

7. A Sense of Homecoming : Vigilante Self-housing Provision

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Introduction

The iconic squalor of much of the industrial community of west central Scotland by mid twentieth century, left the area socially bankrupt. At one time its housing stock was so compromised that consideration was given to allowing vast swathes of Glasgow to burn in the blitz. It was hoped that from the ashes a socially fairer city might, phoenix like, emerge, which of course was never the case. Such an extremis of old fashioned utopian socialism is now quite hard to appreciate in the post-industrial theocracy of the make believe town and its iconic buildings with short life and little relevance to need or to use. It is especially so considering the once real and honest demand for proper basic housing. A demand that saw people living in buses, grabbing vacant property, doing just anything for somewhere to live, including in one extremis using a packing case.

Vigilante housing provision is the subject of this paper and explores the period when people organised for their own housing provision. It was a socially important concept, cheap, cooperative and flexible. Creative indeed, considering the bus and tram world astride the bings at Springfield, Bishopbriggs. Communal and cooperative services developed around the needs generated by these "new" communities and evolved in the long term into the concept of housing cooperatives.

It was an evolution full of incident and ranged from good to frankly awful experiences. Dechmont which became known as "The Dachau of Lanarkshire" was a case in point. Evidence available shows how vigilante self-housing provision created quite vigorous responses to the needs of each community, for example do it yourself coal mining, or mass occupation of old military and forces' camps. Frankly the anomaly of shutting up large numbers of well-maintained camps and buildings at a time of extreme post war housing shortage, calls into question the moral responses of the government of the day.

All over Britain moves were afoot to occupy camps and well organised seizures saw the municipal authorities shirk both their legal and social responsibilities. People banding together to find the answer to housing provision shook the establishment to its very roots.

The basic need of people is for somewhere to live and that had a tremendous post-war impact. That society's very structure was shaken to its roots, is shown by feral youngsters willing to bed any adult for a bed for the night. But it must also be said that there was plenty of basic business opportunity in this moral earthquake. An interesting example was The Scientific Instrument Company of Surbiton, who grabbed hold of the idea of cheap deal housing by selling out-of-use buses at £295 a time for basic housing. Strange buses lay all over Surrey as post war homes. The photographs of the 1953 floods show exactly the same property pattern about S.E. England's coastal lands, with numerous bus homes, even a London trolley-bus emersed in water. It was only a little different in Scotland though probably cheaper as home hopefuls bought any old bus even tram bodies from scrappers and companies for next to nothing.

The Bing Camps

Bishopbriggs might not be the first place considered for alternative housing but the Springfield Bings were once a housing out station. Irish gypsies used the bings for their homes for many years, but post war there were a group of Springfield Bing families waiting for Council Houses in quite an effective little community. An old

Walter Alexander's bus provided one home for quite some time. It had once run on the Glasgow-Falkirk route via Bishopbriggs. An old L.M.S. third class coach was also part of the shanty town. Anthony Green, his wife and two children, lived there without any real sanitation but at least good local spring water. Water was shared with Edward Young in the bus and the Bradford Family who had a former Glasgow Corporation tram body. The driver's vestibule formed a small kitchen, with the body divided into three small rooms and this included a little lounge. The other platform was a dressing room and the Bradfords' had built on a small bedroom in brick. The name of Eric Fitzpayne, of Glasgow Tramway's fame, was still on the side of the body. The land rent was 2/6d. (12p) per week from the local farmer and this shanty town survived successfully for quite some time. Anecdotal evidence suggests that locals accepted the shanty towners but not the Irish gypsies.

