

# The New Towns Record

*Planning the New Towns...*  
*In their own words*





## **About the Idox Knowledge Exchange**

We believe in the importance of using evidence within public and social policy, and in frontline practice. Established for over forty years, we are the research and intelligence arm of Idox, a major supplier of software and services to the public sector.

## **About the New Towns Record**

The New Towns Record was a unique archive resource bringing together primary and secondary research materials on the UK New Towns programme. It was intended to be a reference work for anyone involved in research, practice and teaching in urban development.

Created in the mid-90s, it includes in-depth interviews with over 80 key practitioners and academics.

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## **Foreword**

*The 33 New Towns developed since 1946 represent the most sustained programme of new town development undertaken anywhere in the world. Today, they are home to over three million people.*

*The New Towns Programme drew on the expertise and enthusiasm of a group of committed and visionary planners and architects. As well as being the driving force behind specific New Town schemes, many of these individuals became major figures in the development of late 20th century architecture and town planning in the UK. The New Towns Programme offered them the opportunity to develop their approach to masterplanning in a post-war environment that was remarkably open to innovation and experimentation.*

*Interviews conducted during the 1980s and 1990s with those directly involved in the New Towns Programme offer an intriguing insight into the challenges they faced in creating communities from scratch. Contradictions had to be negotiated between commercial interests and ambitions for social development and inclusion. Existing communities had to be won over and regulatory and bureaucratic problems overcome. Inspiring the whole programme was a positive belief in new beginnings and the potential of change within our society.*

*Taken from the New Towns Record archive, we hear in their own words the thoughts of those who made the New Towns happen. Reflecting on their experience we can hear pride, as well as a touch of bemusement at the scale of the programme that they were part of delivering.*

*Although today's very different political and economic context means that similar approaches to large-scale planned development would be virtually impossible, we believe that this interview material is of more than just academic interest.*

*It celebrates the life-long commitment and vision which the planning profession brings to place-making. It also represents a historical narrative of the radical spirit that inspired those who built the New Towns.*



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*“I was really astonished  
how fortunate we were that  
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# **Lord Campbell of Eskan**

## **8 August 1912 – 26 December**

### **1994**

Jock Campbell was the first Chairman of the Milton Keynes Development Corporation, holding the post between 1967 and 1983.

Extracts from an interview conducted 1985.

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You asked what I knew in 1960 about the decision to build a new town in Buckinghamshire. I'd never heard of Milton Keynes and I only knew Bletchley because it's where I changed trains going from Oxford to Cambridge. Chairman was a marvellous job to be offered, not in terms of money but in terms of simply a great challenge.

The Llewelyn-Davies plan<sup>1</sup> was very much a synthesis between the views of Board Members, including myself, and Llewelyn-Davies and the other experts on landscaping, economics, transport and so on that we got in. I very quickly came to the conclusion that we mustn't have a definitive plan. I always used to say the Development Corporation was simply the yeast which started a process of fermentation and that eventually the local authority and the people would take it over. We'd got to start things going and we must make a very flexible plan which would enable us to change things and not to have too many constraints.

How did they choose the particular name? Well, this was Dick Crossman<sup>2</sup> who said

*"Well, Milton the poet and Keynes the economic one - planning with economic sense and idealism; very good name for it".*

I've been very lucky with General Managers. Walter Ismay was one of the most modest, delightful, saintly men it is possible to meet. I wanted somebody that I could work with in this pioneering job.

Then we appointed Fred Roche who was outstanding. I mean, he cuts corners, he's a commando operator, he's very confident, he gets things done and he doesn't mind getting them done by treading on people's toes. He reached decisions and he banged heads together. Splendid man to work with.

As Milton Keynes grew, we wanted a rather different sort of General Manager. Frank Henshaw has been absolutely marvellous as General Manager in the rather new circumstances. Milton Keynes' success is due to three quite exceptional General Managers, all at the right time, in the right place and pointing in the right direction as it were.

I was really astonished how fortunate we were that we weren't lynched in the streets with the appalling upheaval that it meant for the people. People genuinely felt that we informed them and genuinely felt that we consulted them and genuinely felt that when they met us, and we were very accessible to them, that we understood their problems.

Was it ever an option to draw up a plan for Milton Keynes similar to Pooleyville<sup>3</sup>? Yes, it was an option. Very early in the game Ralph Verney<sup>4</sup> [...] asked me to his lovely house to lunch with Jim Cassidy<sup>5</sup> and others from the County Council. I simply listened to them for a long time and said,

*"Well, I don't think that's really the right way to do it, there are too many preconceptions".*

But I think we had better co-operation than any new town has ever had from a County Council.

Milton Keynes was the first new town that actually thought through what it wanted to do at Board level before it started. I mean, are you going to have high densities, are you going to have low densities, are you going to encourage the motor car or discourage the motor car, are you going to have grade separated junctions or are you going to have roundabouts, are you going to have multi-storey car parks or are you going to park on the ground, are you going to have fixed rail transport or are you going to have roads on which buses and private cars can go?

All these sort of things we had to talk out. Are there going to be allotments, what size, are you going to give people gardens, are we going to try and plan for three generation families rather than two generation families, are you going to try to build so that you blur the lines of demarcation in housing, are you going to rent and sell or not? All these sort of things were discussed. Were we going to do a lot of publicity or were we not? And what were the whole economics of it and what should our target be for the split between houses for sale and houses for rent and to what extent are we really doing London overspill or, now that the population balance is changing, are we going to not mind where we get people from?

Mel Webber<sup>6</sup> made, in a very early seminar, a remark which stuck in my mind.

*“Remember that you know almost nothing and can know very little about what’s going to happen in the years ahead.”*

That was very telling to me. You wouldn’t have foreseen the Industrial Revolution and we didn’t foresee the energy crisis of course, but because we’d left our options open we were able to make various changes.

I think everybody was fearful, it’s an enormous social change. People live in the villages, of all classes; they live in a village in order to live in a village and however much we talked about keeping the character of the villages, directly we started building they ceased to be villages, just as Kew or Hampstead ceased to be villages.

How easy was it, at first, to attract the industrialists? It wasn’t easy. Firms coming into Milton Keynes had to get Industrial Development Certificates<sup>7</sup>, the big ones that is, and the Government was always trying to push them to the Development areas, the North East, areas of high unemployment. Quite justifiably in my view.

