

**Below are the five main sections. None of the links are active. It is recommended that the reader accesses these links in the main website because they do provide valuable further information.**

## **Chapter One: Beginnings and Foundations**

The objectives of this section:

1. To explain the intellectual influences and practical experience that led to the post-war New Towns movement.
2. To detail the biography and opinions of Patrick Abercrombie and Nye Bevan, who both played prominent roles in the New Towns movement and hence the creation of Harold Hill.
3. To look closely at the lives of the estates original residents before they moved to Harold Hill.

### **Victorian Undercurrents – Robert Owen**

The construction of Harold Hill, part of the post-war New Towns movement, remains the high point in the building of social housing in this country.

It was an accumulation of nearly 150 years of theory and practice that started when certain factory owners, having grown rich off of the massive profits available during the Industrial Revolution, began paying attention to the plight of their poor workers - employees who were the victims of the very same economic system of which the employers had taken such ruthless advantage of.

Often this attitude was based upon dissenting Christian ideals, held by men such as David Dale and Joseph Rowntree, but also political radicals such as Robert Owen.

The first, [David Dale], born in 1739, was a successful Scottish cotton factory owner, and in 1784 he opened mills first at New Lanark and then established new premises at Blantyre, Sutherland and Oban. He took in pauper children from the Workhouses of Glasgow and Edinburgh, as well as refugees from the Highland Clearances. Uniquely in this period, he also provided a basic standard of education and homes for his employees.

Marrying into the family in 1799 was [Robert Owen]. Moving from Manchester where he had already made a name for himself as a philanthropist, he took charge of New Lanark, and invested more money into the workforce and housing quarters. It is Owen's association with the model village that is best remembered today.

Others later in the nineteenth century would also engage in striving to find solutions to the dire problems of urban poverty to be found at that time. People such as Col. Edward Ackroyd who constructed Copley and Ackroyden near Halifax, Sir Titus Salt who created [Saltaire] near Bradford, William Hesketh Lever's principle role in building [Port Sunlight] in the Wirral, George Cadbury who instigated [Bournville] next to Birmingham and the Rowntree's with [New Earswick] just outside York. The names of these industrialists are still a familiar feature on products found within today's kitchens and bathrooms.

Although not all these new towns survived, the ideals behind them lasted far longer and were part of the infusion that created the new towns and estates after the Second World War.

Owen first began to draw attention to his 'self-supporting home colonies' in 1817. Here 1,200 persons would occupy a quantity of land from 1000 to 1500 acres, some details of the settlement being,

'To the right of this building, of which the ground-floor will form the infant school, and the other a lecture-room and a place of worship.

The building to the left contains a school for the elder children, and a committee-room on the ground floor; above, a library and a room for adults. In the vacant space within the squares, are enclosed grounds for exercise and recreation: these enclosures are supposed to have trees planted in them.'

(Report to the Committee of the Association for the Relief of the Manufacturing and Labouring Poor. A Supplementary Appendix to the First Volume of the Life of Robert Owen... London: Effingham Wildon, 1858, Vol. I.A, Appendix. No.1, 1817)

In 1841, still banging the home colony drum, he further detailed his ideas, selective paragraphs of which are:

'At each corner of the square will be a large building, designed for A School or College, -the four constituting An University, for the scientific formation of a superior character – practical, intellectual, moral, and practical – from infancy to maturity.

In the centre of each side of the square will be a magnificent building, containing Assembly and Concert Rooms, Libraries and Reading Rooms, Museums, Laboratories, Artists' Rooms, Lecture Rooms, Committee Rooms, Places of Worship, &c. &c.

1st, a Basement Story, to be used as Store-Rooms, &c.; as well as for a variety of purposes connected with the apparatus for Warming and Ventilating, and supplying with Hot and Cold Water, and artificial Light, every apartment throughout the whole square.

Within the square, also, and conveniently situated with regard to the other buildings, will be Gymnasia, and Baths.

The whole of the interior of the square, will be laid out in the most tasteful and scientific manner, as Pleasure Gardens; containing Botanical, Horticultural, and Floricultural Gardens.

This, then, is a general description of what may be fairly termed A Magnificent Palace, containing within itself the advantages of A Metropolis, A University, and A Country Residence, without any of their disadvantages, and situated within A Beautiful Park of 2000 or 3000 acres; the whole most scientifically arranged, and placing within the reach of its inhabitants, at a very moderate annual expenditure, arrangements far superior to any known, for the production and distribution of wealth, the formation of character, and the government of the population, with innumerable advantages never yet possessed by the most favoured individuals in any age or country.'

('General Arrangements of the Proposed Home Colonies. A Development of the Principles and Plans on which to Establish Self-Supporting Home colonies... London: Home Colonisation Society, 1841: 37-40)

Owen's plans were based on the close proximity of both agricultural land for food, parks for the well-being of the workforce and factories for local employment.

Today they translate like a cross between a humane Workhouse and the Israeli kibbutzim.

Points that draw attention are the central importance of places of learning, churches, entertainment areas, libraries, fitness centres, heated apartments with artificial (gas) light and hot and cold running water; as well as gardens and green space that were to be both within and around the residential area.

These are essential points, reflecting the radical nature of Owen's plans, and which, in a more appropriate twentieth-century form, would come of age in Harold Hill.

What once seemed utopian would become a reality.

On his death bed a church minister asked Robert Owen if he regretted wasting his life on fruitless projects. He responded; 'My life was not useless; I gave important truths to the world, and it was only for want of understanding that they were disregarded. I have been ahead of my time.'

Principles of the most progressive planning ideas were being standardised in the nineteenth century. At the heart was to be a self-reliant community of some thousands, within easy reach would be places of employment, schools, recreation opportunities, all to be entwined and surrounded by green areas. Most importantly, was the redistribution of population away from the cities.

### **Ebenezer Howard and the Garden Cities Movement**

Later in the nineteenth century would come a continuation of experiments in right planning and design: the Garden Cities Movement, as envisaged and promoted by [Ebenezer Howard].

Writing in his seminal work, *Garden Cities of To-Morrow*, he outlined the three options [see diagram] facing the British population under the title 'The Three Magnets', each of which was pulling 'The People' in a different direction.

The countryside offered lack of society, beauty of nature, hands out of work, land lying idle, trespassers beware, wood, meadow, forest, long hours, low wages, fresh air, low rents, lack of drainage, an abundance of water, lack of amusement, bright sunshine, no public spirit, need for reform, crowded dwellings and deserted villages.

The town, on the other hand, offered the closing out of nature, social opportunity, isolation of crowds, places of amusement, distance from work, high money wages, high rents and prices, excessive hours, an army of unemployment, fogs and droughts, costly drainage, foul air, murky sky, well-lit streets and slums and gin palaces.

For Howard, the two had to be brought together as town and country that would then offer beauty of nature, social opportunity, fields and parks of easy access, low rents, high wages, low rates, plenty to do, low prices, no sweating, field of enterprise, flow of capital, pure air and water, good drainage, bright homes and gardens, no smoke, no slums, freedom and co-operation.

He rather grandiosely declared: 'Town and country *must by married*, and out of this joyous union will spring a new hope, a new life, a new civilisation.'

Building upon the attention gained by his book, the Garden City Association (G.C.A) was formed in May 1900. Following that, two conferences were held, at locations that weren't coincidental, at Bournville in 1901 and Port Sunlight in July 1902.

These existing developments were used by the G.C.A. as practical economic examples that gave credence to their own proposals.

It led to The First Garden City Ltd being registered on September 1, 1903.

[Letchworth] was the first town to be built, the plans for which were based on a population of 30,000 living in an area of 1,250 acres with 2,500 acres of rural green belt surrounding the residential properties. After the First World War came Welwyn Garden City. Perversely, although these towns inspired a whole generation of architects and social planners, they were also to arouse private developers who, between the world wars, built uniform mimic suburbs - such as Upminster - that were a travesty of Howard's vision.

## **World War Two: Re-planning and Construction**

So in the Garden Cities Movement there was a strong theoretical and practical experience that laid down the basis for the future Harold Hill, to be built in the 1940s. But before the conception of Harold Hill the Second World War intervened, a catastrophe of such gigantic proportions that though it did not cause a complete break with economic and social continuity it certainly heralded a major psychological break. Even to this day, history is often measured in language that uses terms such as 'after the War' and 'since the War'. For many people, one feels, history started in the 1950's and from which came modern civilisation.

Most notably though, out of the human cost of war on the home front came the final flattening of the slums which had truly begun in the 1930s.

Much has been written about the East End of London, but little matches the oral testimony of former residents. Bryan MaGee, a child of Hoxton, remembers how crime and poverty were intrinsically bound together in his excellent memoir [Clouds of Glory]. And it was from this overcrowding and hardship that many would gladly leave.

The slum clearance programme had begun in earnest in the 1930s, but it wasn't until the destruction of World War Two that the opportunity was given for social planners and thinkers to obtain the necessary authority.

A prominent individual at the top of this growing mass of reformers was Patrick Abercrombie. Born in 1879, he trained as an architect before becoming the Professor of Civic Design at the Liverpool School of Architecture (established by Lever) in 1915. Afterwards, he made award-winning designs for Dublin city centre and gradually asserted his dominance as an architect of international renown.

In 1942 he produced the County of London Plan for the London County Council (LCC), and in 1944 he wrote the Greater London Plan for the Ministry of Works and Buildings. The later document was an extended and more thorough product than the 1942 publication, and for Abercrombie it was an accumulation of nearly 50 years of experience and knowledge in the field of planning and architecture.

It was the most ambitious scheme that London had ever seen and for details of which read [Now We Must Rebuild: The Greater London Plan, 1944]

## **The Greater London Plan, 1944**

World War Two was closing upon the publication of Abercrombie's second work, but the beginning of peacetime in 1945 would allow the gates to open for widespread social re-organisation. The pivotal catalyst being the election of the Labour government in 1945.

Before the war's end the Labour Party, along with many other political and pressure groups, issued pamphlets detailing their future housing policy. Although ['Your Home Planned by Labour'] is aimed at all working-class people, reflecting the times, the introduction is targeted at housewives seeking a better kitchen:

'For every woman in Britain today who is pleased with her kitchen, there are several who want – and urgently need – a better kitchen. Labour's post-war policy has remembered the fact that your kitchen is the core of your home, your workshop, where you spend much of your time, out of which come the good meals and the clean linen which help to make yours a truly happy household.'

