

HISTORY OF STOCKBRIDGE VILLAGE

Stockbridge Village has emerged from the despair and dereliction synonymous with the classic example of a sink housing estate that was Cantril Farm. A planner's dream of a safe environment, good shopping areas, schools and churches for the community. Built in the mid-1960's for a population of 15,000, Cantril Farm was intended to be a model green belt housing estate to decant people from Liverpool's decaying city centre. The dream lasted only until people tried to live there.

The following history links three separate accounts. The early days of Cantril Farm, as remembered by a long term resident; Mary Routledge. Secondly the "official history" of Stockbridge Village Trust Ltd, (later to become Villages Housing) the private company established to regenerate the estate and reverse the spiral of decline that beset the estate in the early 1980's. Finally, an "insiders" view of the legal and political processes involved in such a large scale stock transfer, as recalled by Mike Carter, the former Chief Executive of Stockbridge Village Trust and former Deputy Chief Executive of Knowsley Borough Council.

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The origins of the Estate lie back in the 1930's, when the double deaths in the Stanley family forced the former Earl of Derby to sell large tracts of his estate to pay the double death duties. The only buyer of such large parcels of land at that time was Liverpool Corporation, who with considerable foresight acquired for what would now be regarded as a pittance, large parts of Huyton, Kirkby, Halewood and Cantril Farm.

Then came the war, when a large part of Kirkby was turned into an industrial estate producing equipment and ammunition. After the war the seven County Boroughs – particularly Liverpool and Manchester, started to cast their eyes on extending their boundaries to incorporate large pieces of land in Lancashire County (which was then comprised of 108 District Councils). In fact they promoted Bills in Parliament to this effect. These were opposed by Lancashire County Council who saw their presence as the largest and strongest County in England being dissipated and their County Clerk, Sir Robert Adcock, assured Parliament there was no need for such extensions as Lancashire could and would provide all the services necessary, i.e. Education, Health etc. This was the most expensive promise ever made by a local Government Official and led to the deprivation of the north of the county at the expense of the south – the Mersey belt.

So came into being the infamous 'overspill' (now called outer estates) agreement whereby Lancashire agreed to take over 200,000 people from Liverpool in Huyton, Kirkby, Halewood, Cantril Farm and Skelmersdale. So during the 1960's Huyton and Kirkby were developed. The early sixties saw the expansion of Halewood along with the arrival of the Ford Factory, so by the mid-sixties we arrived at Cantril Farm.

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The land upon which Cantril Farm was built was set aside for development in 1961, having been bought by Liverpool for the sum of £132,500....so what was it like to live in?

Early Days in Cantril Farm

Mary Routledge's parents were to be included in what then was called 'relocation into temporary housing' and returning when their old flat was renovated. Alternatively, they could move to Cantril Farm as part of a huge slum clearance by Liverpool City Council, which they accepted. This was in 1966 and they were truly delighted with their four-bedroom house. This house was in the new estate of Cantril Farm.

The first residents came in 1965-66 and my parents were amongst these. The estate was built on what was then farmland; hence the names accorded to each area, e.g. Barons Hey, Boode Croft, Spinney. Pubs had names such as Thatcher, Plough, Barley Mow. At this time there was no transport on the estate. Tenants and visitors had to alight from a bus in Deysbrook Lane or Princess Drive and walk from this point. In 1966, the main drawbacks, as in any new community, were lack of transport, medical care and shops. Considering all this, things moved steadily. The doctor's surgery was to be two houses in Round Hey and continued quite successfully for some years until a health centre was built.

In November 1966, houses were allocated to the priests who were to form the local parishes. The rent for 147 Steers Croft tenanted by Father Scrivens and Father O'Rourke was £7-10-0 a week with a garage, for which an extra charge of 15/9 was charged. To compare, the tenant's rent was £4-4-0 weekly and the same charge for a garage if they were lucky to have them. Without any local shops we managed with mobile shops, but I have to say they were more expensive. We tried to obtain a police shop to serve the estate, but it never came to anything because there was, at that time, a local police station in Stockbridge Lane near to Page Moss.

