

### MALCOLM VEITCH

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#### John Sutton Nettlefold

Back in the late 1880s, everyone living in cities like Birmingham knew the terrible overcrowding in the inner cities, but few were bothered about it. Yet it took a small group of industrial philanthropists to do something about it through changing the planning laws to create better living conditions for their workers.

One such was John Sutton Nettlefold, mostly remembered in conglomerate Guest, Keen and Nettlefolds, now GKN plc, a multinational engineering company headquartered in Redditch. He was born in London in 1866 and came to Birmingham in 1878, after leaving school entered the Broad Street offices of Messrs. Nettlefold and Co. (later GKN). Later he became managing director of Kynoch Ltd.

As well as his civic duties where he was a councillor in the new City Council; chairman of the Women's Hospital; a Justice of the Peace for Worcestershire and a magistrate for the city of Birmingham, he was also a social reformer.

He was an active member of the Unitarian Church applying himself to town planning and in writing several books on the subject, 'Slum Reform and Town Planning' and 'Practical Housing'.

John Nettlefold's most notable contribution was in 1907 when most of the inner-city housing was of 'courts' with a crowded back-to-back design, he established the garden suburb Moor Pool in Harborne to provide 'low density affordable housing with many interspersed green spaces, centred around a community hall'.

But this was to prove a difficult fight for better conditions for working people, as there was much prejudice against them.

John's vision of inner-city housing, "Scenes in Slum-Land" led to a sustained demand for reform. In a heated debate in the council on 19th June 1901, when John Nettlefold argued passionately about the need to set up a Housing Committee his motion narrowly succeeded by two votes.

The formation of the Housing Committee was a very controversial event and was discredited by the Birmingham Gazette's exposé, that the Health Committee's Chairman was himself a slum landlord, although the Chairman took the slander to court and won, token damages of £250 were awarded compared to the £5,000 which had been demanded.

Once Housing Committee was established, John Nettlefold as chair served notice on landlords to improve their properties not fit for human habitation and forced the demolition of some properties. Writing about these steps the Birmingham Gazette wrote: "Thieves, loungers, peaky blinders, roughs, and vagabonds in general, most of them associating with prostitutes of the lowest type used these courts".

On the other hand, the Birmingham Daily Gazette wrote on 8th November 1901, 'They do not want cleanliness, fresh air, or anything else that makes life healthy, decent, and orderly. It would be easier to keep tidy dwellings for pigs than to make them appreciate improvements and respect owner's rights in the property they inhabit.'

### **Moor Pool Estate - The Planning**

Moor Pool Estate was the embodiment of John Nettlefold's beliefs and his studies on town planning. It came about when there was a proposal in 1906 to construct a tramway from Birmingham to Harborne that threatened to encourage the worst kind of speculative building. The architects Martin and Martin, created a development that fitted into the topography, using several different designs of 'cottage style houses with semi-detached and small terraces, adjusting to slopes in a mixture of bricks and rendered with their use of gables and projecting porches create an overall varied attractive 'village' feel. The landscaped spaces between the pavements and the houses have allowed trees and hedges to flourish and the gardens mainly attractive to fit into the landscape.

Where the houses were to be set above the roads there was a common design feature, involving retaining walls, steps and handrails. (The one issue that was never considered was the car owning population's need for off-street car parking, so many pictures of the Estate will have the householder's own cars parked up on the street.) There must have been pressure put on the Harborne Tenants Ltd to allow garages to be subsequently built.

The plan was to create a garden suburb development that was to turn 36 acres of former rolling, Worcestershire farmland into attractive housing for rent for working people, with space to grow vegetables and to have clean air for them and their families, a far cry from the 'back-to-back-courts' that many were living in until 1930s.

Initially the estate was planned to build on 36 acres, however at its completion in 1911 it comprised 500 houses on 54 acres.

Moor Pool Estate has been described as “Possibly the most charming enclave of 20th Century social housing in Birmingham and, arguably, one of the city’s best kept architectural secrets” (Steve Beauchamp & Simon Inglis, Played in Birmingham, May 2006.)

Moor Pool Estate was designed in the Arts and Crafts style in the early 1900’s in response to the overcrowded urban dwellings, and to provide residents with extensive green space, allotments as well as leisure facilities. Today it remains a virtually intact example of a Garden suburb since its creation, which was the vision of John Sutton Nettlefold.

Whereas the project was set up to be financially viable, to retain the Estate as closely as possible, it had to consider changes in the population and the housing market.

It was designated into a Conservation Area under the Civic Amenities Act 1967. Up and until 1975 the properties were let under the Co-partnership Tenants Society, however owing to ‘inflationary costs spiral together with rent restrictions forced the sale of selected properties on preferential terms to tenants who wished to buy and further selected properties would be sold on the open market as they became vacant. The trustees had to ensure they kept the right balance between capital and assets. They also had kept faith with those tenants who were unwilling or unable to purchase their houses. This together with other measures put Harborne Tenants Ltd, on a more secure footing.