Near the back page under the title "More Worthy Of Our People", opposite a picture of a slum, the text reads:

'These are the stately homes of England!  
In ugly huddles of brick and mortar like this, millions of our people must spend their lives. These are the cramped and dangerous playgrounds of our children. These are the homes where the wallpaper turns musty and peels away from the wall. These are the homes where the women must wage an unceasing battle with dust and drains and grime....  
These are the homes of the people whose courage and determination made Britain an unconquerable fortress during the grimmest days in our history. Out of these streets came the men and women to fill our fighting forces. Out of these streets came workers, in their millions, to make weapons which safeguarded the future of mankind.  
The courage, the skill and the determination of the people from the mean streets have made the greatest epic in the long course of human history. The Labour Party insists that the reward of victory shall be a country more worthy of our people. The men and women who have fought and toiled to make victory possible must not live out their lives in cramped and ugly streets. Children shall not be denied sunlight – or opportunity. Women must be released from endless drudgery of tenement and slum.  
Labour means to get new houses for the British people. Modern. Sunlit. Labour-saving.'

Although much of the successful post-war social planning rested on the shoulders of the Labour government, efforts were being made almost from the outbreak of war to ensure that peace would also bring prosperity to the masses.

People such as Frederick J. Osborn, who, in 1940 – when the winner was far from decided – found themselves at the heart of Whitehall arguing the case for radical efforts to tackle Britain's housing problems. Osborn was then the Honorary Secretary of the [Town and Country Planning Association] – Howard's direct descendents – and submitted evidence on their behalf to the [Barlow Royal Commission on the Distribution of the Industrial Population].

Through diligent work, Osborn was instrumental in persuading the participants in the Barlow Commission to come down forcefully on the side of a redistribution of the urban population, but even this wasn't radical enough for some and led to a Minority Report, signed by Patrick Abercrombie himself, which called for far more centralised and authoritarian powers by the national government to deal with the problem.

This concentrated and prolonged lobbying was a product of the widely viewed failure to capitalise on the possibilities presented after the First World War. The cry ‘Never Again!’ was taken up by both the people and professionals, and within Whitehall both Lewis Silkin – the new Labour Minister of Town and Country Planning – and Lord Reith – Chairman of the Ministry’s Advisory Committee – played fundamental roles which lead to the New Towns Act (1946) and the [Town and Country Planning Act (1947)].

Highlighting the urgency of new housing, a Gallop poll in 1945 found that 32 percent of respondents were seeking new accommodation.

### **The Beginnings of Harold Hill**

Harold Hill was not, unlike Harlow and Basildon, a New Town under the supervision of a Development Corporation, it was built as an ‘out-county’ estate under the control of the London County Council.

It was, though, part of the same housing programme, and they remain interchangeable facets of the same expansion.

A new ‘out-county’ housing estate on the doorsteps of Romford, later to be given its official name of Harold Hill, was announced on September 19, 1945. Here are several articles taken from the Romford Times from 1945 to 1947. Listed in chronological order they present a means of gauging how the process of announcing the new estate and the early building was covered in the local area.

- [ ‘L.C.C Reports on Mammoth Romford Estate’ – Romford Times, October 10, 1945.]
- [‘New Housing Estate “Not Second Dagenham”’ – Romford Times, October 17, 1945.]
- [‘The New Despotism Marches On’ – Romford Times editorial, January 15, 1947.]
- [‘Dagnam Park Being Planned As New Style Suburb – LCC Pass Big Romford Scheme.’ “Mixed Social Community” – Romford Times, May 7, 1947.]
- [‘First’ of L.C.C. Estate Settlers – Meet the Newmans of Magnolia Close’ – Romford Times, July 16, 1947.]

Although the regional newspapers reports were detailed in this era, they certainly didn’t reflect the horror that was felt in the local area.

There was a rumour that preferential places were going to be given to recently released criminals, while the de-facto leader of the Conservative Party, Hilbery Chaplin, stood up in the Council chamber and accused the L.C.C. of ‘importing Reds into Romford.’

Much though was based upon ignorance. It was widely viewed in middle-class lore at the time that if the working-classes were given their own bathroom they would only use it for storing coal. While in the 1930s economic depression the great mass of East End unemployed was disparagingly referred to as ‘the great unwashed’.

This ignorance was the result of a sharp separation of classes, a migration of the wealthier elements from the pollution and sheer unpleasantness of urban life had commenced in the nineteenth century and reached its zenith in the 1930s suburban expansion.

By the end of the Second World War class was still as rigid as before the conflict. For all the talk of a ‘people's war’ and a dissolution of class barriers, it mattered little when hostilities were over. It was, after all, those living in London, and in particular

the East End and south London dock area (Luftwaffter Target Area A) that had suffered the worst casualties and damage, with only occasional accidental bombing forays into the suburbs.

In the eyes of local people the cost of war did not count in the post-war re-planning of London.

In effect the original inhabitants of Harold Hill –described as both ‘settlers’ and ‘pioneers’ – were refugees from a war zone. They were a sickly population with a high incidence of TB, who had fought on the frontline both abroad and in London, who undoubtedly suffered great hardship in the 1930s, and who were escaping the wretched housing situation in the capital. They were not wanted in Romford - although those in the surrounding areas that found themselves working in Harold Hill, through, for example, the churches or politics, would be pleasantly surprised at the character of those they found living on the estate.

This mixture of disgust and snobbishness is still a feature of contemporary society.

Migration, for all who came to Harold Hill, was a profound experience as is evident in the testimony of residents. Most had left hardship alien to today’s residents. It is worth reading the memories of, firstly, my own mother, [Dorean Walpole], as well as [Massie Lambert].

The first stage of building was the prefabricated houses (prefabs) that were churned out in their thousands as war production was channelled into more social uses. These houses were put together as whole sections, transferred from the factory on the backs of transport lorries, and then bolted together when they reached their destination.

Universally liked by their new occupants, they were only intended as a stopgap for better housing in the future, which in Harold Hill meant their replacement in the Sixties onwards with more conventional housing on the Briar Road estate. The features of the prefabs which appealed being a kitchen area, bathroom and most impressively, their own refrigerator. But, importantly, they were detached, a characteristic which many only came to appreciate when they moved into terraced housing that replaced them. Altogether there were 605 prefabs erected.

By 1948 though the houses themselves – some three-bedroomed and some semi-detached – were being built. The building specifications such as the floor space and ceiling height were so generous that they remain unparalleled in the history of social housing in Britain. The newly elected Tory government of 1951 would, under the push for greater quantity, reduce this standard several times during their rule.

The first redbrick occupants moved into their new home at the end of 1948.

· [‘The First Family’ – Romford Times, December 1, 1948.]

A year later, at the end of 1949, the Labour Minister of Health paid a visit to Harold Hill.

Aneurin Bevan, just as much as Margaret Thatcher in later decades, was a central figure in the history of Harold Hill. It was the driving passion of this practical, peoples-first Marxist that really drove through the immediate post-war house-building programme.

See [Never Again! Nye Bevan, Housing and Harold Hill]

### **Chapter Three: Recreation, Education, Disillusionment and Joy**

The objectives of this section:

1. To reflect on the problems and successes of the early residents, and how the authorities coped with the mass of incomers.
2. An overview of recreation and pastimes for the early residents.
3. To look at experiences in school and to assess whether the comprehensive system of education worked.
4. To look in a fresh and realistic light the role of policing in Harold Hill over the decades.

### **Work Starts on the New Towns and Estates**

By 1951 the rate of house building was proceeding at a pace. In December of the previous year 3,000 had been constructed with completion estimated for June 1953. By March of 1951 3,325 houses were built, 3,854 in total by May, 4,771 by November, and 5,253 in January 1952. Which is a building rate of 193 a month.

German P.O.W.'s played a significant part in the early building programme. They all left by 1948, sent back to their homeland. For further details read [When the German P.O.W.'s Built Harold Hill]

Symbolically, the foundations of much of the Harold Hill housing came from the bombed rubble left over from the destruction of the old London, with demolished air raid shelters in particular being used as part of the early roads. Quite literally, the new world was being built on top of the ruins of the old.

For a good overview of the New Towns development push read the interview with David Grove: [Forging the New Jerusalem: Reflections of a New Town Planner].

### **Harold Hill Horticultural Club**

George Orwell, writing in his wartime essay 'The Lion and the Unicorn', cleverly observed the relationship between the English and their hobbies:

‘...it is worth noting a minor English trait which is extremely well marked though not often commented on, and that is a love of flowers. This is one of the first things that one notices when one reaches England from abroad, especially if one is coming from Southern Europe. Does it not contradict the English indifference to the arts? Not really, because it is found in people who have no aesthetic feeling whatever. What it does link up with, however, is another English characteristic which is so much a part of us that we barely notice it, and that is the addiction to hobbies and spare-time occupations, the privateness of English life. We are a nation of flower-lovers, but also a nation of stamp-collectors, pigeon-fanciers, amateur carpenters, coupon-snipers, darts-players, crossword-puzzle fans. All the culture that is most truly native centres round things which even when they are communal are not official – the pub, the football match, the back garden, the fireside and the ‘nice cup of tea’.

Living up to Orwell’s remark, the following Harold Hill-based clubs were mentioned at least once in the pages of the local press up until 1956: Animal Defenders’ League, British Legion, Tenants’ Association, Angling Club, Ambassadors’ Amateur Dramatic Society, Catholic Association, Old Folks’ Club, St John Ambulance Brigade, St Georges Ambulance and Nursing Corps, Army Cadets, Air Training Cadets, Catholic Women’s Association, Catholic Men’s Association, Cycling Club,

Sunshine Club (for the blind), Hilltop Social Club, Motor Cycle Club, Dagnam Park Entertainments Committee, Roman Catholic Parents and Citizens Association, Mothers' Club, Community Association, Sports Club, Dramatic Society, Working Men's Club, Higher Income Tenants Association, Poultry Club, Women's Social Club, The Friendly Women's Club, Pensioners' Pals, British Red Cross Society, Questors Dramatic Society and the Three Clubs Choir.

These were the clubs reported on in the press, and there would have certainly been more, with many individual streets having their own social clubs. Many of these clubs such as the Catholic Association and the Community Association had multiple societies under their wing, and would allow space for them to operate in their own respective halls. Although some of the above were founded for religious reasons, or, like the various Tenants' Associations, for practical reasons, they also took it upon themselves to organise for leisure purposes. Added to this were the political parties of all colours who had their own social committees, as well as the various churches who used their own halls for their own clubs.