Derek Walker came in as the Architect when Fred Roche became General Manager. If you look at the Plan, the whole of the soul, of the spirit, of the Plan has been kept. I’m always astonished when I look at this how much it’s really gone according to plan.

I would say every occasion that flat roofs and industrial systems and synthetic facings came up, most of the Board loathed them. But we were told that we wouldn’t be able to get the houses built within the cost yardstick. Instead of building so many a month we would build a third of the number, unless we agreed to this unconventional sort of building and Fred Roche, in the end, would have very strongly backed this. It was a fairly short period but, of course, we built a lot of them in that short period. The truth of this lies in the open way in which I said

*“I think everybody was fearful, it’s an enormous social change.”*

in my Annual Report, these are awful houses.

I've said again and again and again, all the best early buildings are the County's, designed by County Council architects, in Milton Keynes, including Wavendon which was built very cheaply and was very effective. Looking at Milton Keynes now, what have been the greatest successes? It very largely conformed to the Plan we conceived for it all those eighteen years ago. I think that our industrial record there, investments, have been extremely good. I think apart from those early faults, our house building has been good. I think we have, sensitively, gone over from largely public finance to largely private enterprise finance without losing any of our inspiration or any of our plans.

I think it's a town for people and I think people, to some extent, feel that. I think it's roughly worked as we intended it to and I think it will become a great city, no doubt about this at all.

I really am conscious that all the jobs were really done by the officers and by the Board who were much more expert than me and by our relationships with other people. I think I was a fairly useful instrument at that time. I didn't design a building, I didn't actually do anything except pick other people's brains and harness them.



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*“Cities must absorb change,  
live with it, rather than  
prohibit it”*

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# **Walter Bor, CBE**

## **14 October 1916 – 4 October 1999**

Walter Bor was a former Partner of Llewelyn-Davies, Weeks, For-estier-Walker and Bor, joining the firm in 1966, where he worked on housing for Washington new town and the overall plan for Milton Keynes. He was president of the Town Planning Institute in 1970-71 and was awarded a CBE in 1975.

Extracts from an interview conducted 1985.

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I always thought that new towns were an integral part of a strategy for large cities, most of which have been overcrowded and in need of more space inside the city. Also, people ought to be given an opportunity of an alternative lifestyle which new towns can offer. So I was always very interested in the idea. One of the reasons why I resigned as City Planning Officer of Liverpool in 1966 was that it would have excluded me from actually planning a new city.

I feel that we may have made the mistake of having too many small new towns because basically people who move to new towns come from metropolitan areas where the shopping and leisure facilities, and the opportunities for health care, education and so on are, of course, at their best because of the large number of people they serve. Also, there are great disadvantages of living in existing cities. It is difficult in cities to provide both for cars and all the space one needs for bringing up children. People should be given a choice whether to live in old cities or new towns.

I think one of Milton Keynes' great advantages is that it has this very large population. Milton Keynes can afford a very high level of cultural activities and an enormous range of shopping and leisure facilities, almost unheard of in this country, and affordable. People with modest means can send their children riding, surfing and so on, it is all there and it is one of the reasons why there is so much satisfaction with it.

I started getting involved with my firm, Llewelyn-Davies, at the tail end of Washington new town. Then there was the competition about Milton Keynes. We didn't just start planning it, we felt we really ought to reflect very carefully what we can learn from existing new towns. One

*“We felt we really ought to reflect very carefully what we can learn from existing new towns.”*

of the things we learnt was that they really are very much of a sameness. There had been very little experimentation between Harlow and Cumbernauld, for instance. The population sizes were still on the small side and the neighbourhood principle was still governing the plan and we felt that a new approach was needed.

We were very much helped in this by Professor Mel Webber from Berkeley University, who happened to be here on a sabbatical. He talked about planning for movement rather than restriction, for choice rather than dictate what should be there.

We were also influenced by the oncoming market economy, restraining ourselves from planning too much in detail. We aimed at producing a framework for development, whereas previous new towns worked out in great detail what should go where. I think you get good results if you have a combination of an excellent Board and intelligent planners. The people who commission you are just as responsible for the quality that comes out at the end.

They wanted a 21st century new town, not the end of the 20th century. So we had to think ahead to what kind of changes there will be, particularly in industry and the increasing role of knowledge, computerisation and so on. This was way ahead of contemporary thinking at the time and it was one of the things which we were very keen on.

Anyway, we were trying to develop a strategic framework for development which would be sufficiently firm for the infrastructure to be constructed, because you have got to tell the engineers where their roads and sewers will be, etc. So for that you need a clear and firm physical structure.

Beyond that we were hoping to have, as it were, a menu of the different approaches, different solutions, within this framework. In other words, we were planning for pluralist solutions rather than single and we were very keen that it wasn't just a physical plan, that it was a plan which understood the social implications. We were keen to resolve at least some of the problems which usually existed in new towns.

Basically, we had this framework idea and within it there would be different physical expressions and we were aiming at a whole cross-section of population. This was one of the other great limitations of earlier new towns. They attracted mainly the skilled workers.

We also made a virtue out of necessity. Because you need large reservoirs

for the run-off water, so we created these big lakes; they are now being used for recreation and are some of the major attractions of Milton Keynes. There is also the River Ouse running right through it in a linear park. This land is low lying and subject to flooding, so why not have a park. It's also a very green city.

*“I think there are still great opportunities left to enhance the centre.”*

The roundabouts are against our recommendations of synchronised traffic lights. You see the roundabouts have several disadvantages. One is that they confuse you in a situation where [the design has] already disorientated you by not emphasising the local centres along the main roads. Roundabouts also need a lot of space which is doing nothing and fragment the urban fabric even more. There is a diagram in the published report on how we would have liked to have seen the city centre develop.

First of all we were hoping to have much more residential there. A greater mix of different uses. A much more compact mixed use urban form. I had a strong disagreement with [Derek] Walker about that. I thought this was a wonderful opportunity of getting the kind of city centre we so admire abroad. The whole centre could have been pedestrianised with administrative measures for servicing.

