

## **New suburbs and UK post-war reconstruction: the fate of Charles Reilly's "greens"**

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During and immediately following the Second World War there was a great boom in replanning in the UK. This was not limited to the few badly-damaged towns: many undamaged towns jumped on to this bandwagon. The government, and indeed many of these plans themselves, strongly urged that housing should be the highest priority. Bomb damage, six years of no maintenance, and the continuing need for slum clearance had led to a significant housing shortage. To overcome this, the consultant planners and professional officers writing these reconstruction plans proposed solutions ranging from the safe "garden city" style to the radical. One of the most interesting radical idea was proposed by Professor Sir Charles Reilly, for Birkenhead (NW England): he proposed houses arranged around mini-"village greens", with many communal facilities, to foster a new community spirit. The rejection of this plan in Birkenhead caused a national political and press upheaval. This paper explores the nature of this radical suburban layout, its failure in the Midlands towns of Bilston and Dudley, and its subsequent disappearance from post-war suburban design.

The immediate post-war period in the UK was of great significance in the design and development of housing. It included the designation and building of New Towns, the adoption of system-built high-rise flats, and the use of Green Belts to halt the outward sprawl of suburbia. But this paper explores one of the more radical concepts for residential development, involving a new urban form and technologies, leading to a new way of community life. These were the new 'green communities' proposed originally by Professor Sir Charles Reilly in his reconstruction plan for Birkenhead, but implemented in the Midland towns of Bilston and Dudley. Yet despite initial enthusiasm, this implementation was flawed and partial, and this radical concept disappeared shortly after Reilly's death.

### **The context: destruction and housing**

By the end of the Second World War approximately 3,745,000 houses were either damaged or destroyed (Titmuss, 1950, p. 330). Added to this are the need to redevelop slum housing, already under way before the war; the virtual cessation of house maintenance; and, particularly, the lack of the 1.75 million new houses that would otherwise have been built during the war (Holmans, 1987, p. 93).

The Ministry of Health (MoH, whose remit included housing) was in early 1943 considering a post-war construction programme of between three and four million houses in England and Wales alone, in a period of 10-12 years. Clearly, housing was a concern both during the war (Taylor, 1995; Malpass, 2003) and had first priority in the Government's approach to reconstruction (Hancock and Gowing, 1949).

The form of housing was contentious. Numerous public surveys had been carried out during the war, resulting in an overwhelming desire for houses rather than flats (Bullock, 2002, p. 156). There were studies of preferences for internal layouts, and considerable propaganda about the contribution of labour-saving devices in the home.

The management of the house-building programme was also contentious. Housebuilding would largely be carried out by local authorities (NA<sup>1</sup> CAB 87/7 Postwar housing, 22/1/44). But the MoH not only exerted its authority to approve each estate layout and house plan, but restricted the number of houses a local authority might construct, and their price. The national payments crises in this period resulted in abrupt cuts to the housebuilding programme in 1947-8, from 101,000 dwellings approved but not yet started to 42,000 (MoH, 1948, pp. 239-240).

### **Sir Charles Reilly and his ideas**

Professor Sir Charles Reilly (1874-1948) was an influential architect, promoter of the first university department of planning ('civic design', at Liverpool) and campaigner. In 1904 he was appointed Roscoe Professor of Architecture at Liverpool at the age of 30. He was strongly socialist in many of his ideas. He built little and was best-known for his promotion of architectural education. He was pivotal in promoting the discipline known variously as 'civics', 'civic design' and 'town planning', persuading Lord Leverhulme to finance a Chair first held by Stanley Adshead and then Patrick Abercrombie. Reilly retired in 1933 but led an active retirement as a consultant, being awarded the RIBA Royal Gold Medal in 1943 and knighted in 1944. By the time of his involvement with Birkenhead he was aged 70, in declining health, and resident in Twickenham. Yet he remained active in promoting reconstruction until the end of his life.

His key idea was to promote community-based living, using a distinct physical settlement form to do so. He laid out elliptical 'Greens' bounded by a narrow track, onto which the houses (semi-detached or short terraces) faced. They had private rear, but not front, gardens. There was a communal suction waste disposal system. Each cluster of Greens had a 'club' providing reading and games rooms, and a kitchen providing meals for dining rooms. Meals could also be ordered by a private telephone link and delivered to individual houses (Figure 1).