During 1967, when I used to visit my parents after they moved here, I remember people getting on very well together and for the most part were happy living here. Between 1968 and 1970, the social activity began with pubs opening and the buses coming to a terminus. We could enjoy our church club of St Albert's which I will always remember as a wonderful family club atmosphere. This got better and for some years things went well. We enjoyed a number of other pastimes as the months went on, namely our library facilities, small pensioners clubs, some which began in houses, and then into the various community buildings as they were built. By the time I arrived in 1970, to live on the estate at the Mossraig multi-storey on the eighth floor, the estate was rapidly growing."

Local Community – Shops

"The original plans were to build an estate where it would be safe for children and adults alike to cross roads in complete safety. Subsequently they built subways

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all around the area. If people did not make use of the subway, the alternative was to walk along the grass verges surrounding the estate. This resulted in the development of tenant's own pathways. There were some disastrous consequences, namely fatal accidents where people leapt off the grass verges into oncoming traffic. This was of course when transport came into the estate area, around 1967-68.

The first shops were small supermarkets, 'Gourley's' and the 'Co-op'. In fact the transport bus, 12C, at that time, was terminated at Gourley's, Steers Croft, which was an improvement for the residents at the start of the estate. Eventually, as the estate progressed, so did the bus service. By 1970 a shopping centre was built, called 'The Withens', it provided quite a good variety of shops including a post office and, later, a bank. I was allocated a flat in November 1970. My husband and I were very happy with our multi-storey flat. When we arrived on Cantril Farm Estate we could not have foreseen the changes that would come in the years to follow. Most of the people were happy to live in what was then thought to be a relatively safe environment in which to bring up a family.

We were a very mixed community, namely North End, South End, and West Derby Road and Everton area's, each of which bringing their own special way of living to the area."

Churches and Education

"The Parish of St Albert's was then a new parish and we became a part of it very quickly. Most churches laying their foundations in a new area have a part in shaping the structure of the community, and so bringing people together. This was swiftly put into motion by the three parishes in Cantril Farm. The people themselves then took an active part in the church's beginnings and this is what many people did on this estate. It was a very good beginning.

St. Jude's - The foundation stone to Cantril Farm's first Parish Church, was laid in 1971 and was hoped to be completed by the summer. The Church of St Judes was built at a cost of £40,000. There were three other parishes, but as yet no other churches. They were St Albert's, St Brigid's and Cantril Farm Methodist. St Albert's - Christmas 1966. Mass said for the first time for the parish, celebrated at St Timothy's before a large congregation. Sadly not a photo was taken to mark such an historic occasion. Nevertheless we held four masses in the builders canteen on the estate on Christmas Day. The hut was loaned to us and with the help of some parishioners it was transformed into a humble but clean room.

The parishes' of St Brigid's and St Albert's were to be established and schools to be built accordingly. With 80 pupils in Dovecot primary and 90 pupils in St Joseph's, Kirkby, and some children still in Salisbury Street, their needs were urgent.

October 1967 – St Brigid's Parish was the responsibility of Father Reilly who was also allocated a house in 34 Marled Hey. This parish included tenants in Marled Hey, Corner Brook, Barons Hey and Hare Croft.

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"Nevertheless we held four masses in the builders canteen on the estate on Christmas Day."

During the coming months foundations were laid for both parishes to become permanent fixtures on the estate. Later however, another decision was made and the two parishes became St Albert's. St Brigid's retained the name for their school only. There were in fact three catholic schools until closure of St Clements, namely St Albert's, St Brigid's and St Clement's.

In January 1968 work had already begun on two schools, but a meeting was called for the building of a parish club. This year was the start of major changes and looking through church records, all of them were done very swiftly.

In September 1968 St Albert's children began to attend their new school, and in October, St Brigid's children started their new school as well. All children were encouraged to use the subway at all times for greater safety. The parish foundations of U.C.M. Legion of Mary were established, and in December 1968 the chapel and hall were built. This was part of the social club building, and masses and services would now be taken in 'chapel-hall'. In addition St Brigid's hall would still be used by both parishes until the building of a church in the future.

January 1969 – The club opened and the social life of the parish began flourishing. By September 1970, Father Reilly had left St Brigid's and until further notice St Albert's priests looked after the parish. The future merging of the two parishes possibly started here." Life in Cantril Farm was developing but what was driving the development of Cantril Farm behind the scenes?

