



Building a Community

Construction Workers in Stevenage 1950-1970



Stevenage was the first of the new towns to be designated under the New Towns Act of 1946. Seen as a step towards a better world, better home environment and better social conditions after the ravages of war, it became home to many of the building workers engaged in its construction. This pamphlet tells the stories of some of those men, their work on the building of the town and their contribution to the development of a new community.

www.buildingworkersstories.com

ISBN 978 0 903109 32 1

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Cover and interior design: Beryl Janssen/Cologne

Cover photographs: Stevenage building workers in the 1950s, courtesy of Peter Legge;
Houses round a courtyard in Chells neighbourhood, 1960s

Preface

This pamphlet has been produced as part of a two-year University of Westminster research project, entitled 'Constructing Post-War Britain: Building Workers' Stories, 1950-1970', which began in August 2010. The project is funded by the Leverhulme Trust and aims to collect oral history testimonies from construction workers who were employed on five of the highest profile sites and developments of that era:

Stevenage New Town; Barbican development, City of London; South Bank arts complex; Sizewell A power station; and the M1 motorway.

The aim of the research is both to gain a greater understanding of the processes of change within the construction industry during these decades and to highlight the role that construction workers played in the creation of the post-war built environment.

For more information see project website www.buildingworkersstories.com.

The researchers on the project are:

Christine Wall, Linda Clarke, Charlie McGuire and Michaela Brockmann.

The research for this pamphlet was conducted during August 2010-August 2011. Eleven ex-workers were interviewed:

Fred Udell
former bricklayer,
interviewed in Stevenage on 2 November 2010

Ted Oswick
former bricklayer,
interviewed in Stevenage on 23 November 2010

Dave Ansell
former bricklayer,
interviewed in Stevenage on 30 November 2010

Harry Whitfield
former painter,
interviewed in Stevenage on 15 December 2010

Arthur Utting
former carpenter,
interviewed in Potton on 22 December 2010

Luke Donovan
former forklift driver,
interviewed in Stevenage on 1 February 2011

Bob Hooper
former bricklayer,
interviewed in Stevenage on 6 April 2011

Trevor Utting
former carpenter,
interviewed in Luton on 6 April 2011

Fred Whiting
former bricklayers' labourer,
interviewed in Stevenage on 18 May 2011

Peter Legge
former quantity surveyor,
interviewed in Letchworth on 4 June 2011

Ivan Martin
former carpenter,
interviewed in Hitchin on 21 July 2011

Introduction

The building workers of Stevenage made a huge contribution to the development of the Town. In addition to the construction of the houses, shops, roads and factories, which formed the physical landscape of the new town, they also played a leadership role in key aspects of the town's civic and political life. Settling in large numbers as a result of Stevenage Development Corporation's (SDC) policy of giving them a house, building workers had to fight hard to secure decent pay and conditions in an industry that was notorious for its casualised nature and non-existent health and safety provision. But the influence, impact and role of the Stevenage building workers went far beyond the sites.



Fred Udell



Ted Oswick



Dave Ansell



Harry Whitfield



Trevor and Arthur
Utting

They offered leadership to many of the early community groups and were also elected as councillors on Stevenage Urban Council. Building worker trade unions played a key role in numerous campaigns designed to improve the conditions of the New Town residents, as well as those which had a more internationalist purpose. Being young men in the main, some of these workers regarded themselves as part of an exciting social experiment that had the potential to create a society free of the type of squalor and poverty they had witnessed in London. For these workers, building Stevenage meant more than erecting new buildings – it meant the building of a community itself.



Luke Donovan



Bob Hooper



Fred and Joy
Whiting

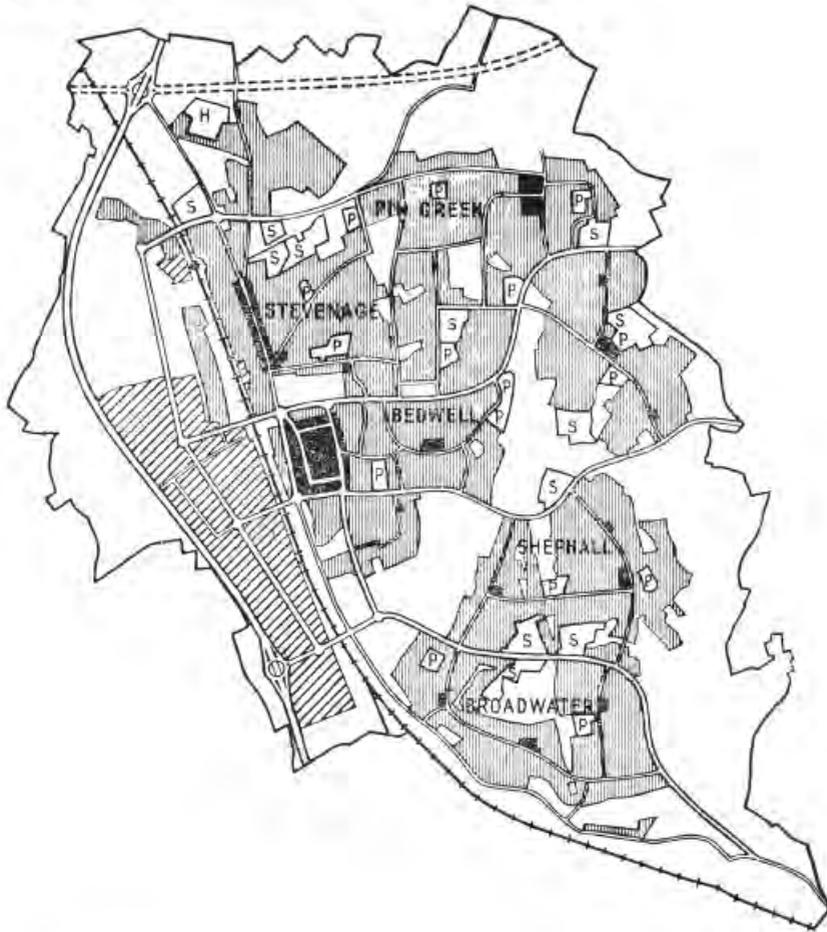


Peter Legge



Ivan and Valda
Martin

STEVENAGE



-  RESIDENTIAL
-  INDUSTRY
-  TOWN CENTRE
NEIGHBOURHOOD CENTRES
AND SUB-CENTRES
-  OPEN SPACE AND
AGRICULTURAL LAND

-  MAJOR ROADS
-  RAILWAYS
-  SCHOOLS
PRIMARY
-  SECONDARY
-  HOSPITALS



OUTLINE PLAN
Scale of Miles
0 1/4 1/2 3/4 1

Stevenage Development Corporation Outline Plan, 1955

Background

Stevenage was the first of Britain's new towns, planned and constructed by the state. Its origins lie in a series of investigations and reports into the British social and economic structure and in new ideas concerning town planning, originating during the Second World War and concluding with the Abercrombie report (1944). Abercrombie proposed a series of radical solutions to the sprawl of London's population, which had grown from four million in 1919 to six million in 1939, dividing London into 4 concentric rings, inner, suburban, green belt and outer-country. Development that could not be contained within the first two rings moved into the fourth ring. To facilitate this process, Abercrombie suggested a series of satellite towns, beginning with Stevenage.

The war period also saw the publication of the Beveridge report, which envisaged a state response to what its author described as the five 'evils' of want, disease, squalor, ignorance and idleness and inspired the Labour government's social welfare programme from 1946 onwards. Although not identical in its aim, the New Towns Act (1946) can also be viewed as part of this process of change which created the welfare state in Britain. The pressures for change amongst the British working class in particular and the widespread desire for the creation of a society better than the one they had endured in the inter-war and war

periods had propelled Labour to power and influenced to some degree the thinking behind the new towns. The Labour government's Town and Country Planning Minister, Lewis Silkin, may well have been indulging in political rhetoric when, at a difficult public meeting in Stevenage Town Hall in May 1946, he spoke of his belief that people would come from all over the world 'to see how we in Stevenage are building for the new way of life',¹ but he was also giving expression to the hopes that many had in this new experiment in centralised state planning and social engineering.

A master plan was produced by SDC, which envisaged six neighbourhoods, each containing around 10,000 people, and each with its own local shops, schools, churches, garages, pubs, community centres and clinics etc.² It was hoped that work would be completed in ten years. A programme of 500 houses was supposed to begin in 1949-50 but with the town master plan yet to be approved by the government, it was decided to begin building on the periphery of the Old Town, on both sides of Sish Lane. The development here was a block of flats at Stony Hall and a hostel for building workers in Sish Lane. Progress was slow and by the end of 1950 only 6 houses had been built, with around another 449 contracted. It was

¹ Balchin, *Stevenage First New Town*, Stevenage (1980), p10

² Balchin, *op cit*, p69

not until 1951, when government post-war restrictions on labour were lifted, that house-building really began. Tenders were invited by SDC and large contractors such as Tersons and Carltons soon moved onto the sites. Between 1951 and the end of 1954, the figure for completions rose sharply, with almost 2000 houses finished by this point. Of this figure, 532 were allocated to building workers.