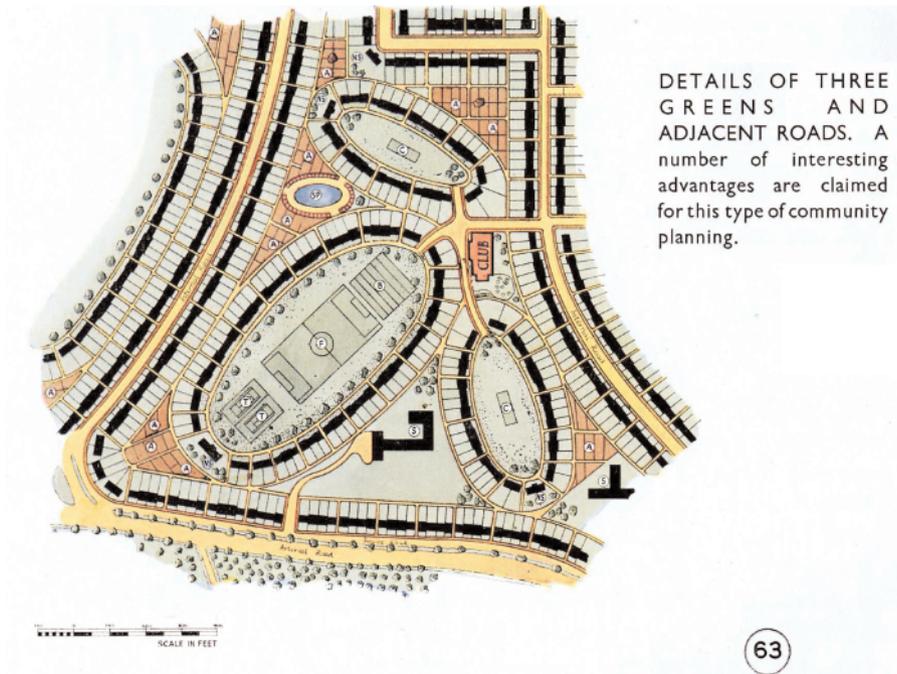


Figure 1: Reilly's ideal Greens (from Reilly and Aslan, 1947).

Much of Reilly's approach culminating in his Greens seems evident in a lecture given at the Royal Institution shortly after retiring from Liverpool (Reilly, 1938, Appendix 1). But there were earlier antecedents. One of his students, F.X. Velarde (later to design a Reilly community for Bilston) wrote to Reilly stating that "if I remember rightly you have talked on such lines since I have known you" (1/8/47<sup>2</sup>) – and Velarde entered the Liverpool school in 1920. Reilly had extensive contacts in the United States and would thus have been familiar with Perry's 'neighbourhood unit' concept, and its development at Radburn by Stein and Wright. And Reilly referred on numerous occasions to the parallel of the English village green, and the popular writing of Thomas Sharp (1932; 1936) on the relationships between the English countryside and English town design are unlikely to have escaped his attention. Boddie's 1942 proposal is also of interest: a square of terraced houses, with private rear gardens but no demarcated private front spaces, facing inwards to a minor street and a central 'green'. This is one element of a large grid, which could include schools, crèches, playing fields, communal facilities, shops and so

on, at a density of 12 dwellings per acre. It seems a very regular, geometrical version of a 'neighbourhood unit', with a few of the advantages of Reilly's later suggestions.

Reilly wrote frequently for professional journals, and took every opportunity to publicise his ideas: however he was always scrupulous to declare his interests. In a review of the Plymouth reconstruction plan, he suggested that within 50 years, shopping would be done by television and telephone – hence estate structure and facilities would need to be different (*Building* July 1944, pp. 183-184). In reviewing Manchester's plan, he advocated communal heating systems (*Building*, November 1945, pp. 289-290).

### **Reilly's solution at Birkenhead**

Reilly's eminence and local experience made him the natural choice for Birkenhead when the town came to consider a reconstruction plan, and he was appointed in early 1944. He soon intervened in a suggested new suburb, overlaying the Borough Engineer's standard plan with his Greens. His action and his self-publicity must have caused friction within the authority: although the left-wing politicians supported it the Conservatives did not, and his plan was rejected (Potter, 1998; 2003).

Part of the national publicity for Reilly's ideas came from Lawrence Wolfe, apparently a child psychologist, who had contacted Reilly soon after a *Picture Post* feature in 1944. Wolfe published a short book in September 1945 which promoted the type of community-based semi-communal living that he termed the 'Reilly Plan' (Wolfe, 1945). In its Foreword, Reilly elaborated somewhat on his rather crude original sketches: the idea was for "a semi-new planning principle ... that of houses round greens, as in pre-Industrial Revolution England, and the greens themselves arranged like the petals of a flower round a community building, the modern equivalent of the village inn" (Reilly, 1945, p. 10). Reilly later wrote that the book "was written without my seeing it till the galley proofs arrived, and then the author would not let me reduce his superlatives and other marks of enthusiasm" (Reilly, 1947, p. 56).

