners, Terry Kennedy and Peter Shephard, were mainly

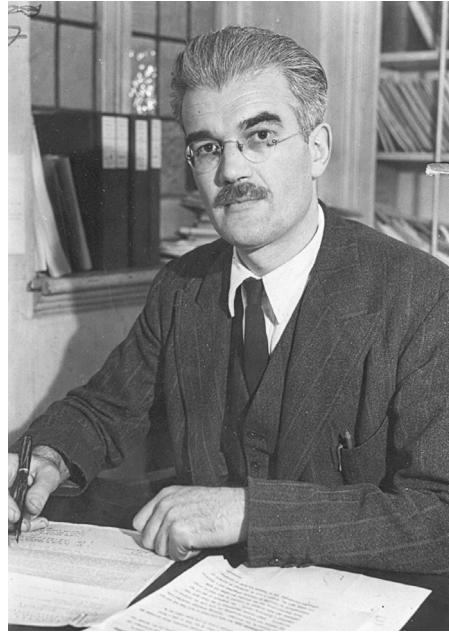


Figure 5.1 The leader of the team which in 1945–6 made the first plan for Stevenage, Gordon Stephenson, photographed in November 1947. He chose not to remain as Stevenage's chief architect and planner but had a significant later involvement as a private consultant. (Liverpool University Special Collections and Archives)

similar in age. The others were an older surveyor, Tom Coote, and an engineer, Eric Claxton, seconded from Surrey County Council, who, in the event, had a bigger impact than any of the others on the town that followed.⁵

As mentioned in Chapter 4, Stephenson, Shephard and Coote had worked with Abercrombie on the Greater London Plan, experience which fed directly into their work at Stevenage. Stephenson and Coote had identified sites for Abercrombie's proposed satellite towns and it was they who had selected Stevenage. Stephenson and Shephard worked on the principles of community planning which were adopted in the Stevenage Plan and Shephard had also worked on the indicative plan for the proposed (but never built) Abercrombie satellite town of Ongar.⁶ Stephenson had overseen the whole planning process at Stevenage, leading meetings with local and other interested parties (where necessary aided by other civil servants), supplying ideas and acting as critic. Coote prepared the site and ownership survey. Shephard largely elaborated the detailed design, with Claxton providing the engineering input. Kennedy's great practical experience in designing and realising large building projects ensured that the team's bold ideas did not stray too far into fancy.

Stevenage in 1946 was a small country town of around 6,200 inhabitants straddling the Great North Road and with a small railway station on the London and North Eastern Railway mainline out of King's Cross station. The town was

built mainly of local brick and had grown up gradually and organically, with an underlying unity of building materials, vernacular style and scale. There was also a pleasing informality (which is still visible) that came with varied building and roof lines set on each side of the wide main street, with many mature trees. Although there had been some more recent buildings, such as a local cinema, which seemed to jar with the historic character, this had not 'spoil' the small town and it had not suffered any destruction during the war.

Functionally it provided shops and other services for the surrounding, predominantly agricultural area. There were also several comfortable historic inns, some of which had provided accommodation for visitors since its days as a coaching stop. Rather as the areas of Letchworth and Welwyn Garden City had been before their development had begun, it was surrounded largely by farms and some woodland. There were a few small clusters of houses and other buildings at several places, but, other than Shephall Green, these were not big enough to be described as villages. Two country houses – Aston House and Shephalbury – lay a little south of Stevenage town and its countryside also contained a few smaller gentry houses and rather more farmsteads. There were also nine factories in and around the town, mainly very recent arrivals.⁷ The largest three of these manufactured gantries and conveyors, school furniture and similar products, and motorcycles. Together all the factories employed around 2,000 workers, around three-quarters of them living in Stevenage. The other main employers were in services (mainly retailing and professional services and transport) and agriculture. Though not a commuter town, some of its middle-class population travelled by train to London to work.

Overall, therefore, most of the Stevenage area before the New Town had changed only relatively slowly over time. While he was involved in making the plan, Stephenson recalled meeting a farm worker who lived where he worked and rarely travelled more than the two miles from his home to Stevenage High Street.⁸ He had been to London only rarely, and not at all since 1939. On the other hand, against such seemingly unchanging ways of living were set the town's growing numbers of metropolitan commuters and the surge in wartime local industrial growth. These were signs of accelerating change, quite regardless of what was about to occur in the form of the New Town.

Like the Ongar example that Shepheard had worked up for the Greater London Plan, the 1946 Stephenson plan for Stevenage was based around six residential neighbourhood units, each planned for roughly 10,000 inhabitants (exactly so in Stevenage's case), with a single large industrial area (Figure 5.2).⁹ The main railway line north from King's Cross station separated the industrial

