

James Debney

SELF-BUILT IN SOLIHULL



The remarkable Silver Birch Housing Association, 1950 - 1957



Multi-occupied, multi-used houses in Hockley, Birmingham. Post-war Britain saw couples, perhaps with children, living in single rooms in houses like these.

The world had been at war for the second time in a generation; the entire population of Britain had been involved. Now the men had returned to their sweethearts and wives. A new, reforming government had been elected by a landslide.

War had wrought havoc on an already decrepit housing stock. An absolute over-riding commitment for the Labour government was to provide decent, civilised housing for working people, never successfully achieved in the past.

It failed. Millions continued to live in rooms, often in the worst conditions, or with relatives. For them there was no comfort, no reward for years of hardship in defence of the country. By 1950 the dream was as far away as ever.

But an idea occurred to some here and there.

In Solihull it led to the amazing story of the Silver Birch Housing Association.

Cover: one of the last bungalows to be built (in 1952). A garage has been added since, and the property sympathetically updated..



Houses were almost unattainable in 1950, especially ones such as these.

For most couples joining the council waiting list, queuing only brought forlorn hope.

Arkley Road, Gospel Oak.

The blitz contributed very greatly to the post-war crisis in Birmingham housing.

13,000 houses alone were destroyed during the period 1940 to 1943.

Cateswell Road, Acocks Green.



The Problem.

To deal with the housing crisis the government adopted a 'command-style' approach. For every proposed private house four council houses were approved; this was to direct resources in a time of such difficulty. Responsibility for most building now lay largely in the hands of local authorities, who in turn awarded the scarce new housing to those they judged most in need.

In 1950, selection for most had become impossible - either they lived in accommodation in some sense adjudged acceptable, or they had too few children. You could build a private building if you had the money - the only alternative, it seemed - but you needed a licence, land, planning permission and materials. Otherwise you had to wait for the housing legislation to do its work and produce social housing. The millions waited patiently.

So it was that passive desperation was in charge and couples would investigate any opportunity - real, or for the most part imaginary - in the quest for a home that would be their own.

The post-war need for housing produced responses such as the prefab - beloved of their tenants later - and, soon, the high rise flat.

Demand for local authority housing far outstripped any possibility of supply.

Tile Cross flats and prefabs.



Logic and necessity promoted the 1960s solution.

Had they been available in 1950, these flats would have been seen in very different terms by young couples then looking for housing.

Great King Street, Hockley.



An Opportunity.

Such a chance entered the lives of a young couple in 1950. Reg and Dot Harvey lived with Dot's parents in their home in south Birmingham; they had one daughter, Tina, a baby. Reg was a telegraphist with the Post Office and Dot, too, had worked there, as part of the army of women-workers of the time. They were 'invisible' in the council's considerations.

Dot's mother, Matrum, was a 'reader'. One day Reg came home and was presented with an article she had read in a local publication. It was about a man who said you could build your own house.

The man, George Lavender¹, also worked for the Post Office though not in the same depot; Reg went to see him. He and some fellow employees had built houses as part of a project, but it was what he had read that was to prove so worthwhile.

Driven like so many others, he had turned to the government's house building regulations and read them completely. He saw that because of the rule granting building licences in a ratio of 4 to 1 in favour of social housing, if you were a social builder you would have a far better chance of gaining a precious licence to build a house. But his further realisation was far more significant. You did not have to be a local authority to build social housing. . . .

¹ - Page 35

An Idea Shared.

Reg wondered. He told his fellow telegraphists . . . A group was formed. They wanted to see if they might also, in certain circumstances, build their own houses; say, as social housing. They knew that building licences were granted in accordance with the supply of materials in 'Austerity' Britain. All they would need then besides licences - they told themselves - was some land, building plans for the sought-after materials, a local planning authority which would look on them favourably, money, and the ability to build!

It almost seemed possible. To these young people in depressing times anything seemed possible. At least they could think about it.



Reg and Dot on their Wedding Day,
at St. Mary's Church, Selly Oak.

They also saw that they would need tradesmen above all - if nothing else, to teach them to build. Reg put an advert in the local newspaper.

He was astonished by the response; he received sackfuls of replies, all from tradesmen as desperate to build houses as themselves. Now he had a further problem - who to choose?

In the event he spoke to applicants Sam Marfleet, a carpenter, and then to Harry Pestrige, a builder.

Matrum Ashby, Dot's mum, taken in 1916. Her observation, seeing an article about self-building, led to the Silver Birch Housing Association.



