

Earlsmeadow and Duns Housing between the Wars

David McLean (2022)



Part of the Earlsmeadow scheme, built by Duns Town Council in the 1930s

Background

Earlsmeadow was the biggest of half a dozen council housing schemes built in various parts of the town by Duns Town Council in the 1920s and 1930s. As a housing estate, there is nothing in its history which is particularly unique. It exemplifies very well, however, the serious housing issues which afflicted this country in the years after the Great War and the co-operative efforts made by national and local government to address them.

By the early twentieth century, Duns displayed considerable contrasts in its variety of housing. Over the past eighty years or so, many of the town's professional and business families had built impressive villas for themselves in Teindhillgreen, Bridgend and Station Road. Meanwhile, the houses in the traditional heart of the town – areas like North and South Street, Easter Street, Castle Street and Gourlay's Wynd – were increasingly left in the occupation of the poorer classes and fell into varying states of disrepair. Some of these properties dated back to the eighteenth century. They had frequently been crammed into small spaces. By 1900, they were often characterised by dampness, deteriorating mortar between the stones and decaying timbers – although most houses had at least had their thatched roofs replaced in slate to reduce fire risks. In 1919, over 50 houses in the town were deemed unfit for human habitation and there were also many which were overcrowded either from large families or from accommodating excessive numbers of lodgers. The dangers to health in such living conditions are only too obvious.

Government Housing Policy after the First World War

By 1914, there was already a marked shortage of housing in Britain. During the Great War, house-building ground to a halt with the result that, at the end of the conflict in 1919, the housing shortage was even more acute. Small rural towns like Duns were just as affected as the larger towns and cities – the only difference was in scale.

In the 1920s and 1930s, governments passed a variety of Housing Acts designed to encourage local authorities like Duns Town Council to embark on house-building projects for the working classes. The common factor in all these Acts was the principle of subsidy – national government would contribute to the costs. At first, this was done by paying lump sum grants. For example, in the early 1920s, local councils received between £130 and £160 for every house they built, depending on its size. Later Acts changed the detail but the subsidy principle remained constant as in the 1924 Act which arranged for councils to be paid £9 every year for the next 40 years for every house they built.

In the 1930s, the government principle of subsidy for house-building remained but the focus turned to getting people out of unfit and overcrowded dwellings. Since the emphasis throughout the inter-war years was on supplying houses for the working classes, local authorities were bound by various restrictions, especially in having to keep rents down to affordable levels. Every house-building project was sanctioned and carefully monitored by the responsible government body, the Scottish Board of Health, created in 1919.

There was also a Public Works Loan Board from which local authorities could borrow money at reasonable terms to help purchase land and build houses with their accompanying infrastructure of water supply, sewage, roads, street lighting and so on.

Easter Street, The Crescent and The Mount

Before embarking on the scheme at Earlsmeadow, Duns Town Council had built houses at three other locations. Their first efforts were made in Easter Street. In the summer of 1919, agreement was reached to purchase part of a field owned by Swans, the town auctioneers, suitable for the construction of eight houses in four semi-detached blocks – a mixture of three-bedroom and four-bedroom properties. By the spring of 1922, six houses had been occupied and the remaining two were nearing completion.

The town council's next efforts, at the top of Bridgend, seem to have been beset by repeated delays. The Board of Health first gave permission for council house-building at Bridgend in late 1920. But five years later, the project had hardly started. Work finally went ahead on eight houses in 1926, a mixture of two- and three-bedroom properties (the latter costing around £500 each) to be ready by Easter 1927. Oddly, no name was formally given to the scheme at the time. The tenants moved in and started saying to others that they lived in 'The Crescent'. Eventually, Duns Town Council wisely decided to adopt the name officially. It is probably the only part of Duns named by 'the people'.

The third scheme to be built before Earlsmeadow was The Mount. Specifications were drawn up for houses there in early 1930 and 28 dwellings in flatted blocks had been completed to the architect's satisfaction by the spring of 1932. That satisfaction proved ill-founded when dampness began to affect a number of the ground-floor flats by 1938. When floor-boards were lifted, it was discovered that the foundations had not been sealed as stipulated in the specifications of the original contract.