In 1955 the plan was altered more substantially by Leonard Vincent, who had been promoted to the position of SDC's Chief Architect the previous year. By this stage, it was considered that the limit of 60,000 inhabitants placed on the new town was too small and required expanding. Vincent suggested a new population figure of 80,000, to be achieved through higher density housing and building on the green belt of undeveloped land in the town. Between 1955 and 1959, a further 6,000 houses were built. By the early 1960s, further revision was felt to be necessary

and in 1966 Vincent produced a new master plan, which envisaged an eventual population size of 105,000.

Immigration from London was to cease after 1975, at which point the population was expected to be around 80,000. Thereafter, growth would take place more slowly, as the town reflected the growth processes and population movements of any normal town. Further development of the six neighbourhoods was planned by Vincent, to which would be added a new neighbourhood, Symonds Green, in the 1970s. Vincent's plan, updated in 1972, would form the basis of Stevenage's development until the wind-up of the new town corporation in 1980. But the population growth he envisaged did not take place. In contrast to the 1960s, the 1970s would prove to be a decade of economic decline and rising unemployment. Far from rising to 105,000, the Stevenage population would hover just above the 70,000 mark for most of those years.



View of Bedwell North,
October 1953

Row of houses at Leaves Spring,
Shephall neighbourhood,
early 1960s

Houses at Marymead,
Broadwater neighbourhood,
early 1960s

Coming to Stevenage

The building workers who came to work in Stevenage were mainly men who had been living in or close to London, many with young families. While in the immediate post-war period there were plenty of building jobs available in the war-ravaged Capital, housing was in extremely short supply. **Fred and Vi Udell** were living with their young daughter in Dagenham with Vi's parents. They were just one of many families who had little chance of getting a house:

I went to the Housing Officer in Romford, Romford Council, because I was told that if you was an ex-serviceman, you got some points. They had a points system that lifted you up the housing list. Anyway, I had the interview with him, and he said to me, "You married?" So I said, "Yeah." So he said, "Where are you living?" so I told him, and he said to me "I'll put it straight to you. We have 7,600 people on the housing list. Some are chronic, some are urgent, and some are not so. And the rate of building licences, we're only building less than 53 dwellings a year – that's all we can do, and it's come back in 10 years' time, and I'll put your name on the list!" I said, "You're joking!" He said, "No, work it out for yourself – that's what it is."

In order to persuade building workers to come and work in Stevenage, SDC offered a corporation house to all those on London housing waiting lists, on the proviso that

they work on the new town sites for at least six months. More than any other, this was the factor that brought most London building workers to Stevenage. Painter, **Harry Whitfield**, was in his mid-20s when he came to Stevenage.

I'd heard that if you put your name down for a house, and you worked in Stevenage and you were there six months or more, you could get a house. Well, of course, we was only in two rooms up in Hackney, so consequently when I came down, I put me name down for a house.

The workers who came to Stevenage had the option of either living in a hostel, or of travelling the thirty miles or so from London every day. The first hostel was adapted ex-army accommodation in Aston, but later two purpose-built hostels were completed in Sish lane and Monks Wood. For those who chose to travel to and from Stevenage, buses were put on by the building contractors. It made for a long and tiring day.

The first day, it was quite a walk, wasn't it, Vi, about a mile and a half, to Chapelheath, and the bus come along, and bugger me, out of all the buses they had, this one had slatted wooden seats, not soft! Anyway, I travelled backwards and forwards, and that in itself, it was nearly eight months. It wasn't a straightforward ride from Chapelheath. We

went through parts of London and picked up other people, to get a busload. So I used to catch the bus about twenty to six, something like that, and I never got home in the evening till...

Vi: Nearly nine.
(Fred Udell)

But although most of the workers who built Stevenage came from the London region, not all did. Some, like **Dave Ansell**, were based in nearby villages.

I worked from when I was 15 until I was 18, and I was 18 and I went and did me National Service, went out to Hong Kong for a couple of years, and came back, and I was a bricklayer improver then. I started at Longmeadow, at Stevenage. There was a lad lived about four doors away from us in Knebworth, and he was a carpenter, and I knew him before I went in the Army, and he said... "They're looking for a bricklayer on our site. Come with me Monday and get a start to doing the anti-gossip walls and all the little boundary walls for retaining and that." So I went there as an improver, and was there, I suppose that was '56 until mid-'57, and then I went on to the New Town, the first phase of the town itself.

In addition to English workers, a sizeable component of the men who built Stevenage came from Ireland. The work they did was physically demanding.

There was bricklayers, Irish bricklayers, Irish chippies. A lot of the Irish were pipe-layers, what they called drainage workers. It is hard work ...it's got to be done right, because if you've got a leak in a pipe, after

you've filled it all in, you've got to dig it all out again.

So they'd be quite skilled at it then?

Oh yeah, highly skilled. Their pay was the same as a skilled worker. They were classed as skilled workers.

(Luke Donovan)

There was a lot of Irish on the sites in Stevenage?

Oh, a lot of Irish. Bedwell to here, full of Irishmen.

What sort of jobs did they do?

Mainly groundwork. ...you probably wouldn't know, but all the early foundations of Stevenage were hand-dug. So you had a gang of four would go round and the profiles were set, lined, and the labourers would dig, hand-dig, the trenches for this block of five and believe you me, it wouldn't take them long to dig it.

And how did English workers get on with the Irish workers?

Oh, fine, no problems at all, no.

Was everybody in the trade unions?

Yeah. eventually of course, all them Irishmen, all members of the union, not initially, didn't come here as trade unionists, but they soon were welcomed in and lived in hostels in the beginning... I think there was two blocks of houses, and housed the ground workers for the initial beginning of the town, but quite a few years after, they were still hand-dug, until machines come and took over.

Did any of the Irish workers settle in Stevenage?

Oh, hundreds!... Oh, there still is a large contingent of Irish here.

(Ted Oswick)



Road building on Whomerley Wood Estate, June 1951

The builders who began creating the new town in the 1940s were housed in prefabricated aluminium bungalows in the grounds of the Aston Estate

Working on the sites in Stevenage

Many of the building workers who came to Stevenage were also, like Dave Ansell, young ex-servicemen, who had recently completed their National service. This was one factor behind the camaraderie and comradeship that would soon become their hall-mark. But not all had been in the armed forces. Fred Whiting, born in 1919, had grown up with a father debilitated by shell-shock, following his involvement in some of the bloodiest battles of the First World War, including Mons and Ypres. Fred became a Christian pacifist and did not join the army, spending World War Two working on the land, before moving to Stevenage in 1950.

The other factors that produced this collective mentality and solidarity can be located in the conditions that they faced upon arrival on the sites, as well as the particular qualities and in some cases political backgrounds of the men themselves. The work was hard:

Yes, started at eight. Sometimes, the labourers were asked to come in a half-hour earlier, mix the mortar and get all the mortarboards loaded out ready, so that when you came on the scaffold at eight o'clock, you started work. Mainly, when you was on bonus, well, you wanted to get stuck in as soon as possible, so you could earn some money. It took you from Monday, Tuesday, perhaps Wednesday afternoon before you covered the wages of the gang.

The wages of the gang was then set against a target value, and what was over was the bonus split equally amongst the gang members. So you'd work... and of course, you would probably have about three or four blocks on the go at one time, and when I say blocks, that could be a block of four, block of six, block of eight, and they was at various stages – first stage, second stage, third stage. When you got to the second stage, the carpenters came along, placed the joists in position, and... scaffold was lifted and away you went. Dinnertime came, had your dinner, and in the afternoon, back again on the scaffold. I've never worked so intense for so long a period. (Fred Udell)

Started at eight o'clock in the morning. The labourer would knock the cement up and sometimes they started half an hour before us. He'd knock the cement up and the bricks would be there from the previous day, you loaded up and you would start work at eight o'clock. At 10 o'clock, you would stop and have a 10 minute break. It always turned out to be about 20 minutes, half-hour, but there again, it was your own time basically. But then at lunchtime, you would have half an hour at lunchtime, and then you'd go through and, at three o'clock, you'd have a cup of tea, 10 minutes, and then go through, and if it was four or five o'clock, whatever. But I've got a feeling it was 46.5 hours we worked. (Ted Oswick)

On most large sites in Britain, bonus payments made up a substantial portion of a building workers' pay, and many different systems could be used. Normally, these would involve a bonus rate, based on some form of measured output, for craft workers and a plus rate, usually determined by the type of task being undertaken, for non-craft workers. In Stevenage, the system operated by the bricklayers reflected their collective approach and the solidarity that was developed through struggle

Five bricklayers and two labourers – you would earn x amount, and then you would take out the basic money, like your basic pay. The labourers would be less. But the bonus, we would share out 100% equally, because the labourers worked hard, like the bricklayers, and a good labourer was worth a bricklayer kind of thing. They'd have everything at hand – the bricks, the muck, the wall ties, the damp course, and if you had to nail the damp course to the frame, then the nails would be there. So, they was worth their weight in gold really.
(Dave Ansell)

Did you share your bonus?

Oh, definitely, yeah.

Between the bricklayers and the labourers?

Oh, yes.

Equal?