So there was a wonderful opportunity to develop a really quite compact complex of traditional streets and squares, but that was ruled out. Instead, they were aiming at making Milton Keynes the dominant regional shopping centre, to capture the market from the surrounding areas. That meant well over a million square feet (92,900 square metres) of shopping in the first instance. It was a completely different concept but it was carried out with great panache and has been a major commercial success.

We thought there would be [...] some perimeter parking but, once inside, it would be a tightly knit, almost a continental type of urban environment with a lot of informal activity. You see, this is what makes these old towns so attractive. There isn't segregation of different uses and all sorts of things are happening in an unplanned way. This was the idea, but they

over-ruled us by very strong commercial arguments. And I must say having over-ruled us, I think they made as good a job of it, as was to be expected, and I think there are still great opportunities left to enhance the centre.

These were the slight disagreements - well not so slight, this was an important one - and I think it is typical of what happens in an on-going situation where you get commercial pressures. It was so enticing at that time to build this new centre which is serviced from the top, you know it looks very good.

This is the beauty. It is a constant change. Cities must absorb change, live with it, rather than prohibit it. So, I think there is still great scope to improve the city, and I think it will happen. They realise that many more people could, and should, live in the city centre.

One of my criticisms of earlier new towns was they lacked the academic dimension. Very few people who work at universities are living in new towns. I did some research into this and found that approximately the same number of new towns were built as there were new universities under the university expansion programme. It coincided with the 'University of the Air' [Open University] beginning to look for sites where they could have their headquarters. They went to Reading and, fortunately for Milton Keynes, the Reading planners made great difficulties for them. They couldn't get off the ground because of all sorts of planning restrictions. Campbell tackled the Vice Chancellor at once and promised,

*"If you come to Milton Keynes, we'll give you permission in a fortnight."*

And that's how it happened.

Was it a mistake not to give the team who wrote the plan a chance to build the town? It's not so much a question of building the town as to remain part of the new town's team. I think we were cut off from it too soon. I think there should have been at least a five year period of our gradually withdrawing, but still retaining sufficient influence to see it through. When we planned these main roads, I still remember, we said, "But, wait a

*“We thought Milton Keynes could have been one example where high buildings of quality would really be meaningful and greatly enhance the city centre.”*

as a disgrace, and deservedly so, since their proliferation has ruined the skyline of many cities. So the Milton Keynes Development Corporation ruled that no building should be higher than the surrounding trees anywhere. We envisaged that the centre of Milton Keynes could benefit from having some elegant high buildings grouped around it. They would be meaningful because they would visually accentuate the city centre as the most important part of the city.

Historically, high buildings had important social functions for the city as a whole and buildings such as the town hall and church spires were distinguished architecture. Nowadays, it is just haphazard, second rate commercial stuff. So, we have lost our way on high buildings. But we thought Milton Keynes could have been one example where high buildings of quality would really be meaningful and greatly enhance the city centre.

One of the great assets of Milton Keynes is that the densities are low and that there is still room for buildings along the main roads and much vacant land in the city centre to remedy some of the deficiencies in this otherwise, I believe, remarkably successful new city, economically, socially and environmentally.

When we celebrated the 25th Anniversary of Milton Keynes I was asked “what do you like and dislike about Milton Keynes?” I mentioned four things, three of which were positive. First of all, the plan got implemented to a large extent; secondly, the quality upon which the Corporation

minute, we have to be careful that people will know where they are and that they don’t just drive through pretty trees, that they can orientate themselves and get a feel for the city. So they must see buildings”. But our advice was ignored.

We planned Milton Keynes at a time when high buildings were beginning to be seen

insisted was the highest ever seen in any new town; and, thirdly, it turned out altogether very largely as we had hoped. For instance, commuting. 10% to 15% commuting in and 10% to 15% commuting out, which is what we predicted and what is happening, more or less. So these were the three things I liked.

The thing I didn't like, and which is a departure in a very important aspect from the plan, is the locations of local activity centres. In the first rush there was a tremendous pressure to get things going. The chief architect, Derek Walker, in many ways a very able visionary, misinterpreted this aspect of the plan. He had the typical architect's reaction. When you get a grid square you put the centre in the middle; he couldn't understand, although it is spelt out in great detail in the plan, why we didn't think it should be in the centre but at midway points between grid roads.

This connecting point was missed and that means that when you travel through Milton Keynes people say, "where is it? We can't find it behind the trees" and so on, but that was never the intention. The intention was to have the reservations on either side varied and reduced to nil where the local centres are. People would have known, "Ah, this is so and so centre." Where it has been adopted, at Neath Hill for example, it shows clearly the advantage of it.

Of course we have made mistakes and it had a slant towards the private motor car but this is what we were asked to do. It was not an unreasonable approach for a new town situation, over 25 years ago.



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*“I am optimistic that  
mediocrity is not an  
inherent British trait”*

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# **Professor Derek Walker**

## **15 June 1929 - 11 May 2015**

In 1970, Walker was appointed as chief architect and planner to the new city of Milton Keynes, the last and most ambitious of the British new towns. He held this post until 1976. During the eighties, Walker served as professor of architecture at the Royal College of Art.

Extracts from an interview in 1996.

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I had been successful in a modest way in practice, I had won a series of national architectural awards, and as a result of that I was given a job in Runcorn on a housing scheme which went down very well. I was invited to interview having had absolutely no experience of new towns or public sector.

They offered me the job of Chief Architect and Planner, working directly to Fred Roche. Fred was there in a curious position. He was very much General Manager or Chief Executive Elect with a curiously ambiguous title. Walter Ismay was there and Walter had been perfect for the Board in the early stages. He was a most charming man but he had no construction or building experience and therefore his appointment had been to diplomatically lead the public debate into the Designated Area. He had done a superb job ... but he was totally the wrong man for implementation. He hadn't got the building dynamic that Roche had and so Roche was given the strange title of Director of Technical Services.

Within three months we all knew what was going to happen, including Walter Ismay. I mean, there were no hard feelings at all, it was felt that one man had done an extremely good job of paving the way to almost universal agreement in the public debate and that Milton Keynes, for all its scale, size and separate communities, became united in the adventure to implement a new town. Walter Ismay and Lord Campbell established the best possible relationship with the existing public.