Easter Street : the very first council housing built in Duns, 1922

Building Earlsmeadow : Phase 1

The Earlsmeadow scheme was built in two stages in the 1930s when the emphasis was on providing new dwellings for people living in unfit (which usually meant insanitary) and overcrowded accommodation. With forty houses in the end, it became the town council's biggest project so far. The lands west of Duns, stretching to Clockmill, are shown as 'Earls Meadows' in a map of 1862; the name was supposedly a reference to Randolph, Earl of Moray who was granted the lands of Dunse by his uncle, King Robert the Bruce, in the fourteenth century. The housing project was known in its plural form as 'Earlsmeadows' at the outset but, curiously, the 's' on the end was dropped after a couple of years.

The land bought for the housing scheme was not owned, in fact, by the Hays of Duns Castle but by Lieutenant Colonel Andrew Gillon, proprietor of Abbey St Bathans Estate; he sold the town council some land at what became Earlsmeadow for about £150. In late 1932, tenders were invited for the construction of 20 houses and notice was given of the council's intention to borrow a maximum of £7500 from the Public Works Loan Board to finance the project. The scheme was built as five flatted blocks with four dwellings in each block, a mixture of two-bedroom and three-bedroom properties. This method of construction was economical in the sense that it maximised the number of houses on the land but it meant, of course, that half the residents would be living in upstairs properties.

By May 1933, work was sufficiently advanced for the council to invite applications from prospective tenants for the Earlsmeadow houses. The rent for the two-bedroom properties

was set at £13 per year and, for the three-bedroom properties, it would be £15 per year. Compare this to the present day. In February 2022, when this paper was being written, Berwickshire Housing Association (which now manages the Earlsmeadow rental houses) offered a two-bedroom property for rent of £85.20 per week; this represents an annual rent of about £4430 or 340 times the 1930s figure! There was a clear demand for these new houses since the council received 64 applications for the 20 dwellings, including about 12 from people who wanted to move into Duns from the surrounding rural area.



Typical Earlsmeadow block : four houses (two up, two down)

Building Earlsmeadow : Phase 2

The Earlsmeadow houses were scarcely completed when the town council started to have regrets about not going further. Councillor Cochrane said that there were still seven or eight Duns families living in condemned houses. At the same time, the Scottish Board of Health was alleging that the council was not building enough new homes. Such pressures typified the dilemma which all local authorities faced in the 1930s. Building new houses was obviously a good thing and the Housing Acts meant that councils were paying only part of the cost, the rest being met by the government subsidies. However, whatever way one looked at it, the council share of the cost had to be ultimately covered by the ratepayers and keeping the rates down was always a key priority – especially when it came to election time for town councillors! The government subsidy scheme also meant that the Board of Health could influence the rents and so councils had limited room for manoeuvre there as well.

By late 1933, the council was looking to purchase the remaining 1.25 acres of the Earlsmeadow site from Gillon of Abbey St Bathans; he agreed to the same price as before of £120 per acre. Originally, the council planned on twelve more houses but the figure gradually rose and, under pressure from the Board of Health, they agreed on another twenty dwellings, doubling the size of the Earlsmeadow scheme.

In the spring of 1934, an interesting alteration had to be made to the architect's plans for the new blocks. The intention once more was for a mixture of mainly two-bedroom and a couple of three-bedroom houses. But a man called James Feeney was occupying a house in Gourlay's Wynd which had been condemned. It would appear that it may also have been overcrowded since his family was too large, even for a three-bedroom property! So the plans for one of the blocks at Earlsmeadow had to be altered so as to create a unique four-bedroom dwelling for Feeney and his family with another in the block having to be made smaller to compensate.