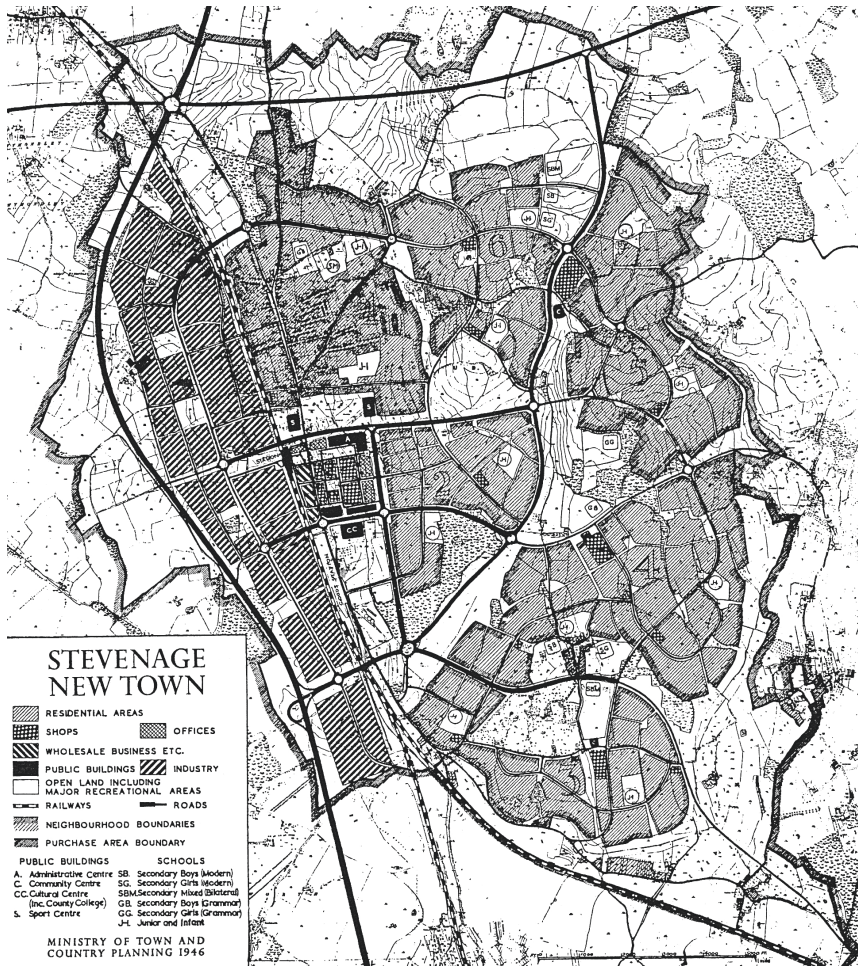


Figure 5.2 The Stephenson team’s plan defined the key features of the New Town. It formed the basis of the 1949 official master plan and was significantly modified only in 1966. (author’s collection)

(to the west) and the residential (to the east) areas. An entirely new town centre was planned, also to the east, lying between the residential areas and the industrial area. There was some criticism of this location, which was ‘off-centre’ as far as the residential areas were concerned, though the planners argued that its position between the employment and living areas would maximise use of central shopping and services. The old town of Stevenage was incorporated within neighbourhood 1, north of where Stevenage’s new centre was to be. The planners thought (correctly) that this would allow the attractive historic qualities of the original town to be protected, since otherwise the old town would be the obvious

location for major shops and other town centre activities. The Great North Road, which bisected the old town, was to be entirely bypassed on the western boundary of the new town, removing through traffic and giving easy access to the industrial area without vehicles needing to enter the rest of the town.

Good standard primary distributor roads without direct frontage development were also planned for vehicle circulation within the town. Despite this, it was not the truly car-orientated plan that it might now appear to have been. Very high cycle use was predicted (up to 50 per cent of all movements between inner residential areas and both the town centre and industrial area, based on estimates of contemporary patterns in Welwyn Garden City). It was suggested, largely at Claxton's prompting, that a proper cycleway system might be provided.¹⁰ Significant numbers were also expected to walk from nearby residential areas to the new town centre. For the centre itself, the team very radically suggested that it might be pedestrianised (another idea rehearsed in the Ongar plan).

Completed in July 1946, the Stephenson plan thus presented a quite detailed vision of an actual New Town, one that, with a few changes, was to shape Stevenage's development for many years. All that was missing was the legal authority to put it into practice. The Attlee government and Lewis Silkin were, however, reasonably confident that this would be a straightforward process. How completely wrong they were.

'... a first class press story'

During the plan's preparation Stephenson and his team liaised with local council officials on technical matters relevant to the plan. Although those officials probably kept their council leaders informed, it was some time before direct meetings began between non-technical civil servants dealing with the bigger political questions and the elected representatives of the local authorities. Even then, however, Beaufoy and his colleagues preferred to deal with Hertfordshire County Council and the Executive Planning Committees for different sections of the county. Legally, county councils did not become the actual planning authorities until after the 1947 Town and Country Planning Act became operative. However, since the 1930s many county councils, including Hertfordshire, had begun to encourage the creation of executive committees, bringing together the district and municipal boroughs which were the actual planning authorities on a voluntary basis.

The aim was to pool their legal powers and share them with the county council to enable co-ordinated planning across the county. It was an interim

measure that, by its nature, confused planning responsibilities, although it gave the ministry an apparently simpler means of consulting with local councils over post-war plans such as those for the New Towns. But, significantly, ministry officials did not usually consult directly with the district councils themselves until much later. This proved a serious mistake in the small country town of Stevenage and its surrounding area, which, by the spring of 1945, was set to be the government's first satellite town.¹¹ In Stevenage, as in most proposed future New Town areas, there would be at least some local resentment about actual or feared loss of property, especially from farmers, and about the more general inevitable dramatic changes to an established way of life.

Reluctance to address this at Stevenage may simply have been a product of inexperience at a time when government departments had got used, during wartime emergency conditions, to taking peremptory action without public consultation. But there may also have been other factors specific to Stevenage. In July 1945 two senior ministry officials met Walter Gaunt, former estates manager at Letchworth in its early days, future member of Lord Reith's New Towns Committee and, at the time, chairman of Hertfordshire County Council's planning committee. Privately Gaunt told them he thought Stevenage the best location for a satellite town but warned of local unrest, especially from farmers. He also showed that he had not lost the reputation for plain speaking which, as we saw in Chapter 2, had upset many during his days with the Letchworth Company. Thus he also advised the ministry to steer clear of the affected area's main local authority, Stevenage Urban District Council, which he thought 'a stupid body'.¹² He seems to have feared that the council would be deliberately obstructive. The officials were surprised at this directness, but it certainly appears to have put them on their guard.

It was not until the autumn of 1945 (by which time Silkin had become minister) that a ministry official, Beaufoy, first met Stevenage's local elected representatives. Although it was intended to be confidential, a garbled account of the meeting appeared in the local press, worsening mutual suspicions.¹³ Yet, despite frequent consultations with Stevenage's officials, the ministry's small planning team prepared the outline plan for a satellite town (ultimately of 60,000 people) during late 1945 and early 1946 without further incident. The local council was not, in fact, averse to significant growth. In the late 1930s it had already planned for Stevenage to expand to a population of well over 30,000 (roughly five times the 1946 population).¹⁴ Pressed by a Labour councillor, Philip Ireton, a railway clerk who was enthusiastic and well-informed about town planning (and certainly not 'stupid'), the council had established a special

development committee in 1944. Again at his prompting, it gave guarded support the following year to the Abercrombie proposal that Stevenage should be a new satellite town.

Yet, for all his energy and vision, Ireton's was not the only voice on the council.¹⁵ There were a few other white-collar railway workers, mainly Labour or sympathetic to the party, who broadly favoured the project. However, they were not a majority and the council also included a few neutrals and others who opposed it with varying degrees of vehemence. They included a stone-deaf farmer aged about 80 who said nothing in meetings, hated the idea of the New Town and could be relied upon to oppose the ministry. There were a few others who were also instinctive opponents. It might have been these councillors that Gaunt had in mind; at any rate, this new stage of the peaceful path was to be anything but.