I think the biggest challenge was to rationalise the implementation ideas inherited with the Master Plan from Llewellyn-Davies. I respected Llewellyn-Davies greatly as a planner but he has never had the same distinction as an Architect. He is a pure planner in my view and I think the Master Plan, a generalised series of specific goals and aims, was perfect from my point of view because it did not seek to dictate anything in detail. It was very bland. One cannot argue much with the idea of a kilometre grid. It is very easy to work with and all the things which the Master Plan talked about, dispersal of industry, dispersal of centres, dispersal of resources, was something that I personally believed in and felt I could handle.

The big problem was that the city was destined to be, and I found this very acceptable mind you, a low density city. The difficulty was that we had no established building industry in the Designated Area at all and we had a very vicious yardstick, at that time, for low density public housing. A very unrelenting yardstick because we had to pay a premium to import the necessary building industry to build all the earlier schemes. This posed incredible problems and demanded some very ingenious solutions.

*“It was a checklist almost of the best architects in the country.”*

We had approximately 600 building operatives in the area and we needed about 6,000 operatives to be in residence to build the new city at the speed we were expecting. Our housing densities were low, our unit price was high. In fact our unit price was higher than Central Birmingham so the main aim was to find methods of really cheating the yardstick.

We had this wonderful sleight of hand with the Ministry where we drew tight lines around our building areas so the density appeared much higher than it was. We got away with this for about three years, rather amazingly. Whether it was turning a blind eye or that we just managed to do it, I don't know, but we therefore were able to inflate the yardstick price.

I wanted flair and so I brought in, I think, around 90% from the private sector. We built up to about 200 - architects and planners - and they were a remarkable bunch. In a way it was rather like Leslie Martin's old Greater London Council. Since Milton Keynes, I would think at least 30 or 40 of them have been extremely successful in practice or academia, both in this country and the States. Jeremy Dixon and Ed Jones, who are building the Opera House at the moment in London, were part of one of the housing teams.

Stuart Mossdrop, who worked on the shopping centre, became Design Director with Conran Roche. Trevor Denton and Wayland Tunley also gained international reputations. Pierre Botschi became a partner with Richard Rogers. My enthusiasm was infectious and because I was

relatively young I was able to attract a very talented young team which mirrored my enthusiasm. They would work late into the night and didn't have any ingrained public sector feel about them.

Because the project was so enormous in new town terms I also managed to persuade the Board to use 30 of the best architects in Europe for individual projects. So we had a background of very good people in-house and a roster of private architects - Foster and Rogers, who were very young then, people like Larsen from Denmark who built Heelands, Cullinan, Richardson and many others. It was a checklist almost of the best architects in the country.

I think that the challenge was largely bringing in, on price, housing at low density which had never been done before from a standing start and I think we achieved this. The other challenge was to talk the Board into something which I didn't feel we would be able to do; that is to allocate 20% of the total land take for landscaped recreation and leisure areas.

Very early on I produced a matrix of the landscape proposals for the city. My idea was to design the city around the landscape matrix to grid roads and open spaces and that meant the Board accepting a colossal investment in plant material in the early stages of development and a precise allocation of land.

As luck would have it, I think the only reason why a major town had never happened in the area before was the Designated Area was very subject to flooding all the way down the Ouzel Valley which meant a colossal infrastructure requirement. We had to put in a system of balancing lakes which form the basis of a linear park for the city which went literally north to south. The idea then was to link that laterally across the city to the Loughton Valley so that we had two huge parkland systems so that everybody in the new city, where they lived, worked or went to school, were within two minutes' walk of the Parkland system.

The great disappointment to me was we have a lovely structure, we've integrated 18,000 parking spaces over the whole of the centre, all at ground level, all of that is recessed 1 metre below road level and well landscaped, so the infrastructure is very, very good, but what is less good

is that the shopping building, which we designed in 1972, is still the best building in the city centre. That should not be so and, to me, the great disappointment was that after 1976, and really right through the Thatcher years, it's been a bottom-line developer-conscious city centre. In other words, indifferent architects and design and build produced a plethora of rather third rate buildings. Although there are a number of reasonable buildings within the city centre there are certainly not enough.

My hope was to have signature buildings by good architects in each sector. This is what was agreed with Lord Campbell but I think after 1979 the private sector took over and it wasn't prepared to finance high quality buildings like some of the London sites. It was only prepared to come in and do 'pot-boiler' buildings and I think that's been my greatest disappointment.

I think, when you are designing a new town you are designing in percentages really because you can never be totally satisfied. The thing that has worked magnificently is the landscaping, that really is worth every penny that was put into it.

I am optimistic that mediocrity is not an inherent British trait and of course I think a lot of the more disreputable little buildings will all go in time. They don't look to longevity of life.

I was passionate about quality and planning gain. My motivation in joining the Corporation was eminently design led, which was very unusual because most of the bureaucrats weren't used to dealing with designers, they were used to dealing with tremendous hustlers like Fred Roche.

Before Campbell died last year we had long talks and he said that the reason he had wanted me, and the reason he had enjoyed my company and optimism, was that I made

*“It was interesting in many of those housing areas that the public housing was much better at every level than the private housing.”*

him laugh and also, I think, he felt perpetually that I was going to try something and he couldn't quite fathom what it was going to be.

The initial difficulties were largely caused by the lack of a building industry in the area. For instance, we were doing large scale bulk housing to start with. We had to push up almost instantly to nearly 3,500 completions a year from a standing start. We did manage that but the problem in the first two years was we hadn't got the building industry really interested; we had to allow contractors onto tender lists who were peddling both lightweight and heavyweight systems. *[Editorial note: This resulted in bias in the value for money calculations which discriminated against the higher-quality building proposals]*

What we wanted to do was to design housing where you couldn't tell the difference whether it was private or public.

As the years progressed we were able to get more contractors in the city, therefore your tender lists were comparing like with like, but in the early years you did have this problem.

The other great problem with bulk housing is obvious. Every architect, if he is really being honest, would like to design, say, 80 houses at a time because with that you can really control detail and you can make it exceedingly personal. With the larger schemes it inevitably becomes too depersonalised. The thing in our favour of course, and I suppose I was always against it, but the systems that were being peddled in the 1950s and 1960s were totally unacceptable to me for public housing - the gallery access, the huge castles in the sky.

