

Book Review

Reid, Aileen *Brentham: a history of the Pioneer Garden Suburb 1901-2001*. Brentham Heritage Society (ISBN 0953877507)

Co-operative housing is difficult to promote. It requires access to large amounts of capital, and the members have to be able to afford the rent. In Britain, after some false starts it finally got going early in the 20th century, with the development of the Brentham Garden Suburb in Ealing. In order to finance the project, the members adapted the idea of labour co-partnership to housing, giving both tenants and outside shareholders a stake in the equity, with the hope that eventually the tenants would be able to buy the others out. It was a good idea, but an unstable one; out of around 50 estates that were built, most were quite soon taken over by the outsiders and eventually sold off for owner-occupation, though a few evolved into genuine tenant-controlled co-ops. The main interest in them comes from historians not of the co-operative movement but of town planning and the garden suburb.

Aileen Reid's book does three things well. First, it shows how the co-operative movement gave rise to labour and then tenant co-partnership, concentrating on the prime mover, Henry Vivian. Then it shows how the town planning and garden city movement coalesced with this, putting some of Ebenezer Howard's ideas into practice, through the work of the architect, Raymond Unwin. None of this is news to historians, but the story is well told. Third, it tells a detailed story of how the Ealing Tenants suburb was built, focusing both on the architectural innovation that came with the appointment of Unwin, and on the evolving relationship between the tenants and the shareholders. It explains how a project that had begun with the idea of tenants gradually buying out the outside shareholders quite quickly went into reverse. A change in voting rights meant tenant-members would always be outvoted, while new tenants were not encouraged to become shareholders. It shows how this came about, through the desire of Vivian to centralise the movement so that it could grow faster, and through a growing realisation by shareholders that the Ealing and Hampstead Garden Suburb had become desirable real estate. The book traces the changes of ownership that led eventually to the estate being gradually sold off, and it comes to the surprising conclusion that the owners were not seen by the tenants as being much different from the original co-

partners - so quickly had the scheme degenerated into a conventional landlord-tenant relationship.

Here I have to confess a certain bias. I spent several years working on the subject of tenant co-partnership, and was left with several unanswered questions that I had neither the time nor the energy to answer. This book answers most of them. For instance, it tells how the tenants did initially have a say in the design of the houses, but also how their ideas often clashed with those of the architects (especially over the vexed question of front parlours). It shows how the original ideal of mixing the social classes was compromised by the need to provide a sound investment. It speculates, I think convincingly, about why George Bernard Shaw invested heavily in the project despite being a critic of labour co-partnership, and why he continued that investment even after the tenants had been 'sold out' (to find out, you will have to read the book!).

After these revelations, the rest of the book might have been an anti-climax, but it is still full of interest. There is a chapter on the architecture and planning of Brentham, and a social history of the suburb showing how it fared during war and peace. It ends with a chapter showing how the Brentham Society was formed, and how it successfully fought for the suburb to be protected as a conservation area. An appendix gives a useful guided tour for those who want to visit the estate. Much of the detail of these chapters will be of more interest to residents than outsiders. The careful study of the evolution of the May Day celebration (dancing round the maypole, May queens and so on) left me unmoved, but I am sure it will be of interest to anthropologists.

This is a weighty book, in two senses. First, it has a foreword by the Prince of Wales, and an introduction by Sir Peter Hall, who as well as being a world-famous planning professor is also a local resident (though not in the suburb itself). You cannot get much weightier than that. Second, it is literally heavy, with over 260 pages (the text is twice as long as originally envisaged) printed on high quality paper, and with archive photos, architect's drawings, and illustrations on nearly every page. It is not often that one comes across a book so sumptuously illustrated that it is hard to read the text for looking at the pictures. It cost over £30,000 to produce, and the money was raised through local 'co-partners', who provided sponsorship in return for a signed copy of the book. It seems that the spirit of co-partnership is still alive in the 'pioneer garden suburb'.

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