

FROM ST MARTIN'S COTTAGES TO JUVENAL DWELLINGS

Liverpool's pioneering role in the provision of public housing

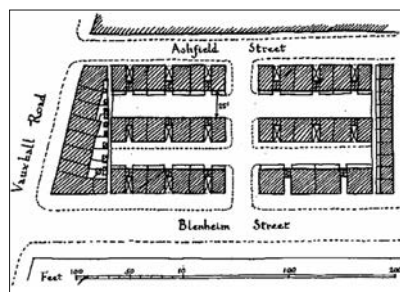
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Opened between February and April 1869, the development of the country's first purpose-built council housing for the working classes, 'St Martin's Cottages' by the Liverpool Corporation, placed the City at the vanguard of social reform within England. However, despite the laudable intentions of those who had advocated their construction, the size of the development was such that it could only ever have assisted the very smallest fraction of the town's most deprived. In focusing upon the subsequent developments at Nash Grove, this article suggests that the re-engagement of the Corporation in direct schemes to alleviate the housing conditions of the indigent is, in many ways, at least as important as the original St Martin's Cottages development. This is because their construction was accompanied by a specific policy acknowledgement by the council that it had a duty of care with regards to the housing conditions of those displaced through slum clearance programmes. This not only chimed with developments in political ideologies at a national level but would, despite the criticism contemporaneously levied against the Corporation, culminate in Liverpool leading the nation in the provision of social housing.



Above left: St Martin's Cottages in 1944.³ Above right: location of St Martin's Cottages.⁴

Following an effective six-year hiatus, largely a consequence of the costs involved in the St Martin's Cottages project and the need for fiscal retrenchment by the Council, the passage of the government's 1875 Artisans' and Labourers' Dwellings Improvement Act reawakened both municipal and public opinion in Liverpool as to the urgent need to improve the living conditions of the working class. In introducing the Bill, the Home Secretary, Richard Cross, repeatedly criticised the sanitary conditions of Liverpool and their effect on mortality.¹ That Liverpool was castigated for promulgating within its environs a situation in which the working-class were,



St Martin's Cottages facing demolition towards the end of their working life in 1968.

"condemned to see their children die like flies before them",² was a public rebuke that stung, for within such comments was the implicit charge that the Corporation's previous endeavours had failed.

This was a humiliation for the 'second city of Empire', with Dr Playfair MP (who had previously given evidence with regard to Liverpool to the 1845 *Royal Commission on the State of Large Towns and Populous Districts*) declaring that even after 30 years of, "much noble local effort", Liverpool remained, "in a terrible condition of unhealthiness".⁵ Liverpool's problems were not merely portrayed in health terms, however, for Playfair graphically illustrated that failing to resolve the

underlying issue had not only cost the city £370,000 in "preventable and wholly unnecessary sickness", but that remedial action would safeguard the city's future prosperity through increased taxation.⁶ Faced with public scrutiny and an envisaged loss of wealth, The *Liverpool Courier* harnessed local consternation, and called for the Corporation to undertake a sustained programme of civic improvement to enable, "the ground [to be] covered with dwellings after the model of St Martin's Cottages".⁷

In keeping with the provisions of the 1875 Act, the council concluded on the 27th October 1875 that a four-acre expanse of slums – 'The Grove' – inhabited by 1,100 people should be cleared and made available for the private sector construction of working-class dwellings.⁸ Initially making representations to house some 1,700 persons, the council subsequently amended its proposals and, in August 1876, permission was granted through a Local Government Board Order, for the construction upon the site of not fewer than 1,100 working-class homes, along with a few shops.⁹ By August 1878, almost three years after the council had approved the recommendations of Dr W.S. Trench, the Nash Grove site had been sufficiently cleared to enable private sector construction to commence.

Councillor A.B. Forwood, the Conservative leader of the Corporation, reported at the end of March 1879, however, that no tenders to undertake the Nash Grove tenements had been received.¹⁰ There followed protracted discussions within council as to what to do with the site that primarily centred upon two options. The first was to leave the site barren and undeveloped until such a time as a private developer might be found to build the requisite housing. The second option, proposed by the, "fervid Orangeman and municipal reformer", Councillor Joseph Ball,¹¹ was to obtain a dispensation from the Local Government Board to sell the land, "free from the conditions that buildings shall be erected thereon suitable for dwellings of persons of the working class" and thereafter encourage private sector construction of replacement housing nearby.¹²

Pursuing the second course of action in May 1879, the council was unchastened both by the Local Government Board's refusal and its concurrent suggestion that, in the event of the former failing to secure private development of the land, it would be "*competent for [the council], with the consent of the Board, to erect dwellings on the site*".¹³ Notwithstanding this statement, in January 1880 Liverpool sought a further relaxation of its obligations under the 1875 Act and permission was obtained at the end of May 1880. This was a consequence of the passing of the 1879 Artisans' and Labourers' Dwellings Improvement Act,¹⁴ which permitted authorities to rehouse those displaced on alternative sites *in the vicinity of* whence they had come, and further enabled the cleared sites to be sold for commercial purposes.¹⁵ Indeed, given the length of time that had passed since demolition, the Local Government Board further concluded that Liverpool need undertake no 'replacement' construction, for those who had been displaced had surely already moved elsewhere.¹⁶