Harry Pestrige was the foreman builder at Ten Acres and Stirchley Co-operative Society (TASCOS). He recalls that he did not know any of the group, but Sam Marfleet, who had now met Reg, had volunteered to meet him at Snow Hill Station, so that he could be introduced to Reg. Sam did not know Harry either, so Harry was to wear a red carnation. That the encounter was successful was a measure of the good fortune that was to follow!

The three produced the idea that Harry should train the group to be builders. The Post Office itself now lent quiet support and a portion of the rear yard at the Hill Street Head Office was provided for 'practice'. When eventually the first session did take place (some time later) it produced much mirth in onlookers, but Harry had already told Reg the truth. The Post Office workers would not make builders, he had said loudly.

The makeup had been decided - more tradesman to be recruited. The group was always known informally (and is still to this day) as the Post Office scheme, but almost half of its members were to be 'practical men' with the Post Office men assisting.



Harry Pestridge in 2015, aged 99. He inspired the approach to building and was the guardian of its quality, seen clearly in the bungalows today. He was foreman builder of TASCOS and, at another time, of Ansell's brewery. He was the mainstay of work on the site. Right, Joan Pestridge.

Sam Marfleet, right, and below with Avis on their Wedding Day in 1945. They both worked during wartime at the Malvern radar establishment, where they met. Sam had a reputation for ingenuity and for creativity in employing and recognising/finding resources. When he joined Silver Birch he was occupational manager at the local Remploy factory.



From the postal applicants Harry then recruited two bricklayers, a carpenter, men who could plumb, an electrician; he became foreman while Sam was principal carpenter.

Now the Post Office Workers' Union took a hand. It was clear that the would-be builders needed help - all the help they could get. Was it really possible to build your own houses and what did you need for this? What was the legal position? Local representative Bill Roach used his union contacts to arrange for Reg to talk to civil servants in Whitehall. In turn they talked to him on the direct orders of no lesser person than the housing minister himself, Hugh Dalton.



Hugh Dalton, Health minister for the Labour government in 1950. Housing was then part of the Health brief.

J. STURROCK VHA 2245,
W. STEVENS VHA 2270 RUMING, BACA

FOREMAN (LEAD OF WORK)

- 6 BRICKLAYERS
- 2 CARPENTERS
- 2 ELECTRICIANS
- 2 PLUMBERS
- 2 PLASTERERS
- 2 TINKERS
- 8/10 LABOURERS

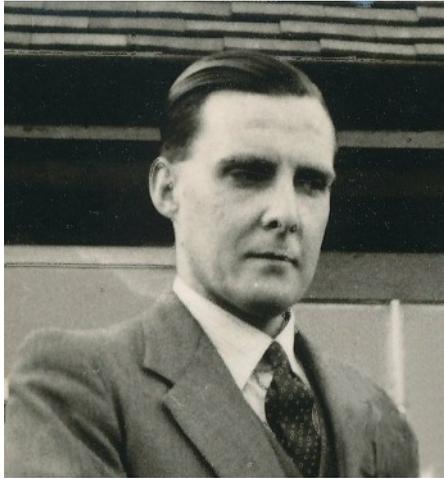
ESTIMATE COSTS

- ARCHITECT
- ACCOUNTANT
- CONCRETE
- TRANSPORT & MECHANIC
- SELECTION

The builders should form an association, Reg was told, legally put together and with trustees. They needed a constitution. The homes built would have to be for rent to the members, thus social housing; for which then they could apply for licences to build. These were not in easy supply, and the government granted them to local authorities on a piecemeal basis.

In the summer of 1950 the group talked while they met to train and pursue their aim.

This is the list of the personnel thought necessary for a small self-build project given to Reg by his Whitehall contact - an unexpected survival. Trades and numbers were very similar in the project as it turned out, with the exception of plasterers whose work done by contractors². The note image is very faint.



Joe Debney (left) and Norman Rose. Both had seen service in the second World War, like all the Silver Birch men, Joe in the Royal Artillery administration. Norman was an able carpenter but Joe would have had difficulty knocking a nail in straight. But he made sure the association was always financially sound. Right: wartime picture of Beryl, Norman's wife.

Putting Things Together.

It was again ‘Where to start?’ They needed somebody who could put an association together, and the association should have a name. From there they supposed that they could look around for some land, which then would allow them to do all the other things they needed to do.

The name question was easily solved, in an unremarkable way. The group went on a ‘day out’ as a relief from routine, and the question was raised in the coach. Reg looked around and saw a silver birch tree. ‘That’ll do’, he said.

A new recruit solved the second question. Carpenter Norman Rose knew a man who was an administrator - they once had rooms in the same house. Joe Debney was well educated, meticulous and working for the new National Health Service at Highcroft Hospital in Erdington - a figures man. He was asked to join.