I believe very strongly in the kind of suburban quality of Milton Keynes and this was very successful when we got the tender lists right in areas like Springfield or Neath Hill.

It was interesting in many of those housing areas that the public housing was much better at every level than the private housing. You always find, I think, with any form of housing that low density provides greater satisfaction, particularly in the United Kingdom context.

I left late 1976. I had been there for seven years and I was mentally tired, really exhausted. It sounds trite but if you are motivated by design and you are motivated by the look of what you are doing and the Utopian aspects of the development, in time you become stale and I felt I had almost done as much as I could do.



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*“One reaches the point of asking, ‘are cities the things we need?’ ”*

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# **Sir George Grenfell-Baines**

## **30 April 1908 – 9 May 2003**

George Grenfell-Baines was Master Planner of Aycliffe and also worked on the design of Peterlee with Lord Beveridge. In 1974, aged 66, he became professor of architecture at Sheffield. On retirement in 1978, he was knighted for services to architecture.

Extracts from an interview conducted 1995.

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How did I get involved in the Plan for Aycliffe? It was through William Holford, who later became Lord Holford. We had been friends in our early days as students. He was leading the New Towns Group in the Ministry of Town and Country Planning which was appointing Master Planners. Aycliffe wasn't a large project, 10,000 people, and they thought [it would suit] an outfit like the Grenfell-Baines Group, composed of people only just into their thirties, with not a tremendous lot of experience but known as urban designers.

I went down, was interviewed and they entrusted us with this project. They were particularly interested because I told them I would work with a sociologist from the start since I was a firm believer in the Geddes 'folk work place' formula.

I left once we had completed the Master Plan and followed it up with several Development Plans, going into greater detail and large scale. By that time the Corporation had appointed its own technical and professional people, which was a sensible thing to do, and then moved on to appoint outside architects, consultants and quantity surveyors. Mr Goldstraw, the Chief Architect they appointed, and his assistant, Harry Durell, were in complete sympathy with what we were doing and could give far more day-to-day attention to matters than we could, operating two hundred miles away. The town made excellent progress.

As I had never designed a new town before I had no previous ideas about what might have been done. The site itself had physical characteristics which made their own impact on our thinking but it was working with Chapman<sup>8</sup> which really got us on to a viable solution in human and social, as well as physical and economic, terms.

*“As I had never designed a new town before I had no previous ideas about what might have been done.”*

The Plan had to be a combination of contributions from all those different areas and it was our duty to pull them together into an entity, ending up as a whole greater than the sum of the parts.

At first Chapman and I had many discussions which didn't seem to be getting us anywhere then one day ... I said to him, "Can you tell me something that might shape it?". That request prompted him to say to me, "What do you think is the most important thing in life?" I said, "If you really want to get to basics, it's survival". He then said, "If we talk about survival, can we talk about children?" I saw what he was getting at. I said,

*"If the town is to be based on the child, and I grant you the child is unquestionably the guarantee of survival, we must go to the development of the child, in the home to begin with, but its first move out from the shelter of the home would be into a nursery school. So what can we say about nursery schools?"*

Quite literally, the main idea for the town was based on working outwards from nursery schools.

Against all planning thinking of the day, we came to the conclusion that a community of about 2,500 was a suitable basis to be an entity in the town because, given all the various conditions surrounding nursery schools, that would be the population to support a nursery school for forty children, considered to be an optimum size.

That led on naturally to families and naturally to housing and population. The figure of 2,500 people was one basic cell or building block or whatever you want to call it. I called it a ward.

Interestingly, some days later I was travelling to London from Darlington with Lord Beveridge. Peter Rowntree joined us and began discussing our work, talking about the wards, as I called them. He said,

*"That is extremely interesting because our village, New Earswick, which we have for the workers in Rowntrees of York, has that population and is a strong community. I am sure if you made your town of four, five or six of these, you would have a strong degree of community life and with a strong degree of community life you might well have a very lovely town."*

Information and thinking of that kind influenced me more than shapes of buildings and landscapes and so forth. I didn't ignore those but was certain that with the 'ward' concept we were on to something.

*“So, ‘activity, space then roads’ became our policy.”*

Later on I was told by an educationalist that a person called Fawcett<sup>9</sup> had written a book called ‘A residential unit for Town and Country Planning’. He had worked outward from education, from the different kinds of schools required, and had come to the same conclusion, that the schools up to secondary education could arise from that population. He called his unit a ‘vill’.

It was an encouraging piece of outside thinking. The approach that one thought first of was ‘ways of life’ then the activities involved, first nurturing the child, then providing for education, then thinking of further education and so on. All of these were benchmarks along the way to some idea of a basic community which would ally itself to others of a similar size and nature, all of them ultimately coming together as a town. It all fell into ‘folk work place’, the Geddes formula. In a way, the town was really a sociological pattern.

A tracing of that was put over the physical pattern of the site to see how these things would fit with the place and surroundings and our Master Plan came together quite rapidly. Most interestingly, we saw what the structure of roads should be. When you think of it, roads weren't already here, roads came about because people wanted to go from one settlement to another and the line of the road was determined by that. So the lines of our roads were communications between the wards.

So, ‘activity, space then roads’ became our policy. Aycliffe was one of the first of the new towns to adopt that policy. Later on, when I was asked to help out with Peterlee which was not making progress, I found that the principles evolved for Aycliffe were readily applicable to Peterlee. I realised this had something of the calibre of a universal idea.

I believe that is the most unique factor of Aycliffe - planning that is based

on people, activities, space, served by communications, the lines for which were quite easy to fill in when one knew where you were going.

I think the main problem was trying to realise it instantly, so to speak. They wanted the town 'yesterday'. There were logistical problems of getting contractors, designs, documents and all the necessary preliminaries to getting a thing built.

I had used the village green as an idea for grouping housing. It was obvious that size could affect social behaviour. That enabled us to decide on the population around the green squares which composed a lot of the housing.

Just as the town had its basis in the ward which would support a nursery school, it would also support a group of shops, 10 to 12 shops, economic and with duplicate shops for competition. The original shopping centre was very active and profitable. Other shopping centres followed on, their size influenced by experience.