Political Climate

In summer of 1964 Mike Carter was appointed Clerk of Whiston R.D.C. (he had been Deputy Clerk for the previous six years). One of his first tasks was to oppose the building of 9 multi-storey blocks on Cantril Farm. A study was commissioned that showed how you could house just as many people and not exceed 4 storeys, but it was overruled by a combination of Liverpool City Council, Lancashire County and Government and so 9 blocks (now reduced to 6 by the demolition of the Withens) were duly constructed in the late 60's. "It may be a coincidence that Liverpool had a contract to buy 50 or so such blocks from Unit Camus, and the last few ended up in Cantril Farm."

The Estate was completed by the early 1970's and Liverpool, as at Huyton, Kirkby and Halewood, was the absentee Landlord, i.e. it was only responsible for the provision of Housing and ancillary services (such as shops) leaving Lancashire and the District Councils to provide all the other Local Government services from scratch.

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At this time talks ensued between Liverpool and the 3 District Councils – Huyton, Kirkby (formed in 1958) and Whiston as to the possibility of buying the estates in their areas, but they never reached any firm conclusions.

At the same time the Conservative Government reforms, leading to the Local Government Act of 1972 (coming into force on 1st April 1974), created the Metropolitan County of Merseyside (only 1 of 5 in the Country) with its five Metropolitan Boroughs of Liverpool, Wirral, Sefton, St Helens and Knowsley. (Originally there were only 4 proposed as St Helens and Knowsley were joined into one). On 1st April 1974 the new Metropolitan Borough of Knowsley came into being comprising the Districts of Huyton, Kirkby and Prescott and 5 of the 10 parishes Of Whiston R.D.C. – Cronton, Tarbock, Whiston, Halewood and Knowsley, the latter containing Cantril Farm.

The first thing it realised when it became a shadow authority in 1973 was that approximately half the dwellings in the Borough – over 26,000 - were owned by Liverpool and so the Council immediately set about negotiating a transfer of them. This occurred on the Borough's creation and was on the basis of Knowsley taking over the outstanding debt. This was the only such transfer to take place on reorganisation.

The District Councils themselves owned over 12,000 houses, therefore, two-thirds of the dwellings in the Borough were owned by the Council and an element of choice occurred because supply for the first time for many years exceeded demand. Nearly 3,000 dwellings were available per year as relets – so the Borough had no need to build new homes. With the transfer of these dwellings also came the work force who were supposed to maintain them and also their highly suspect bonus scheme. These were perhaps two of the major factors leading to the decline of the estate, along with the lack of a major political voice on the Council. The seeds of decline had been sown.

The Degeneration of the Estate

The decline started possibly in the 1970's and by 1980 the estate was rapidly deteriorating. By 1982, unemployment was 49% amongst males and 80% amongst young people. One in eight lettings were to homeless families; one in fifteen households were lone parent families; one in four residents were less than sixteen years old, Close to two out of three tenants were in arrears with the rent, and a backlog of repairs had risen considerably.

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Because of the pedestrianisation of the estate, it was proving difficult for police cars to respond rapidly to calls, and there was antagonism between some sections of the community towards police officers. This had resulted in police being ambushed and unable to find exits. The road system was in need of change. The whole of Cantril Farm estate was in desperate need of change. The escalation of theft and in some cases violence, was to continue and the effect on the law-abiding tenants was one of fear. They had come to this area full of hope and what they were seeing was a crumbling of their community. Shops started to put up hoardings, everywhere looked bleak, and break-ins were common.

People were discontented and started to leave the estate; those who remained began to believe nothing would be done. This resulted in an apathetic attitude in general towards the police and whoever the people believed was to blame; consequently the police received little help in finding criminals. The guilty ones then had the freedom to carry on and the whole situation was a nightmare. Fires were commonplace; St Brigid's school was to suffer several times before they finally destroyed the school completely. St Albert's and St Jude's also received their share in the wanton destruction that was to follow. St Albert's junior school was set alight and also destroyed.

St Judes suffered break-ins to church cars, which were stolen and set fire to in a car park area in both parish grounds. One cannot apportion blame on any factor in this rapid downslide; there was a complacent attitude in the housing department as well. One-parent families or single young men were allocated flats that had become empty during the decline. Most rents were paid by social security so it seemed a way out to recoup rent for these places. The rent arrears must have been astronomical as a result of many people leaving without telling the rent office. Re-housing these young people may have been a solution, or so they thought!"

