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Shenley Green, it's Quite Nice

Shenley, which has also been called Shendley, is believed to take its name from the Old English 'Scen Leah' meaning 'beautiful or bright clearing' (i). The area of Shenley is in south Birmingham. It is situated between Selly Oak to the north and Northfield just to the south, spread across low rolling hills that bound the course of Merritts Brook.

For centuries the lands here were farmed as open strip fields but by the 18th century these fields had been enclosed under the purview of three local farms. Shenley Court Farm, which is now the site of the secondary school of the same name; Shenley Hill Farm which was on the other side of Shenley Hill adjacent to where Fourlands Road now runs and Shenley Fields Farm which is where St Davids' Church and a small shopping precinct now stand at Shenley Green.

Evidence of these farms has mostly disappeared except for the old farmhouses surviving as private residences and the large pasture atop Shenley Hill. Additionally, a connected medieval farm track (and rumoured Roman Road) Bell Holloway and Merritts Hill, is still in use today. A single track enshrouded by trees, it runs parallel to Shenley Lane in a natural dip between the hills. Aside from tarmacking, the course of the lane remains mostly unaltered and forms the southern boundary of the Shenley Estate. On foggy winter days the lane is a great place to walk and lose yourself in our forgotten recent history (if you can ignore the fly tipping that is!).

I've lived in the Shenley area since 1990. In many respects Shenley is a bit of an unknown area, when people ask where I live the usual response is *where the eff's that?* Shenley is a subsidiary estate of Bournville, added to the Cadbury portfolio in the 1950s after the Bournville Village Trust (BVT), the housing association responsible for running Bournville, bought up the old Shenley farmlands. The Cadbury Family already owned land at the neighbouring Manor Farm. George and Elizabeth Cadbury had lived at the old Manor House with its fifty acres of landscaped parkland, since the 1920s.

During those years the Trust, as we residents call it, rapidly expanded. In conjunction with Birmingham Corporation, the Trust built over six hundred houses across the area, sixty percent of which were for rental with the other forty for private ownership. Many of the homes were built by local cooperatives who constructed houses for the Trust whilst building their own

homes. The majority of rental properties were completed by 1955, with the last of the private homes completed in the early 1970s. All the houses have good-sized front and back gardens with roads often laid out around communal green spaces with trees and benches. Behind most of the houses are gated service roads and a network of alleyways allowing residents to short cut through the estate. On the main roads that run through the Estate lie its schools, community centres and shops.

Between 2005 and 2012 Shenley underwent substantial renovation and rebuilding. A swathe of three-storey maisonette blocks situated at the southern end of the estate (Lower Shenley) were demolished and replaced with 167 environmentally friendly bungalows, houses and apartment blocks, costing £25 million. These properties utilise low-flush toilets, reduced-capacity baths, passive solar heating and solar powered hot water systems that enable more efficient energy use. Consequently, the character of Lower Shenley is rather different to the rest of the estate, but the residents themselves seem to be happy living there.

Back in the 1990s I lived in a one bed flat in one of the maisonette blocks that was demolished on Burdock Road. They were clean, well built and pleasant to live in. Ironically, the Trust had plans for a wider ranging regeneration of Shenley but fortunately, they ran out of money! This meant that the remaining maisonette blocks slated for demolition have survived. These blocks live on today, the Trust were forced to fall back on the cheaper option of renovation rather than regeneration.

Shenley, like its Quaker sibling in Bournville, is a so-called Dry area, meaning that there are no pubs, clubs or shops licensed to sell alcohol or stay open late. Shopping on the estate is also kept to the minimum. That said there is plenty of provision in the way of schools, community centres, churches, garages and parkland. When I moved up here in the early 1990s the Trust were very active in the community, with events, community groups, tenant associations and competitions staged regularly in the local community halls. Several of these wooden village halls have since disappeared as the Trust has had to cut back on costs. Tenant associations across the Trust back then were particularly proactive, reaching out to tenants regularly to encourage community involvement.

It was common knowledge that if you left your front lawn unmown or your fences unpainted for any length of time you'd soon get a stern but supportive typed letter from the local busybody (hand delivered through your door) reminding you of your tenant responsibilities. Older tenants were known to walk the Estate early in the mornings, making note of those tenants who were letting the side down. If your house had anything new, unusual or out of character on it, woe betide you! The Trust were soon on your case. Satellite dishes were a particularly thorny issue. Whilst pretty much everyone had them, the residents of Bournville and Shenley were banned!

The Trust decided satellite dishes were a blight on the landscape, so residents were banned from putting them on their houses for many years.

That sense of the Trust as a micro 'nanny state', watching over the lives of its tenants, has diminished a lot since the turn of the Millennium. There's definitely a sense of irony when I say that I miss it (*sometimes!*). Back in the day, it was more than a little annoying if you got a reminder of your tenancy responsibilities through your door. It made a lot of people uncomfortable and embarrassed. The irony is, now that iteration of the Trust has disappeared, standards have begun to slip. Newer tenants don't care so much, gardens go untended, doors don't get painted, rubbish piles up and anti-social behaviour has increased somewhat. But those are minor grumbles really.

Looking at Shenley as a resident it's easy to focus on grumbles and minor downsides, because that's what people do, familiarity breeds contempt and all that. Shenley remains a relatively quiet, hospitable area where people seem to settle for life, my Family and I included. Yeah, Shenley ain't cool, it's ruddy boring!

It definitely doesn't have the cool vibes, venerable architecture or vintage pubs that make places like Stirchley, Moseley and Digbeth such desirable places to live (apparently!). Instead Shenley's virtues lie within its stolid blandness, it's just NICE. The local in-joke is that there's simply nothing to do in Shenley. Whilst the architecture isn't significant or out of the ordinary, Shenley's red brick ubiquitousness feels solid, reliable, dependable and well maintained. The overall feeling of Shenley is well behaved, leafy and quiet, just how the Quakers would have liked it.

Nice.

Reference: i. "SHENLEY – Shenley Fields, Shenley Green, Lower Shenley" – Dargue, William, 'A History of Birmingham Place and Placenames A to Y' – accessed 28th May 2023. <https://billdargue.jimdofree.com/placenames-gazetteer-a-to-y/places-s/shenley/>

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