Oh... which is an important, feather in Stevenage's cap, I'm certain. Jim Collman, our trade union organiser at the time, we had our meetings, our trade union meetings in Stevenage were unbelievable. We would – our community centre's main hall would be full. I'm talking about probably 100 people at a branch meeting – hard to believe for some

people, but this is fact. We filled... we would have people standing up, couldn't be seated – fantastic meetings, we had! Well, we had a trades meeting, and we decided, on a very popular vote, that where the labourers should receive the same bonus earnings as the bricklayers. It was passed – I forget the percentage, but it was very, very high, like 90 plus, all voted that the labourers should receive the same. (Ted Oswick)

Bricklayers' labourer **Fred Whiting** was clear about the comradeship between the craft and non-craft workers in his gang

Start work, and then... start the mixer, quick as you can get in place, and the two of us taking up the bricks, and the other two, who were on the muck, would be getting the muck ready for them, getting it up to the bricklayers. They'd maybe start about eight o'clock, and you'd try and get best – because it was nearly all bonus work, in those days, and you'd try and get best part of your work done before, before dinner and so it was all go all the time then. But oh, it was good, good... very sort of friendly gang they were then, and what struck me about bricklayers like that, whereas, with some bricklayers, they treat the labourers as second-class, with this gang we was with, great gang, they – although the bricklayers got I think tuppence an hour extra, they shared the bonus out equally, shared between the bricklayers and the labourers, and so you all got your fair share of it. I stayed with them, oh, right till the work got short in the building trade. We got on very well.

Quantity Surveyor **Peter Legge**, who moved to Stevenage as a ten-year old boy in early

1951 and later worked for Carlton, a major contractor in Stevenage, on several of their housing developments, regarded the bricklayers' labourers as the most important members of their gangs

Well, in the bricklaying gang, the labourers are key. The bricklayers are not the ones. It's the labourers are the ones that earn the money for the bricklayers, because they're the ones who place all the material in place. If the material is not there, the bricklayers can't lay it. And you don't want too many bricks there – you want the exact number of bricks, because you don't want to take them away afterwards.

Carpenters also recognised the importance of a good labourer

They were a mixture of labourers and what they would call shuttering hands. Labourers – because people get this mistake – labourers themselves have got their own intelligence in their job. If you've got a good labourer, who knows what you want, and when you want it, and how you want it, he makes you money, because it's there and its right and you can get on without worrying about anything, because you've got to remember, in those days, a carpenter, for instance, had a labourer to wait on him. These days, a carpenter has to do everything himself. In those days, if I was hanging doors, I'd walk into a house ready – the doors, the locks, the handles, the architraves, they'd all be in the right place for me, and I could just get on working straightaway. So, they were worth their weight in gold, a labourer.
(Trevor Utting)

Bricklayers, carpenters and many labourers earned good bonus, sometimes double their basic rate of pay, and even treble. But not all building workers had that level of bonus, or such a collective approach. The situation was very different for painters in Stevenage. They operated an individual bonus system, based on painting an entire house, inside and outside, per week. The bonus rate was not very high:

The bricklayers and then the carpenters and because they were doing pretty well like, but as painters, you just had what was left, which wasn't terrific like, because the rate then, in '51, it was four shillings an hour. And I think, for the week, somehow or other, you got a fiver...

...but the old boy at the back of me, he was a carpenter, old Bobby Woods, and he was a good carpenter and all, and he showed me his pay-packet "This is what I'm getting," and it was over 20 quid. It was a lot of bloody difference between them and us like, as I say, five pounds, and the rent in these houses was 33 or 34 bob, and because I decided that I'd have an end of terrace, they charged another one and six! [Harry Whitfield]

Site conditions in the early days were deplorable. Health and safety provision was virtually non-existent and trade union organisation was poor. The main contractor on these early Stevenage sites was Tersons, but sub-contracting was common.

I suppose I'd been working there about three weeks, and I suddenly discovered I was working for a brickworks sub-contractor, not working for Terson's direct... This unsettled me a bit, and I thought, well, I've

got to stick it out, whichever way. He was an absolute tyrant this George Wiggins, the brickworks sub-contractor, and conditions on site was appalling. For example, there was no heat in this Nissan hut that he called the canteen. You didn't stop for rain or bad weather. You just kept going. And to go to the toilet, the toilet was an Anderson air-raid shelter, with two doors at an angle, over a pit, and a wooden pole that you sat on, and you couldn't reach the pole because the sides of the pit had fell in, so what you was doing was you walked into the Love's Wood down there and went to the toilet, best you could, and then come back again. And I know the first time – I know it's a bit rude – bearing in mind that you're out of your sequence, getting up early in the morning, your normal times when you do these things, and I know I hadn't been there long and I needed to go, and I said to him, before I realised what the situation is, I said, "George, where's the toilet?" He said, "Toilet? What do you want a toilet for?" I said, "Well, what do you use a toilet for?!" So I said, "Well, I need to go". You know what he said? "You shit in your own time, not mine!" That was the atmosphere. I'm sorry about using the word "shit", but that's how it was, and you were treated as if you didn't exist. (Fred Udell)

Carpenter **Ivan Martin**, who had learned the trade on one of the government's intensive six-month training schemes, set up to provide the skilled labour necessary for the

post-war reconstruction programmes, also recalled poor conditions on the Stevenage sites

Toilets were absolutely appalling. They were just frames, like a sentry box, stuck over a hole, and a piece of four by two wood, and that's what you sat on – that was your toilet. And they didn't even provide toilet rolls. This is the building industry. We're talking now – obviously, before my time, it was like just the same, probably worse, if you could think of it being worse – but we're talking about now late-'40s and into the '50s, in fact quite a way into the '50s, before they started slowly getting...where they had proper portable toilets.

So you didn't have canteens on-site or anything like that?

Not in the early days, no, we didn't, no, not with these housing schemes.

So how did you do for food? Did you have to take your food?

Take it, always take your own food.

And no hot drinks? How did you make your tea?

No. That gradually, that came about early – tea was made in galvanised buckets and a labourer would take the bucket round. Let's say we were on a housing site. He would go round the site and all round there, to where the tradesmen, workers were. And that was the beauty of it. I can remember some dipping their own mugs in it. Rather than him ladling it out, which is anywhere near hygienic. It was appalling really.



Folk dancers
in the town square, early 1960s
Stevenage shopping centre, early 1960s

Trade union organisation and struggle in Stevenage

The fact that workers had to wait around six months before getting a house made them wary of being sacked and less likely to challenge management. Some have spoken of the pressure they felt to 'keep their mouths shut'. But, once they had received their houses, things began to change, markedly so. By general consensus of the workers themselves, the single incident that led to the beginning of a fight back was the sacking of an Irish labourer, Kevin Murphy, on the Tersons site in 1951:

The first dispute in Stevenage... A bloke by the name of Kevin Murphy, who was a labourer working on a site with Jim Collman. Kevin got the news through that he'd been given a house. Well, you can imagine, that was a great thing in those days, to suddenly find you've got a house. So, poor old Kevin, without asking permission, went to see it, went to have a look at it and of course, when he got back, he got the sack. But, that was it! The lads said, well, we're not having that! Here's a bloke, just come back from the War – all these lads had been in the fighting services, and he ain't going to be treated like that just because he went to look at his house that he'd just got! So they went on strike, and that really, the first strike that ever took place in Stevenage was because of Kevin Murphy. (Arthur Utting)

The sacking of Kevin Murphy was the first real showdown between workers and

employers in Stevenage. According to bricklayer Bert Lowe, it helped to develop and build a strong sense of comradeship among the workers:

The general feeling was that if this was allowed to happen to Kevin, who's turn would it be next! A meeting of trade union members was held in my house and an agreement was reached to call for a mass stoppage the following morning to demand the re-instatement of Kevin, each member was delegated to board one of Tersons' buses as they slowed down at the roundabout in Elder Way. This would enable them to inform the men on each coach that there was a mass meeting in the canteen. We had a 100% response to the strike call and Kevin was re-instated. The lads now knew that if they acted together in unity most of our aims could be achieved. This feeling of solidarity was great.³

As Bert Lowe indicated, the victory that the building workers achieved over Tersons in relation to Kevin Murphy's sacking encouraged them to stick together and fight for further improvements on the sites. It is from this point onwards that we see the emergence of the unions as a powerful force in Stevenage, and the first signs of what would become a hall-mark of the

³ Bert Lowe, *Anchorman*, Stevenage: 1996, p55

building industry in the new town, one that the workers are still proud of...