But the biggest of all these hobbies and entertainment societies was the Harold Hill Horticultural Club with a membership at its height of 1,500. Starting in July 1947 when 27 prospective members gathered in a prefab house to discuss possibilities, the first Chairman, Mr. C. Crotchley, announced;

‘We are living on a new estate that you might say is spoiling the countryside. Anyone who loves the countryside can see it being spoiled each day. Roads are being cut, houses are shot up... But the idea of being a gardener is to minimise that as much as possible, and it is societies like that that can achieve some small measure. By building gardens you can bring back to nature some of the beauty owing to it.’

At the time of this speech they had 259 members, by 1953 they had 1,000, a couple of years later they had 1,500 members. It would seem Harold Hill folk loved gardening – for most, if not all, this was the first time they had a garden of their own and they took full opportunity of what was presented to them.

By the time of the fourth horticultural show in 1952 they had prize winning sections for best gardener, vegetables, flowers, fruit, and women's, handicraft, children, and old folks, with all these categories having several subsections each.

By the fifth annual show the then secretary announced ‘Harold Hill can be proud of its gardens. The estate is becoming, as I said in the Town Hall five years ago, a city of flowers.’ The annual summer flower show proved to be Harold Hill's biggest crowd-puller, with all local dignitaries such as Mayor and MP attending the event

This was the era before garden centres, and besides if there were any such businesses in Essex the people of Harold Hill had neither the transport nor money for such goods. Consequently, people made do with what was around them. The LCC, despite persistent rumours, never provided top soil for gardens, and so every weekend all the men from a particular street would concentrate on one house at a time and take soil from nearby fields, while the Dagnam Park – having become known as ‘the Manor’ because of the derelict old aristocratic mansion – was pillaged of plants and bulbs. Sunday would witness a flow of residents, wheelbarrows full, streaming to and from the park. People were also resourceful with the builders waste, and many a rookery was built with the rubble left lying around in gardens.

## Returning back to London

Nevertheless, despite a number of leisure and hobby clubs boredom was a persistent complaint from when the first residents moved into the first prefabs in 1940s and throughout the 1950s. It was certainly something the local press picked up on either sympathetically or disparagingly for years.

Under the title of 'Hundreds Try To Quit Harold Hill', the Romford Times recorded the following opinions in March 1953:

'I've only been here six months and I am sick to death of Harold Hill. I've been trying to get away from here ever since I came.

'Nine out of ten people will tell you the same as I will. This is just nothing to do here. There are no cinemas, dance halls or pubs. That's what I miss.

'It's not too bad for those with their own transport, but when you realise that it costs 10d. to go to Romford and back it's a different story altogether.'

- Constance Snell

'You think of it – 10s. extra rent a week than they used to pay previously, and on top of that fares to London each week. That makes quite a hole in the working man's pocket.'

- Cyril Lancaster

'Believe me, that advertisement is just one of dozens that I have displayed in an effort to get away from this place. I have been trying to leave ever since I came here 18 months ago. My husband wants to go back to London, too.

'We are so lonely here. You must have fun while you are young, mustn't you? I want to see life again. I would far rather live in a flat in London than in a house in Harold Hill.

'If I want to have a day out in town it costs me a small fortune because I cannot leave the children at home. The cost of fares is a terrible burden on us.'

- Stella Rose

Reflecting decades later, residents commented upon the unrest that many felt in the early years:

'What happened was that when I visited the house, the lady next door, Mrs Hastings, said, 'Anybody who doesn't take these places doesn't really need a place.' I thought I better take it because it was my third opportunity. There was a lady next door called Mrs Ricks, and she went within six months, while Mrs Hastings left after four years. In fact, she stayed the longest, but the rest of them were here today, gone tomorrow.'

- Mrs Munday.

'When they opened these estates like Harold Hill, East London people couldn't stomach it because it was so quiet and they came back. And Harold Hill was the same it was like a graveyard.

The main attraction though was Fords. They used to work shift work, two weeks on and two weeks off. All the men went to work and all the women stayed at home and locked their doors because there was nothing to do'

- Danny Silver.

'I remember getting off the removal van such as it was because we never had any furniture, and for years and years I cried because I wanted to go home, and when I got married I went back to Tottenham and within five months I was back here because I hated it in London.'

- Brenda Dryer.

For some time the local shops were full of cards from hopeful tenants seeking a swap with London tenants, and certainly there was many as an LCC spokesman admitted in 1953:

'It's true that people are trying to leave Harold Hill. For instance, five families left in one week alone last month.

'During the past three months nearly 40 families have packed up and returned to London and the Home Counties. A slow outflow is being maintained throughout the year.'

Those leaving through official channels would have been the tip of a much larger iceberg, with most returnees seeking do so with informal swaps.

### **Happiness Found in the Post-War Reconstruction**

It was for many, though, a new start that they had long sought.

An interesting series of feature articles was run in the Romford Recorder during 1956 and 1957. Called 'Down Your Street', two journalists picked a road in either Romford or Hornchurch and interviewed the residents to give a flavour of its inhabitants. The three streets picked in Harold Hill were [Chippenham Road], [Petersfield Avenue] and [Gooshays Drive]. They provide some interesting insights into the backgrounds of residents before they moved to the estate.

The personal memories of [John Beavis] shed light on some of aspects of early Harold Hill society.

Providing another illumination on past outlooks, but from a different angle, are these extracts taken from essays written by thirteen and fourteen year-old pupils of Quarles Girls Secondary School in 1959:

'Our teacher... says she thinks that Harold Hill is the nicest estate she has ever seen because of the lovely scenery, modern architecture, new modern schools, new and up-to-date houses. In one word the whole estate is having more and more things added to it which are MODERN.

'The houses are respectable along with the people who live in them. They are clean and fresh and are decorated often.

'Harold Hill Estate will soon be fit for a Queen to live in as it has every means of near transport.

'And one thing that must be stressed is the amusements that will surely come into development for the younger generation'

- Gloria Johnson.

'I remember how thrilled I was at having my own bedroom, and how big I thought it was. Then my mother found the emersion heater, so now instead of boiling kettles of water we could just turn on the switch and within half-an-

hour or so we have boiling water for a bath. Then we saw the cupboards in the kitchen all along one side of the wall.

“It was a present from heaven,” as my mother said.’

- Carol Watts.

‘Our house seemed like heaven – tiled bathroom with a wash basin, separate toilet, and hot and cold running water – only to mention a few of the luxuries.’

- Barbara Sheppard.

‘The advantages were, we had hot water in the taps and a garden to grow flowers, vegetables and to play in. Where as in London you only had a yard and no hot water.’

- Helen Murdoch.

‘I like the housing estates with their garden especially these big wonderful schools. When I was at Pitsea I went to an old school not half as nice as this one and when I used to tell the girls what it was like they couldn’t believe it and wished they could come here.’

- Marie Pottle.

### **Prejudice from the Rest of Romford**

Few in the surrounding areas warmed to the new influx, with estate tenants complaining of being snubbed by bus drivers and of shop assistants refusing to accept cheques. Crime in Harold Hill was reported on weekly in the local papers, with local residents quickly becoming exasperated with the coverage they were receiving. Here are some comments from 1951 – all from different Harold Hill residents - as printed in response:

‘I feel that as a resident of Harold Hill I must write to you about your vindictive and insinuating question mark on the front page of your hitherto-interesting and communicative paper.

‘I realise, of course, that we are not wanted by the residents of this area; but it must be realised that for the most part, we ourselves were compelled by circumstances to reside in this district and, left alone, with a few exceptions, we hope to make this a strong, thriving and happy community. I think that the people I have come into contact with since I have been here are all most helpful and obliging, to say the least, the neighbourly spirit being well to the fore.

‘I suggest that you leave those vicious thrusts and direct them towards those human animals who rush off the train at Gidea Park, knocking down and trampling all who are coming down to the platform – even young children.

‘Give me the humble people at Harold Hill who, for the most part, are happy in their own homes for the first time, and only wish to be left alone.’

‘The council is far too slow in providing recreation facilities here. Youths between the ages of 12 and 17 are too young to have enough money to go into Romford every night and too old to go to bed at 6 p.m. They are either forced to sit in with their parents or hang around on street corners.

‘Are many of the estates residents undesirables? No, all the undesirables live in Gidea Park.’

‘We have some very good people in professions here, good citizens all. In years to come, Essex and Romford will be proud to mention the Harold Hill estate.’

‘At present nothing is right with it, no schools for our children, which means that have to travel back and forth to Romford and no amusements. We are snubbed when travelling on buses and shops directly you mention you come from Harold Hill.’

‘We have all been placed badly and it’s all wrong. Our children have to go to schools in Romford and are classed as “The Kids on the Hill”.’

‘Owing to the absence of shops, we find the cost of living much too high, therefore encouraging crime.’

‘Growing pains, emphasised by the silly tittle-tattle of alarmists who without any factual knowledge of the extent of crime, see fit to write to their local papers and by doing so create a bad atmosphere.’

‘We need more shops. I have women staggering along roads on the estate looking like beasts of burden with shopping from Romford.’

‘They feel we are putting up their rates, spoiling the look of what was once countryside and getting houses when thousands of Romford people are homeless.’

‘More police are required; but how much crime is the natural result of the almost universal terrible financial position of most tenants? Rents, fares, hire-purchases and the iniquitous cost of living are blameworthy.’

To a meeting of the Gidea Park Ratepayers’ Association in October 1951 the Chairman of the London County Council Housing Committee said this in response to the ongoing criticism from Romford residents:

‘I want to give you a picture of London’s problems which are not appreciated. London is a physical mistake, and it should have never happened. It is a wonderful place and I have done a lot of globetrotting, but it is an aggregation of buildings that were just allowed to happen.’

Citing figures of 200,000 people being on the waiting list, with 60,000 of those being urgent and another 60,000 being very urgent, he said that re-planning London would take 20 years, and in which time half-a-million new houses would be built.

‘We have a tremendous slum problem in London, and clearing the slums involved sending people ‘out-county’. Unless that is done the slums will go on, and there will be a wastage of wealth on traffic problems (!). We will do

all we can in London but unless we still come 'out-county' the great LCC within three years will cease to exist.

The LCC has done its statutory duty, and that is to supply a number of houses, and we intend to do that at any cost.

The Harold Hill estate is one of which we are proud.'

There were many appeals by the local dignitaries and officials for tolerance towards the new Romford residents, but the association between crime and Harold Hill continues to this day. But Romford itself was hardly without fault with the market town being one of the major black market centres during the Second World War, and statistics from 1953 revealing higher levels of crime for the Romford district than for the City of Liverpool:

['More Crime Here Than in Liverpool', Romford Times, July 29, 1953]

One resident remembers how she delighted in taking revenge against her complaining mother-in-law:

'When we moved here there was much prejudice, especially from Gidea Park. I married a bloke from there, much to his mother's disgust.