Wolfe principally discusses some social or sociological aspects, albeit based largely on assertion rather than research. It seems to have been Wolfe who promoted the communal facilities such as kitchens and restaurants, and indeed the communal way of life, rather more than did Reilly himself. But the book received few reviews and has recently been heavily criticised (Potter, 1998; 2003).

The work for which Birkenhead had commissioned Reilly, preparation of an outline redevelopment plan for the County Borough, was completed in late 1945. It contained a formal hexagonal residential development proposal, which again received criticism from the Conservatives: it was "fantastic, extravagant and unpractical" and "entirely valueless" (*Liverpool Daily Post*, 1945). Yet at the opening of an exhibition of the plan, Lewis Silkin, Minister of Town and Country Planning, said that "Sir Charles's idea of community living was interesting and fascinating and [he] hoped that it would be tried out somewhere, if not in Birkenhead, in the near future" (*Birkenhead Advertiser*, 13/4/46).

### **Reilly Greens in Bilston**

Bilston, a small industrial town in the 'Black Country' of the Midlands lying between Wolverhampton and Walsall, north of Birmingham, had a major housing problem. During the war the Town Clerk, A.V. Williams, a solicitor, played a pivotal role. Reilly wrote of Williams that

"I think he is unique. I have never before met a man with such fine sociological ideals, such administrative capacity and such quick decision. The idea of the carrying out of Bilston, as it will be one day, is more his than mine" (23/8/46).

Williams and colleagues had undertaken a Civic Survey in 1944 which showed that of the 7,771 houses in the borough, 34% were unfit and a further 16% in poor condition. About 38% were over 60 years old. Although there was much land available, it had been used for coal-mining or iron production and required substantial reclamation: "before this land can be used for building purposes it has to be reclaimed by means of bulldozers and other mechanical equipment, and in order to provide for any future subsidence of the land, any building has to be constructed on concrete rafts" (A.M. Williams, 1947, p. 253).

The influential social scientist Dr Otto Neurath was invited by Williams and a Socialist councillor to advise on the replanning problems. He felt that architecture and planning should be a co-operative venture with the public, and that housing developments should have communal facilities such as cultural centres, cafés, and a central building or meeting-room to bring people together regularly (Neurath, 1924: translated by Iain Boyd Whyte). On his advice, detailed changes were made to the plan already commissioned from the eminent planner T. Alwyn Lloyd for Stowlawn (Minutes,<sup>3</sup> 18/9/45). He was invited to co-operate in the planning and reconstruction proposals for the Borough and "returned to Bilston shortly afterwards and set up a 'clinic' in Brook Street in a New Town slum, and for some weeks met and chatted with many of the inhabitants" (Smallshire, 1986, p. 139). Unfortunately, Neurath died on 22 December 1945.

Soon afterwards, Williams reported that he had been in contact with Ella Briggs, whom he described as "a Viennese architect of international repute", and invited her to design 160 houses at Stowlawn. Williams presented Reilly's ideas to the Development and Reconstruction Committee, and was asked to persuade Reilly to meet the Housing and Planning Committee to discuss the redevelopment of Bradley. At the same time it was reported that the MoH's Regional Architect had stressed the need to avoid monotonous local authority development, and suggested the engagement of individual architects for separate developments (Minutes, 17/1/46).

As a result, Williams wrote to Reilly:

"Having studied your Birkenhead plan and Leonard Wolfe's recent publication on your work, I feel quite sure that what my Council desire in the redevelopment of this town and what you as an architect would evolve, substantially coincide ..." (5/2/46).

Reilly would later write that Williams had read the feature in the *Architects' Journal* (1944) on Birkenhead (23/8/46). Williams later wrote to Reilly that one of the major influences on his thinking about urban redevelopment was Mumford's *Cities and Civilization* (*sic*: was this *Technics and civilization?*), which he had read "very thoroughly ... five times" (3/7/46). The local newspaper told a slightly different story, crediting a politician rather than the civil servant (*Express & Star*, 15/5/46).

Reilly responded very positively: the invitation "is a great compliment to my ideas" (8/2/46). On 26/2/46, Reilly made a presentation to the Housing and Planning Committee; he was instructed to prepare sketch layouts for Bradley and Stowlawn. Meanwhile, Briggs had suggested detailed amendments for Stowlawn, which were agreed. She "would erect the houses round a common green" (Minutes, 13/2/46: see Briggs, 1949). It is not known how independent of Reilly this design was: she did later ask to see him as "I am doing a small section of your Bilston scheme" (Briggs to Reilly, 7/12/46).