Lack of real information greatly strengthened the hand of those who opposed the proposals, particularly as local planning applications began to be rejected from February 1946 because they might cut across future proposals for the satellite town. In early April the writer E.M. Forster, who knew the area well and had used it as the setting for his celebrated novel *Howard's End*, broadcast his own opposition to the satellite town, calling it instead a 'meteorite town'.¹⁶ Already, a 'hands off our homes' poster campaign had begun.¹⁷ On 25 April 179 homeowners received official letters telling them that the sites of their properties, mainly in the Fairview Road area, were going to be used for the satellite town. Though the letters offered to buy properties by agreement, it was also made clear that compulsion was ultimately an option. Although many affected homes lay in the proposed industrial zone west of the railway (subsequently reduced in size, so that the houses are still there), this element of the plan meant, bizarrely, that the New Town was instantly equated, during a grave housing shortage, with the proposed – though never implemented – demolition of perfectly habitable dwellings.

Astonishingly, it was only later that same day that the ministry planning team finally met the council face-to-face to explain their planning proposals.¹⁸ Beaufoy was pleased with the meeting but sensed a dominant mood of 'polite antagonism'. Silkin himself had already agreed to visit the area, meet the council and address a local public meeting (Figure 5.3). Despite mounting opposition, he seemed confident of carrying the day and requested that a story be prepared for release to the world's press to announce the triumph he anticipated: '[t]here is a first class press story here on May 6th [the day of his visit]: "A new town is born"'.¹⁹ His assessment was prescient, though not initially in anything like the way that he had hoped. Others more accurately foresaw immediate events. On



Figure 5.3 Minister of town and country planning, Lewis Silkin, speaking at a difficult public meeting in Stevenage on 6 May 1946. The wavy-haired man in the dark jacket seated beyond Silkin is Samuel Beaufoy, the ministry's planning official, who had been liaising with local councils in the area. (Stevenage Museum P2635)

30 April the London *Evening News* carried the grim headline 'DOOM TOWN PROTEST RISING'. As yet the protesters had no formal organisation that brought together their concerns, but the following day the Stevenage Residents' Protection Association was formed and quickly attracted members.

Throughout his visit Silkin heard many objections, especially from local people. There were two main sources of public opposition to the New Town. The first came from farmers who were to lose their livelihoods in the area and those residents who (it seemed at the time) would lose their homes. Yet many more general concerns were also voiced at the evening meeting. The essence of them was that Stevenage was bearing the costs of a national experiment, that its history was being uprooted and that it was all being done in a dictatorial fashion. Over 350 people were crammed into the Stevenage Town Hall with (possibly) as many as 3,000 people outside, listening avidly to the loudspeaker relay on the old High Street. Inside the hall, although there were some cheers, things did not go well for the minister, his own speech frequently being interrupted by jeering.²⁰ He tried to appeal to the audience's highest instincts:

During the war years we in this country stood together and suffered together, whilst fighting for an ideal, for a democracy in which we all believed. I am sure that this spirit is not dead in Stevenage, and if you are satisfied that this project is worth while, and for the benefit of large numbers of your fellow human beings, you will be prepared to play your part to make it a success.²¹

Yet such arguments did not assuage the protesters, who thought him profoundly anti-democratic. Nor did Silkin's own attempts to deal with interrupters always help: the riposte to one that 'it's no use jibbing, it's going to be done' was countered with 'Hark, hark the dictator'.²² At another point there was a loud cry of 'Gestapo' from one protester. Towards the end of his speech Silkin stated that 'The project will go forward, because it must go forward. It will do so more surely and more smoothly, and more successfully with your help and co-operation.' He also assured listeners that soon 'People from all over the world will come to Stevenage to see how we here in this country are building for the new way of life.'²³ He left the hall to find that a tyre of his official car had been deflated and (it was suspected) sugar put in the petrol tank.

'Silkingrad'

For several years the deflated tyre and disabled engine were more apt as metaphors for Stevenage's fortunes than were Silkin's expressed hopes at the stormy meeting of 6 May. The New Towns Bill received its second reading only two days after Silkin's visit to Stevenage and did not become law until August 1946.²⁴ The government publicity machine duly swung into action, but for several years local reality scarcely matched the official narrative that was being promoted. The early mishaps of the meeting and what had preceded it were not easily overcome and new problems (several partly of the ministry's own creation) were to arise, including a badly presented case for the New Town at the public inquiry on the designation, staffing and leadership mistakes or misfortunes and a serious financial crisis. Local opposition to the New Town was actually not as numerically strong as might be supposed. A poll of local electors held by the council (at which only 52 per cent actually voted) showed 1,316 entirely opposed, 913 in favour and 282 giving qualified support,²⁵ while the Residents' Protection Association grew in strength to over 1,100 members by the summer. Yet it was the vehemence rather than just the scale of opposition that was important. It did not help that the advisory committee established in August 1946 to oversee early progress on the New Town included only two councillors from Hertfordshire, only one (Ireton) from Stevenage itself.

In October 1946 a local public inquiry in Stevenage considered objections to the proposed order to designate it formally as a New Town under the new Act. Unlike the May public meeting, at which the raw feelings of the original residents of Stevenage had been expressed, this related more to the planning arguments for and against the New Town and the actual boundaries of the designated area. It therefore involved discussion of specific matters such as the fear of the New Town coalescing with nearby towns, details of how and on what terms existing farmers would be displaced and implications for drainage and water supply. Silkin's peculiarly contradictory legal position as both promoter and judge of the scheme limited the rigour with which his ministry could simultaneously press his own arguments in favour. Even so, the ministry was poorly represented, with no positive advocacy of the New Town and no cross-examination of objectors. Some piquancy was given to the proceedings by the appearance of Ewart G. Culpin to articulate the local council's opposition.²⁶ As shown in the last chapter, he had been a leader of the Garden City Association's revisionist move towards garden suburbs before 1914, and had also been a Labour colleague of Silkin and Herbert Morrison on the London County Council between the wars. But for Culpin, just a few months before his death, this was personal in another way – Stevenage was his birthplace and he considered that approving the New Town would encourage a large urban agglomeration of Stevenage, Welwyn Garden City and Hatfield.

The inspector's confidential report to Silkin, though expressing surprise at the ministry's apparent complacency in failing to contest any objections, accepted that the counter-arguments held some validity.²⁷ Although he did not say that Stevenage should not be a New Town, he felt that Stevenage would *not* be a good setting in which to launch the whole programme. He recommended that this particular New Town should be delayed until the more serious objections (which had come from the water and river authorities and were about proposed arrangements for surface drainage) had been addressed. The ministry's chief inspector, reading the Stevenage inspector's report, added his own view that the size of the New Town should be reduced.