Underlining individual personality dynamics within the policy-shaping process, the council would but weeks later, on the 24th June 1880, instruct the Borough Engineer Clement Dunscombe to prepare plans to facilitate the building of workmen's accommodation upon the site whilst retaining a substantial portion of the plot as open space.¹⁷ The *Liberal Review* sought to portray this change of policy "*after five years of inglorious inactivity*" as a remarkable *volte face* inspired by Forwood's "*jealousy of Mr McDougal*" for the latter, as Chairman of the Market Committee, had sought the 'freed site' for a new wholesale fish market.¹⁸ Forwood's actions, however, as well as the vacillation of the Health Committee, can instead be interpreted as further proof of the wider ideological battle within the Conservative Party of the time and the personal commitment of Forwood to better the living conditions of the town's most marginalised. Thus, whilst Tory traditionalists opposed to "*compulsion, centralisation, and confiscation*"¹⁹ helped to defeat Forwood's motion by favouring the amendment brought by the Whig Councillor J.A. Picton, it was ultimately the one-nation view that triumphed with regard to the need for greater direct municipal involvement in the provision of working-class housing.

Picton's motion, supported in full council by a majority of 24-14, resulted in no further action being undertaken at Nash Grove, for the motion called for the land to be levelled and made available for general public usage.²⁰ Eighteen months later, the question as to the development of the Nash Grove site – in the long term – remained unanswered. Subsequent protracted discussions in both the Health and Finance Committees ensued, centring upon three propositions: to turn the land into recreation ground, which would realise no revenue; to continue to attempt to sell the land to a private developer – a course of action that might lead to its holding the plot indefinitely; or to construct artisans' dwellings itself and, through so doing, not only recoup some of the revenue hitherto expended, but also, "*get rid of a dispute on which a great deal of time ha[d] been expended to little advantage*".²¹ Council decided on 7th June 1882 to build, a decision the *Liverpool Courier* declared would make the public, "*glad – if they could think that the decision arrived at... will be really carried*

out".²² With the appointment thereafter, in November 1882, of an Insanitary Property and Artisans' Dwelling Committee chaired by Forwood, progress was swift: within ten months permission was sought from the Local Government Board to construct a series of tenements.²³ Tenders duly received and contracts awarded, the dwellings at Nash Grove were finally opened on 20th October 1885 by Cross, and christened 'Victoria Square'²⁴ (pictured below in 1966²⁵).



Consisting of 272 tenements constructed in five, five-storey blocks, a caretaker's house and 12 ground floor shops, Victoria Square cannot, however, be evaluated as clear evidence of the success of the 1875 Act. This is because such was the lapse in time between its passage, and their opening (a little over ten years), that their construction can neither be viewed as having been a direct consequence of central government legislation,

nor as having answered the rehousing needs of those originally displaced.²⁶ As Mr Jones, the building's superintendent, confirmed in his report to the council in March 1886, his "*careful... selection of tenants*" resulted in Victoria Square being overwhelmingly tenanted by tradesmen such as bricklayers, fitters, cabinet makers, printers, permanent labourers (by default, therefore, not dock workers), warehouse porters, retired widowers, widows with children, young childless couples, and "*good respectable people*".²⁷ Indeed, this process of vetting, when combined with weekly rentals of between 2s and 5s 6d, the interior design of each individual tenement, and the external finishes afforded each block, provides significant contemporaneous evidence in support of the contention that the dwellings were never truly destined for those members of the working class most in need of residential assistance. As the *Liverpool Mercury* reported, each interior benefitted from:

a specially-designed cooking range, with a cast-iron mantelpiece decorated with the Liverpool coat of arms, and the word 'Artisan' cast on the front... and window sills.... with ornate iron railings [upon which] tenants are expected to place pots of flowers [and] ferns with the view of cultivating a taste for horticulture for their own and the public's pleasure.

Externally, the buildings featured:

*handsomely decorated entrance doorway[s] of terra cotta... [and] ornate balconies [to] give quite a continental aspect to the daily life of [tenants... and] remind the imaginative visitor of the gay scenes still to be witnessed in Italian and Spanish cities during religious and other festivals.*²⁸



Above left: drawing of Victoria Square showing the quadrangle.²⁹ Above right: bird's eye view.

Notwithstanding such 'deficiencies', Liverpool was, despite the castigation that it had received by Cross in 1875, the only provincial city in which such working-class housing was constructed. It was Liverpool's council, therefore, that had once more shown that if the working classes were to be better housed, the State was the only organ – certainly within the provinces – that could afford to do so at a price that was commensurate with that which labourers could afford to pay.