Reilly very quickly produced a sketch layout for Stowlawn, because German prisoner-of-war labour was already being used to construct the roads and sewers of Lloyd's layout. Reilly proposed two greens "incorporating a good many of the sewers by making the drive round the greens follow them". However, the MoH stated that for reasons of expense and speed it would not be possible to construct Stowlawn exactly on Reilly lines. The Borough Engineer had produced a layout "embodying the principles" of Reilly, preserving Lloyd's proposed road structure, and this the MoH approved (Minutes, 12/3/46). Within three weeks, therefore, one of the Reilly Green schemes had been very substantially diluted.

But Reilly was resilient. In April and May he wrote to Williams nominating various architects to produce the detailed house and estate plans. These architects included Derek Bridgwater (Reilly's son-in-law, which he made very clear) and other former students of Reilly's from Liverpool. He also suggested that "I think it might be very wise to ask Clough Williams-Ellis to do a community, if he is not too much engaged" (30/5/46). (Williams-Ellis had published several pieces in support of Reilly's ideas.) (Figure 2)

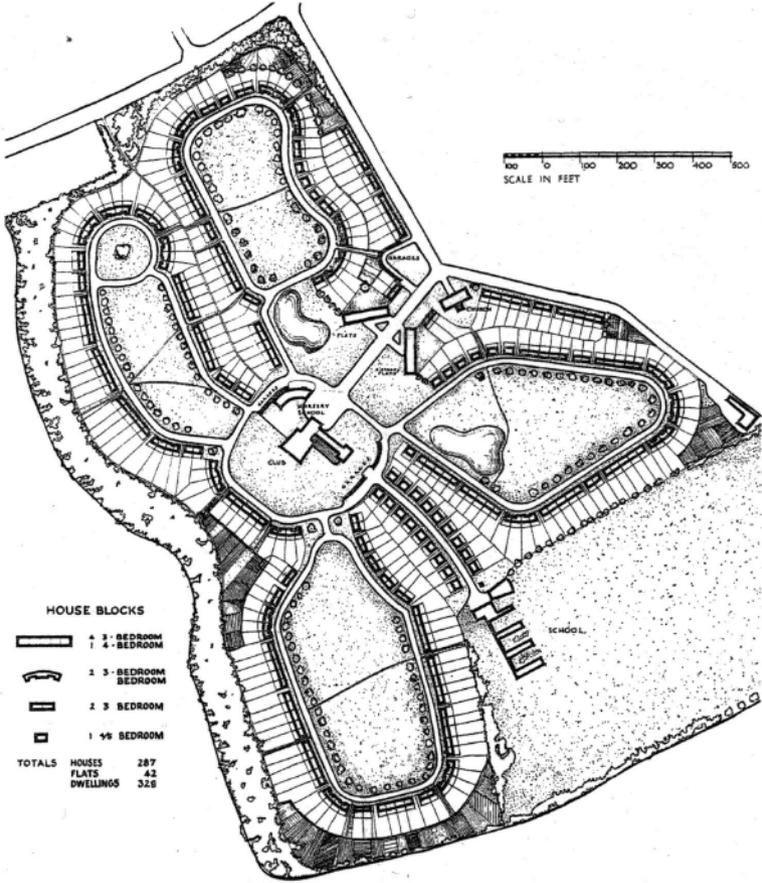


Figure 2: Estate proposal for Bilston, by Williams-Ellis and Brett (not built in this form) (from Madge, 1950).

Meanwhile the Planning and Reconstruction Committee was supporting Reilly. The Garchey suction refuse system was to be installed at Stowlawn (Minutes, 14/5/46), despite the expense. The layout of Bradley on Reilly principles was approved (Minutes, 15/5/46), as was Ettingshall (Minutes, 12/6/46). District heating at Stowlawn and Bradley was approved, and the advice of specialist contractors was sought (Minutes, 18/6/46).

Miller was "delighted to receive your letter with the immediate prospects it holds out for me in creating the first "Reilly Green" (1/6/46); although "I may say ... that I feel just a little nervous about doing work of a kind I have not yet attempted" (4/6/46). Williams-Ellis responded "Of course I am delighted to have any hand in your new deal" (1/8/46).