When one reflects on how original towns grew up over long periods of time, it was almost an evolutionary process. Aycliffe was a very different situation, a whole town was being created in a matter of a few years. Where did most of the original people come from, the people who came to Aycliffe? They were imported. Some came from nearby but the town was deliberately restricted in size because neighbouring towns and villages didn't want their best people to be taken away and attracted into the new town. Many people came from the south. They were looking for work and the industrial estate had quite a number of factories already built and companies wanting to operate in them. We rapidly erected prefabricated aluminium bungalows for key people to come and live there.

So it was a mixed population, local and national. I couldn't tell you where they all came from but they did form a community and the

*“One of the aspects which makes the British New Town Movement unique is the public money that was actually put into it.”*

*“We were absolutely convinced we were doing the right thing.”*

arrangements we made for the different relationships, between the buildings and so on, drew them together. We succeeded in that respect.

The town has expanded considerably, it has grown to many times its original planned size. Economically it has been a successful town.

One of the aspects which makes the British New Town Movement unique is the public money that was actually put into it. It was a colossal investment. Of course, it was a contribution to slum clearances in cities. Towns in the south were a tremendous contribution [to this] because the people could be moved out into new homes and old houses freed.

Although, looking back, one realises that some very good ones were demolished in the whole business of sweeping away the past. We were absolutely convinced we were doing the right thing. There was tremendous confidence that we would do it all much better but we made a lot of mistakes in ignoring the lessons of the past.

Things are so different now. The pressures are different, some of the thinking, the basic principles. One would like to see a survey of how the towns have gone on and what has happened to the ideas. For myself, I have wondered if we should not have gone in far more for renewing the urban settlements we had. We made a big mistake in demolishing so much good town, in many cases quite soundly built houses, substituting new more suburban diffused type of groupings which mitigated against neighbourliness and the cohesion.

Concentrating on new heating systems, plumbing systems and, perhaps, rearranging some of the land to permit planting greenery and streetscape would have been better.

We could have made far more use of our existing urban fabric than we did and cut new towns to a much lesser degree. This was borne out by Jane Jacobs, the noted American writer and social thinker, with whom I

became friendly. I visited her in America. She came to stay with me here and came to see Aycliffe and was interested. But she felt that far too much destruction had gone on and far too much unsuitable new building had been done.

When it comes to styles of building, that is to some extent secondary to the larger issues of destroying whole neighbourhoods in the interests of progress. Being wise after the event, I think modern architecture, which of course we were all wanting to do, had its own in-built faults. Traditional building had a lot of lessons which the pressures of the war and the feeling that 'the New Jerusalem would be ours' carried us away. That is why I am now more in favour of urban renewal and working within the fabrics of our existing towns, doing it with a purpose and doing it with a strong sense of creating the physical facilities which would enable community life to develop. We haven't solved that problem yet.

Diminution of authority of the church, which was the centre of community and social life and very strong indeed in Victorian times, has left us without purpose and centre. We haven't found out yet how to create arrangements of houses and facilities which would naturally encourage a communal lifestyle.

There is a colossal amount of unused land within existing towns that was never properly put to use. I think the new towns used land economically and sensibly, there is no doubt about that, but in the end, of course, they did occupy an enormous area. Aycliffe is only a small new town but, I believe, the Designated Area was nearly 900 acres (364 hectares) which was quite a lot for 10,000 people.

*“Being wise after the event, I think modern architecture, which of course we were all wanting to do, had its own in-built faults.”*

One reaches the point of asking, 'are cities the things we need?' When I consider this, which is a way of life where people working from equipped homes are just as productive, it makes one stop to wonder, 'what should we be doing?' I have often thought myself that a lot of the troubles

with traffic and so on, caused by commuting, might encourage a central living area, turning a town inside out, where its work places are outside connected to the motorways of the country and its people live in the centre and walk about for their education and shopping and needs like that. A new approach to that could be possible in some places.

I certainly think that research programmes should be set up to test the feasibility of some of these ideas. This one, of course, could mean that the work places and the houses were in the same place, except for heavy and big scale industry, but commuting would be cut down dramatically. I mean commuting from home to work. Commuting causes a great deal of the transport problems, the Americans in particular have found this out.



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*“The corporate spirit of the team was legendary and it was probably its interdisciplinary structure which assisted in its radical thinking”*

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# **Sir David Gosling**

## **September 14 1934 - May 1 2002**

At the forefront of British new town developments, David Gosling was deputy chief architect and planner to Runcorn New Town from 1965 to 1967. In 1968 he became chief architect and planner at Irvine New Town in Scotland. In 1973 he became professor and head of the School of Architecture and Dean of the Faculty of Architectural Studies at Sheffield University.

Extracts from an interview conducted 1995.

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Runcorn Development Corporation was established in 1964 and was regarded by planning and architectural historians at that time as one of the first Mark III<sup>10</sup> new towns.

At the age of 30, I was appointed Deputy Chief Architect of Runcorn in Spring 1965 and joined the Development Corporation in September 1965. My responsibilities there were as leader of the design team. The two and a half years I had spent at Leach Rhodes and Walker were significant in that I began to understand the relationships between commercial viability and architectural design.

Fred Roche, the Chief Architect Planner, was, at 33 years of age, the youngest Chief Architect in the new towns and he formed a formidable team of young designers. Not only were new towns a fashionable focus of architectural interest in the 1960s as being test beds of architectural experiment, the culture of the day was all expressive of an enlightened, egalitarian, culture of youth.

Instead of appointing me as his administrative deputy, Fred Roche decided that I should become the design team leader for the new town centre. Roche was a Ling protege, having worked for Arthur Ling at Coventry when Ling was the City Architect. It was ironic, therefore, that the first conflict between Ling, as Master Planner, and Roche, as Chief Architect, was over the design of the town centre. Ling's vision for the centre was that of a citadel or acropolis, sited immediately below Halton Castle. The design, which had overtones of Oscar Neimeyer's design for the Planalto in Brasilia, was a finite, crystalline structure as the centre piece of the new town.

At first, Roche instructed me to prepare a design for expanded shopping in the existing town, in opposition to Ling's scheme, partly to calm the political hostility towards a town centre shown by the Council and traders in the existing town. This design was in the form of market halls on stepped platforms which allowed for the retail flexibility which seemed to be required. By the time the design team was formed in early 1966, the centre had been transferred back to the Master Plan site.