The press was extremely biased and every little thing that happened on Harold Hill would make the front page. When I was twenty I worked for CID in Romford and my mother-in-law lived in Gidea Park and she was always going on about Harold Hill and what a terrible place it was and there were all these villains coming out of London. And I had great pleasure, because I hated her at the time, in going through the records at CID and finding out that there was more crime in Gidea Park and Romford than there was in Harold Hill and which was never publicised.'

### **Women Make the Best of the New Estate**

Women have often been the hidden part of history. Much of the East End mythology is predominantly masculine: gang warfare, industrial disputes, political riots; but the plight of women was often far worse; with back street abortions and the common practice of pulling out teenage girls teeth to ensure no dental bills for a future husband.

Women, when arriving on Harold Hill, faced the hardship of daily shopping (no fridges, and no car for transport), and isolation from their own extended family, but for those determined to stay there was a sense of joy amongst the hardship – 'How we laughed. We did laugh; we laughed an awful lot. We weren't miserable; it was a good life'; 'We used to go barn dancing, it was fun, all women, 400, 500 women and you get a caller there and it was fantastic, it was hilarious wasn't it?' ; 'Oh, we never stopped laughing, we went home with wet knickers, it was lovely!'

In truth, of the new residents that decided to settle, there was an attitude of making the best of what was available. Many settled because of the superior housing, some yearned to go back for years but were unable to because they had no housing to return to, many decided to stay because of their children. The process of building essential amenities was painfully slow – it wasn't until the 1960s that the swimming pool and community centre was finally built. The authorities seemed to care little other than for housing.

The change for many though opened up new opportunities, for them and their families.

\* Isbell, Carla: 'Boyhood Strong, Girlhood Graceful: A Study of Working Class Women's Lives on the Harold Hill Housing Estate'

### **Chapter Three: Money, Work, Religion and Politics**

The objectives of this section:

1. To assess the changing nature of employment over the decades.
2. To write about the effects of the 1980s Right to Buy policy.
3. During the early decades of Harold Hill, to assess the role of the Labour party, Communist party and Liberal party in the community.
4. To explain the reasons for the rise of the Conservative party vote from the 1980s onwards.
5. To go into detail on the activities of the Tenants' Association and Community Association over the decades.
7. To look at the role of the various religious groups in Harold Hill in the early decades, and with particular reference to the Sunday school movement. In the main this means the various denominational Christian churches, but also the synagogue.

#### **Community Activists**

Right from the beginning, local community activism on the 'Hill' has been carried out by small determined groups and individuals, much of the time despite the indifference and apathy of the majority. This, in the face of such hurdles, makes their contribution to local society even more impressive: there are some individuals who spent their lives on the well-being of the local estate.

The first activist of note was Winifred Jay (1900-54) who was one of the first tenants to move to Harold Hill. Despite having her own family she took on a leadership role, and her personal efforts saw better street lighting and an improved bus service. She was also one of the principle sponsors of the RSCPA clinic, and with her husband took on the position of secretary and assistant secretary of the Community Association when interest flagged. Councillor Olive Roberts said in her memory,

'I worked with Mrs Jay when the Tenants' Association was first formed. She was a great woman and took an interest in everybody. She would help in any socials and dances that were being organised and even when she was ill helped the first drama group formed on the estate.'

The second activist of note was Ben Cohen (1910-77): the long-term branch secretary of the local Communist Party, and a stalwart of local politics for nearly three decades until his untimely death in a plane crash in Havana, Cuba in 1977. Ben, arguably, played a greater role in local campaigns than any other individual. A constant presence for decades, he both instigated and supported various incarnations of the Tenants' Association. Although a school headmaster by profession, he never belittled

or patronised those he worked with and which gave him a loyal and respectful following amongst tenant and Labour party activists, some of whose opinions of him read:

‘That man never had a selfish thought in his life.’

‘He was the only man I ever met who thought the invasion of Hungary in ’56 was a good thing.’

‘Ben Cohen was a very clever man. It was sad because a lot of his views were only for the good of the people: everybody should have equal opportunity. But people were scared of communism, but he was a very intelligent man and I had a lot of intelligent conversations with him.’

After Ben’s untimely death the following eulogy was produced, complete with grammar and spelling mistakes, by the local Tenants’ Association:

In Memory of a Comrad

How can one sit, and put pen to paper.

To try to explain One mans lifetime,

Had this man written, his life story, it would go from school children, for which he was an Head Master for many years, and well respected.

To many familys on Harold Hill. He spent most years of his life with his Dear Wife, who he lost, just a few years ago. Working for his public representing them on many various committees.

His time and Patience were often Rewarded by the many letters he Received from his Public Thanking him.

His Chairman of the Harold Hill Tenants Association.

We the Committee, Have Lost a very learned Gentleman for the working class people of Harold Hill and Surrounding Districts.

This Man This Ben Cohen. Gave untold Time, to help his Public, that were in Some Distress.

To His Memory The Harold Hill Tenants Committee will pledge its self to Carry on his Good Work. For we know That this would have been his Last Wish. To his Sons Simon and Michel you both had a father to be Proud of.

There are Very few people on the Harold Hill Estate who can claim the Respect and admiration of Ben Cohen.

He will be missed.

But his memory will live on.

Although Amy Crockford (1909-85) was a long-term member of the Labour Party and Gooshays ward secretary for some years, her impact on Harold Hill is best remembered through her work at the St Neots playground. A powerful character, she was as one contemporary remembered, ‘A bundle of dynamite, very forceful; you didn’t mess with Amy, she knew her views were always right.’

From 1957 until 1975 she ran this pioneering children’s play area until forced to retire at the age of 66.

Her first attempt at the scheme was in 1955 when she persuaded Bermondsey council to open an adventure playground. Amy then started another one in Harold Hill after

moving to the estate a couple of years later. It was to be the first in the country, as she later explained:

“I always loved kids. I was brought up in Hoxton, one the slum areas of East London, so I understand the problems children face from that particular background experience.

“Twenty years ago (1955) my husband walked out and left me with my three children. I was shattered. A friend of mine came back from America shortly afterwards with lots of go ahead ideas.

“One of these was “junk playgrounds” where children could do virtually anything they liked under supervision.

“I thought it was a great idea. It was a battle to convince people that it would work, but we managed.”

Despite staging a campaign to force the council to employ her beyond retirement age, she left the job in 1975 which, over the years, had won her legions of adoring kids. Winning the MBE in 1977 for her work for young people and welfare groups in the local area, she said:

“Never in my wildest dreams did I think I would ever be called to Buckingham Palace to receive an MBE.

“I miss that playground everyday and I still believe I should have not been pensioned off.

“Since leaving I have battled for many years – for tenants on the estate, for the poor, for the old, for the deprived.

“I would gladly trade in my MBE – glad of it though I am – to take up my post at St Neots again.”

Frank (1909-99) and Reta Coffin (1909-2001) were consistent in their dedication to Harold Hill from when they first moved to the estate in the early 1950s to when they passed away almost 50 years later. Both were religious Quakers, vegetarians, and pacifists, and they served as Labour councillors for the ‘Hill over a number of decades, including time as Mayor and Mayoress in the seventies.

Frank grew up in south London and Brighton, one of five children. He made a decision at the age of 10 to become a vegetarian – a decision he stuck with for the rest of his life. Active in the temperance – that is, anti-alcohol – movement, he met Reta at a meeting of the International Order of Good Templars.

Reta Schwindt had grown up with hardship. Having lost her father to alcoholism she was forced to leave school and become a wage-earner at a young age. Her experiences of her father’s problem led her to signing the temperance pledge as a result of which she met Frank, marrying in 1931.

The following ten years were ones of much change for the Coffin’s as they lived in a variety of places, including Welwyn Garden City where they first became politically active and joined the Labour Party and the Peace Pledge Union. Also, they joined the Christian Society of Friends (Quakers) whose beliefs meant observing absolute pacifism.

Come the Second World War their religious philosophy meant spending the years working on the land at Tolleshunt Knights in Essex. These were particularly hard years for these two conscientious objectors, but out of this came Frank Coffin’s

involvement with the National Union of Agricultural Workers and his appointment as their National Organiser in 1952.

After moving to Harold Hill, Frank was first elected to the Romford County Council in 1953, with Reta becoming a councillor and joining her husband in the town hall not long after.

He carried on sitting on the bench in Romford, first becoming a local magistrate in Colchester; awarded an MBE in the 1972 New Year's Honours List, he retired from the local judiciary in 1979 at the grand age of 70.

Reta was elected mayoress in 1971 and again a few years later. Not being a political animal she was less interested in the town hall and more enthusiastic towards the public engagements that such a position involved.

Whether as Christians or Socialists, both Frank and Reta were dedicated to religious and political ideals that were firmly rooted in a love of the people and, for the Coffin's in particular, a love of the people of Harold Hill.

### **Community Association**

Two organisations, the Tenants' Association and the Community Association, have played prominent roles in Harold Hill over the decades.

The first of these, the [Community Association], began at a meeting sponsored by the London Council of Social Service in February 1953 when 150 tenants gathered to discuss the possibility of opening a community centre. Gooshays Farm House was mooted as one prospect. In May the same number of residents turned out again to see the adoption of a constitution for the Association, the objects being:

- To promote the well-being of the community by a common effort to further health, advance education and stimulate physical, intellectual and moral development.
- To foster a community spirit;
- To assist in the maintenance and the management of a community centre.
- The association will be non-political and non-sectarian.

There was a battle between the Working Men's Club and the Community Association over the use of Gooshays Farm, which also included a straw-roofed eighteenth century barn – the biggest in Essex. The Community Association won, with the opposing group moving into the Red House and which continued as a Working Men's Club until the nineties.

Mr R.J. Frost, part-time warden and Broadford's school teacher, announced: 'It will take a long time to get the Association running smoothly, but when we do, it will be of great benefit to the residents of the estate.'

Familiarly, the following week's Romford Times reported that the building had been vandalised, this time by Teddy Boys.

By the summer of 1956 they had a total of 218 individual members, with 15 affiliated organisations. Their magazine, Farm House News, had a circulation of 1,000 while every room in the Gooshays Farm House was fully booked daily during the week with such classes as needlework and motorcycle maintenance.