These misgivings (which were not, of course, made public) were certainly not what Silkin wanted to hear. With cabinet backing he decided to address the perceived (though not actually serious) drainage problems but otherwise press on regardless. Beaufoy wrote to the local authorities in the designated area explaining the minister's reasons and the designation order was confirmed in early November 1946, further hardening local opposition.²⁸ The Stevenage New Town Development Corporation was formally created a few weeks later.²⁹ Its composition reproduced the advisory committee set up in August 1946, with



Figure 5.4 Shortly after Stevenage New Town was formally designated in December 1946, local protesters replaced the station name-board with the name 'Silkingrad'. Donations to the Residents' Protection Association flowed in as the campaign was publicised nationally and internationally. (Stevenage Museum P9316)

Clough Williams-Ellis remaining as chairman. He was an architect and Welsh landowner who created the fanciful village of Portmeirion on his estate, a fact which frightened some who feared that Stevenage might suffer the same fate. He was also a charismatic advocate of the idea of planning and of rural protection. Yet he was not a natural chairman of any New Town, let alone one that would be able to do almost nothing for several months.

Shortly after the New Town was formally designated, two local residents who were set to lose their properties, with the help of some friends, surreptitiously put painted hardboard signs bearing the name 'Silkingrad' on the Stevenage railway station entrance and platform nameboards (Figure 5.4).³⁰ In the first snow of what would soon become the worst winter in living memory this new name, coined by one of the perpetrators, Clarence Elliott, consciously evoked Soviet totalitarianism. It seemed to the opposition movement to express perfectly how local interests were being disregarded in a dictatorial fashion. The action was quickly publicised and the story soon spread around the world, attracting support and funds for a legal challenge to Silkin's decision that, days later, was lodged in the High Court.

The Residents' Protection Association and the local branch of the National Farmers' Union wanted to quash the designation order.³¹ They argued that Silkin's advocacy of the New Town at the public meeting in May had led him to treat objections in a biased way at the public inquiry. The High Court upheld this view in February 1947. Silkin and the government considered their options, but quickly decided they had to fight this decision in the Court of Appeal, otherwise not only would the entire Greater London New Towns programme very probably have been stopped in its tracks³² but it would also have been far more difficult for Silkin personally to steer the major Town and Country Planning Bill then before parliament into law. Silkin triumphed in the Appeal Court in March 1947, whereupon the Protection Association raised more funds to carry the battle to the House of Lords. Eventually, in July, this supreme court decided in favour of the New Town and, at last, it seemed, the new Development Corporation could do its job of developing the new Stevenage.

'Sweet Stevenage! loveliest town they never built'

Or at least it could try to. The impact of the dollar crisis of 1947 put great pressure on public spending and work on all the New Towns was severely curtailed. Despite the early start at Stevenage, legal delays, during which the Development Corporation could do little more than mark time, had swallowed up that advantage. Now limitations on capital spending and staff appointments created another hiatus. Stevenage was in a worse position than any of the other three London New Towns which had by then been designated. In October 1947 an unknown poet published 'The Deserted Satellite' (mimicking Oliver Goldsmith's 'The Deserted Village') in the political journal *New Statesman and Nation*.³³ The verses satirised Stevenage as the 'loveliest town they never built', the 'Fairest of London's stillborn satellites'.

Stevenage was also to suffer other, more specific setbacks.³⁴ In November 1947 the first chairman of the Development Corporation, Clough Williams-Ellis, resigned in frustration at his own inability to achieve anything. His departure signalled the start of a phase of great discontinuity in the Development Corporation's leadership: his successor, the former civil servant Thomas Gardiner, took the post for only a year and *his* successor, the Reverend Charles Jenkinson, the well-known and widely respected socialist leader of Leeds City Council, died after a few months in August 1949. The most disastrous appointment of all then followed in the person of Monica Felton. There was nothing wrong with her record. She had been a member of the Reith Committee and the original deputy chairman to Williams-Ellis at Stevenage. Silkin then promoted her to

chair the Development Corporation of the coal-mining New Town of Peterlee in County Durham before bringing her back to Stevenage in August 1949. She and Silkin had served together on the London County Council from 1937 and were very close personally (she was very probably his mistress during at least some of this time).³⁵ Not uncommonly for many of those associated with the early New Towns programme, she had strong left-wing (in her case Marxist) sympathies. She also possessed very great abilities: a strong intellect with clear views about planning and a strong character capable of dominating committees, badgering civil servants and getting things done. The real problem was that she also showed astonishingly poor judgement at times, most notably at Peterlee, where her style sharply divided local opinion between those who judged her strong and fearless and those who thought her a dictator. Despite working in the extremely male-dominated local society of the County Durham coalfield, she also allowed herself to become the subject of scurrilous rumours by being perceived as overfamiliar with some of her male staff. This might be viewed differently today, but she was judged by the standards of the time. However, the circumstances of her undoing were entirely unambiguous. She was absent without permission when she was supposed to be reporting Stevenage's progress to a parliamentary committee in June 1951. Her actual location at this time was also profoundly relevant: she was in North Korea on a Soviet-organised six-week trip at the height of the Korean War. This was a period of great paranoia about the Soviet Union (the defection of two senior British diplomats, Burgess and Maclean, about to be unmasked as Soviet spies, occurred at almost exactly the same time). It is doubtful whether even Silkin would have been able to have saved her career and political reputation. By this time, however, he had been replaced with the minister of local government and planning Hugh Dalton, who summarily dismissed her a few days later. She was the only New Town chairman ever to be sacked and there were later calls for her to be indicted for treason. Silkin might no longer be minister but, as far as Stevenage was concerned, Felton's real Soviet connections now seemed to be perpetuating the idea of 'Silkingrad'.

This poverty of leadership of the Stevenage Board in the early years might not have mattered as much if the general manager had been a stronger figure. Unfortunately, the legal challenges had made it difficult to attract an outstanding candidate.³⁶ Eventually, in 1947, the second chairman was able to appoint Major-General Alan Duff, who had had a distinguished military career, latterly as a senior administrative officer (several of the first generation of general managers were from senior military backgrounds). Yet, despite his high rank and unflinching courteousness and decency, Duff was not a natural leader in a civilian context. He

found it difficult to respond sympathetically to the new residents' organisations, bolstering the idea that the New Town was a remote and unresponsive organisation. Neither could he counteract the severe discontinuities higher up or the lack of cohesion within the Corporation itself. Early uncertainties had also contributed to difficulties in the retention and effective team-working of other officials, not least in planning.