Fred Roche's management methods, as well as those of the General Manager, Derek Banwell, were quite revolutionary. They both insisted on the formation of interdisciplinary teams. The Runcorn team included, as well as architects, Ron Turton a planner, Peter Thompson a quantity surveyor, Ewart James a structural engineer, and Hugh Gunton an estates development specialist. Loyalty developed, not along departmental lines but towards the project itself. A rivalry was deliberately encouraged by Roche between the industry design group, housing design group and town centre design group with the aim of achieving the most revolutionary designs. The town centre group was regarded by the establishment as a rebel group, who were hard drinkers but worked all through the night.

*“The corporate spirit of the team was legendary and it was probably its interdisciplinary structure which assisted in its radical thinking.”*

At one point, during the design development, the town centre group was relegated to a County highways engineer's cabin at the base of a derelict roadstone quarry three miles (5 kilometres) away from the main office! The corporate spirit of the team was legendary and it was probably its interdisciplinary structure which assisted in its radical thinking. Ewart James' previous professional experience was in the North East, designing dry dock and major bridge construction and it was his breadth of vision, as well as that of the Principal Engineer, Alan Bell, which led inexorably towards a megastructure solution.

The initial designs, which I prepared before the design team was formed, were a series of megastructure proposals stepping down the hillside from Halton Castle. Subsequent discussions within the design team resulted in a list of design criteria. One, the town centre should provide the correct balance of shopping, social and welfare amenities to serve the needs of a population of 100,000 people by the year 2000. Two, that it must be financially viable and although a 20 year break-even point was the realistic goal, the ideal goal was 7 to 8 years. Three, it must be capable of phasing according to population growth in the new town. Four, it must

be integrated with high density housing in the immediate vicinity. Five, it must have a contemporary architectural image.

Then I was appointed Chief Architect/Planner of Irvine New Town in November 1967. I looked forward to the challenge with a mixture of excitement as well as a little fear and trepidation. Excitement, because it was Britain's first new town whose designated area included a coast line and a wild and beautiful Ayrshire hinterland. Like Fred Roche, I would be starting a new town, not continuing the work of others. Trepidation, because of the formidable reputation of the general manager, Dennis Kirby and the fierceness of the corporation board who appointed me. There were also the more complex political pressures in incorporating two existing towns into the master plan.

Sir Hugh Wilson (Wilson and Womersley) were appointed as consultants to prepare the master plan which was published in 1967. It was an exciting linear concept some 3 km inland indicating a series of linear settlements developing northwards towards Glasgow. A geo-technical survey carried out shortly before I arrived in February 1968 proved the impossibility of undertaking the Wilson-Womersley Plan. Coal mining, which had ceased in Irvine by the middle of this century, resulted in massive land subsidence. The original Wilson/Womersley plan was unbuildable.

I was charged with preparing a new plan in conjunction with Hugh Wilson and Jamieson and Mackay, their traffic consultants. The new plan abandoned the concept of linear development northwards towards Glasgow and related much more closely with expansion and growth on an east-west axis between Irvine and Kilmarnock. It was a radical plan and, in the same way that Runcorn Town Centre had a major design input from structural engineers, so Irvine's new plan was influenced by the radical thinking of Bill Mackay, the traffic engineer and a senior partner of Jamieson and Mackay.

*“I would be starting a new town, not continuing the work of others.”*

It was based upon the concept of a group of new housing communities in parallel

*“In simple terms, the goals and objectives of the plan was the total integration of new communities with the old communities.”*

series, adjacent to the existing villages like Dreghorn and Springside, and located between the town of Kilwinning to the north and the Royal Burgh of Irvine (400 year old) to the south. The new communities were termed ‘urban acceleration units’. The presence of an existing infrastructure in existing communities allowed the

acceleration of the development of adjacent communities by using the existing infrastructure until the new infrastructure of roads and drainage was complete.

In simple terms, the goals and objectives of the plan was the total integration of new communities with the old communities. In new towns this was an important factor since new housing areas could not always be built on greenfield sites. Bill Mackay introduced the concept of “community routes” which essentially was the re-use of the existing country lanes linking the small villages and farmsteads. Normal vehicular traffic was taken off the community routes. This then became the focus of pedestrian activity with most of the social facilities located along its length, such as schools, shops, churches and pubs.

The only vehicles permitted on the community routes were local buses providing an efficient and low-cost public transport system instead of constructing new trackways at greater cost. As existing farms were purchased for new housing development, the farmhouses were converted into community centres. The Annick Valley development, including the award-winning Bourtreehill housing development, was an important innovation in the conceptual evolution of community route structure. Whereas Runcorn incorporated a purpose built public transportation-track at high cost, the community route idea utilised existing roads and country lanes.

Higher density rental housing was developed to adjacent community routes, where private car ownership was likely to be low and accessibility

to public transport was important. Lower density owner-occupied housing was built in the hinterland with easy access to the new district distributor roads which encompassed each development. In terms of architectural imagery, the design team utilised the vernacular

architecture of the traditional Scottish high street with bright colour washes on the rendered exteriors of the houses along the community route, whereas the lower density housing was a monochromatic black and white, reflecting the vernacular architecture of the farmhouses.

*“He was a young, dynamic chief executive whose politics were described by one board member as ‘slightly to the right of Ghengis Khan.’”*

The key to achieving this megastructure pattern of development lay in the design of the commercial core which, like Runcorn, was financed by private capital in partnership with the Development Corporation. Once again the Development Corporation was appointed as architects by the developers, Land Securities PLC and Ravensfeft Properties. The design team, led by me and Barry Maitland, developed an ambitious but commercially viable centre which was also fully let before construction was completed. Construction started in mid-1972. I left Irvine at the beginning of 1973.

The first years were not entirely happy. Dennis Kirby, the general manager of the highly successful (in industrial and commercial terms) East Kilbride new town, near Glasgow, was deeply suspicious of architects. He was a young, dynamic chief executive whose politics were described by one board member as “slightly to the right of Ghengis Khan”. In the long term, however, he proved to be a visionary leader and his initial enmity towards architects might have been based on his resentment of Sir Hugh Wilson. On the other hand, once he was convinced that his own architects had a sense of vision as well as practical application, he became a great supporter and advocate.