In April 1934, the council invited tenders for construction of the second phase of twenty houses; this was the time when the 's' was dropped from the end of the 'Earlsmeadow' name. The normal procedure was that tenders were opened by members of the council's housing committee and the winning tenders were provisionally decided – but those decisions had to be sent to the Board of Health for approval. In the meantime, however, indignation arose in Duns Town Council. Ex-Provost Winter complained that, within twenty minutes of the end of the housing committee meeting, the 'confidential' tenders were being discussed at 'Graham's Corner' in the Market Place (now the area beside Forte's shop)! As an aside, it can be said that 'Graham's Corner' is still a popular location for blethers today.

By early 1935, the second phase at Earlsmeadow was well on its way to completion and the first weekly rent collections were being made in May. Councillors would have been glad to hear that 'in every case the rent had been paid'. Tenants had rent books which were signed each week by the rent collector as evidence that they had paid their rent; this method of rent collection was still going strong in the 1970s.

The Road Argument

Earlsmeadow was built as a cul-de-sac, of course, in the form of a loop. Planning new housing estates in the 1930s was often beset by delicate discussions over their location in relation to existing roads and streets. In the nineteenth century, town expansion had often been achieved through what came to be known as 'ribbon development' – building houses along roads leading out of town. It can be seen clearly in Duns at Teindhillgreen, Bridgend and Station Road. But this form of development was increasingly frowned upon by the 1930s. It was one of the reasons, for example, for the later delay in building the council houses at Tannage Brae.

Earlsmeadow was certainly not ribbon development but not everyone agreed with building so many houses in a location with only one way in and out. The Berwickshire News correspondent 'Man-in-the-Street', for example, commented that he was not in favour of houses being planted in 'pockets' behind existing buildings as had been done at Earlsmeadow, The Crescent and even, to an extent, at The Mount.

The issue became more relevant still when the additional twenty houses were being planned for Earlsmeadow in 1934. Councillor Cairns suggested that, when the architect planned the site lay-out for Phase 2, provision should be made for an 'ample width of road' leading out of the scheme to the south. But ex-Provost Winter was forced to confront his fellow councillors

with the reality. To make any road in that direction, he pointed out, 'would be going into a bog'. Even if this were achievable, they would never be granted land from the high school playing field on the other side (now the location of the Longfield housing development at Todlaw Road). That only left a way out through the public park. Apparently, some councillors seriously looked at driving a road through the middle of the park to Station Road. It was never a realistic proposition. The terms of the original gift of the land purchased by Andrew Smith of Whitechester would almost certainly have prevented it and, in any case, there would have been uproar from the people of Duns. So, the 'road' ended up as the narrow footpath which now leads out of the estate towards the park.



Not the 'ample width of road' which some desired

Issues at Earlsmeadow

Not all tenants in the town's new housing schemes treated their properties with adequate respect. In 1936, it was reported that some tenants were mistreating their houses. Plaster had been cracked, fittings had been damaged, children had been allowed to scribble on the walls. It is not clear if Earlsmeadow tenants were included in this criticism but, when it came to their outdoor amenity, they were very much in the firing line.

The town council had spent £60 on the open area in the middle of the Earlsmeadow loop to plant it up as an attractive green space. It was now in a 'most disgraceful state'. Football was being played on the plot. Stones had been dumped on it – probably by tenants getting rid of them as they cultivated their new gardens. Trees and shrubs had been torn up or trodden down. And adults had trampled paths through the shrubs to effect short-cuts to their doors 'to avoid going round a corner'. The destruction was described as 'beyond all reason'. The council agreed to construct a rockery in the middle of the plot to discourage the activities causing damage but it is unclear whether they actually went ahead with this plan.

The issue of lodgers in relation to council houses became a cause of heated debate. Taking in lodgers to earn extra income had been a common practice in Duns (as in other towns) for as

long as anyone could remember. In council houses, however, the practice was banned unless a tenant received special permission. Some councillors could not see what the problem was if a tenant had a spare bedroom. There was, however, a delicate financial issue at stake. Since houses like those at Earlsmeadow had their cost subsidised and their rents controlled by the government, tenants were paying, in effect, artificially low rents. As ex-Provost Winter pointed out, a tenant could be paying around four shillings a week in rent but could probably let a room to a lodger for five shillings a week. So a tenant in a subsidised house would be making a profit at the expense of the taxpayer.