Not everything was unquestioningly positive. A.V. Williams, who appears to have become something of a family friend to Reilly – who stayed at Williams's home on several occasions – resigned as Town Clerk of Bilston, having been appointed to the same position in neighbouring Dudley (Minutes, 27/6/46). He wrote to Reilly that

"You must have no fear about Bilston now that I am leaving; I assure you that everything will be tied up effectively before I depart. I hope that we will be starting building on your Greens on a fairly considerable scale within the next month" (3/7/46).

He was replaced, initially temporarily for one year, by the Deputy Town Clerk, Alfred Mervyn Williams.

But work carried on. Bridgwater, on Reilly's recommendation, was appointed to design flats on the Mountford estate. On 23/8/46 Reilly wrote to Williams-Ellis: "I am so glad you are pleased to do a so-called "Reilly Community" – the best and the only one not going to one of my own people, which I hope you take as a compliment". He noted that, by then, Crabtree "has the opposite site on the other side of the main dividing road", and urged consultation.

By 28/8/46 Reilly and his nominated architects were well into design details. The Birmingham practice McKewan, Fillmore & McKewan, whom Bilston were using to design houses, discussed details of roofing design and materials with Reilly: in particular, costs and availability of materials made it impossible to use the very low pitch that Reilly specifically wanted. A month later they were sending to Reilly the plans of a community centre ('club' in Reilly's terms) costed at £83,000 (28/9/46).

Williams-Ellis, however, was having problems. He asked "Having accepted your general thesis, I am free, I take it, to interpret it ..." (28/9/46) and wrote "I have just been over the draft of our bit of your New Bilston ... and even as an abstract exercise I don't like it well enough to put forward ..." (2/10/46).

The notion of the clubs, too, was becoming problematic. Reilly was in correspondence with J.H. Forshaw, then Chief Architect at the MoH (and another of this former students), arguing for resources and sanction for the expenditure. Forshaw was concerned, in a telling phrase, "that leisure time may not be used to good account" in these clubs (16/10/46). Reilly's response was a robust but general defence of his concept. Reilly also saw Forshaw in person to argue his case.

The detailed layout of some of the sites was not straightforward. Reilly wrote to A.M. Williams that he had seen a model of Williams-Ellis's "slightly enlarged community". The model also showed Crabtree's three three tall flat blocks: "I felt at once ... and so I find does Crabtree really ... that these three lofty blocks of his represent an entirely different way of life to [the] adjacent cottage scheme and will not only harm that, destroying its quiet character, but Miller's scheme as well". Reilly suggested alterations (letter of October or early November).

There was significant progress early in the New Year. Reilly recommended F.X. Velarde to undertake the detailed design of the remainder of the Bradley area. He wrote to him stating that "It was because of my faith in you that I gave you this job, the best at Bilston ... Now as Bradley is the best of my Bilston opportunities I am of course very anxious that it should be a success and embody all my ideas ..." (14/3/47). McKewan, Fillmore & McKewan submitted a draft

scheme for Ettingshall, apparently having some Reilly principles. This was approved in principle (Minutes, 21/1/47). According to A.M. Williams, "Crabtree has now made a good looking house scheme for his reduced area which works well with [Williams-Ellis's] which his scheme for three tall blocks of flats would have destroyed" (12/2/47).

Now came the most serious blow of the entire reconstruction project. Resources and funding were scarce, and were being allocated nationally via the MoH. Bilston had been slow in securing housing completions, and therefore its allocations were cut very significantly in early 1947 (MoH, 1947). Bilston was allowed to proceed with only 162 municipal houses during the year on schemes already approved. Approval was given for only five new houses, and 415 which were at tender or being negotiated with the MoH were halted. "The strongest representations possible had been made ... against this drastic decision" (Minutes, 18/2/47). In Bilston's defence it should be noted that the extensive, expensive and time-consuming site preparation works on these former ironworks and mining areas were causing especial problems, and the unusually cold winter of 1946-47 had caused delays. Even so, the meeting of 18/2/47 approved Miller's design for the Bradley North estate, with Reilly Greens.

A.M. Williams wrote twice to Reilly appealing for help, on the second occasion stating that "I can see no hope of commencing to build any of our true 'Reilly Estates' for some years" (written after 5/2/47). Reilly wrote direct to the Minister, Aneurin Bevan, pleading for a housing allocation to build a Green at Bilston as a demonstration project. The Reilly layout "with its abolition of the ordinary isolationist house, breeding Conservatives whose aim in life is to keep themselves to themselves, goes right to the heart of Socialism" (23/2/47). He met Bevan at least once. It had the desired result: Reilly was able to write to A.M. Williams on 23/3/47

enclosing a letter from Bevan to Reilly, increasing Bilston's housing allocation by 20 dwellings. Williams was naturally pleased, but wondered how the MoH's regional office would take this intervention!