It was a situation that probably would never ever be repeated, that with Stevenage new town, most of the chaps that were working in the town were ex-servicemen, and we were, by chance, call it what you may, the local Amalgamated Union of Building Trade Workers branch, we had quite a few active trade unionists from London in their respective branches, trades councils and that sort of thing, so you could say we were blessed with people that were very experienced and knew their way around. Oh, very politically active... (Fred Udell)

I'm proud to say that I think Stevenage new town was built by 90% trade union labour, and very successfully as well. I'm not talking about getting away with anything at all. I'm talking about working conditions and good relationships with employers and Stevenage Borough Corporation, very close we all were. We were even asked, by certain members of Stevenage Council, if you've got

any grievances, bring it to us... By the time I think the town was half-built, I think even the building contractors come here, knew what they were coming to. (Ted Oswick)

At that time, the buildings around here, you couldn't get on without a union card. There was no such thing as the lump or anything like that. They wouldn't allow the lump in here then. You had to go to a meeting in Bedwell Community Centre here, and there could be 400 people at the meeting, where they all held union cards, and they really stuck together, and there was a real comradeship, something similar as the miners had, before Maggie Thatcher destroyed them. (Luke Donovan)

It was called the North Herts. area, and Stevenage was known as the hotbed right throughout the unions, one of the best organised areas in the country really... and it covered Letchworth, Stevenage, Welwyn Garden City and Hatfield, the combination of the four New Towns, and it was all the same, wherever you went. (Arthur Utting)



Systems Building
on the Pin Green estate,
1964

Fighting against the 'Lump'

As the unions became more organised and stronger, one of their main demands was for the removal of labour-only subcontractors. These were gangs of nominally self-employed workers who were hired by contractors on a labour-only basis and paid a lump sum for an agreed amount of work. Labour-only gangs, or lump gangs as they were also known, had no interest in trade unionism and, in addition to boosting the profits of the main contractors, who did not have to pay national insurance, sick pay, or pension payments for them, they were also used to weaken trade unionism on the sites. Sites which were dominated by labour-only gangs were also notorious for poor health and safety. Trade unionists regarded labour-only subcontracting as parasitical and, in Stevenage, fought hard against it:

Did you have any problems with labour-only subcontractors in Stevenage?

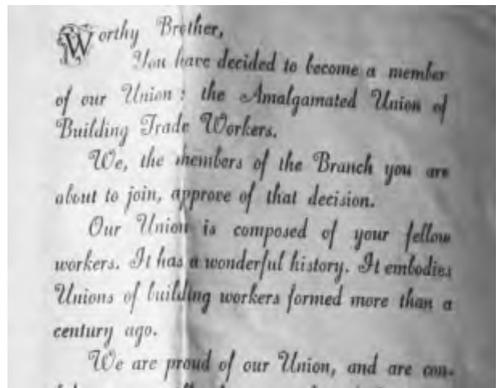
Certainly did... But we just wouldn't tolerate it – we would not stand for it. The minute we got wind of it, we would demonstrate. First

of all, we would send a deputation to Stevenage Borough Council and tell them what we had heard – please, if you can do anything about it, do it, or else I'm afraid you'll have demonstrations. On two occasions, I can remember, a company [Combyn & Wakeland] had a brickwork subcontractor. We got a job with him... and worked for him, until reasons were found to get rid of him, and that's how...and it was worked that way. They found reasons to remove him, legally. The rules said that he must supply mixers and these was laid down, which he didn't. That was one reason. He was to supply forms of transport, which he didn't. The company did, he didn't, and they got rid of him. (Ted Oswick)

Fred Udell also has recollections of struggles against the lump.

At what point had you removed lump labour from the sites in Stevenage?

It was early. It must have been about '52, '53. And that was on the first contracts. Once we



got our houses, then it was a totally different ballgame.

So how did you go about getting rid of the lump.

Put your tools down.

And that worked?

Yeah. Because some of the contractors was on a penalty clause, you see.

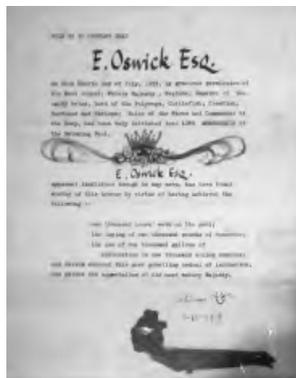
A major struggle against non-union labour-only sub-contracting took place on a site in Albert Street:

Foster's, in the Old Town, old established Stevenage firm, they started a subcontractor, quite a big subcontractor from Luton, onto houses down in the Old Town, on bungalows, in Albert Street, and we heard that there were subcontractors on the town. We were all working on the housing side. Well, we can't have that, can't allow it, because if he gets away with it, then our builders are going to start doing it. So, we all went down there. We stopped sites, at different points, Of course, they called the police. They'd go on a site, and when we went on the site, all these subcontractors used to run in their canteen and shut the doors. We never done brutality – there was never no aggression. All's we wanted was that firm to take on union labour... And if they'd have all

joined the union, we'd have walked away. (Bob Hooper)

Arthur Utting also recalled this particular dispute.

Jim Collman had been [tackling] this site because there were self-employed people on there, and of course, what we would never have in Stevenage. We always insisted on direct work, and we kept that right through nearly to the end. They'd brought subbies onto this site. They had a bricklayer gang there working labour-only. Collman had different sites from Stevenage stop work and march down to the site to picket the site, but none of it seemed to have any effect. Anyway, Jim Collman decided on a last gamble. One day, he called the whole site, the whole town out. It must have been at least 500 workers all marched down onto this site and marched onto the site – and we were naughty because we were kicking walls over, we were doing a lot of damage. The cops came, and, give the head cop, the officer, whoever he was, he was a sensible bloke, because, whereas the agent and the employers were saying to him, "Get them off! Get them off! Get them off the site!" he said to him – I heard him because I was close – he said, "Now, don't be foolish," he said.



Trade union memorabilia belonging to the interviewees

He said, “There’s 500 angry building workers there,” he said, “and I’ve only got a dozen coppers and there’s no way I’m going to risk them! The best thing you can do is to get the organisers into your office and do a deal.” This was the cop! I thought, hello, this is wonderful!! In the end, that’s what we did!

We went in the office, I went in the office as well because I was a leading figure in those days, and me and Collman and one or two others went, and the copper, he came in as well, and he said, “You better get settlement,” and so we done a settlement. But the funny thing about all this was, on the site itself, in the end, all the subbies went into the canteen. It was a place about the size of this room. They went into the canteen, and then, all around the canteen was 500 workers, walking round and round and screaming out of course for them to get off. So eventually, we got an agreement that they’d go off, so they all got into the van, and just as they was driving off, old cowboy, who was one of the characters. He was one of these characters – he wasn’t a Party lad, far from it, but he was a good lad, good fighter – he said to the cop, “Look,” he said, “their licence is outdated!” The licence on the car was outdated, and off they went, and it was a victory.

The struggle against labour-only sub-contracting would continue throughout the building of Stevenage New Town. It had been removed from the sites by the early 1950s, but there were several attempts after that to re-introduce these gangs, all of which were beaten back by the workers. Eventually, in 1967, following another successful but bitter battle against the lump, Stevenage Development Corporation formally agreed that in the future no contracts would be awarded in the town to firms using labour-only contractors, without consultations with the unions.⁴ Given that this was a time when the lump was on the rise everywhere, particularly in the south-east of England, the ability of the Stevenage building workers to resist its spread was remarkable and testament to their commitment to trade unionism, their organisational abilities and the quality of their leaders. Important here were individuals such as Bob Hooper, Fred Udell, Bert Lowe, Jimmy Cunningham and Jimmy Collman, all highly intelligent, politicised activists of long-standing, the latter three being also members of the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB).

⁴ *Building*, 12 May 1967



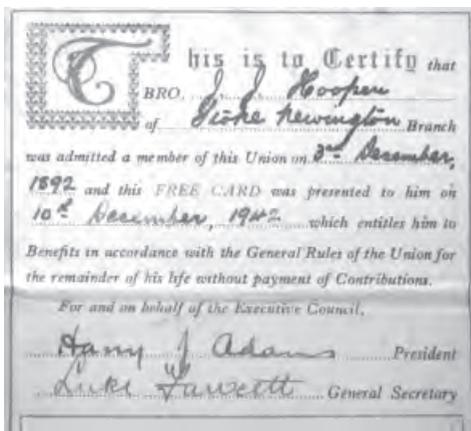
As Arthur Utting's story on the struggle against the sub-contractors on Albert Street indicates, the late Jimmy Collman was a particularly important figure. A bricklayer by trade, Collman was born in 1917 in Notting Hill in London and was politicised at a young age through contacts with communists he encountered at a local working man's club. Along with his brother Frank, he was a founder member of the North Kensington Young Communist League and eventually came to Stevenage in 1951, following a period working on the development of Borehamwood. Collman appears to have been the key person in the local trade union movement for the best part of two decades. A highly effective shop steward on the sites, he was eventually elected as the district organiser of the Amalgamated Union of Building Trade Workers (AUBTW) in 1956. Like many other trade union and socialist leaders before and since, Collman seems to have had an abrasive and powerful personality that could leave people all for or against him. Fellow communist Bert Lowe, also now dead, had many difficulties with Collman, describing him in his memoir as a 'divisive' man with a 'cruel tongue'⁵. Some

other Stevenage building workers have also commented on Collman's apparent unwillingness to work productively with people who disagreed with him.

However, Jimmy Collman also had plenty of supporters and most of the Stevenage building workers appear to have had much respect for him. Fred Udell in particular was a close friend and offered some insights into Collman's personality and intellect.