Homes in Extremis

Vigilante self-housing provision could be taken to extreme and the post-war squats were only a continuation of a very long history of homes in extremis. Springfield Bing again featured in this with the remarkable case of Jimmy Hill who physically lived in the bing from 1920 to 1931. Jimmy Hill's home was a dug-out hole about three metres long by two metres or so and up to a metre in height, excavated in the bing side. Jimmy Hill was in his sixties when he made his home (or hole) in the bing, it took four days digging and the hole was reinforced with old wood and corrugated iron dumped about the site. Jimmy Hill's home had a door made from the planks of an old herring box and a padlock and chain gave some security when he was away. Though it really was not too secure as birds he kept in a cage were released by people who broke in when he was away. His carpet was grass sods and his chimney was old tin cans. Jimmy Hill had begun his mining career at Springfield when he was only nine years old and after working around other mines such as Robroyston, retired to Springfield, where he died in 1931. Hill's experience was extreme though not unique. Miners were men of the earth and in Hill's case his homecoming was even in the earth, for he was so much a part of the mine that had been his life for many years.

Camp Squats about Glasgow after World War 2

The most dramatic form of vigilante self-housing provision were the camp squats that began with a mass occupation of Bearsden, Blackhill (near Lambhill), Crookston, Darnley, Dechmont, Nitshill, Toryglen, all about 16th August 1946. More isolated locations such as Carlisle R.A.F. camp were taken by twelve families and even the naval huts, at Temple (near Anniesland), attracted some interest.

Seizures were dramatic affairs, the McCarthy Family of Govan galloped into Crookston astride a coal cart, or so it seemed when photographed. McCarthy and friends had requisitioned the cart and it proved useful to shift furniture from Govan to what had first been an American and then Polish camp. In all thirty men and women moved in on the site in a well planned seizure backed by Peter McIntyre of Govan Tenants Association. But claims were actually fought over at first until McIntyre's enforcers rallied to protect against claim jumpers. Perhaps they squabbled amongst one another but they soon united to chase off police who attempted to oust them.

Darnley was targeted from Bedford and Warwick Street, Gorbals. It was really no wonder for the camp was then in very good condition with all mod cons and sixty squatters took over the site. Remarkably it was the very first time some Gorbals children had seen real grass - not the weeds the kids had decorated their muddy tenement backcourts when playing pretend gardens. Janet Anderson's little girl walked open mouthed from Rouken Glen tram terminus to Darnley, she had never seen a world so green before. Cows and rabbits were new to her too, leaving the child gazing at the world around her.

Inevitably there was some squabbling with arrivals one after the other finding the best huts taken. "The Pirate's Rest" was a prize for Helen Sharp and her family of eight as it was a kitchen facility and gave her bargaining power for perks. In a surprise move too the Corporation assisted what became a semi-official squat and took considerable interest, for the time that is, in the welfare of the squatters.

But this was not always the case, for at Smithston the Corporation got their heavies in first and broke up the huts to frustrate any squatters. It was in any case a very poor site and was quickly vacated as illness struck, a problem that increased.

Kennishead was squatted, the sixty army huts near to Cowglen Golf Course were taken by Warwick Street tenants escaping sub-let conditions. Tea and 'pieces' in the woods at Kennishead were a whole new world.

Dechmont camp was another early squat with fifty families setting in for the duration, however long that would be. Interestingly, sanitary inspectors worried about this site from the first and with good cause as explained later. It was also one of the most disputed, with an occupation force coming from Ardoch in Cambuslang only to be chased by those already in residence at the site. Ardoch Lodge was once on Central Avenue, Cambuslang and had been a WRNS base before the Cambuslang squat.

Lanarkshire had many squats and Auchinraith Special School, Hamilton, was the subject of an illegal squat by fifty families the instant the forces moved out. Police charged in and thirty families were forced to flee though a group of fifteen from Blantyre and three from Hamilton barricaded themselves in and so remained.

Such was the demand for "homes" that a house was made out of a great big packing case. The Healey Family's "home" was on the Newhouse industrial Estate and was an act of desperation. Healey cut two windows for daylight each side of the great big wooden box, but this let the weather in and the rain seeped in and wet the beds and soon his children were very ill.

It gives some idea of the conditions that people were having to live in when even housing was so wet as to be unusable. Kingston out at Neilston in Renfrewshire was little better than Healeys' big box, for the stone houses were just as damp. Soon fevers were rampant amongst the children.