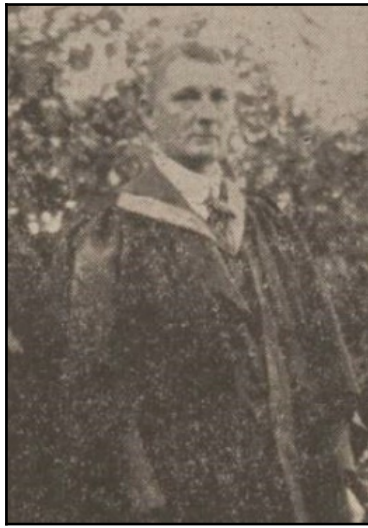
Questions were frequently raised about whether these new council houses were always being allocated to working class families as intended. The council was reluctant to apply a means test but the conditions of the government subsidies could not be ignored. There were even occasional threats that tenants in these new schemes who were too 'well off' might be forced to pay higher (that is non-subsidised) rents, purchase their properties or vacate!

Some aspects of modern life began to affect Earlsmeadow, in common with other parts of the town. In the autumn of 1934, Councillor Cochrane was pointing out that motor cars were being left out all night on the street at both The Mount and Earlsmeadow; it was, he said, 'a most dangerous thing'. He feared interference with such vehicles which might end up causing them to run away. In those days, the law dictated that any vehicle parked on a public street during the hours of darkness had to show lights both front and rear.

After Earlsmeadow : Tannage Brae and Winterfield

The building of council houses continued relentlessly through the rest of the 1930s. After Earlsmeadow, attention turned to Tannage Brae and an extension to The Crescent scheme in Bridgend. Land at Tannage Brae was bought from Mrs Hay of Duns Castle in 1935 but work did not begin until the summer of the following year when a start was made on 24 houses; all were completed and occupied by the autumn of 1937. These houses had the added modernity of open fire grates instead of ranges in the living rooms since gas cookers were provided in the kitchenettes; to encourage this, the gas company had offered to supply all such cookers free of charge if the council paid to install them. It would not be long before some tenants started to request permission to have their gas cookers removed so that they could install electric ones instead – causing further acrimonious debate in Duns Town Council.

The question of 'ribbon development' had held up the Tannage Brae scheme and delays also occurred on the Bridgend extension, this time over the purchase of land, again from Mrs Hay, but satisfactory progress on 20 houses was being made by the summer of 1937; a year later, all the houses had been occupied. It was decided, in 1938, to call this scheme 'Winterfield Gardens' in honour of William Henry Winter who was first elected to Duns Town Council in 1911. He served two terms as Provost and was always the main driving force behind the town's house-building programme. When he retired from the council due to worsening deafness in 1941, he had given 30 years of continuous service to the town. He had also spent most of that time as a teacher at the Berwickshire High School in Newtown Street. The naming of 'Winterfield Gardens' was surely a fitting tribute.



Provost William Winter and five of the ten Winterfield blocks built by 1938

In among these various housing projects, Duns Town Council had looked at a few other possibilities, none of which materialised. In 1929, they considered house-building in Gourlay's Wynd, especially when Duns Castle Estate offered a plot of land free of charge. But excavation would cost too much due to the land levels and there were too many trees to cut down. The council also hoped to acquire land at the west end of Newtown Street but the Hay family considered that this would encroach too close to the castle policies and they would not sell. The Church glebe was another attractive potential building plot but the General Trustees of the Church of Scotland would not even enter negotiations on that one.

There was an added dilemma for councillors as their house-building projects progressed. Over the years, many properties in Duns were declared unfit for human habitation but, even where condemned, occupiers could hardly be evicted if there was nowhere else to go. However, once the town council had placed such people in one of their new schemes, it was illegal for the condemned properties to be re-occupied. The council therefore had decisions to make – whether such houses could be effectively repaired and brought back to habitable condition, either by their owners or by the council, or whether it was better to purchase the condemned properties for demolition so that new properties could be constructed.

The information in this article has mainly been researched from the 'Berwickshire News'.

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