For a while it seemed that several of the Stephenson planning team might continue as officers of the new Development Corporation. Stephenson was tempted by the post of chief architect and planner but in July 1947 declined, disappointing both Williams-Ellis and the ministry.³⁷ Shortly afterwards he moved to a career that combined academia and consultancy, first in Liverpool and then in the Commonwealth, based first in Toronto and subsequently in Perth in Western Australia. (He did, though, play one significant further role in planning Stevenage, as we will see.) Shephard was to have been his deputy and actually held this post for a short time. He was, however, unable to work with the chief architect appointed instead of Stephenson, Clifford Holliday, who at the outset appeared to want a different master plan.³⁸ The only member of Stephenson's original team who stayed in the long term was Claxton, who spent the remainder of his career at Stevenage. Despite his own periodic frustration with Holliday and others in the Development Corporation and beyond, he did much to uphold and deliver the promise of the 1946 plan.

Naturally, the publication of what would become the first official master plan in 1949 and the subsequent public inquiry provided some scope for a partial re-run of earlier battles with the Residents' Protection Association.³⁹ But the Association's impact was no longer as great as it had been in 1946–47, when its opposition had almost sunk the entire project. The Development Corporation now gave much more attention to public relations and a local information bureau was opened in October 1948. The main changes to the 1946 plan were to the primary distribution road system, including, eventually, the dropping of the proposed primary road along the Fairlands Valley.⁴⁰ The factory area was also slightly reduced in size and, although the industrial zoning for the houses in Fairview Road was not yet actually dropped, it was made clear that these dwellings would be removed only in the very long term (which never came).

However, Holliday's early interest in resiting the town centre more centrally within the town and the residential areas, on the Bedwell–Pin Green ridge, did not survive long. The then deputy architect Shephard, who had played the key role in the 1946 design, intensely disliked this idea.⁴¹ He recruited his former colleagues in the ministry to press Holliday to maintain the original vision. The

plan was approved by the ministry in 1950. It was never seen as an absolute final blueprint for the New Town and underwent regular revisions, most fairly minor, every five or six years. The most important of the changes will be highlighted in later sections.

Gradually, then, with the establishment of an agency to develop the New Town and the acceptance of its plan, Stevenage had moved if not yet to reality then to being a more robust vision. The 1947 financial constraints were eased by the effects of the Marshall Plan and a massive American loan, but other problems of labour and material shortages remained. Moreover, some officials were also slow to respond to new opportunities as the 1940s ended. The result was that early housing output (only 28 permanent dwellings completed by 31 March 1951) was derisory, rather worse than in the other London New Towns, even though they had been designated after Stevenage.⁴²

Building the New Town

Following its painfully protracted gestation, birth and early infancy, Stevenage experienced sturdy, at times prodigious, growth throughout the 1950s and, despite fluctuations, the 1960s. The Felton fiasco finally brought much better leadership to the Development Corporation.⁴³ Thomas Bennett was appointed as chairman and seemed a good candidate to be able to give the stability and direction that had been lacking. He was also chairman of Crawley New Town (which was performing much better than Stevenage) and a successful architect with expertise in managing large building projects. This led him to intrude more than necessary into professional and technical matters, often irritating officials; yet his proved a caretaker appointment and, on doctor's advice, he resigned after two years. It was only in 1953 that real continuity of leadership arrived in the form of Roydon Dash, a retired civil servant who was already deputy chairman at Bracknell New Town and remained chairman at Stevenage until 1962. Despite varying judgements about him, it seems that Dash was able to get the best out of the Development Corporation. This was especially so after Duff retired and was replaced as general manager by R.S. ('Sedge') MacDougall, previously county treasurer of Hertfordshire and better attuned to the sensitivities of local politics and society.

As this more effective organisation gradually evolved, so its operations moved into higher gear. First the process of buying the farmland needed for development began to accelerate. The Corporation had powers to acquire, by agreement or compulsion, all 6,156 acres of the designated area at its pre-New Town value,⁴⁴ but it still required central government approval and money on



Figure 5.5 Early houses built by the Development Corporation on the Stony Hall estate in Neighbourhood 1 (Old Town), completed in the early 1950s. (author photograph)

a year-by-year basis to do it. By 1952 about a third of the designated area had been bought by the Development Corporation and by 1960 roughly half. By 1980, when the Development Corporation was wound up, about four-fifths of the designated area had been purchased. It was estimated that about two-fifths of acquisitions had involved compulsory powers.

There was normally a further delay before ownership of acquired land could become full vacant possession, allowing construction to begin in earnest. Even so, housing completions rose significantly in the early 1950s and then soared. From the mid-1950s Stevenage was averaging around 1,000 house completions a year. By 31 March 1960 8,783 houses had been built by the Development Corporation.⁴⁵ A few others had been built by the local council (to meet pre-existing housing needs) and by private developers, but these together were rather less than a tenth of the total construction. The New Town proper was well underway and no longer a mere vision. Apart from further development in the Old Town (neighbourhood 1) (Figure 5.5), the first entirely new neighbourhood units began to take shape with developments in neighbourhood 2 (Bedwell), neighbourhood 3 (Broadwater) and neighbourhood 4 (Shephall). Neighbourhood 5 (Chells) was also started by the end of the 1950s.

Building was not, of course, just a governmental process undertaken solely by the Development Corporation. It also involved private building firms tendering for and undertaking the various construction contracts. A major problem in the

early post-war years was the sourcing of sufficient building materials at a time when the big cities were tackling their own housing needs and other New Towns were being built. The initial desire was to build as much as possible in brick, but as housebuilding began to accelerate nationally from the end of the 1940s bricks proved to be in short supply. Practically every other material was also scarce at one time or another. Even the supply of hardcore for foundations ran short as the rubble from London's wartime bomb damage ran out.