Jimmy being a Communist, he was always prattling on about how good they were at playing chess and the Hungarian football team and one or two other things, which was a bit irritating really! Anyway, he decided to join the Stevenage Chess Club. I talked to Arthur Joicey a little while later and he said to me "that was the worst thing ever letting him join the club." So I said, "Why's that then, Arthur? Well," he said, "he only played you once and he'd memorised your game! And you'd sit down and you'd make an opening move, and he used to say, "You've lost!" Arthur said, "Well, how have I lost?! I've only had a couple [of moves]!" It's because he had this card-index mind and he could remember – it was phenomenal, wasn't it?!

⁵ Bert Lowe, *Anchorman*, Stevenage: 1996, p58



He is also recalled as an immensely energetic and intelligent strategist, whose importance to the development of the trade union movement in Stevenage is beyond question.

So, we sit all down round the table. There's Mr Smith, there's these two top blokes from the Head Office, there was the trade union chap, the organiser, advisor, there was Jimmy, there was myself, and this federation chap. So of course, the meeting opened and he'd had the [bonus] preamble completely reprinted and they all got a copy of it. He said, "Do you mind if I chair the meeting?" and everybody said, "No, not in the least." So of course, it went on and they were nitpicking some of the items in the preamble, and one particular item was they weren't very happy with that Jimmy had put down that every man should receive an hour a day travelling time. Of course, Mr Smith turned round and said, "You mean to tell me I've got to pay an hour's travelling time to men that are literally falling out of bed onto the site?!" That's how it was, you know! Anyway the meeting carried on, and Collman just took it over, and he destroyed nearly every one of them, all their arguments, and they had practically nothing else to say, and it came to the end of the meeting, where they agreed almost everything that we wanted, which was pretty rare, to say the least.

So we'd had a break, cup of tea and biscuits, and Jimmy and this other chap – Jimmy knew this trade union advisor for Wimpey's. And he went out the door, with the other people, so it left Mr Smith there, and I was just following out last. He said, "Just a

minute!" I turned round. "Yes," he said, "I want to have a word with you!" So I said, "What's wrong, Mr Smith?" So he said to me, "Where did you dig him up from?!" So I said, "Who?" He said, "Collman." I said, "Dig him up?!" I said, "He's a member of our branch, a prominent member, and also, he's the senior bricklayer steward". "Is he?" he said. "Well, I'll tell you this much: if ever I have an argument with my wife, it isn't going to be me that's going to do the arguing! I'm going to take him home and let him do it! We wouldn't have done anything – whatever we achieved in Stevenage, we would never, ever have made the progress we did, that's true. He's never been given full recognition for what he achieved. He made more enemies than friends, because, at times, he had to be a little bit ruthless with them, and knock them into shape, knock some sense into them, and as a result of that, he made enemies of some of them. We wouldn't have been so organised and achieved as much as we did. Some people could argue that it was done for political purposes. So what isn't, these days? But they were singled out and they suffered as a result of it to some extent? Really did.

[Fred Udell]

Collman was a big influence. I liked the bloke. When he took the organiser job, the money was nowhere near what he'd earn laying bricks, because he was a good bricklayer as well, Collman. I admired Jim Collman. As I say, we wouldn't have had the standard of living if it wasn't for him... I admired him because he forfeited a lot, I think, to be honest with you. But he was the boy.

[Dave Ansell]



Jim?! Phew, red-hot... He was a great man. Oh, we had many arguments though, many. (Ted Oswick)

Fred Whiting recalled Jim Collman as both a friend and a formidable activist.

I got on well with Jim, but I know what they mean about him – he was a hard – case, was Jim.

Jimmy Collman would later move to Milton Keynes. He continued to work as the UCATT eastern regional organiser, an area that included both Stevenage and Milton Keynes, right up to his retirement in 1982. He died in October 1993, a few weeks before his seventy-sixth birthday.⁶

⁶ We are grateful to Jimmy Collman's son Tony for this background information on his father.



Jim Collman (centre) with colleagues, early 1970s

Jim Collman's AUBTW and UCATT 50 year membership badges

Pay and conditions

In addition to the struggles against the lump, there were numerous battles with employers over pay and conditions. At the outset of a new contract, employers often attempted to cut down bonus payments, a move that was resisted by workers:

In them days, I suppose really and truly, it's like it everywhere, where it's not regulated tightly, they want to get you there for the less. They'll have a fleet of cars with all the management, and then they'll want you to knock up cement with a paint bucket; instead of buying new bucket, you'd have an empty paint tin, you know what I mean? And like the price of the brickwork, we always used to say to them, you're trying to screw us – because in them days, it was yard, per yard, and it would be something like three shillings a yard, two and ninepence, three shillings, old money, a yard. We'd say, "Oh, we want three and tuppence," and they'd fight like hell – no, no, no! So, they'd spend all this money on a compound and wire fencing and all that, what's taken down afterwards, but yet the building is going to stay there forever – why don't you give us an extra couple of coppers and you can really make a nice job? (Dave Ansell)

Purely and simply, every time you were satisfied and you went through that estate okay, well, of course, you'd earned reasonable money. So of course, consequently, the price was dropped. And so we said, that's it, we're

on strike. "What are you on strike for?" "Well, because we want the same pay for this site as we had last site," you know, because it was all go. It wasn't as though they was giving you anything. (Harry Whitfield)

Viewing matters from the employers' perspective, quantity surveyor **Peter Legge** was clear about the importance of the bonus question and its potentially destructive impact on industrial relations

The bonuses vary below ground, so my job below ground, everything was then dug by hand, laid by hand, and so you would get blocks of houses and [Stanley's] boys would do like 10 houses, they'd dig out this week, and so I would need to go and measure everything they'd done, and everything they'd done, there was a rate agreed for. So it might be, I don't know, [11 pence] a cubic cubic yard probably. So, say they got a pound a cubic yard for digging out, they would have a target of, say, three yards per hour for their gang, so if they dug four yards an hour, they would get an extra pound, so that's how it worked basically. So, the bricklayers were very similar – they had a target of I think about an hour and a quarter per square yard of brickwork, which they would then have a rate for. So, all these arguments you hear about with the unions were about how much the rate was going to be. So, they might say, well, it's going to be 11 pence a yard, and

someone else would say, no, we want a shilling, and so there would be massive arguments, occasional strikes.

By the 1960s, conditions and pay on the Stevenage sites had improved as result of workers' efforts. The strength of the unions on these sites can be seen with the experience of **Bob Hooper**, who became ill and had to give up work, but was re-employed on Mowlem's Pin Green site, mainly on the word of union steward, Johnny Marney.

I went to hospital, in 1963, I had a busted ulcer – I'd had it in the Army. I'd been up north, and I drove back from the north, got home, got out the car, run up to the toilet because I felt sick, and I collapsed, and I'd been bleeding, he said, for a couple of days. And, so afterwards, I was off for weeks. I had five weeks in hospital. Altogether, I was off for about five months I think. And I wanted a job, so, I started on this site, funny enough. When I felt better, I walked over from my house – I lived in Chells then, and I'll never forget it, I went and all the blokes I knew, of course, the bricklayers, and Johnnie Marney was the steward here, and I walked over and Johnny said, "Hello, Bob!" Ever so sympathetic, old Johnny, lovely man he was, and very, very staunch Labour man! He'd fight any Tory! Anyway, he said, "Ah Bob!" and he came over and shook hands and "How are you going?" So he said, "What are you doing about work?" I said, "Well, to be honest, John, I have none at the moment." He said, "Yes, you have," he said, "start here Monday." It wasn't his job to tell me that, but he had the power of the men behind him, and so he said, "Meet me in the office on

Monday!" And I went in there and, very polite he was, said this man, blah, blah, blah, blah, and the agent said, "Yeah okay, you want him, yeah."

But although conditions and pay had improved, struggle was necessary to keep things that way. **Arthur Utting** described conditions on that same Mowlem's systems-built housing contract in Pin Green:

The first day there, they said they're shutting the canteen, and they put these tarpaulin shelters up all over the site. They said, "We're shutting the canteen – we don't want you in there during your tea-break". It was pouring with rain, so I said to Harry, "Oh, we're not having this!" So I went to see the steward, who was the federation steward and I said, "Look, we can't have this, we'd better get back to the canteen." He said, "No, they got away with it at Downing Street" because apparently Mowlem's was doing a job on Downing Street at the time. I said, "this is not Downing Street, this is Stevenage. Come on!" So Harry and I led, we started walking towards the canteen, and then the lads converged, came from all over the site, all the lads converged behind us, and we got to the site and it was locked. So one of the labourers got a spade and smashed the lock through and broke in. Then, we got away with that.

And as **Dave Ansell** showed, some of the contractors still had an unenlightened approach towards industrial relations:

We went on a job, Marriott's in Stevenage, in Six Hills Way, and the agent came back from Egypt. He'd been there on Suez... so he come

home and he got a job as a site manager, and he told everybody, and he was swearing and hollering, as if he was in Egypt like. He was a colonel, the old man, the gov'nor, and he come there one day with his cigar. They had a meeting with him in the canteen, and I can always remember... we was on a go-slow, weren't on a strike, a work to rule, and "Bloody blimey, lads," he said, "you haven't earnt your wages!" He thought a go-slow meant you still produced enough to cover your wages! But that was resolved in the end, but it all started from this chap. He came back with his attitude. He banned the union representative from coming on the site, the organiser... and he was going show him what he was made of and do this, that, but it sorted out.