Reilly's patronage, and his determination to get his ideas built, are clearly seen in the intervention directly with the Minister and with Velarde. But, as with Williams-Ellis, the detailed design produced problems. Velarde wrote to Reilly that he had, for political reasons, increased the number of "normal" houses (ie not facing greens).

There were continuing problems. A.M. Williams noted on 18/6/47 that "As far as the suction system of refuse collection and district heating are concerned, not to mention the construction of community centres, the Ministries seem determined not to permit us to proceed". Miller had not been making progress owing to his teaching commitments at Liverpool and, after inquiries from Reilly prompted by Williams, Miller agreed to withdraw from teaching at the end of the academic year. A day later Reilly was faced with a letter from A.M. Williams containing both good and bad news. On the good side, for the Stowlawn sites,

"All the Ministries concerned have now agreed to the installation of district heating ... As far as I can gather, we are among the first authorities in the British Isles to receive this permission, if we are not in fact the first ... in spite of the fact that one has to fight very hard for these new ideas, the Government Departments can be persuaded to permit a town to rebuild itself into a place fit for human beings to live in".

On the bad side, for local political reasons Williams had not been confirmed in his acting role as Town Clerk, had been forced to resign, and was concerned that he had to leave Bilston with so much undone. He wrote "Isn't it a dreadful state of affairs when one has to fight the elected representatives of the people in order to build decent homes for the people." Eventually, however, Bilston did offer Williams the permanent appointment, but not until October.

Meantime Reilly was in contact with the Chair of Bilston's Public Health Committee, who wrote on 15/8/47 that

"The layout of Crabtree and Brett is a charming change for a Black Country town ... Perhaps they are a little too far ahead of their time to receive the full measure of praise that will belong to them ... I am permanently very grateful to you for your continued interest in our pokey little town ... "

*Inter alia* in a letter from Williams to Reilly on 2/9/47 he comments acerbically about Williams-Ellis that "Clough I see, quite characteristically, is too busy again to finish off what he started with such overwhelming enthusiasm". However, there was an interlude of progress, with Velarde's plan being approved on 30/10/47; but again bad news at the meeting on 18/11/47: the MoH stated that it might not be possible to agree to proceeding with district heating after all, on cost grounds.

Reilly died on 2/2/48, having seen work begun on a number of Reilly Green schemes, by competent architects – most trained by him at Liverpool, and whom he could trust and suggest ideas. But despite very considerable investment by Bilston, none had come to fruition and all had already been changed away from the original concept. This can be seen in a letter from Reilly to Forshaw:

"The Stowlawn estate is not one [a Reilly Green] but so keen have they got up there about my ideas that they have tried to amend that, not with much success in my opinion, by adding greens to one side of it" (7/2/47).

These modifications continued as the estates were built, once the 1947 funding crisis had eased. For example, the Borough Architect had to modify Stowlawn, substituting a road for one green, owing to drainage levels (Minutes, 19/1/49). The district heating system and the suction refuse system were not built. The services provided by the community centres were far less than Reilly had envisaged – as is indicated by the quiet dropping of his term 'clubs'. They became low-density housing estates with large open spaces rather than the socialist-inspired models of community living for which he had worked.

### **Reilly applied to Dudley**

As has been mentioned, Bilston's Town Clerk A.V. Williams left when the Reilly project was in full swing, to take the same role in neighbouring Dudley. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that in his first letter to Reilly, the family friend, after announcing his resignation, A.V. Williams should note

"PS I have already indicated to the Dudley people that they have got to do something about the Reilly plan in Dudley. When you are over, perhaps we might pop in and have a word with the Mayor ..." (3/7/46).

Williams lost no time in making a presentation of Reilly's principles to Dudley's Housing and Town Planning Committee. He made use of a model of a community of three Reilly Greens which had been made by the model-making section of the Ministry of Town and Country Planning to Reilly's directions. Reilly was invited to prepare outline scheme for the 90-acre Old

Park area (Minutes,<sup>4</sup> 6/9/46).

Within a month Reilly prepared a basic layout, and nominated Derek Bridgwater for the detailed design (Minutes, 4/10/46). This was to be a multiple-green system on the full Reilly principles. The possibility of district heating led Williams to consider an adjoining site for an estate of flats, using an extension of the system (Minutes, 17/1/47). Early in 1947 the Corporation sought specific powers to build and operate district heating and refuse collection services, as part of what became the Dudley Corporation Act 1947 (the first in the country seeking such powers).