## **Timeline**

- 1901 John Sutton Nettlefold becomes chairman of Birmingham’s Housing Committee
- 1907 Harborne Tenants Ltd set up to develop the land known as Moor Pool Estate – First Sod cut by Margaret Nettlefold
- 1908 First house completed
- 1910 Moor Pool Hall (the community hub of the project) opened
- 1912 Moor Pool Estate completed
- 1929 Status changed to a Company
- 1970 Moor Pool becomes a designated conservation area

- 1994 Bradford Property Trust acquires Moor Pool Estate from Harborne Tenants Ltd
- 2003 Grainger plc takes over from Bradford Property Trust
- 2006 Houses protected – prevent further alterations to houses affecting the character of the estate
- 2009 Planning application by Grainger Plc to build 16 new houses on the site, (there had been a previous plan to build 36 new houses, but this had been turned down by the planners
- 2011 Moor Pool Heritage Trust (MPHT) set up to save the community assets from development
- 2014 MPHT takes ownership of community assets, this was possible when a successful, local Birmingham businessman, Bob Michell stepped in to fund the shortfall in the Trust having to raise £325,000 to secure the Estate for the Community. The Trust were very indebted to his generosity
- 2017 Nettlefold Pocket Park, situated corner Margaret Grove and Moor Pool Avenue created on previously overgrown land and opened by the Lord Mayor

### **Transfer of Lands and Facilities**

After the transfer from Bradford Properties in 1994, from Harborne Tenants Ltd, it was sold on to Grainger Plc in 2003.

By 2009, Grainger was making 6 applications to make the Estate a more commercial proposition, involving demolitions of 137 garages and removal of 12 allotments to build 16 new houses. It was stated that Graingers owned the freehold of 100 Moor Pool homes and the village hall and tennis courts.

The opposition came from hundreds of residents who had signed petitions and written letters of objection and been backed by MP Gisela Stuart, local councillors, allotment associations, Friends of the Earth and national conservation watchdog English Heritage.

They argued that the houses, to be built by development firm Graingers, were out of character for a historic area and that the loss of allotments, garages and open space was unacceptable. There were wider fears with pressure to build thousands of new homes in the city.

By 10th July 2009, having taken several weeks to consider the applications and having visited Ravenhurst Road to see the site, the planning committee were warned by the committee's lawyer that a Conservation Area status does not prevent development. But they voted by a majority in favour of all six applications.

In 2014 it was understood Grainger plc planned to sell off the local amenities, including the hall, the bowling green, tennis courts, skittle alley, fishing pond, some open space and shops. On 14 December 2014, The Moor Pool Heritage Trust made a deal with Grainger to acquire the community facilities for £325,000. After a fundraising, which included a £98,900 Heritage Lottery Fund grant, the acquisition was completed on 14 December 2014.

## **Summing Up**

John Nettlefold set out co-operative ownership, which they have managed to maintain, this also meant they were self-managed and independent. From my own observation, Moor Pool is about people and how as a community they can make it work in the 21st century. It is a community it is not a museum and it has never been a conservation area such as the Bournville Trust. So, it is having to adapt to local pressures and changes in the law.

You can step back in time and experience walking tours of this unique hidden gem by pre-arrangement for your group. The walk around the enchanting estate will include the scenic Moor Pool itself, the Orchard, intriguing hidden pathways, the bowling green, and outstanding examples of Arts and Crafts architecture as well as a chance to see the original historic skittle alley hidden below the Main Hall.

My walk took me from Harborne High Street, into Station Road, Ravenhurst Road, Park Hill at the bottom of which I walked 'into the Moor Pool Estate at Moor Pool Avenue. Following this to Circle and around into Carless Avenue, The High Brow and Ravenhurst Road (not sure about Margaret Grove) then back to the circle and up Eastway and out through the archway and into Park Hill.

Good luck, happy exploring.

## **10 Pictures of Moor Pool Estate**

- (1) Moor Park Avenue, Moor Park Estate
- (2) Moor Park Avenue, Moor Park Estate
- (3) Community Shop, Circle, Moor Park Estate
- (4) Corner Houses, Wentworth Gate, Moor Park Estate

- (5) Carless Avenue, Moor Park Estate
- (6) Carless Avenue, Moor Park Estate
- (7) Carless Avenue, Moor Park Estate
- (8) High Brow, Moor Park Estate
- (9) Entrance to Moor Park Hall, Moor Park Estate
- (10) Moor Park Avenue, Moor Park Estate

I am indebted to Henrietta Lockhart, Curator (Museum Collections) to view several documents held in the private collection of John Nettlefold and to the staff at Winterbourne, I have made extensive use Moor Pool Estate website and other websites connected with The Nettlefolds.

Any views expressed in this article are mine and are my interpretations of any of the documents that I have encountered, I apologise for any inaccuracies.

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