Trevor Utting, who like his father Arthur was both a carpenter and later a trade union official, recalls a struggle against victimisation on the Symonds Green estate in the late 1960s.

Symonds Green, near the Old Town in Stevenage, because they were still building the Old Town as well as the New Town – that was the job up Fisher Green where I first became a steward, and it may have been partly that, because the minute I become a steward, the foreman started getting awkward with me. He asked me one day if I would go and do a particular job. The trouble is, he never asked me – he said, "Go and do that job!" so I just pretended I never heard him, so he said it about four more times, and then he walked and he said, "I told you to go and do that job!" "Oh, are you talking to me?!" "Yeah, I'm telling you to go..." I said, "Now, can I get this straight: are you telling

me or are you asking me, because if you ask me, I'll do it; if you're telling me, get knotted"... and so he wanted to... sack me. I said, "Sack me!" So of course, next thing, everybody's in the canteen – "You're not sacking our steward! Over what? You know, he just asked you to be polite. He didn't refuse to do the job. He just asked you to treat him like a human being and then he'll do it!" So, that petered out, and I won, but within about four weeks, I was made redundant. And the blokes knew what was going on, and they said, "We'll strike again!" I said, "No, no, don't, you carry on. I'll go and get another job," which I did.

In 1972, building workers held what was only the third national stoppage of the twentieth century, with the main demands being a rise in the basic pay from £20 to £30 and a reduction in the working week from 40 hours to 35 hours. As **Bob Hooper's** account here indicates, many building workers in Stevenage were earning more than £30 per week as a result of bonus payments, but the strike was solid and again shows how strong the principles of comradeship and solidarity were:

In 1972, we came out on strike, because of the basic rate. It was 20-odd quid I think the basic rate, and I was earning, at that time, about 80. I was on bonus, but I came out on strike. We all did, because we said, as we get older, that's going to be us, down there – and that was the '72 strike.

Was it a total shutdown of all of the building sites in Stevenage during the '72 Strike?
They was all shut. I was on the strike committee, obviously, because I was a militant.

And did you go round the different sites then...?

Yeah, we had a bus and I had a minder – a big old fellow, big old Irishman, Jimmy Colegan. I was earning more than we were fighting for, at that time, but I knew that wasn't statutory, that could be stopped, at a moment's notice, and I could be back on that! So, I was on the strike committee, and I used to lead the buses round to sites. We were condemned by the Government. I remember going to a site in Hemel Hempstead. Now that area has always been anti-union, it had always been subcontract and once you got outside of this little area, because we'd become renowned for a union stronghold, and even subcontractors, in the end, wouldn't come there because they didn't want trouble. So, anyway, we hired buses, and we had an office down the town with Ted something or other. He weren't nothing to do with us really. He helped people get their rightful entitlements off the benefits, and he had an office, and he made it available to us straightaway. I used to go round in this bus, and I remember going to Hemel Hempstead, and we walked on, big site, massive site, and there was a busload of us and we found the offices. I went in the office, with Jimmy Colegan, he come with me because you never know if someone wants to thump you and I done the spiel and I told him what we are, we're on strike, told him what we're striking for, the agent, I said, "And, we've come... if you don't close the site, we'll picket it – we'll send pickets down

every day." In fact, I don't think we could have done that because we couldn't have found any volunteers to keep coming down to Hemel Hempstead!... "Alright," he said, "come with me." So he sent someone to get all the gangs on the field and bring them in the canteen, and we went in the canteen, our blokes and all, and we were at one end, and all the blokes come in, drifting in, from the jobs. I felt a bit sorry for them because I thought they're working and then suddenly there's all this chaos coming up, but we knew what we were doing it for: to raise the rates, and they were helping to keep the rates down, by their system of piecework. They come in, and the agent called them together, and he said, "Right, I'm closing the site at 12 o'clock," right out of the blue – oh, I was shook rigid! I didn't ask him why, I was so pleased! I thought what an achievement! Of course, afterwards, I started thinking – I know what they've done – they're in trouble on that site, financially, and they've used this... because of their contract, they've used this as a get-out... But okay, I was willing to be used like that if it achieved our aims.

The 1972 strike ended after six weeks, with the workers winning a £6 per week rise for craft workers and £5 for labourers. There was no end to the lump. It fell far short of what the workers had been campaigning for, but, thanks solely to efforts of ordinary rank-and-file trade unionists, it was still the biggest pay rise building workers had ever won.



Standard 3-bedroom houses at Broom Barnes,
Bedwell neighbourhood, early 1960s

Building a community in Stevenage

Up until the formation of the Union of Construction, Allied Trades and Technicians (UCATT) in 1971, building trade workers were split into several different trade unions, in the form of separate craft unions for the different trades and general unions for labourers. Carpenters and joiners were in the Amalgamated Society of Woodworkers, (ASW) painters were in the Amalgamated Society of Painters and Decorators (ASPD) and bricklayers were in the AUBTW. All of the unions produced talented and committed activists and displayed solidarity with each other during disputes. The most significant union, in terms of impact, quality of leadership and ability to organise and defend workers interests was the AUBTW. Although a craft union, the AUBTW also recruited labourers, following its merger with the labourers union in 1952. Reflecting the large influx of building workers into the fledgling new town, the Stevenage AUBTW branch grew substantially and quickly became a powerful social actor. The new town residents had suffered from a democratic deficit, since the SDC was not elected and, as such, not accountable to the local population. In addition, the relationship between the SDC, Stevenage Urban Council and Hertfordshire County Council was complex, with each being responsible for certain aspects of town planning and development. Residents complaining to one of these bodies about the lack of amenities

would invariably be told that it was the responsibility of one of the other agencies. This created the need for vibrant community organisations that were able to exert pressure on the various bodies, in order that the manifold concerns of residents were articulated and addressed. The AUBTW responded to this and went on to play a major role in the various different community and residents bodies that were established.

Life was more than just paying your rent, going to work, and living in a house. There was other things and the good thing about it was we organised a tenants' association. Again, that was through the unions. That represented the tenants for their little things that they wanted done or couldn't get done. and they played a major part, again, and our people, our Chairman of our Branch [Bert Lowe] was the Chairman of the Tenants' Association. (Fred Udell)

The type of campaigns headed by building workers varied from concerns over the development of the local built environment to radical political campaigns, offering a sharp critique of government policy. One example related to the decision of the British government to support the re-arming of its new cold war ally, West Germany.

Herbert Morrison came to Stevenage. A public meeting was held in Barclay School

main hall, and the subject matter that Herbert Morrison was speaking on was rearmament of Germany, which was a very contentious issue. I think it took place in 1949, if I remember rightly. And it was said that the branch meeting be held over, and the minutes to remain on the table, and we were all to depart to the Barclays School, which we did. So of course, there was Sergeant Smith on the door – I think there was only about two policemen in Stevenage in those days! And there was all these metal school seats, and we came in at the door, at this end. Herbert Morrison was on the stage, and two or three of the local Labour officials, so we started and we walked all the way through the chairs, like that, filling it up. There was quite a lot of local people, and if you imagine the noise that those metal chair legs made. We were eventually told to settle down, which we did. So of course, Herbert Morrison starts his spiel, why we should do this and why we should do that, and in the main, you could say it was anti-Communist, most of his subject. So of course, at the end of his thing, it was then open for questions, and the first person to jump up was Jimmy Collman. "Very interesting," he said, and he said about he'd served in the Army, which he had, and "Of course," he said "I don't really know how you've got the gall to stand on that stage and to try and convince us that we should rearm the Germans. Shall I tell the audience why?" Silence – you could hear a pin drop. "You forgot to tell them you was a conscientious objector in the First World War!" Well, the meeting just collapsed and everybody left! Completely destroyed his meeting! It probably wasn't a laughing for him, but that's what we used to do. (Fred Udell)

Another example of this was the opposition of the local branch to nuclear weapons. This included a one-hour stoppage against the production of the Blue Streak missile in the local British Aerospace plant in 1960. Peace campaigner Pat Arrowsmith was invited to address the AUBTW branch, where a resolution was passed supporting the action.

The Blue Streak Rocket was being built in Stevenage. She [Arrowsmith] came and visited and all the sites decided to support it, and the whole town stopped, so there was a thousand building trade workers and that was the first time ever of industrial workers taking action against the Blue Streak. (Arthur Utting)

Bert Lowe's **Anchorman** gave some more details on this strike.

I then had to set about organising general meetings on every building contract in the New Town in an effort to gain the support for the resolution. It was not easy we had to fight and argue every inch of the way. In the event the stoppage was practically 100%. Within minutes of the town centre clock striking 4 pm scores of building workers from the nearby construction sites came down from the scaffolding and entered the town square. A short time later more arrived from the outlying sites carrying posters reading "Stop Work on the Blue Streak Missile", "No Rocket Factories for Stevenage" and "Nuclear Weapons Threaten Your Kids' Futures". Building workers also downed tools in support of the protest from sites in Datchworth and Hitchin. All in all a thousand workers took part in the stoppage.