By 1957 though the membership had dropped to 130 with a corresponding decline in enthusiasm – five years after starting, it looked in terminal decline.

Typical though of the dedication of the small minority of activists, 22 people went out to knock on doors and recruited 256 new members. The chairman of the Association said:

‘We visited 777 houses in selected areas. On average each canvasser has spent 40 evenings or Sunday’s going from door to door explaining our aims. They have done a wonderful job.’

By 1959 that had risen to 500 members, and from there continued years of pressurising the authorities to build the Community Centre that was finally built in the mid-sixties.

There were hundreds of estates and towns that had their own Community Association. For a more thorough explanation read [The Development of the Community Associations: Dagenham and Beyond].

### **Tenants’ Association**

[Tenants’ Associations], and their organisers, have often played quiet roles and battled on with little recognition for the part they have played in local areas. Occasionally, such as in the late Sixties and in the late Eighties they have effectively united together in national or London-wide campaigns, but tenant leaders have for the most part found themselves battling on in isolation and without applause. On the whole, working class activists led the Associations, and despite a lack of formal education they exhibited a flare for leadership and organisational ability.

The first incarnation of the Harold Hill Tenants’ Association sprung up with the prefabs in the late 1940’s. The issues raised on behalf of members were typical of those to be found on a new estate such as Harold Hill – the lack of transport for children schooled miles away and the need for a nursery school. Other complaints aired were the lack of pavements forcing children to walk in the road, and school meals that often only had vegetables without the ration-quota meat.

Social events were an important aspect of the Tenants’ Association organisation. A typical event was that organised in the autumn of 1949 at the Harold Wood War Memorial Hall. Over 100 people gathered to dance to The Blue Ravens led by Ted Scott. The M.C. was the Association’s secretary. At these events the kids of estate residents were always catered for so that parents could enjoy a night out at the end of the week.

Much of the work of any Tenants’ Association is often low key and outside the glare of publicity. Occasionally, though, they do make the headlines, as happened in May 1952 when nearly 200 children were involved in a ‘school strike’.

Parents were unhappy at the free school bus being withdrawn from those attending Heath Park Girls’ School and Pettits Lane Boys’ School.

A meeting of mothers took place on the Tuesday in the field behind the works canteen of C.C. French – a common meeting place for Harold Hill tenants before the community centre. 100 women decided to form a strike committee and sent a deputation to Chelmsford where the Essex Education Committee was based. They visited the deputy education officer for Essex and handed in a 650-names-strong petition but were disappointed when he refused to reinstate the free transport.

After this the fathers became involved too and another deputation was organised. This time it went to the House of Commons to see the Romford M.P., Lt.-Col. J.C. Lockwood. He refused to see them.

By Friday the strike had spread with more parents pulling their children out of school and 200 collected in the same field where Tuesday’s meeting was held to decide upon their next move. A Parents’ Strike Committee was formed with Mr. C. Grutt as

secretary and Ben Cohen as press officer, while tenants from nearby Theydon Bois estate came to offer advice having themselves just recently undertaken similar action on the same issue. The press officer read out the following statement to waiting journalists:

“First, the people have decided as a result of the meeting to stand together until free transport is provided. The whole action is concerned with the welfare and education of the children.

“On Thursday, Romford Trades Council passed a resolution giving us their support.

“Children who have to take a scholarship are going to school under protest, but they will come out when their examinations are finished.”

Every morning hundreds of ‘striking’ kids would be lined up and the registration taken. They waited by the same bus stop at the same time for the transport necessary to get to school. The stand of the tenants’ was clear: Here are our children ready to go. Now send a bus to pick them up.

They won the battle: the authorities caved in a month later and conceded the need for free transport.

The Harold Hill Tenants’ Association was re-launched several times between the late 1940s and the late 1960s, but it was to be permanently launched in 1968 after the newly elected Tory majority on the Greater London Council (the renamed and expanded London County Council) decided to increase rents by 70 percent under the pretence of a budget deficit. Harold Hill, like many places in London, responded by holding a demonstration in which 200 people marched around Central Park. This was part of a London-wide campaign that accumulated in 6,000 demonstrators marching to the Hampstead home of the Minister for Housing, Tony Greenwood. Unsurprisingly, Greenwood reacted to this by intervening and blocked the proposed GLC rises.

The new Association had two aims:

- To oppose present and future rent increases.
- To secure higher standards of estate management and repairs to, and maintenance of, maisonettes, flats and houses on the Harold Hill GLC estate.

From this re-launch came a Tenants’ Association that lasted up until the nineties, when it imploded with bitter infighting. It was, reputedly, the largest T.A. in London by the turn of the eighties. Other activists came to the fore during its existence, and in particular the Battling Betty’s – Betty Strathern and Betty Whiting.

Mike Davies, a prominent activist in the eighties and nineties, remembers how they gained their nickname:

‘...they were known as the Battling Betty’s because people used to go to them when they were in trouble. Betty Strathern was astute, very articulate and could put a letter together. When I was Chair of Housing I looked at her file and where as most tenants’ files are an inch thick, hers was a foot thick!’

## **Religion: Protestants, Catholics and the Rest**

The Churches – and also the synagogue and Kingdom Hall – have been a constant presence in Harold Hill right from the early days. The Greater Plan For London, 1944, envisaged church facilities for 10 percent of the New Town population, while Harold Hill's original plans donated space to six different churches.

In fact, during the fifties there were two [Church of England] premises built – St. George's and St. Paul's; as well as churches for the [Methodists], Evangelicals, [Baptists], and the [Catholics]. The small communities of [Jews] and [Jehovah's Witnesses] also erected their own centres of worship.

Although active Church membership was limited amongst adults, for the children it was a different affair with parents en masse sending their kids to Sunday School, mostly to seek some peace and quiet. Because of the estate's youthful population, St George's claimed at one point that they had the largest Sunday School attendance in the country.

The Baptists founded their own permanent church on the estate in the mid-fifties. Historically, they grew out of the Church of England, with the first congregation in England being established in 1609. There followed centuries of persecution as the established Anglican Church and the state tried to suppress and marginalize them, which left the Baptists with a strong anti-authoritarian streak.

The basic tenets of their organised faith being that the entire congregation, not just the minister, should run the local church, and that the individual church has autonomy within the wider Baptist framework. In particular, Baptists believe that Christianity has to be the choice of the adult, so baptism (that is, entrance into the church) can only be undertaken once the individual is old enough to make a conscious and informed decision.

Baptists and Congregationists played an important role in the Garden Cities of Letchworth and Welwyn, and they were to be a prominent part in Harold Hill. The two groups found enough similarities to hold religious meetings together in the early years of the estate, but the Baptists split away later to concentrate on building their own church. At the time of purchasing the land on Taunton Road from the LLC for £645, there were 70 Baptist churches in Essex, with the local group on the estate using the Straight Road primary school for services. The hall, opened in September 1954, was built to seat 250, and was named after the late Rev. Hugh McCullough who had led a team of missionaries called the 'Essex Five'. At the opening ceremony the Rev. W.H. Tebbitt, said,

“This is a very important day for many of us, and for Harold Hill and the whole great community here.

“I hope, too, that this is one of God's great days, and it is certainly a red-letter day for us. There are a large number of problems but here is now a solid church which is worthy of what it represents. This is our gift to Harold Hill and, more than that, it is our gift to Jesus Christ.”

One of the more bizarre stories in Harold Hill's history was the 'squashes' religious revival of 1955. In January of that year the Romford Times ran a front-page article entitled the 'Miracle Story'. It concerned Patricia Letty and her family who had converted to Christianity after their prayers were answered, although the miracles were hardly of Biblical proportions (one of which was finding their lost dog).

From there grew the 'squashes' movement that saw religious meetings held in people's houses. News of the revival spread around the world and interest was shown in the United States, Australia and Canada.

The Romford Times journalist visited a ‘squash’ at a particular house. 40 people, mostly teenagers, had gathered to celebrate their faith. They were to be informed by a middle-aged woman that she was once a cripple and could hardly walk – even with the aid of sticks; but now God had given her strength to walk again. The journalist reported: ‘There are many meetings such as this on the Harold Hill estate. It is all part of a tremendous religious revival that is taking place there.’ He observed the liveliness of the ‘squash’:

‘It is surprising how happy these meetings are. Everyone sings at the top of their voice, and every now and then there are shouts of “Hallelujah,” which reminds one of the old Negro spirituals.

A blind man is there. He cannot read the words on the hymn sheets, but he taps out the rhythm with his white stick and every now and then joins in a chorus which he is familiar.

The revival is growing. More and more people are joining the hymn singing and the praying.’

One of the largest religious communities on the ‘Hill was the Catholics, an estimated one in eight to one in seven of the population being of that particular faith. Presumably, this indicates that large swathes of the original population were either Irish or had descended from Irish stock there having been large-scale emigration from Ireland to England for centuries.

The early masses took place in the workmen’s canteen of W.C. French – the private company responsible for building the estate. They also took place at Harold Wood hospital and the Plough pub on Gallows Corner, and for the particularly devout there was a weekday 6.30 am service at the priest’s house in Tring Gardens.

The editor of the Catholic Herald opened the 1954 summer fete of Petersfield Avenue’s Church of the Most Holy Redeemer: “There are no fewer than 2,900 Catholics on the estate, an enormous figure in relationship to the population of the parish.” Pointing out a higher proportion of Catholics in Harold Hill than elsewhere in the country, he said:

“This suggests that in this new Catholic community the Church has got in on the ground floor.

“We Catholics have certain beliefs about what is important and these things have formed for over 2,000 years the basis of our civilised community. It seems that in a Catholic community so strong these things can be a great factor for building up a centre.

“I know that Protestants are leading good lives, but we have a stronger idea of a good life.”

Concluding, he said, “this little gathering at the centre of the estate is beginning history.”

### **The Conservatives Start Selling Council Houses**

The Right to Buy as enshrined in the 1980 Housing Act was one of the biggest factors in changing Harold Hill after it was built in the 1950s. The change has been irreversible, although whether that it is beneficial or detrimental to the community is a debate that still continues today.

Harold Hill started as a completely council-owned housing estate, that is, the landlord was the municipal government which was initially the London County Council (LCC), then the Greater London Council (GLC) and then later the London Borough of Havering.

From 1967, but particularly from 1980, tenants have bought their own homes leaving council-owned properties now in a minority in Harold Hill.

The effects have made a fundamental difference, as former Labour councillors Dennis Cook and Del Smith note:

‘The vast change has been the Right to Buy that transformed vast rows of industrial rabbit hutches because people started to improve the front of their houses. The fronts of peoples houses were revolutionised by the Right to Buy – the place was transformed.’