Where possible, local builders were used, but they lacked the capacity to handle really big contracts. As a result national contractors soon dominated, especially Terson, Carlton, Wimpey and (later) Mowlem.⁴⁶ Between them these firms constructed about three-quarters of the more than 20,000 dwellings built for the Development Corporation between 1950 and 1980. In general, big contractors also tended to be the winners in the struggle to get hold of scarce building materials in the early 1950s.⁴⁷ As a consequence Stevenage actually did better in this respect than most other New Towns, particularly those which used more and smaller building firms. Even if material supply problems did arise, big contractors (especially Wimpey and Mowlem in Stevenage) were more able to handle the non-traditional construction methods that could offset both these and skill shortages. In early 1950s contracts Wimpey built terraces of housing in Stevenage using its 'no-fines' technique,⁴⁸ which involved concrete made without sand (that is, 'fines') being cast in situ between huge moulds to form the walls of terraces in just one pouring operation. No-fines concrete had wet-handling and insulation advantages over conventional concrete. Although the walls still needed a final render or other finish, the moulds could be used repeatedly and this method needed less skilled labour than did traditional all-brick construction.

Despite these expedients, labour supply was a continuing problem. It was very difficult in the New Towns because they were undertaking building programmes so far in excess of their existing populations, especially so in Stevenage. Many efforts were made to attract and keep construction workforces. Contractors' buses daily ferried building workers from London to Stevenage. The Development Corporation also provided hostel accommodation (initially in temporary prefabs). But the real incentive for many workers compared to working in London was the promise of getting, after just a few months of working in Stevenage, the tenancy of a good-quality new house, well equipped and with a garden. Many building workers (like thousands of others) were living in cramped, inadequate accommodation in London, with several families often sharing the most basic domestic amenities. So the prospect of decent housing secured far sooner than would be possible in London was a very real draw.

Not that this growing commitment to Stevenage meant that building workers simply complied with everything the building contractors demanded; working on large sites also facilitated large-scale labour organisation. Moreover, many London building workers already had a strong sense of the value of collective action, an attitude quickly strengthened by the very effective local leadership of the Amalgamated Union of Building Trade Workers. The most prominent single figure was a Communist bricklayer from London, Jim Collman, who came to Stevenage in 1951.⁴⁹ Though seen by some as divisive and abrasive, he was a natural leader and soon won the respect of workmates for his ability to get the better of contractors in disputes. It is clear that he encouraged other prominent union activists, such as Jim Cunningham, Bert Lowe and Pat Sullivan. Inevitably the early months of working in Stevenage had to be ones of acquiescence, but once the precious home was secured by a growing proportion of the workforce it was increasingly possible for the building unions to flex their muscles to seek improvements to what were often primitive working conditions, poor wages and the threat of arbitrary dismissal. They were particularly zealous in eliminating the so-called 'lump', whereby labour-only sub-contractors were used. This involved sub-contractors who supplied teams of nominally self-employed workers with fewer rights who accepted much poorer working conditions than those directly employed by the main contractors. While this practice did not disappear entirely, it soon became rarer in Stevenage than elsewhere.

Generally Stevenage became the most highly organised location for New Town building labour. Local union leaders estimated that around 90 per cent of Development Corporation housing was built on unionised sites,⁵⁰ and there were many short-term disputes. So, on top of its early problems, Stevenage also began to get a reputation for labour militancy. But this should not be seen simply in negative terms, as the fluctuations over time in dwelling completions were not the result of labour disruption. The reality was that the building workers brought a great deal that was positive to the emergent New Town. They and their families, many of them of Irish origin, dominated the first wave of New Towners.⁵¹ In building the places that they, their workmates and their families would call home, they had a real stake in maintaining both housing output and quality. Increasingly, as discussed later, they also provided important social and political leadership within the wider New Town community.

Attracting jobs

Although building provided most of Stevenage's early employment growth, continued expansion depended on a major increase in manufacturing jobs. As

for building workers, having a job in Stevenage was the key to being allocated a Development Corporation house. Only in this way could the central ideal of people living and working in the same town, inherited from the garden city movement and refined by Abercrombie and Reith, be fulfilled. Fortunately Stevenage was a place with clear potential for industrial growth. There were already several factories there in 1946, providing jobs for most of the existing working population.⁵² Local industrialists, eager to expand, were important supporters of the New Town project.

As noted, the master plan made generous provision for new factory development in the future Gunnels Wood industrial estate west of the railway. Industrialists were initially reluctant to set up on what were, in 1950, still largely untouched fields. Combined with the slow start to house-building, this difficulty compounded the early hesitancy in Stevenage's growth: people would not move to Stevenage without having houses and jobs available. When he became chairman Bennett pressed the Development Corporation to build the first factories and roads on the industrial estate as a catalyst. Along with some astute negotiation with potential employers and central government, the effect was remarkable. The first new factories duly opened in 1953 and a spate of new employers followed within a few years.⁵³

Almost from the outset military aerospace became the dominant manufacturing sector in Stevenage. De Havilland Propellers (later Hawker Siddeley Dynamics), already established in nearby Hatfield, opened in 1953. An even bigger prize, English Electric (later British Aircraft Corporation), arrived in 1955.⁵⁴ By 1961 they were already employing around 5,800 workers between them, representing 26 per cent of all Stevenage jobs and 37 per cent of those in manufacturing.⁵⁵ Two other important early employers that had preceded the New Town were King's (general engineering) and the Educational Supply Association. King's employed almost 1,800 workers in 1961. Another significant arrival was the photographic firm Kodak, which arrived in 1954 and employed 1,600 workers by 1961. Over the next few years further key employers moved in, including British Visqueen (later ICI Plastics), British Tabulators (later the computing conglomerate ICL), both in 1954, and Mentmore (pens and pencils) in 1956.⁵⁶ Although each of these three employed fewer than 1,000 in 1961, they subsequently exceeded that figure. In 1962 the last two of Stevenage's major employers during its New Town years arrived.⁵⁷ These were Taylor Instruments, which grew to around 1,100 employees by the early 1970s, and Bowater (packaging), which also peaked at the same time with around 600 workers.

Yet decision-making in industrial location at this time was not simply a function of Stevenage's natural and artificial advantages, the persuasiveness of the Development Corporation and industrialist preferences. Following the 1945 Distribution of Industry Act the location of factories during this period was heavily affected by central government policies.⁵⁸ From 1947 the key instrument of control was the industrial development certificate (IDC), which applied to any new factory development or extension of over 5,000 square feet. By issuing or withholding IDCs the Board of Trade could decide where new manufacturing could or could not take place. The broad policy was that the development areas (regions or parts of regions which suffered unemployment persistently higher than the national average, largely in the north, Wales and Scotland) would be most favoured. The Greater London New Towns became a secondary priority for IDCs, in instances, for example, where firms were moving out of Greater London or had other valid reasons to stay in the region. All other areas, especially the biggest cities in prosperous regions (and particularly Greater London) had lowest priority. However, IDC policy was applied with various degrees of zealotry. It depended very much on the prevailing national levels of unemployment and various political factors. On the whole (and a little oddly, given their general enthusiasm for New Towns) Labour governments were most reluctant to sanction big factory projects outside the development areas.