News of the strike was broadcast by the BBC, shots of the protesters were shown on ITV...such was the spirit of the day I believe that it still remains the only industrial action against nuclear weapons. Another first for Stevenage.

Most of the campaigns related to the development of the town. One example was the campaign was for the A1 by-pass. Stevenage was planned so that industry and housing were in different zones separated by the Great North Road, which meant that the workers had to cross it twice a day. The road was busy and dangerous, especially in the winter-time when the lack of decent lighting made it a death trap. Demands had been made for a by-pass but very little had been done, leading inevitably to a fatality. In the aftermath of this, Stevenage building workers helped organise a mass protest, which resulted in the erection of a temporary bailey bridge over the road, and eventually the by-pass itself.

There was a couple of people got killed on the old Great North Road, because that was the only road that went right the way through Stevenage High Street right up to the North of England, and to cross it, with the traffic, was a bit hairy. Anyway, we petitioned for a bypass, demonstrated, the usual way. There wasn't much forthcoming, and then this unfortunate man got killed, so we had another demonstration and I don't know who made it – they made a coffin out of some asbestos sheets and some wood, and they carried it down the street with a notice saying "Died waiting for a bypass". Anyway, whoever made this coffin made it a little bit

on the heavy side, so finally, we dumped it on the little roundabout down by the Roebuck It was there for almost a week before it was shifted! We like to think that, as a result of that, we did eventually get a bypass. Who knows, nobody will ever know. (Fred Udell)

The death of a young boy, who was knocked down on his way to school at another particularly dangerous road, Six Hills Way, was the catalyst for another campaign involving Stevenage building workers. On this occasion, the building workers maintained a daily picket at Six Hills Way, in order to allow parents to take their children to school. This campaign also eventually succeeded and a temporary footbridge was set up pending the building of an underpass.

Well, he was crossing the road, a child had come out of school, run across Six Hills Way, he's been hit by a car and killed, and it was quite parochial here, with the builders, and at that time word went round a child had been killed, round the site, and every man jack on the building stopped work, went down to Six Hills Way, on the next day, where the accident had happened and this child had been killed, and they stopped all traffic going backwards and forwards. And the police come down and there was masses of us, and the local police, must have looked at it and thought, well, there's no chance we're going to do it, so they stood on the sidelines and just sort of kept some sort of order. But they couldn't stop us in the road – there were too many of us. And I remember a car trying to get through that was come from the Old Town area, and I remember seeing the blokes pick it up, while it was moving, the

front wheels, and turn it round and go the other way. There was so many of them, they picked the front of it up, like that, and turned it round, and it went back the way it come! And the reason they did that, and the demand was that they put the bridge from the school across the road for the kids to the other side, a footbridge, and I think, to a certain extent, the police were sympathetic to that. That's why they never threw their weight about. (Bob Hooper)

Building workers were also central to a fund-raising campaign for Suzanne Pilgrim, a young child who was dying with Leukaemia. Her parents had read of a miracle cure being developed in Switzerland and contacted the local AUBTW branch to help raise funds to send her there. It would later transpire that the miracle cure was nothing of the sort, but Stevenage building workers nonetheless played the central role in the organising of a campaign that helped fund a trip for Suzanne and her mother to Switzerland in January 1964.

There was a girl, little girl, who lived in Ashdown Road, and she had leukaemia, and we had collections on sites because they said there was someone abroad that could cure this. It couldn't, but at that time, we didn't know, and so sites collected money and took it round the house and gave it to them for that little girl. They had a great community spirit amongst them, and it was the making of a town. It's the heart of a town, you know. (Bob Hooper)

Suzanne Pilgrim died just a few weeks later, following her return from Switzerland.

Two prominent building workers in this area of Stevenage community activity, now dead, were Mick Cotter and Fred Millard. Born in 1920, Cotter was originally from Youghal, County Cork but had been labouring on building sites in London since the late 1930s. Like most of the Stevenage workers, he was living in overcrowded accommodation in London and keen to secure a house for his young family. Cotter began working for Tersons in Stevenage in June 1951 and moved into the new town around eight months later. In 1954 Cotter was elected as Chairman of the Stevenage Residents Federation, the central body to which all of the local residents groups were affiliated.⁷ This body campaigned strongly for improved amenities in Stevenage, criticising what it saw as a lack of foresight in the planning process by SDC, and for lower rents. According to Cotter, its main long-term aim was an elected corporation board, in order to make it democratically accountable. In the short term, it argued that the Residents federation should have representatives on that board. Mick Cotter would eventually – in 1965 – become a member of the SDC board.⁸ In addition, he was a local councillor for over 30 years, being chairman of the council on two occasions, as well as a county councillor for a short period.

Bricklayer Fred Millard was a well-known community campaigner, and councillor on

⁷ All background information on Michael Cotter is in *Stevenage Echo*,

⁸ *Stevenage Echo*, March 1956; Rent levels were higher in Stevenage than London. In March 1953, the rent of an SDC 2 bedroom house ranged from £1 1/0d per week to £1 9s. 6d. per week. The equivalent local authority rate in London was £0 15s. 0d per week to £1 2s. 6d per week. For more see Balchin, op cit, 159-160

Stevenage Urban Council. One of the most famous campaigns he was involved in was the campaign against the development of Fairlands Valley. This was regarded as one of the town's 'lungs' and an important social amenity. SDC had made commitments that no building or development would take place on it. However, articles in the national press suggested that the corporation was now considering high-density developments in the valley, which, because of the location, would fetch higher rents. A 'Save the Valley' campaign was started, involving Fred Millard and the local AUBTW branch. **Fred Whiting** takes up the story.

Valley Park is the pride and joy of Stevenage now if the Tories had had their way that would have been housing. You know why Fred Millard is famous in Stevenage, do you? Well, that's the reason why! Fred, he was friendly with somebody in the office at the time then. This was when they were pushing for more housing. They planned, the Corporation – this was after Macmillan – to build houses on that valley. Well, I think Fred had got wind of it, through his friend in the office who'd told him about it... and he got this friend to photocopy the records, so that he had a copy of it, and so they couldn't deny it. Fred never disclosed who his friend was, and his friend got away with it – otherwise he'd have been sacked, no doubt. So, when they confronted the Corporation with this, and they took it up to London the Corporation couldn't deny it, and nor could the Government, because the Government was behind it, so the Government had to backtrack on it and allow it to go through. So Fred Millard, and his pal, saved the valley for Stevenage, otherwise you'd have had all

housing over there. That was the one thing I'd like you to take back with you – when I think of the valley, that's Fred Millard's legacy.

SDC had denied any such plans existed but as, Fred Whiting points out, a sympathetic contact on the SDC board provided Millard with the SDC paper proposing development of the area. This was copied and presented to the press by a hooded Millard shortly afterwards. Unprepared for the hostile public reaction that this provoked, SDC abandoned all plans to develop the valley.⁹ Fred Millard died in 1974, and, in recognition of the significant role he played in the community, a small sheltered housing complex for the elderly was named after him.

One important way in which the Stevenage building workers were able to influence the decision-making processes was through their involvement on the local urban council. Aware that they needed a voice and could use it to promote the interests of ordinary working class people, the AUBTW branch encouraged members to stand for election, normally under the banner of the Labour Party.

The branch was active in every fight, and it wasn't long afterwards they said to me, "We really ought to have some representation on the Council, Fred. Would you prepared to stand?" (Fred Udell)

The prime mover behind this strategy appears to have been Jimmy Collman.

⁹ Huw Rees, in *History Makers*, Stevenage (1991) pp126-7

He [Collman] said, "We want representation on the council, and we can do it through branch members." Jimmy Collman, he said to me, "Join the Labour Party... and then you can put your name forward, or we'll put the name forward from the branch" because they used to ask for nominations from the branch, for governors for schools and all that sort of thing, which I did, and eventually, they asked me to attend a selection thing in the pub – down in the Old Town. They questioned me and asked me what I was, bearing in mind they were suspicious of me because of the activity on the building sites and they turned me down, didn't accept me at first. Anyway, I tried again, later, and took part in the various meetings in the local Labour Party and then put myself up in an election – I think it was 1956. (Fred Udell)

There would eventually be six building workers elected onto Stevenage Urban Council. This was a remarkable achievement and testament not only to their hard work and commitment, but also the degree of standing that building workers had in this developing community. They were clearly regarded by the local population as effective leaders and campaigners. None of the six were elected under the banner of the AUBTW, but all were members and all of them accountable to the local branch for their actions as councillors.

But of course you do have to bear in mind that all what you did when you attended the next branch meeting, you could be questioned on it, why you didn't do this or why you didn't do that. It was like questions and answer time. Or they might say, "Oh, do you know, Fred, that there's labour-only

subcontractors on one of the council contracts?" because we were building as well, you see. I used to say, "Where?" and they would tell me. "Right, I'll make a note of that and I'll raise it at the next Housing Committee meeting, or I'll get on to the Borough Engineer when I get home," which I did. In fact, I was instrumental getting it included in the Bill of Quantities: no labour-only subcontracting to take place on site, not without the express permission of the architect, full-stop. (Fred Udell)

For **Bob Hooper**, this involvement by building workers in the political structure of the new town reflected a deeper determination to build a better community for future generations.