‘I know people who voted Tory because they wanted to buy their house. They voted Tory just the once, bought their house, and that was that. A lot people did that and I can understand it because working class people had sod all, for decades past they had worked all their lives and after sixty or seventy years most of them had never even bothered to write a will. What would be the point with accumulated wealth of a few bits of furniture and a Sunday suit? Then all of a sudden somebody comes along and says, ‘I’ll give you half a house.’ If you are going to give away money then obviously people will take it and say, ‘Thank you very much’. And they did. Almost all of my friends and family started to buy their council houses at that time.’

Del Smith’s comment about giving money away is a reference to the massive discounts that were made available to tenants. From 1980 onwards there was to be a base 30 percent discount that, depending on the number of years resident in the property, rose to a maximum of 60 and 70 percent for house and flat tenants respectively.

There were attempts by various Conservative local authorities since the end of the Second World War to sell council houses.

Hornchurch County Council had attempted to sell their council homes in the early fifties, but had only managed to hive off six.

Beyond Havering, in 1967 Francis Frederick Griffin, the leader of the Tory council in Birmingham, published a hugely influential pamphlet called *Selling Council Houses*. Based on the experiences of Conservative rule in Birmingham, it was reprinted several times and eagerly read by a generation of Tory Town Hall activists.

As Griffin wrote, their policy was based upon the belief that government, both local and national, should have as little to do with peoples lives as possible:

‘We (the Tory council) determined that it was the function of the local authority to serve the people, not master them... We decided that the vital principle of local government was to interfere as little as possible rather than as much as would be tolerated.’

After seven months in power they had sold 2,101 homes, which included a reduction of up to 10 percent for long-term residents.

When the Tories gained control of the Greater London Council in 1967 they cut subsidies to council houses forcing rents to dramatically increase, but they also embarked on a path of allowing tenants to buy the homes they rented.

The first person to buy their council house in London was 44 year-old James Regan of Sheffield Drive, Harold Hill. He had moved to the estate from Stepney in 1953 and had lived in Sheffield Drive since 1958.

Earning £1,500 a year working for the London Electricity Board, he bought his house for £3,060 having earned a 10 percent discount because of the years spent living there. Instead of paying the inclusive rent of £3 12s, he put down a £60 deposit and was prepared to pay £4 7s. per week. After spending £1,000 on modifications to the house since he lived there, Mr Regan considered it a worthwhile purchase.

Desmond Plummer, the leader of the GLC, ceremoniously handed over a golden key to the new owner on October 4, 1967.

James Regan gladly accepted and furthermore resigned his membership of the Labour Party at the same time:

“I’ve been 20 years a member and 30 years a supporter... My thinking is still along socialist lines, but I’ve resigned because there’s so much local Labour hostility to council house sales.

It works out £2 extra to own this piece of England.

I’ve been a strong socialist since the thirties, but I see no wrong in buying my own home just because the council built it.”

Also in attendance on that day was Horace Cutler, the Tory Chair of the GLC Housing Committee, who had previously stated: ‘Are council houses really necessary any more? In my opinion, no. I believe that local authorities should get out of housing altogether.’

Obviously Horace Cutler saw James Regan as a part of his vision.

By 1970 the then Conservative national government allowed local authorities to give discounts of up to 20 percent for selling their houses. But with all these schemes there were restrictions. For instance, Birmingham council never allowed more than 10 percent of their housing stock in any particular area to be sold.

By the time of Margaret Thatcher’s 1980 Conservative government all such restrictions were removed and massive discounts off the market value were instituted in law. No council could now refuse to sell a property to its sitting tenant, hence, the Right to Buy. By the time of the 1983 general election over 500,000 tenants had brought their own home.

The Right to Buy brought a fundamental change to local society, not least in fracturing the community. Previously, every tenant had one enemy – the council. Now people’s problems were more personalised – everybody was seemingly fighting their own battles rather than the one big collective threat. Brenda Dreyer, a former vice-chair of the Harold Hill Tenants’ Association, views this change negatively:

‘I think that the downfall of Harold Hill started when they started selling the homes because all of a sudden you have a break in the community. You have people who suddenly have a chance they never thought they would have; to own bricks and mortar and they then considered themselves middle class. It was a breakdown and we had to change the name of the Tenants’ Association to the Tenants’ and Residents’ Association. But of course the residents never really supported us because they didn’t have the same problems.’

On August 10, 1980 the Tory Prime Minister, nicknamed the Iron Lady, visited Harold Hill. Her purpose was to visit the Patterson family who were the 12,000th household to buy their council home under her new legislation.

For an in-depth account of the life and views of Margaret Thatcher and an account of her visit to Harold Hill read [Margaret Thatcher: Reggae, Royalty and Riots]

## **Chapter Four: Youth Movements**

### **Youth Movements: An Introduction**

One unique aspect of U.K. youth is its love affair with music. Styles that have moved around the world were picked up by British youth first. If British teenagers were dancing to the reggae rhythm in the late sixties, then, apart from in its West Indian homeland, nobody else was – it wasn't until the Nineties that reggae in any form found popular success in the United States. Likewise, in decades later, obscure forms of music such as House and Techno were taken from small clubs in Chicago and Detroit, adapted to fit the British scene, and then resold to the world to become global phenomenon's – just as much as the Rolling Stones and others adapted and then sold back the Blues to an American audience in the Sixties and Seventies.

From the mid-Fifties to the mid-Eighties a succession of youth movements was embraced by generations of youngsters – there has not been an era for adolescence like it before or since.

The Fifties Teds were followed by Sixties Mods and Rockers, which led into Hippies and Skinheads, and then in late Seventies Punks, Rude Boys and revivals of all that had come before. All had their own distinct style of dress and music, with associated degrees of violence and drug taking.

They became, for those involved, obsessive ways of life that would take up all spare time and wages. Interest usually started at 15 or 16 and would continue until their early twenties when commitment to work and interest in girls became a bigger priority. Marriage then very rarely happened later than 21 so there was an adolescence gap before the expected obligation.

For the first time in modern history the youth had relative freedom – both financially and morally. There was a gap – the teenage gap – between leaving school and adult responsibility and they would find themselves working but living at home with parents and so with money to spend.

At the centre of this youth explosion both nationally and at various times internationally, was London – it was from here that many new styles and tastes developed and grew. This was partly down to the white youth who embraced modernity with relish, but also down to the influence of groups such as Jewish lads, Italians and West Indian's who were living and settled in the capital.

Harold Hill was a part of London – the ties between the two areas were strong. Many of the young people still had friends and family living further in, others worked or went to college closer to the centre, while many enjoyed regular nights out in the West End. The crossover of ideas and taste was a continuous process.'

### **Teddy Boys: New Suits & New Songs**

Up until the late Forties teenagers would commonly be written 'teen-agers' in the press, with the inverted commas implying that their existence was refutable or just fantasy. By the Fifties though the reality of teenagers was indisputable.

Musical matters though really took off with the arrival of Rock'n'Roll. Swing died out with the wartime GI, and from then until the mid-Fifties there were merely vocalists - sardonically labelled crooners - singing whimsical slow ballads that were quite impossible to dance to. The authorities frigidly enforced social restraint in this period. Songs that were obviously harmless found themselves banned by the BBC. The theme to the acclaimed film *The Man With The Golden Arm* was proscribed - although the film was concerned with heroin addiction, the song itself was a jazz instrumental; 'I Want You To Be My Baby' was not allowed to be broadcast because of the line 'come upstairs and have some loving'; while Johnnie Ray's 1954 hit, 'Such A Night', was excluded from the playlist because of grunts in the chorus! Unsurprisingly, when Rock'n'Roll hit this milieu it provoked a strong reaction. The music itself was a myriad of styles fused together, as described by American DJ Alan Freed:

'Rock'n'Roll is really swing with a modern name. It began on the levees and plantations, took in folk songs, and features blues and rhythm. It's the rhythm that gets the kids - they're starved of music they can dance to, after all those years of crooners.'

The dam broke at the beginning of 1955 with Bill Haley & The Comets launching into the singles top spot with 'Rock Around The Clock'. The single would go on to sell one million copies in the UK alone and in Haley's wake came Little Richard, Jerry Lee Lewis, Buddy Holly, Gene Vincent and a certain twenty year old from Memphis, Tennessee called Elvis Presley.

In their home country of America, the reaction was severe: in Alabama the spokesman for the White Citizens Council was quoted as saying, 'Rock'n'Roll is a means of pulling down the white man to the level of the Negro. It is part of a plot to undermine the morals of the youth of our nation.' In Florida, the Miami Board of Review, amusingly, condemned the music because it inspired fans to leave their seats and dance in the isles.

In Britain the reaction to Bill Haley was also startling. The film *Rock Around the Clock* was the first introduction of this particular popular style to thousands of teenagers, and they filled up the auditoriums for show after show. At certain places there were reports of rampaging teenagers wrecking the cinemas, and which in turn prompted a newspaper frenzy whose sensationalism was out of proportion to the violence that had occurred. Various local authorities responded by banning the film altogether.

Sir Malcolm Sargent, the darling of the Home Counties and Prom conductor, said the music was

'Nothing more than primitive Tom-Tom thumping. The amazing thing about Rock'n'Roll is that youngsters who go into such ecstasies sincerely believe that there is something new or wonderful about it. Rock'n'Roll has been played in the jungle for centuries. Frankly, I think if Rock'n'Roll is capable of inciting youngsters to riot then it is obviously bad.'

If Sargent was bemused by its appeal, then its attraction to the young can be summed up in John Lennon's famous quip: 'Rock'n'Roll was real, everything else was unreal.' With the new reality came the Teddy Boys, or Teds. Their dress style was both exotic and original. Their clothing was based around the long Edwardian jacket and from which came the term 'Ted', that being the diminutive of Edward. They wore narrow ties or more commonly just a shoestring under their collars, their trousers were drainpipes and for shoes they wore Brothel-Creepers with cork soles. Their hair was always greased and shaped into various styles such as the Silver-Dollar, the Square-Neck and the most outlandish of them all, the Ducks Arse, which was a quiff so large it resembled a gigantic wave riding upon their heads. For those old enough sideburns were regulation, while a hat, if worn, would be the striped Ratter, or Cheesecutter cap. They were young, street wise, and working-class, and for a couple of years at the centre of infamy and public fear.