Mary Routledge

Time For Change

So it was that by the early 1980's the Estate was a last resort and people were anxious to leave. This was the scene that greeted Michael Heseltine in the summer of 1982,. Heseltine, then Secretary of State for the Environment, in his role as "Minister for Merseyside", visited the estate at the invitation of the Council. He was appalled and asked his Housing Advisor, Tom Baron, to produce a report on what could be done to halt and turn around this spiral of decline. In a matter of months involving discussions with Knowsley Council, Abbey National Building Society, Barclays Bank and Barratt House Builder, a feasibility study was prepared and accepted in principle by Knowsley Council and the scheme was formally announced by the Secretary of State on the 5th November 1982. Many residents recall the public meetings and newsletters leading to that famous meeting in Cantril High School in early December 1982, when Tom made his famous statement "Thou's got nowt, do you want owt, if so put your hands up" which many duly did. Thus the concept of Stockbridge Village Trust was born.

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Stockbridge Village Trust Limited was established on the 18th February, 1983 as a non-profit-making Private Company limited by guarantee. The estate within the Borough of Knowsley, which was owned by the Borough Council, was conveyed to the Trust on the 6th April, 1983, at the District Valuer's valuation of £7.42M. This resulted in the Cantril Farm Estate being split, with two-thirds owned by the Trust, and one third owned by Liverpool City Council. The estate in Knowsley was renamed Stockbridge Village, although one-third still remains Cantril Farm.

The main aims of the Stockbridge Village Trust were:

- the improvement of the physical environment by a combination of demolition, refurbishment and redevelopment;
- the changing of the "image" of the area, the introduction of more varied forms of housing tenure and the attraction of new households from outside the estate;
- the minimising of the amount of public expenditure required and the attraction of the maximum amount of private sector investment;
- the introduction of a new form of housing management together with effective housing repairs and maintenance programmes;
- the securing of community involvement in the future redevelopment and improvement of housing neighbourhoods;
the provision of community and recreational facilities.

The redevelopment and improvements were undertaken over what turned out to be a ten year programme, the main elements of which were: -

1. to remodel the low-rise housing areas;
2. to demolish over 600 maisonettes and 340 flats;
3. to build 400 dwellings for rent and 125 for sale;
4. to improve the security and amenity of 6 No. 15 storey blocks of flats for rent;
5. to radically alter and improve the layout of the estate;
6. to build new shopping and recreational centres.

The remodelling was financed from a guaranteed £11.4m Urban Programme Grant; The Villages Housing Association was established to develop the rented properties and support the build-for-sale programme, with a £11.5m total Housing Association Grant allocation.

Villages Housing

Stockbridge Village Trust transferred all its stock to The Villages Housing Association in 1995. It should be noted that Villages had been a sister organisation to Stockbridge Village Trust from day one, and all staff worked for both organisations. Their skills and their experience, all came over to Villages. In 1999 Villages transferred its sheltered accommodation to the charitable branch of the Group: Villages Community Housing Association.

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Stockbridge Village Today

The reality of Stockbridge Village today is far removed from its notorious past. At the heart of the estate, a thriving central area boasts a modern shopping precinct, health centre and tropical leisure centre. The concentrations of deck-access maisonettes have been cleared to make way for new family houses and bungalows, whilst the Radburn influenced road and footpath patterns have been dramatically altered to a more conventional, acceptable style.

"I believe the perseverance of the people who stayed here, and the formation of the housing trust was manifest in the building of the present community we enjoy today."

Mary Routledge, Tenant.

The remaining housing stock has undergone a comprehensive programme of remodelling, where improved security has been as equally important as the visual improvements sought. However, the current stability and well-being of the estate is a combination of the responsive management service offered to the residents and their growing enthusiasm to work with local agencies for the estate's future well-being. In this respect, the barriers between landlord and tenant have been, and continue to be, eroded, and prospects for the future have never been brighter; reported crime has dropped 62% over the past eight years; property values have more than doubled in the same period and owner occupation has increased from less than 1% in 1982 to over 30% today. Our community budget of over £13,000 per annum supports a variety of activities within the village, from rambles and junior football clubs, to pensioners, Tai Kwando and allotment clubs. The key to the success of Stockbridge Village has been PARTNERSHIP; partnership with the Private Sector, partnership with the Public Sector; and most importantly, partnership with the community.