As Stevenage shows, however, the 1950s proved a boom period for factory development in the Greater London New Towns.⁵⁹ It helped in the granting of IDCs for factory developments in New Towns if other central ministries could be persuaded to support the cause, and in this it was useful to be able to argue that new industrial developments were of national strategic importance (which usually meant producing defence equipment and/or involved very advanced technology). Potential exports from new factories were another factor in gaining IDCs in the Greater London New Towns. These points are critical to understanding why military aerospace became so entrenched in Stevenage. English Electric had originally wanted to expand in Luton, but could not get enough skilled workers there. The Ministry of Defence suggested that they try Stevenage, also pressing the Board of Trade to grant the IDC. The firm seized on this, immediately buying the biggest site available, one of 70 acres (28 hectares). Once established, the export sales of the more successful products (often to rather repressive Middle Eastern regimes) were used to justify further expansions on the site. Although its work edged increasingly into space technology, similar considerations applied to De Havilland/Hawker-Siddeley.

What Howard might have thought about this or what former conscientious objector Osborn did think about this warlike path is not known. Yet there were local protests from trades unions and anti-nuclear organisations in Stevenage itself against its increasing dependence upon the global arms trade.⁶⁰ There was also a downside, in that changes in government thinking on product development (usually state-funded) could affect job numbers. Stevenage was adversely affected by the cancellation of both the Blue Streak battlefield missile project in 1960 and the Blue Water medium range ballistic missile in 1962.⁶¹ In the longer term, most of the other manufacturing firms that had come to the New Town also proved to have their own particular vulnerabilities, partly because they were branch factories of larger undertakings.

As in most other London New Towns in the 1960s, Stevenage's working population mainly comprised male workers doing manual jobs, typically skilled or, to a lesser extent, semi-skilled.⁶² Unskilled workers made up a smaller proportion than the national or regional average. Professional and semi-professional occupations were noticeably overrepresented, reflecting the higher expertise required in several industries (and in building and servicing the rapidly growing New Town). Employers, managers and the self-employed were a smaller proportion of working Stevenage than the national average. This reflected the dominance of a few large, mainly branch firms whose managers chose not to live in the town itself and the more general lack of a small-business 'culture'. As Stevenage started to mature as a fully fledged town during the 1960s there was also a steady rise in service employment, as retailing, public services of all kinds and a variety of office-based activities started to appear. These growing activities also began to diversify the employment base.

As this change occurred, so too did the range of labour that was needed, with more professional and other non-manual jobs and growing numbers of jobs for women and juveniles. Much of the growth in service employment mirrored the existing picture, with the non-manual equivalents of skilled and semi-skilled jobs predominating. This meant it was common for children to leave full-time education during secondary level, many before the age of 18, and enter employment in which they could then often build up their skills. In this, Stevenage was not so different from many other places and the recent industrial investment there made it more fortunate than most. Later, however, this lack of post-16 and even post-18 education would begin to matter for Stevenage's school leavers. In the heyday of the post-war boom, however, it was the plentiful nature of jobs and the absence of unemployment that were important. This was a young town of relatively affluent workers.



Figure 5.6 The first houses completed (in 1951) at Stevenage New Town at Broadview, off Sish Lane in the Old Town neighbourhood. Then, mothers had to push their children's prams and pushchairs through the mud of a construction site. This is now a much easier task and such family duties are more likely to be shared between mother and father. (author photograph)

The first neighbourhoods

But what did the New Town actually look like as its plan began to be realised, and what was it like as a place to live? Inevitably there was much uniformity, even monotony, in the face of the new Stevenage that emerged from the early 1950s (Figure 5.6). Given the short period over which the New Town appeared, it could hardly have been otherwise. The effect was compounded by the overwhelming dominance of one development agency working to a common, if evolving, set of master plan principles. Most of Stevenage consisted of large areas of low-rise public rental housing, often using fairly uniform housing designs and layouts, produced in large construction operations by a few national contractors. It was impossible under such circumstances to reproduce the varied and complex textures of the older, slower and more 'organic' process of growth more typical of Hertfordshire. The effect was also more striking than in the garden cities because they grew less quickly than did the New Towns. Even so, different parts of Stevenage New Town had noticeably different townscape 'textures'. A few examples will highlight this.

The face of the historic Old Town itself remained largely unaffected (though later road changes disrupted its visual integrity) (Figure 5.7).⁶³ Some peripheral demolitions also occurred to allow the first large area of New Town housing to be built in neighbourhood 1 (Old Town) at Stony Hall. Mainly of traditional brick construction, this area reflects the high social housing standards prevalent in the later 1940s when it was conceived and the first parts of it built. There is a greater sense of spaciousness than in later schemes, with more semi-detached houses, more short terraces, wider grass verges and trees on its roads. The six-storey Chauncy House, built in 1952, and nearby lower flat blocks were controversial exceptions that were intended for small middle-income households. (All the original flat blocks have now been redeveloped.)

From 1952 the first completely new neighbourhoods began to take shape, first at Bedwell and shortly afterwards at Broadwater and Shephall.⁶⁴ Unlike in the case of the first neighbourhood, focused on the Old Town, existing building development had very little impact on their layouts. At Shephall, the tiny existing village at Shephall Green remained around its church and small green as a striking contrast with the quite new residential pattern which was inserted around it. But this relic feature of a former rural landscape was exceptional: a protected historic enclave within the new neighbourhood that took shape around it.



Figure 5.7 The historic environment of the Old Town itself was largely unaffected by the New Town. There has been some limited redevelopment of individual buildings but the main changes have come from the longer-term growth of motor traffic. (author photograph)



Figure 5.8 The Broadwater neighbourhood began to be built from 1953. A common house type was the PP77 short terrace built by Wimpey using their no-fines concrete system. Another was the C23 flat-roofed house, shown beyond. Compared with the first housing, there are more signs of a search for economies, though the failure to provide for cars is common in all early schemes. (author photograph)

One of the first entirely new neighbourhoods, Broadwater, begun in 1953, typified these earlier residential areas in the boom years of housing output.⁶⁵ In line with the original 1949 master plan, it was planned at just over 12 dwellings per acre (30 per hectare). The first contract comprised 150 Wimpey no-fines three-bedroomed terraced houses of the Development Corporation's PP77 standard type (Figure 5.8).⁶⁶ This housing type was essentially a variation of a standard Wimpey design and similar in appearance to houses developed elsewhere at the same time. With a pebble dash cement surface finish, the houses are mainly arranged in straight rows of six or eight dwellings fronting the estate roads in a conventional manner. There were small open front gardens with a pavement and a very narrow grass verge with no street trees. Larger enclosed gardens were provided behind the houses. The area typifies the plainness of many neighbourhoods built in Stevenage and other New Towns when the pressure to produce more houses was growing.