As an example of his changing attitude in the early days, he commenced

with a belief that the architecture department should be minuscule with the chief architect merely acting as administrator. The majority of public and private housing as well as industrial development, in his opinion, could and should be developed by “design and build” contractors, such as Wimpey. The internal design team had to prove that they could design cheaper and better looking advance factories than its commercial adversaries, though the design process had to include notional profit margins as though we were in private practice.

In public housing, too, Kirby wanted design and build firms, such as Wimpey, to carry out the work. My first task was to design the first five hundred houses, Pennyburn I and Pennyburn II. This was before I was allowed to expand my department to a working size in 1968. I was allowed to appoint one assistant, Bob Dunlop, a recent graduate from Strathclyde University and together we did the entire project.

On moving to Scotland, my first two years were spent in Troon, an elegant, small resort on the Ayrshire Coast to the south of Irvine. However, I strongly believed and still do believe, that no architect involved in public housing can possibly understand the social issues of their designs without actually living with the finished results. I persuaded my wife, who was pregnant with our third child at that time, that we should move into Pennyburn and there we remained for the next two-and-a-half years.

It was not an empty gesture, but rather had to do with a learning process. In spite of the discomfort of being surrounded by construction for much of the time, it was, in a curious way, rewarding. The experience of living

there altered many of my architectural preconceptions.

The houses were designed around pedestrian squares with approximately 30 houses in each square.

Though I came from a working class background, I had

*“I strongly believed and still do believe, that no architect involved in public housing can possibly understand the social issues of their designs without actually living with the finished results.”*

adopted many middle class values and assumed that families would wish to interact socially. I discovered I was completely wrong and that impoverished families, with little or no mobility, valued, above all else, privacy. In Pennyburn II, the housing types were completely redesigned in the form of courtyard housing and became the most popular housing type in the new town because of this new privacy.

I also argued for play areas for small children because the soft landscaping in the pedestrian square could not withstand the intensity of use by children.

The whole basis of the evolution of Irvine Town Plan in those first five years was dependent for its success on consensus building and public participation. It was at a time when advocacy planning began to emerge in the United States, led by David Lewis of Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh and others who founded the R/UDAT community assistance teams.

I designed many of the early projects myself, but as the department grew to a staff of more than 120 by 1973, much of the design work was done within the teams and I acted as advocate for the teams at board presentations. I tried to emulate the ideas of Fred Roche in the creation of multi-disciplinary design teams and the avoidance of a traditional pyramidal structure.

Irvine New Town was well received. In retrospect, it is interesting how changing architectural theories give a different contemporary viewpoint. Seen from the outside over a period of more than twenty-five years, Irvine has been a success, architecturally, economically, and socially. Much of that credit must go to Ian Downs, the Technical Director and Chief Architect for the past 16 years. His many award-winning schemes show an evolution and continued sophistication in vernacular Scottish architectural design as well as urban design, which have gone far beyond the ideas of those first five years.



## Footnotes

1. The original plan for the development of Milton Keynes was conceived by a consultant team led by the architectural and planning practice *Llewelyn-Davies, Weeks, Forestier-Walker & Bor*.
2. Richard Crossman was Minister of Housing between 1964 and 1966 in Harold Wilson's Labour government.
3. Fred Pooley was county architect of Buckinghamshire and developed a plan for North Bucks New Town, referred to colloquially as Pooleyville, which included a monorail joining high-density residential areas around a central core.
4. Major (later Sir) Ralph Verney was county alderman and appointed to the Milton Keynes New Town Corporation Board
5. Councillor and Chairman of Bletchley Urban Council, later a member of the Corporation Board.
6. Urban designer and theorist at the University of California at Berkeley
7. Policy introduced in the Town and Country Planning Act 1947 to support regional development.
8. Denis Chapman of the Department of Social Science at Liverpool University, employed as a consultant.
9. Book published by Charles Bungay Fawcett by University of London Press in 1944.
10. The third wave of new towns designated between 1967 and 1970.

# New Towns

## Mark One

- Stevenage (designated 11 November 1946)
- Crawley (designated 9 January 1947)
- Hemel Hempstead (designated 4 February 1947)
- Harlow (designated 25 March 1947)
- Newton Aycliffe (designated 19 April 1947 as Aycliffe New Town)
- East Kilbride (designated 6 May 1947)
- Peterlee (designated 10 March 1948, as Easington New Town)
- Welwyn Garden City (designated 20 May 1948)
- Hatfield (designated 20 May 1948)
- Glenrothes (designated 30 June 1948)
- Basildon (designated 4 January 1949)
- Bracknell (designated 17 June 1949)
- Cwmbran (designated 4 November 1949)
- Corby (designated 1 April 1950)
- Cumbernauld (designated 9 December 1955, extended 19 March 1973)

## Mark Two

- Skelmersdale (designated 9 October 1961)
- Livingston (designated 16 April 1962)
- Dawley (designated 16 January 1963; later redesignated as Telford)
- Redditch (designated 10 April 1964)
- Runcorn (designated 10 April 1964)
- Washington (designated 24 July 1964)

## Mark Three

- Irvine (designated 9 November 1966)
- Milton Keynes (designated 23 January 1967)
- Peterborough (designated 21 July 1967)
- Newtown (designated 18 December 1967)
- Northampton (designated 14 February 1968)
- Warrington (designated 26 April 1968)
- Telford (designated 29 November 1968)
- Central Lancashire (designated 26 March 1970)
- Stonehouse (designated 17 July 1973, never built)

## About the New Towns Record archive

The New Towns Record project aimed to bring together for the first time, in a single source, a comprehensive resource library and account of the UK New Towns programme.

The content includes:

- over 40 master plans;
- over 60 key books, articles, items of legislation, white papers and other documents;
- interviews or papers from over 80 key practitioners and academics;
- over 3,000 photographs;
- a full set of annual reports of the 33 development corporations;
- and specially commissioned maps.

These provided a unique insight into the UK New Towns, through both documentary evidence and insight into the personal experiences of those who created and manage, and who live and work in the towns.

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