At the meeting of 24/6/47, Bridgwater's scheme was accepted in principle. It was also decided to invite Professor Simey of Liverpool University to conduct a sociological survey. This appears to have been an extension of the concerns that had led Williams to invite Neurath to Bilston. The Committee was concerned about "the social problems which will inevitably arise in an estate developed on community lines".

By 12/12/47 Bridgwater had revised his plans, proposing 362 houses, 84 flats, 116 garages and space for 13 shops; official sanction had been agreed for district heating; and housebuilding had been programmed to commence during the third quarter of 1948. In fact, Dudley had received special dispensation: the MoH "indicated that they were not prepared to sanction new district heating schemes generally at the present time, but in the case of Dudley they were of the opinion that it was fundamental to the manner in which the estate had been designed" and were mindful of the success of the 1947 Act in obtaining the requisite powers (Minutes, 12/12/47).

In Dudley, the Greens are more elongated, parallel and straight-edged than Reilly's preferred "petal" layout. Although a large "community centre or club" is indicated there is no sign of the plant necessary for district heating or suction waste disposal. The houses are shown as long, largely straight, terraces (Figure 3).

Simey (1947) wrote virtually a promotional piece for the Greens, for Dudley and for his own

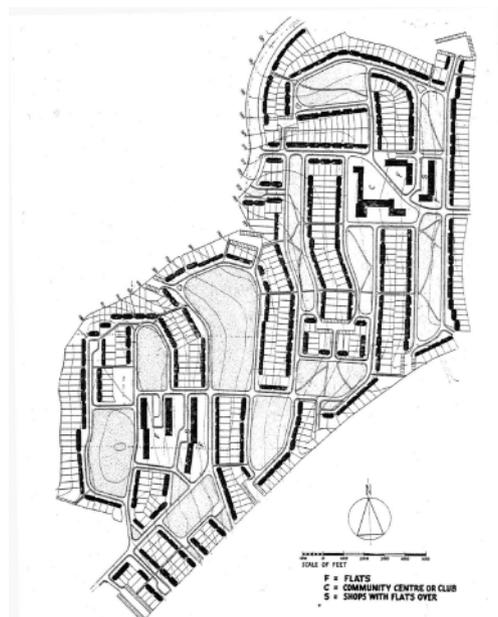


Figure 3: Estate developed at Dudley, by Bridgwater and Shephard (from Madge, 1950).

sociological contribution, in the *Manchester Guardian*. The plan “bears the marks of genius in its obvious simplicity and undoubted inspiration ... [and] amounts, in fact to a most striking assertion of the importance of the human factor in town planning”; it

“says much about the courage and energy of the Council (and its Town Clerk, who has already played a leading part in town planning elsewhere in the Midlands) that so serious an attempt is to be made to make the best of these somewhat unpromising materials. It is to be hoped that the leadership thus displayed will soon be followed elsewhere”.

To celebrate this publication, Williams wrote to Reilly on 19/1/48 as he was convalescing after several operations. It is interesting that he describes the ‘conversion’ of another Council official, and the attitude of the political parties – seemingly rather different to Bilston:

“All our community work in Dudley which is now becoming well known ... has its root object in your own conception ... together we [Williams and the Librarian] have committed the town to a policy over which both parties are only too anxious to claim the sponsorship. The *Guardian* article, appearing today, is magnificent. Nothing can go wrong now!”

This was a handwritten letter, not the formal typewritten correspondence cited above, and was signed ‘Vivian’. Williams discusses visiting Reilly as he convalesces. It is the last letter in Reilly’s correspondence file, prior to his death on 2/2/48.

As in Bilston, however, the plans were substantially changed during implementation. The MoH eventually refused permission for district heating, and no waste collection system was constructed. The impetus seems to have been lost after Williams was appointed General Manager of Peterlee New Town in July 1948, and the Council became Conservative-controlled in May 1949. This Reilly-inspired, but substantially amended, estate finally totalled some 600 houses, excluding the blocks of flats. This should be compared to the total of 2,317 Corporation houses that had been constructed by the end of 1954 (Wilson, 1957).

## **Evaluation**

The entire story shows Reilly as a key actor: a tireless promoter of both his own concept, and of his former students. He appears to have been well known for this:

“It was [Reilly] who persuaded ... the selection committees of borough councils, to take on young architects who had very little training, but were full – he said – of imaginative ideas” (Holford, 1948).

In this case the ‘imaginative idea’ was provided by Reilly himself, and these architects had to apply it and, in some cases, to explain to Reilly why their detailed designs had to deviate from the ideal.