There was little initial provision for cars, reflecting low car ownership at that time. Only 15 garages were originally provided, in a group behind these 150 houses, though the slightly more generous plan for the whole neighbourhood envisaged providing one garage per eight dwellings overall. The original development also included other dwelling types, such as the C23, a flat-roofed

design, and the B9, a maisonette design with a stepped elevation that allowed a less conventional relationship to the road. These two housing designs were produced by the chief architect's department and were more distinctive in appearance than the PP77 type. Both involved more use of brick and were followed by later terraces and even semi-detached housing with entirely brick external walls as material shortages lessened.

As more housing appeared and families arrived, local primary schools were added on sites within housing areas. The shops came a little later and, after local complaints, six then unoccupied houses on Broadwater Crescent were opened as temporary shops with a small Co-op in a caravan parked across the road.⁶⁷ Broadwater's heart was a local three-storey shopping centre (mainly of brick) built in 1957, with small ground-floor shop units and flats above (Figure 5.9). It was arranged in two blocks, with a new neighbourhood church (built in 1955) forming the third side of an enclosure facing one of the main neighbourhood roads. The area between the buildings contained a small paved pedestrian precinct, a grassed area and some car parking spaces. Adjoining the shops was a public house (also built around 1957). In 1968 a six-storey brick-faced block of flats for elderly residents was added and in 1971 some single-storey housing for disabled residents in brick and timber. A local health centre was opened at about the same time.



Figure 5.9 Broadwater neighbourhood shops, built in 1957, with flats above. Nearby are a church, a pub, flats and old people's housing, providing a central point within a large neighbourhood. Over time, more parking provision has been needed and what were originally several small food shops have become one convenience supermarket. (author photograph)

What, then, was the experience of the early residents of these new areas? The reflective personal histories which are the richest source of information give the memories of those who remained in the town.⁶⁸ A minority, it is clear, had found too much to bear the wrench of leaving behind the lively and busy streets of inner London, where family and community ties were often strong. But the great majority of those who came stayed. Almost without exception they were very pleased to have their own new house, several bedrooms, a bathroom and an inside toilet (in the bigger houses sometimes two). As one who moved there at the end of the 1950s commented 'to get a house was lovely. We lived in rented rooms in London with two children We came to look at houses; the one in Penn Road [Bedwell] was really perfect.'⁶⁹

Another mother with four children who came with her husband and family to Bedwell in 1957 from rented rooms in a house in Islington recalled:

Never before had we had the luxury of a bath, hot water on tap and, best of all in our children's eyes, our own stairs. They ran up and down them on that first day calling out 'these are our stairs' and they all kept flushing the toilet. This was a great improvement on our former house, where the toilet was in the backyard.⁷⁰

Also appreciated were the small touches of modern sophistication, such as 'an open porch that even had a light on it, so that when people came you could put this light on and welcome them into the house – we could not believe it ...'⁷¹ Yet many families that had formerly lived in one or two rooms lacked sufficient furniture for the larger house into which they were now moving.⁷² Moreover, while having a garden was a wonderful new experience for most residents, the debris of building had to be cleared before serious cultivation could begin. As one early resident said, '[t]he houses looked as they had been tipped out on to piles of rubble and mud.'⁷³ The closeness to the countryside at this early stage was generally pleasant, but cows straying up to as yet unfenced homes was unsettling and periodic plagues of earwigs a downright menace.⁷⁴

Other problems reflected human emotions of separation.⁷⁵ Although they stuck it out, new residents, particularly housewives, often missed their wider families and the familiar faces and places they had known in their London lives. This was also, however, a spur to early socialisation among new residents. There were also many practical daily problems. Most pressing was the daily struggle to keep the family fed. It was not simply that rationing remained operative until 1954, as that affected the nation as a whole; more problematic was that, in the earliest years, the only shops and the market were in the Old Town. Even from the

first estate at Stony Hall in the Old Town neighbourhood, this could be a daunting trek along unmade pavements beside roads traversed by builders' lorries. In wet weather the experience could be dreadful; in dry summer weather very dusty. The treks as Bedwell and Broadwater began to be developed grew even longer, but by then retail traders were responding with mobile shops and the Development Corporation, as we have seen, allowed temporary shops to be opened in advance of permanent arrangements. However, a range of local permanent shops was appreciated, and when they opened they typically included a grocer, baker, butcher, greengrocer, occasionally a fish shop and, a little later, a laundrette.

While the local shops, schools and other services helped to give clear definition to the neighbourhoods, their physical distinctiveness partly came from having clear edges derived from the landscaped road system. Between the neighbourhoods the primary road network was gradually constructed, with limited access into the residential areas via roundabouts.⁷⁶ In 1950 it was decided to adopt Eric Claxton's suggestions in the 1946 and 1949 master plans to create a fully segregated cycleway system. This was created alongside the new roads, paralleling the pedestrian routes.⁷⁷ Despite the expense, full segregation of road, cycle and pedestrian routes was maintained even at the greatest danger points, the roundabouts. Eventually Stevenage had 26 miles of cycleway forming the country's most comprehensive system. Despite this, however, actual cycle use quickly declined. From the projected 40 per cent of journeys to work, the actual figure was down to 13 per cent in 1964 and just over 7 per cent by 1972. (In 2011 it was just 1.7 per cent, marginally lower than the national average.) Alongside this, the car became the dominant mode of travelling to work.

The car also began to have many other effects on the New Townscape. As car ownership increased, more garage blocks had to be retrofitted into older residential layouts and more generously provided in new ones. The unbuilt, originally grassed, area at the Broadwater neighbourhood centre was also reapportioned to create more parking. These centres were also affected by larger changes in retailing patterns. Following the end of rationing (in 1954) and resale price maintenance (1963), smaller shops gradually became less viable, unable to compete with bigger retailing chains. Sooner or later the small food shops which originally characterised all the early neighbourhood centres were displaced in favour of a single larger retailer.