Concurrent with the commencement of the building of Victoria Square, Dr J.S. Taylor (by then the City's Medical Officer of Health) reported in November 1883 that Liverpool contained 2,684 'fever nests', 984 more than in 1875, and that whole districts were "as plagued as the cholera-smitten cities of India".³⁰ In the same month, Forwood announced to the Liverpool Diocesan Conference that the Corporation needed to replace at least 12-15,000 insanitary properties if the city was to be rid of the worst dwellings, and that if replacement houses were to be built near to places of work, they needed to be in the form of tenements for issues of geographic convenience and cost.³¹ Indeed, Forwood declared that if Liverpool were to address the wider issues pertaining to the housing of the very poorest, it would need to ensure that two thirds of the accommodation replaced was at an affordable rent of one shilling per room for a three-roomed tenement for:

much as I deprecate over legislation or State interference with private enterprise... in the matter of sanitary houses I feel an obligation does lie upon the public authority, more particularly upon a city situated like Liverpool.

Thus, building upon the City's primary motivating factor behind municipal slum clearance, there was now also an explicit policy acknowledgement that "demolition and house-building had to harmonise, otherwise overcrowding was exacerbated".³² This was also seen in national political guidance, for the Corporation's success in obtaining a £200,000 loan from the Local Government Board in January 1884 to help fund slum demolition was contingent upon the former ensuring that there were, erected on such cleared sites "dwellings suitable for the class of labourers who have been displaced... to be let at rentals very similar to those given for the existing dwellings viz. about one shilling per room".³³ This was, however, a level of rent that

the private sector would not tolerate, as experience at both Victoria Square and St Martin's Cottages had shown and despite the comments of both J.T. Harrison, the Local Government Board Inspector, and Forwood, regarding the preference of such building work being undertaken by private enterprise.³⁴

Having, as before, failed to attain private sector interest, the Insanitary Property Committee agreed on the 13th October 1884 that if dwellings were to be built to replace those that the committee wished to demolish, the Corporation would have to build them itself.³⁵ Unfortunately, the Finance and Estates Committee refused, on 13th March 1885, to undertake such works. Undeterred, the Insanitary Property Committee decided to do so itself – a decision made three days thereafter, and agreed by full council on 15th April 1885.³⁶ The eventual result, after a further series of protracted discussions with the Local Government Board, and the allied processes of design competition, tendering, and award, was the opening three years later (in March 1888) of 50 municipal tenements called 'Juvenal Dwellings'. These were located upon part of the wider Nash Grove site that had, hitherto, remained undeveloped; a further 51 tenements followed two years later, in December 1890.

Constructed in a total of four blocks, 45 of the 101 tenements had only one room, and 53 offered two rooms. Whilst the rentals were, originally, an average of 1s 3d, this was, in percentage terms, 25 per cent higher than the level which had previously been seen as an absolute maximum for the type of tenant to which Forwood had previously alluded.³⁷ By 1894, rents for the one- and two-bedroomed tenements ranged from 2s and 2s 9d, to 3s 9d and 5s 3d respectively, whilst the two three-roomed tenements commanded rents of 5s 6d per week. These were rental levels that indicate that, despite the stated desire to accommodate the very poorest, this 'intent' could not be realised at a level of rent commensurate with construction costs. As richer artisans moved into tenements such as Juvenal Dwellings, the result was that any improvement felt by the indigent was only through an indirect process of 'levelling up'.

Nevertheless, in the period addressed by this article, Liverpool's reformist zeal to improve the living conditions of its most needy citizens manifested itself to a far greater extent than anywhere else in the UK. The reforms enacted should not, however, be seen as evidence of a deliberate desire to pursue a policy of municipal statism. Rather, the municipal construction of working-class dwellings in the guise of St Martin's Cottages, Victoria Square, and Juvenal Dwellings arose as a consequence of the inability of the private sector to fulfil this market niche at the price and location desired. Thus, it is clear that the Corporation intervened only when all other avenues had been exhausted. It was also, however, the case that it was increasingly apparent to those in local political control, such as Forwood, that sustained improvement to working-class living conditions could only be realised through a more coordinated approach to the process of demolition, displacement, and restoration. These were policies that could not be successfully addressed by Liverpool in isolation. Instead, they were dependent upon greater powers being bestowed by central government and a wider political recognition that state

intervention to assist the poor need not, necessarily, equate to, in the words of Lord Elcho, 10th Earl of Wemyss, “*strangling the spirit of independence and the self-reliance of the people... by destroying the moral fibre of our race in the anaconda coils of state socialism*”.³⁸ This was a realisation at a national level that would, in the early years of the twentieth century, result in the greater empowerment of authorities throughout the country to build and administer accommodation that addressed the needs of the working classes, and in which Liverpool would once more take a leading role.



The 10th Earl of Wemyss. *Vanity Fair* magazine 23rd July 1870.³⁹

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