The Teddy Boys in Romford made their first appearance in 1954. In May of that year Chief Inspector Victor Cook, head of Romford C.I.D., said the following about their presence:

"At the very first sign of the Teddy Boys banding together we are going to step in. And believe me, we will smash up their gangs quicker than they were ever formed.

"These Edwardians are all right on their own – they're cowards at heart – but it's a different thing when they get together.

"That's when the trouble starts and that's when we start to take action. We will not have Romford terrorised by them as is happening in some other towns.

"It's no good looking for them in the morning. They don't get up until late in the day. They don't go to work – they're too lazy – and they do their best to dodge National Service.

"In the snack bars they buy their breakfast-cum-dinner. To a Teddy Boy that means a cup of tea and beans on toast.

"They meet their mates in the early afternoon and then start their beat. It stretches from Romford railway station to the High Street and from there to the Vogue cinema – if it's Sundays, as far as Raphael Park."

In the next edition of the local paper the Teds responded to this declaration of war:

"It's not true what people like the detective say about us. In Romford, the Teddy Boys are just ordinary working-class lads. We earn our money and we spend it the way we like – on clothes. To say we stay in bed all morning is plain silly."

A Romford Times reporter went out to meet the Teds in their local cafe:

'There was fair-haired David Browning, of 19 Eddy Close, Romford. He wore a pale blue suit with mole-grey velvet at the collar and a fancy waistcoat with wide revers. His trousers, also pale blue, tapered to the ankle. His hair was long. It swept back, curling at the nape of his neck. He was showing a snapshot to Robert Peacock, of Romford, who wore a grey suit with a diagonal pattern, red waistcoat and a Slim Jim tie.

We got talking about their clothes. Some of their pals came over and joined us.

Robert Lazer, of 7 Farrance Road, Chadwell Heath, was the best dressed by their standards. His suit – grey, with black velvet trimmings – cost him £18 from a South Street tailors.

“This isn’t my best. That’s at home. That really is worth seeing,” he said.

Asked why they wore Edwardian outfits – “Because we like them, that’s why,” they said. “We look smart and the girls like us this way. We go dancing a lot and if you haven’t a touch of the Edwardian about you, they just don’t give you a glance.

“Other people look just dull. We want to be different and wear bright clothes. They suit us and they are the latest thing in fashion.”

Are they thugs? Robert Peacock laughed at the idea. “Look,” he said, “do you think that I go about with a knife strapped to my leg? People think we’re a lot of thugs because of that business on Clapham Common. Honest, I wouldn’t beat up anyone and neither would our mates.

“None of the lads I knock about with have ever been in any trouble. All I want to do is to be left alone and enjoy ourselves where we like.

“We tried to get into a pub this evening, but they turned us away when they saw we were Teddy Boys.”

All the Edwardians I spoke to that night were in the building trade and earning good money – about £8 or so a week.

Robert Lazer showed me his hands. “Don’t tell us we don’t do any work,” he said. His fingers were covered with blisters. “You don’t get them hanging around about the streets all day,” he said proudly.’

### **Mods: Fire 'n' Skill**

The most distinct and influential of all the British youth movements were the Mods. Mods – an abbreviation of Modernists – were the epitome of the Sixties. Stylish, ultra-cool, ultra-modern, subversive and narcissistic, they began with a few Jewish kids in Stamford Hill at the beginning of the decade; wealthy and clothes conscious they did little but pose and spend on the latest fashion. Somehow, the style spread, and with it came the new sound from America, Soul, typified by the Motown label. George Baker, one of the original Harold Hill Mods, noticed the style transformation early on:

‘I noticed the change in fashion in school as early as 1960. It was still in the tight trousers and winkle-picker era, and one or two of the lads were wearing baggier trousers. I left school in 1961 and within a year of that a new fashion was really taking hold of London.’

The Mods were interested in one-upmanship; they had to have the latest change in style before any of their peer group. Those that reached the top of this fashion ladder – presumably those with the most access to cash – were called ‘faces’. Although trends changed rapidly, there were some common denominators: the tonic suit, traditionally three-buttoned; Harrington jackets, Sta-Press trousers and Levi jeans coming onto the scene via cash-strapped Black American GI’s in West End clubs; mohair suits and Cuban-heeled shoes from the Italian lads; quasi-military attire such as parka jackets, suede desert boots and RAF t-shirts; pork-pie hats from the West Indian rude boys; the essential American-style button-down shirts, which at its most pristine was Brooks Brothers, or Ben Sherman for best of the rest; splashes of colours

everywhere, maybe white jeans, a pale yellow shirt; perhaps blue or striped or chequered. Most importantly, was the attention to detail which changed with pace: maybe one week it would be a six-inch vent on the suit jacket, maybe next week eight-inches, maybe bowling shoes, or perhaps a feather in the cap. The variations in style were not noticeably to the 'outsider', but they mattered to the in-crowd.

George Baker:

'When the Mods first came out we didn't wear parkas and all that. I used to have a leather coat that I wore while riding my scooter. Clothes were more important than music – for me particularly, but I think it was the same for most people. It was mohair and tonic suits, and I had quite a few of those. We used to go to a place called Lew Rose in Romford who was a tailor and he used to get our suits made up. We used to buy them on the tick and pay for it weekly.

'I never wore a pork pie hat. To me they were a badge of servitude, which you either doffed or saluted. Everybody would wear a suit at the weekend and be smartly dressed. When I look at the younger generation today they haven't got a clue – they may spend more money but the effect is nowhere near as dramatic.'

Keith Simpkins was one of the early Modernists from the estate:

'I was a little Mod in Harold Hill and I started when I was 14, 15 years old, which was around 1960, '61.

'Brenda Collins in Romford was the place to buy clothes. It used to be at the top of Romford market. The bloke that used to run it was a right budding entrepreneur. He had about eight outlets, he had one in Oxford Street as well. He used to listen to what we wanted, and then he would go and get it. Jackets without any collars, shirts with button down collars, what colour you wanted, and within a week or so he would have it in stock.

'People used to take the mickey out of us all the time, if you wore a pink shirt you were considered a poofter. People like your parents, or your mates parents, if you turned up around their house with a pink shirt – you'd have the rise taken out of you'

The influence of Italian culture at this time was strong. After the war nearly half a million Continental soldiers either chose to remain in Britain, or were forced to because the impossibility of returning to Soviet-dominated Eastern Europe. By 1950 they numbered 429,329, of which 162,339 were Polish with thousands more Ukrainians, Estonians, Latvians and Lithuanians. There were also 1,000 former Italian POWs, which, added to the pre-war resident Italian population became a significant section of the British population. As time moved on, their children, part Italian part Anglicised, played a notable part in the burgeoning style movement.

In Italy itself, the influx of the anti-Communist Yankee dollar meant an explosion in manufacturing and design that has a legacy still felt today. Out of Milan came the scooter. Originally designed jointly by Corradino D'ascanio and Ferdinando Innocenti, these two quickly parted and went separate ways, the former joining the Piaggio company which created the Vespa, the latter creating the Lambretta which was named after the region in Milan where it was produced. The Lambretta 'A' was unveiled at the 1947 Paris Motor Show and went on sale soon after. The scooter was built as a

practical means of transport: easy to ride and economic with fuel; but by the early Sixties it was to become a fashion accessory, as these former Harold Hill Mods remember:

‘I had a scooter. I remember the first time I saw a scooter on the street and I didn’t like it. But one day I came to the conclusion that motorbikes were horrible, dirty and reactionary and people who road scooters were fashionable and progressive. And essentially for the time we were progressive.’

‘The scooters were 'graded'. The more powerful, the better. A Lambretta was a LI 125cc, which was poor, an LI 150cc, which was okay, a TV 175, which was good, or a GT 200, which was the best. Vespa’s were 150's models generally but I think there was a 200 as well. People were either Vespa or Lambretta fans. The engine side-covers, 'Panels' on a Lambretta or 'Bubbles' on a Vespa, were often chrome-plated, usually at the chrome-plating works on the Harold Hill engineering workshop, next door to the Lovable Brassiere factory. There was usually a Mod or two working at the engineering shop who would do it as a back-door job.’

‘We used to go to Redding Court night school in the evening. There were quite a few Mods on scooters there, and one of them taught me how to ride a scooter in the grounds of Redding Court school. And on my sixteenth birthday I went out a bought a scooter. The scooter I got was a TV 175, but most kids at the time were riding Vespa GS’.

‘I paid £75 which doesn’t sound a lot, but I was only 16 years old which was a lot of money. It was all hire purchase from a place in East Ham.

‘You only got a scooter because you were 16 or 17 and it was a way of getting around. At 17 you rode a car, you wore exactly the same style but instead of meeting in scooters you would meet in cars.’

### **The Albemarle Report Leads to the First Youth Club**

In 1963 Harold Hill youth were finding out about the new meeting place - the Albemarle Youth House on Gooshays Drive. The first purpose built youth club on the ‘Hill, it came from a turn-of-the-decade government report that recommended expansion of Britain’s youth service. Partly based upon concern, as always, over rising crime amongst adolescents, it also came from genuine concern that the youth – all the youth, delinquents or not – were not properly catered for.

Previous provision in the Fifties was sport-based, which was a direct continuation of the Thirties policy. Then, the government panicked by romantic images of healthy German Nazi adolescents in the gymnasium and on the playing field, invested to improve the health and stamina of Britannia’s children. The clubs would often find themselves under the direction of a retired commissioned officer who, no doubt, it was felt would be able to install the necessary discipline. Activities for girls were often non-existent.

In Harold Hill the first youth club, the Apollo, was opened in the summer of 1949. Thursdays was boxing night which was practiced in a ring rigged up in a field near Gooshays Farm, while it also had cycling, football and cricket sections which in the case of the latter was under the tuition of an Essex professional living on the estate.

Throughout the fifties Harold Hill teenagers had little to do apart from attend church-based youth clubs, which were not always popular as these testimonies from 1959 confirm:

'On Harold Hill in my view there is not enough for teenagers to do. More youth clubs are maybe the answer. I am a member of a Church youth club which to me is badly situated at Noak Hill. At the club there is not enough members, or any variety like different groups could be formed, but we have not enough members. The reason is because the hall being way out in the country and that it is a Church youth club... not many teenagers are willing to go.'

- Christine Ruff

'There are a few clubs but they are attached to the churches and many of the teenagers will not go near them'

- Rosemary Marshall

'There is nothing to do at night. I used to go to a club with a group of other boys and girls but they would not allow us to have jiving or dancing of any kind so we would just sit all evening if we did not want to play billiards, table tennis, darts etc. So we left. I also used to go to a church club where they had jiving but my mother and father stopped me going.'