Yet it was A.V. Williams, Town Clerk to Bilston and Dudley in succession, who played probably the most significant role. Williams is significant because in most other cases it was the Borough Surveyor, Architect or Engineer, ie with qualifications in and experience of the built environment, who promoted action (eg in both neighbouring Wolverhampton and Walsall). It was Williams who carried out a civic survey, arranged for Neurath’s visit and Simey’s involvement, read Mumford and Reilly, and convinced both councils to appoint Reilly as consultant. In both cases, the impetus seems to have quickly waned once Williams had moved

on.

The concept of using consultant architects for different schemes was promoted by the MoH's Regional Architect, who had told Bilston that the MoH "did not wish local authorities to repeat the monotonous development produced on their Council House Estates erected during the inter-war years; they wanted varied and interesting estates" and that employing "first class architects" could speed the development process (Minutes, 17/1/46). Reilly, too, promoted the concept with the aim of developing distinct characters for the separate developments.

However, even Reilly's carefully-chosen architects had problems – largely of their own making – in producing the desired work at the appropriate time, and he was asked to intervene on several occasions. It is clear in Bilston that Reilly's nominees built far less than the Birmingham-based McKewan, Fillmore and McKewan.

The frustrations caused by the successive adaptations to plans resulting from the MoH's quibbles over costs affected not only Reilly and both A.V. and A.M. Williams. Williams-Ellis wrote of this period that

"once the delights of the preliminary reconnaissance and the draft proposals were behind me and one began to be impeded by the dead weight of public lethargy and official slow-motion brakemanship, I found it hard to sustain my initial enthusiasm or to persevere with whittled down schemes with the necessary patience. For some years, however, I was reasonably persistent ... but the actual physical results on the ground – for all our hopeful work on paper – remain pitifully small" (Williams-Ellis, 1971, p. 255).

The site preparation costs, especially in Bilston, were high owing to the previous industrial and extractive uses of the area. The Garchey refuse disposal system would cost at least an extra £60 per house in Bilston (Minutes, Health Committee, 14/5/46). Dudley would use a cheaper version. Eventually even this was dropped.

Reilly also had to contend with party politics at a time when such concerns were having a major effect on the speed and nature of reconstruction across the country (eg Hasegawa, 1992; Tiratsoo, 1990). In both Birkenhead and Bilston, his ideas were promoted particularly by the left. Only in Dudley, according to A.V. Williams, did both parties support the proposal (but after the 1949 elections, and Williams's loss, support declined rapidly).

Many housing historians have suggested that the post-war housebuilding programme was a failure: it was mismanaged, the manpower and building materials went to other projects, the national economy was in dire straits, and the micro-management by the MoH created problems and delays. The saga of the Reilly-inspired estates in Bilston and Dudley supports these views. The estates were built, albeit with considerable delays. They did have some communal 'greens'. Yet the implementation was fundamentally flawed, largely because of the reluctance of the socialist government to allocate sufficient funding and resources for even a single demonstration project of a new, socialist-inspired, communal and community-based, way of life for the working classes. With this lack of support at central government level, it is hardly surprising that the whole idea quietly faded away once Reilly died.

Perhaps the enduring legacy of Reilly is indirect. He focused on community-building through a form of neighbourhood unit. Mumford (1953) and Goss (1961) both wrote on the pervasive influence of neighbourhood units and social concerns in British residential planning of the reconstruction period, most particularly in the New Towns. The early layouts for Hemel Hempstead, for example, show houses backing on to communal 'play spaces', although the houses face on to traffic roads and have individual front gardens: anathema to Reilly (*Architect and Building News* 1950, p. 380). Charles Madge discussed the Bilston and Dudley schemes at some length, then criticised the Reilly layout – incorrectly – as houses would be separated from

the green spaces by their forecourts and roads, before extolling the Stevenage landscaped layout (Madge, 1950). Reilly's communities and his greens merge with the American Radburn and English landscape traditions.

#### Notes

- 1 NA: National Archives, formerly the Public Record Office.
- 2 Reilly's correspondence is in the Liverpool University Archives, D207/4: for brevity only the dates of letters are given here.
- 3 Minutes relating to Bilston are of the Development and Reconstruction Committee: actions with dates relate to the date of the meeting at which the action was formally reported. The Minutes are in the Wolverhampton City Archives and Local Studies collection.
- 4 Minutes relating to Dudley are of the Housing and Town Planning Committee, which became the Housing Committee on 14/11/47. Actions with dates relate to the date of the meeting at which the action was formally reported. The Minutes are in the Dudley Archives collection.

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*No full reference is given here to short news items or Letters to the Editor in newspapers or professional journals: these are traceable from the edition date given in the text.*

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## FIGURES