Bellahouston and Ralston were a little more successful and as sites became available squatters would gather in force in Govan. Neptune Street was a rallying point. Home hunters from Neptune Street occupied a twelve room house in Paisley Road West formerly used by 123 Squadron ATC. But there was a certain desperation in the seizure of Ralston, a former Polish camp and in a poor way. Housing problems were so bad that one desperate woman claimed a but minus its end at this camp, where the forty or so Nissen huts went on a first come first grabbed basis. Bullying police and petty officials generated this desperation as Ralston squatters had to face truncheon wielding police on a number of occasions. Squatters ran in when police turned their backs as was the case at Rutland House, a former model and a naval base in World War 2. The Govan Road site held about twenty families in Autumn 1946.

Local problems of finding somewhere to stay saw families travel far and wide. Gooseholm, near Dumbarton, attracted interest. Gooseholm was an old prisoner of war camp based around a farm site and was occupied by Poles after World War 2. It was a barbed wire compound and for that reason was in quite good condition as

most huts still had their electricity and water. It is worth noting that the Dumbarton Councillor McGandle took one of the huts, hinting that vigilante housing provision was not just the remit of those at the bottom of society.

Throughout Autumn 1946 there was a stand off between the authorities and the squatters. Hawkhead saw some confrontation as the camp was again required by government forces. Perhaps for fear of provoking street action in response to heavy handed requisitions, tacit backing was given to the continued squats at Darnley, Patterton and eastward at Aikenhead. Though by the end of 1946 Darnley was no longer the pristine camp it had been. Vandalism saw much destruction but the place was still tightly packed with people as revealed in the panic when fire broke out on 23 September 1946, however a quick response from Darnley fire station saved the day.

Darnley camp would actually have developed as a site and this is suggested by the re-opening of the disused coal mine formerly on the Corselet Road. Squatters used paraffin lamps and any naked lights they could to take out considerable amounts of coal from the support pillars and roofs of the old workings. Darnley Quarry was also invaded and coal taken created very serious issues with poor ground tolerance and subsidence remaining an issue to recent times.

Coal stealing was a form of anti-social behaviour and as more families came about Darnley then this issue of anti-social activity increased with numerous assaults. The division of accommodation was certainly a trigger for violence and James Mitchell lashed out at a care-taker unable to take his "managing" when Mitchell's wife was very poorly and there were many squabbles over sleeping space in Hut 27.

Interesting invaders were the feral children continuing a long period of opportunistic sexual behaviour. An example of this were two teenage girls caught in March 1948 with Poles in the camps at Patterton, where the sixteen and nineteen year old had exchanged their tenement homes for their soldier friends' beds. It shows the extremis of morale degradation and that camps and squats with beds seldom more than three metres apart were thriving teenage brothels. But where people lived on top of one another there were other problems too, so that when Archibald Broadfoot's Darnley home burned the whole camp came under threat.

No other camp showed the level of degradation experienced as in the squalor of Dechmont. By 1954 it was well beyond its sell by date and was rightly regarded as the Dachau of Lanarkshire. Its muddy pathways led from one TB invested but to another. Billy Edgar was a five year old TB victim, his sister had a collapsed lung and the parents George and Jemima Edgar was distraught. The Blair Family also lived in this hell, with some of their children so ill with gastroenteritis they were hospitalised as emergency cases. Dechmont was as bad as any European camps, and probably not unique other than it attracted journalist agitators.

What can be said about the camp squats? They began as part of a massive nation wide occupation that involved as many as 40,000. In the Glasgow context it questioned municipal even national government responses to housing stock issues, just as it did nationally. W.J. Brown in the Evening Standard worried about squatting opening "the floodgates of anarchy." In the awful post war conditions this was really no wonder and other than that the majority of people were prepared to be patient, to wait for their turn for better times, to show restraint and respect the law, then "the floodgates of anarchy" might well have opened. That there was more concern for a bed than manning the barricades says a lot about local character and the post war squatters' world than we can barely appreciate.

Note re Source Material: This article was derived from a long term project studying the manufacture of violence and impacts on social history in the west of Scotland. Sources have been newspapers, police reports and personal histories as clues to prejudice and perception in parochial law and order.