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New Utopia

The aftermath of World War I saw cultural, economic, and social change across the world. Empires collapsed, some countries were abolished and new ones created. Maps and boundaries were redrawn. National organisations were abolished, and international organisations were established. While Germany was humiliated and burdened with war reparations, Britain was crippled psychologically, but economically it fared well, and many new ideologies took a firm hold in people's minds. It was during this period that housing policy became explicitly political. In the cities, local parties competed with each other to promise more and more homes, while in Westminster, worried ministers saw a programme of housebuilding as an essential bulwark against the tide of revolution sweeping other parts of Europe. As the Secretary to the Local Government Board put it: 'The money we are going to spend on housing is an insurance against Bolshevism and Revolution.'

The social housing in the Short Heath area of Birmingham is part of the first flush of post-World War I idealism. Under the 1919 Housing Act, the long term vision was to create a municipal dream, a new utopia.

To fulfil the dream of a new utopia, basic needs had to be met. Birmingham Council's Housing Direct Labour Department embarked on one of the biggest house building programmes in Europe, starting in the Short Heath Area. The homes were basic three bedroomed semi and terraced houses with a kitchen, bathroom, a living room, coal store and an outside toilet. A little over ten per cent of homes had a parlour too. The design was based around the living style of the time, architectural niceties took a back seat with a five door kitchen. For warmth there was a coal fire or cooking range. Most houses did not have a hot water system, the bath filled from the wash boiler.

Ample gardens provided space for the tenants to grow their own food with additional provision in the form of allotment gardens. Nearby park space provided opportunities for leisure.

The vision of a world class road infrastructure shaped the layout of the estates. The plan of wide dual carriageways with trams running on the central reservation, cycle lanes between the road and wide grass verges, and ample pavements positioned the building line for future growth.

High on the list of priorities was health and wellbeing. Purpose built Welfare Centres sprang up in convenient places where vitamin tablets, cod-liver oil, orange juice and national dried milk would be issued along with vaccinations for polio etc.

With an increasing and more healthy working population growth was inevitable. The growing educational needs were met by the construction of new schools and extensions of existing sites. A culture of air and light formed the basis of school design with rows of classrooms having opening doors down both sides to let in air and high windows to let in light.

With a shortage of men following WWI, skilled employment was at a premium. Birmingham being an industrialised town and men being seen as the bread winners the brewing industry saw an opportunity to extract cash from working men. Positioned on major road junctions and near bus routes a number of substantially large pubs were built with multiple rooms and bars for the working man to indulge. These places were geared up to extract as much money as possible from working men before they had been home with their wages.

This new utopia seems an ideal lifestyle. Homes for working class people with amenities for health and leisure, transport and education. It was a time of improving equality and a glowing bright future. However, in Germany war reparations were causing inflation and poverty. Inequality was rife. A new political landscape was emerging. The Nazi Party held the most seats in the German Reichstag and Hitler became chancellor then head of state and of the German Government. His aggressive foreign policy gave all of the indications that Britain should prepare for war. New changes appeared in the landscape including air raid shelters and other markings for the preparation for war.

On 1 September 1939, Germany invaded Poland, and the rest of the world held its breath.