Why did so many building workers become councillors, do you think?

I think, for the early ones, they were politically alive, through trade unionism, and I think if they were going to bring their kids up in a town, they wanted the right people in charge of the town, for education and everything else. And you could see a future – this is the point: you could see with all that was going on, you felt part of a big thing, not like today. I feel sorry for people today really. Through trade unionism, you felt part, you felt a belonging.

Concerns were also raised by building workers over the apparent deterioration in the quality of the houses being built. From the mid-1950s, under the direction of the Conservative government, there had been greater financial constraints on house-building in New Towns, and efforts to build more for less money had been made.

Housing Minister, Harold MacMillan spoke of the need for what he called the 'people's home', which was smaller, less adequately equipped and cheaper in external finish.¹⁰ In Stevenage, this led to smaller houses, longer terraces, shorter gardens, and plainer buildings. **Fred Whiting** recalls the changes:

So, first of all, where they said it was five to seven houses to the acre, they increased it to I think about 10 or more houses. I don't know how it started off like that, but I know it finished up with, my friend telling me, that they were building I think, now, it's about 14 or 15 houses to the acre. If you look at fresh parts of the town, you can see, the old parts, there's plenty of space, but the new parts, they're cramped together.

Some of the workers objected to what they felt was a serious decline in the quality of the houses. A building worker working party was set up to investigate the matter. Comprised of Fred Udell, Alf Luhman, Con Carey, Mick Cotter, John Morris and David Newman, this body produced a report outlining its concerns regarding the quality and design of the houses.

A, B, C, D – D was four-bedroom, that sort of thing, E was five – were roofed with mineral felt, a type of roofing material that you use on a garden shed, and since those years have passed, they've had to spend millions in putting right a lot of those houses that should have been right in the first place. Each year, the Stevenage Development

Corporation had to prepare what they called the Blue Book, which was presented to every Member in the House of Commons, and I expect other new town corporations had to do the same, with progress, borrowing, all that sort of thing. Alf Luhman, Mick Cotter and myself, as far as I can remember, we prepared a draft on what we thought was going wrong with the Stevenage new town, and that, again, was presented to every Member of the House of Commons. Nothing came of it.

It was just ignored?

Yeah, and we put a lot of work into it, I can assure you. I mean, we started off – some of the two, some of the three-bedroom houses in [Wildwood] Lane was 1066 square feet, and when the Conservatives took office, it took down to 892. Partly, today, with the problem with teenagers and people like that, because of the smallness of the houses, there's not, you can say, a place where they can go and be their own – in their own thing, or have their mates in and play their records or that sort of thing, you see, and that's reflected in them, a lot of them, not staying in the house at night-time but going out and raking the streets and that sort of thing. Whereas, if they'd have been a bit bigger, larger in area, there even might have been a spare room for an elderly relative. It's had its social implications, but of course, if you're a party that haven't got your heart and soul in what you're doing, and you oppose it, how on earth are you going to make a success? The more you make a success of municipalisation, the less the private sector's got. (Fred Udell)

¹⁰ Balchin, p152



Entrance to school with a sculpture in bronze by Henry Moore, early 1960s

St. Joseph's Roman Catholic Church, Bedwell, early 1960s

Broadwater neighbourhood, early 1960s

Reflections

Stevenage Development Corporation was eventually wound up in 1980, with responsibility for the housing stock being transferred to the new Stevenage Borough Council. This was also the year of the Council Housing Act, passed by the recently-elected Thatcher government, which gave council or local authority tenants the right to buy their homes at a discount. In Stevenage, this would result in the removal of most of the corporation houses from the rented sector, and the conversion of many tenants into owner-occupiers. With local authorities barred from using housing stock sales revenue to fund the building of more houses, it was a policy which brought to an end the vision of those post-war planners, that the state should be the agency for the eradication and replacement of slum housing and a force for building new, healthier communities for working class people. The trade unions were also weakened in this period, as a result of government legislation and the defeats suffered in crucial disputes, such as the miners in 1984-85 and the print-workers in 1986. In Stevenage, it was a period when building trade unionism declined and the lump got stronger. By the end of the decade, subcontracting was common-place and the main building union, UCATT, badly depleted in strength and influence. For some of the Stevenage pioneers, the blame lies in the apparent triumph of a programme of privatisation and consumerism, that has

left younger people today weighed down with debt and unable to fight back.

It was just so organised... but that generation had moved on, and the younger people won't pick up the flag. See, in them days, you never had no outlay. Most people rented their houses. They never had no commitments. They never had cars – well, a few of us had cars, but not many had cars. So they had the resolve to fight for it, but nowadays, these youngsters, they're up to their eyes in debt, they've got a couple of cars, that they're paying for, they want a foreign holiday, and they don't want to fight, basically. Because I often see them now and talk to them, and to be honest with you, some of them are working for less than what I was earning 15, 20 year ago.
(Dave Ansell)

They (labour-only subcontractors] crept into Stevenage – what year would it be? 1980, subcontractors started to succeed in bringing their own labour into Stevenage and we couldn't muster the strength. And shortly after that, I lost my drive of trying to win younger people over. It just wouldn't work anymore. (Ted Oswick)

It was sheer strength that brought this town up really, but then, in the late-'80s, the political climate changed. There was more and more people on the lump or, as you say, self-employed. (Luke Donovan)

To look around Stevenage today is to gain some understanding of what was created and built in such a short space of time. From the pedestrianised town centre – the first of its kind in Britain – to the early housing estates in Bedwell and the later Radburn-type estates of Pin Green, the network of roads and the assortment of factories in the industrial areas, the scale of the achievement becomes clear. This was the building of an entire town in just two decades or so. Throughout all of this, building workers played a central role. Equally as important, through their organisations, they were able to operate at the hub of community development and helped to give the new residents of Stevenage a voice, and a say in how the new town was to be developed. Many of these early Stevenage pioneers are now gone and the organisations to which they belonged are weak and ailing. A union branch that could once attract hundreds to its meetings now has only a handful of activists, most of whom have been long retired from the sites. Despite this, however, there is much pride, not so much about what was built in Stevenage – most workers feel that Stevenage should have been better, and would have been better had planning been more systematic and financial cut-backs not taken place – but at what was created and developed among workers during the building. In many ways, this can be summed up in one word – comradeship.

If anybody was sick, because there was no sick pay, so we would give them their week's money out of that. They would run – a couple of lads would run the book, bank the money. On the site, 150 blokes perhaps would give

two bob, half a crown, in them money, which is 12.5p, but in them days, it counted for something. We had a lad with us, his mum died in Wales, and we collected round, and we paid his train fare to Wales, paid his wages, and when he come back and everything, so he didn't lose nothing. But they wouldn't do that nowadays. It was comradeship and they all looked after one another. (Dave Ansell)

On a certain building site in Stevenage, we had nine gangs of bricklayers on one site. It was coming up to before Christmas. And a gang of bricklayers were going to get the sack, reduce the staff. So that this didn't happen, we quickly had a meeting and got every bricklayer on that site to reduce their earnings to save that gang getting the sack. Now, I think that was one of the finest things I've ever heard of in my life in the building trade. Now, we achieved this, and that gang of bricklayers didn't get the sack. More work was available in the New Year, and so they were still on-site. Now, that was a wonderful thing we thought we did. Because winter-time, they wouldn't have got a job anyway, so that was one of the best things we ever did on this town. (Ted Oswick)

The whole of Stevenage building force was togetherness. We knew all the carpenters. We knew all the painters – everybody knew everybody... mainly I think through trade union. We all went to meetings together. If something happened on the town, we would have a meeting about it, whether it be socially or whether it would be work context. (Ted Oswick)

I have no regrets about it, looking back, or anything like that. I was in a good company of blokes. If anybody was ill on the site, taken ill, they always had a collection for them on a Friday – that sort of thing, and they used to sometimes buy the person cigarettes if he smoked or, you know, if he hadn't got the rent, they'd collect and cover the rent, and we used to have a little kitty, a little pool of money that we collected in the canteen after the meeting, so it was a time. I doubt whether it will ever be repeated – I doubt it. It's just one of those things. It just happened. We was all thrown together in one place. I can't say the same for other new towns though. There's quite a bad sort of history about them, all done with labour-only subcontracting.
(Fred Udell)

It just went on, before and after, the disputes went on, but there was always solidarity – that was an amazing thing – because, if there was a dispute on one side, there would be collections on every other sites – organised by ourselves. It was real democratic because it was done by mass meetings in the canteen or out on the site. That was the kind of rank and file there was, and you'd get the response – it was tremendous! Yeah. I look back on all those lads. I live in my memories now, you know, have done for a number of years, and I sit here sometimes. Vi thinks I'm asleep sometimes, but I'm dreaming... I'm away, thinking back, of all the events and things that took place, and the lads, they came from Royston, which was quite a few miles away for Stevenage, Letchworth was the same, the Letchworth gate disputes we had...
(Arthur Utting)

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