- Christine Casey

In the same year there were still calls for better youth provision. Mr A. Martin of the Association Society of Woodwork Machinists, speaking at the Romford and Hornchurch Trades Council, called for more facilities citing 'They have nothing to do but make a nuisance of themselves.'

The situation in Harold Hill was repeated in many other places and which lead to action from the authorities.

The Albemarle Report, named after the chair, Lady Diana Albemarle, was the government's first serious post-war attempt at both summarising the condition of the national youth service and then producing a plan assessing 'the contribution which the Youth Service of England and Wales can make in assisting young people to play their part in the life of the community, in the light of changing social and industrial conditions'.

Its tone was critical of the past emphasis on values that by the Sixties were looking increasingly anachronistic even to these establishment figures. "Service", "dedication", "leadership" and "character building" were deemed as terms that would find little response amongst contemporary youth, with these particular words now not connecting with the realities of life as most young people saw them – they did not seem to "speak to their condition". It was a fundamental shift away from previous doctrinaire forms of youth work and away from all references to 'Christian values' that had been such a feature of voluntary and paid youth work before. Key to the proposals of the committee was a noticeable expansion of funding that would alleviate the worse financial shortfall experienced by associations in the country:

'Lack of finance is at the root of several shortcomings we have noted: clubs that frequently have to function in dingy drab premises; lack of equipment for the job; insufficient provision for outdoor recreation; and failure to measure up

to the needs of new towns and housing estates, summed up in the remark of the boy who described one of these estates as “a graveyard with lights”.

Also, for the first time, youth workers would be expected to undertake planned education courses that not only gave them the necessary grounding before their employment commenced but also gave their status more professionalism.

‘To sum up: the question now should not be, ought there to be a Youth Service, but can this country any longer make do with one so plainly ill-equipped to meet the needs of the day. In this time of unprecedented plenty, the lives of many young people are likely to be poorer at 20 than one might have guessed on seeing them eagerly leave school at 15. Young people have never been more in a crowd—and never more alone; without a Youth Service many of them would not be more free but less free. A properly supported Youth Service can help many more individuals to find their own way better, personally and socially. This country must choose to have a Youth Service adequately provided for these most important purposes.’

The first generation of trained and qualified youth workers found themselves beginning their careers in the mid to late sixties which was a remarkable time for young people. A change was underway in which the post-war lull of national and international calm was breaking.

The decade started slowly, but reached its crescendo in 1967 and 1968 as a whole series of violent episodes rocked the world, not least the realisation that America was losing the Vietnam war and doing so with horrendous casualties.

On the home front, the Labour government had liberalised much law, including legalising abortion and allowing the women’s contraceptive pill to be made available via prescription.

Notable too was the vibrant music scene, led by the Beatles, which for the first time mixed social issues with technology and reached a mass audience.

It was inevitable that all these events would influence Harold Hill youth.

John Brady was the central youth worker at the Albemarle Youth House in the late sixties. His interview gives a good insight into how this decade changed young people’s behaviour and outlook.

Read [Recollections of a 1960s Youth Worker]

### **Hippies, Freaks and the Summer of Love**

As the sixties progressed, so too did fashion. Scooters were quickly becoming obsolete, together with those that rode them, the Mods. Coming from the West Coast of American was a new youth movement: the Hippies, also called Freaks or Heads. Common legend has it that the scene was based upon sex, drugs, music and politics; some of these were undoubtedly features, but not all simultaneously unless you were in some kind of jet-setting rock group.

Geoff Maynard, a former juvenile Mod, remembers how it gradually took hold of the imagination of Harold Hill youth:

‘Certainly DJ John Peel and co had a hand in promoting the new movement by playing Buffalo Springfield, the Incredible Sting Band and other weird music away from the mainstream Motown and Soul sound. Then Jimi Hendrix and

the Stones started popularising the real longhair, scruffy image as opposed to the clean-cut Beatles look. We followed the music, and the bands were our guides - the longer the hair, the cooler the look. It wasn't overnight. Our hair was cropped as Mods, but then we started to copy the style of the bands. Look at the old black and white tapes of Ready Steady Go! – that was our window into what the bands were wearing.

‘The hippie movement is well documented as being the first middle-class youth subculture, so I guess we working classes followed where they led. I noticed it coming from the art colleges first.

‘Though we frequented the Marquee in the Mod days, we then changed over to the Temple in the Hippie days – both were situated in Wardour Street. Once the Hippie thing caught on the allure of the all-nighter love-ins – as festivals were called then – took over. We were at the early ones in the Alexandra Palace. Most of us didn't have a clue about Vietnam or politics of any sort – we just followed the music and the dope. I got Jimi Hendrix to autograph his drummers broken drumstick, and then swapped it an hour later for a bag of grass!’

For the Heads, those that still clung to scooters and Bank Holiday punch-ups were relics, deadwood, history. Things had moved on: music, fashion. This was where it was happening. Even the language changed: ‘cool’, meaning themselves; ‘straights’, everybody else.

The public and the press once again became interested in a new movement. Del Smith witnessed the closest Havering came to its own ‘Summer of Love’ in 1967:

‘There was a ‘love-in’ in Raphael’s Park, a big ‘love-in’, where people blew up condoms and patted them around, but nothing happened. It was organised by Cornelius, Romford’s only Hippy. I turned up and there were about 5,000 sightseers; it was pandemonium, there were traffic jams with everybody making their way to this ‘love-in’ because the Romford Recorder had run a story on it. There was Cornelius with longhair and an Afghan coat with a couple of women, and that was it. But there were thousands of people all trying to see what was happening, it was chaos.’

With the Hippie movement came a greater inclination by the kids to become involved in running their own events. They was a DIY ethos as highlighted by Paul Summers who ran a group called HARP which was made up of pupils from Harold Hill Grammar School. In the early Seventies they approached the local authorities to put on free gigs in Havering – open air concerts being very fashionable at the time:

‘There was this committee, made up of very elderly people. They used to meet in this old people's home, and some of them were ancient, they were resident in the care home, but others were working class blokes in their fifties. And we approached them with the intention of putting on a gig in Raphael’s Park. And still today I’m astounded that they agreed to it because we didn’t have a clue what we were doing – bear in mind that we were 17 or 18. But they agreed to it, and eventually we put on two very successful gigs in the park.

‘We also put on gigs at the Windsor free concert every year that ran from 1970 until 1975. In one year, 1973, the police tried to break up the concert but they were repulsed. They came driving into the area in a wagon, which they

crashed and was then turned over by the crowd, and they were told in no uncertain terms to get out or else, which they did – this was the days before the mass police charge with truncheons drawn. A couple of years later though they had their revenge and really smashed the site up.’

Spyder Curphy, bass player from Castle Farm, also used the knowledge he gained from playing live to host his own events:

‘My brother and me started a blues club at The Castle in Brentwood. A lot of people would either go to Romford and the White Hart or to Brentwood to drink.

‘The Heads, the musos, used to go to the White Horse; which is where KFC is now. We fell out with the owner because he used to water the beer down. So we went mob-handed over to The Castle. It was a real straights place, but there was a young couple that had just taken over, and we never went back to the White Horse. They had a nice little room in there and I used to use Castle Farm’s gear and we’d invite musicians from all over Essex to come and just jam. We put backline in and drums and it was really successful – soon we had 500 members. It was Monday night because we knew we wouldn’t have a gig elsewhere and also we knew that others were unlikely to be doing anything else. The governor was really pleased because the Monday night was his busiest.’

Del Smith, with others, was instrumental in organising a free gig in Bedfords Park in 1972. They were given the responsibility for writing the publicity brochure and duly obliged by writing an article entitled ‘All Coppers Are Bastards’.

‘There was an article written in there by John Simkin called ‘All Coppers are Bastards.’ Anyway, it was the early hours of the morning and we were sitting in my flat stoned, and suddenly there was this almighty thumping on the door downstairs. Straightaway we thought that it was a police raid, so we panicked and I eventually opened the door and it was this councillor John Riley. He goes, ‘I’ve just been to the police station and they say they are going to raid your house.’ So I said, ‘Why?’ ‘Well I’ve shown them the brochure for the concert.’ So I’m like, ‘You \*\*\*\*!’

Councillor Riley went into the police station and said, ‘What do you think of this?’ They said, ‘If you print this you’re going to be arrested.’ He was banging on my door at one in the morning. He frightened the life out of me, I thought it was the police. He was terrified of the article.

Then we were disowned by the people who were running the concert, which was an Albemarle-based committee made up of a few youth workers, a few councillors and a few youths.

The youths done all the organising, the finance was from the council, the magazine was written by us.

Riley got hold of it not long before the end, and said, ‘You’re all going to get busted.’

Then he said, ‘You can’t print it with that in it.’ So we said, ‘\*\*\*\* you, we’ll do our own. We’ll produce our own magazine and sell it at the concert.’

If the early 70's gig at Bedfords Park was Harold Hill's Woodstock, then the 'cannon incident' at the Albemarle in 1972 was Harold Hill's Altamont:

'It was a Sunday concert with four or five bands in the afternoon. One of the bands was called Storm and they had this cannon which they fired sweets from into the audience after putting gunpowder into it. The people at the Albemarle wouldn't let them set it off which was just as well because they took it outside and set it off in the car park and it blew up – and with it their rodie as well. His guts were hanging out everywhere.

I was in the back room of the Albemarle tuning up with the other members of the band. We were having a little jam when suddenly there was this almighty explosion and all the glass was blown in on our heads. Of course we all ran out and being in the back room we were the first ones there. The rodie was in a real bad state but a couple of other people were badly hurt and they took them away to hospital, and he died on the way.'

Paul Summers was an organiser on that day:

'The rodie of the band Storm had made this cannon that fired sweets into the audience. And the main youth worker at the time, Arthur, asked them to take it outside just so that he could test whether it worked properly, it was nothing to do with health and safety, he just wanted to see if it worked. This rodie that made it used a mixture of sugar and weedkiller as explosive, and the taper was a piece of string soaked in wax – really primitive stuff. So he lit it, and the whole thing split open like a banana. It killed him and seriously injured a few others as well as blowing out the windows of the youth club and the windows of the bands' transit vans.

The main youth worker, Arthur, was deaf for a couple of years afterwards. Infact, he never really talked to us again.

I came home at one in the morning and the Express and Daily Mail had rung my parents asking whether I was still alive. It being the days before mobile phones you could imagine what they were going through.'