Joe worked on the formal side of things throughout July and by August there had been progress. It was time to call a meeting. On August 14th, 1950, the group met formally as a would-be association for the first time.

Report of a meeting held at Moseley Friends Institute
on 14th August 1950 commencing at 7.30 p.m.

The first half of the first page of the Silver Birch minutes book, in Joe's immaculate script.

He took the minutes until the end of 1950, to be replaced by Dot in January 1951, who took the minutes for the rest of the Association's existence.

The last sentence of the last meeting, on Wednesday January 2nd, 1957, written by Dot, is: 'There being no further business the meeting closed at 9.30 p.m.'

At an inaugural meeting held at Moseley Friends Institute on 14th August 1950, the following were, present, Messrs
H. Pealridge, H. Foster, K. Robotham, W. Sierenberg, C. Moseley
R. Mason, J. W. Debney, E. Lawrence, F. G. Stone, S. Warfleet,
R. Harvey, D. Foster, O. Rowson, J. Walker, N. Rose,
F. Roberts, + K. Quiney.

After some discussion during which Mr. R. Harvey explained the objects of the meeting the following resolutions were passed

1. RESOLVED: That a Building Association be formed with the object of building a bungalow for each of the members of the Association.

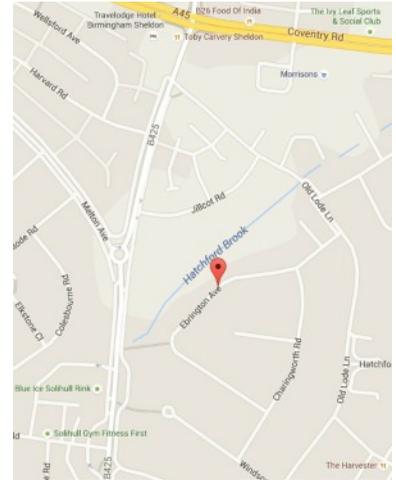
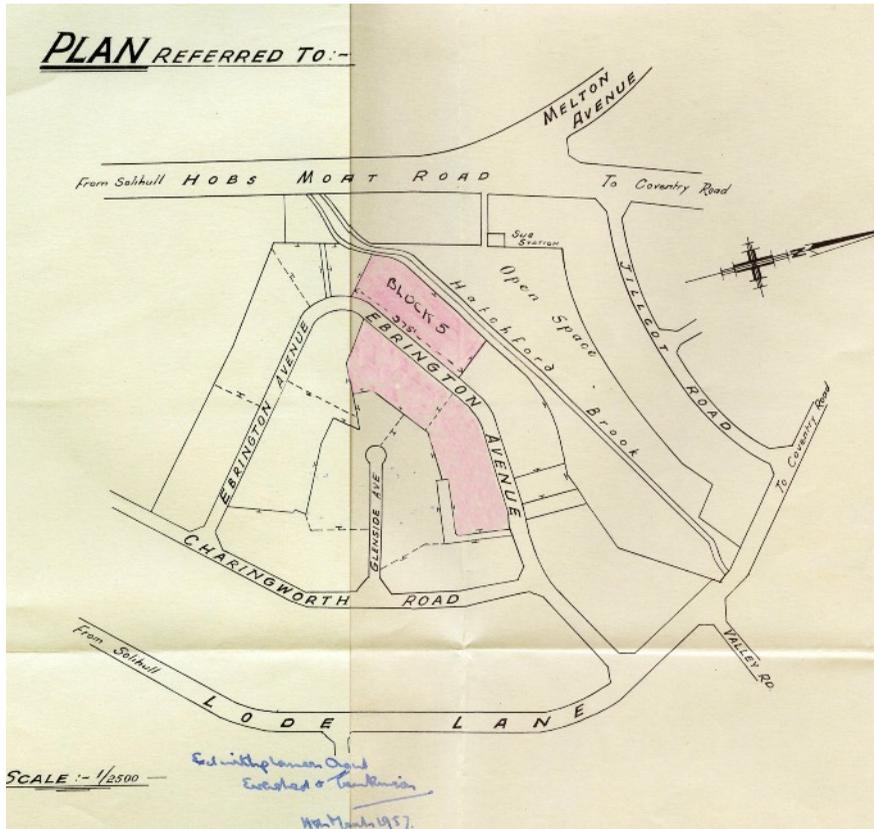
Land and Licences . . .

Joe took the Minutes of the soon-to-be Association for the first few weeks. At the first meetings suggestions were immediate and optimistic. They were about the association's officers and constitution; about what to build, design of houses, financing by members; their commitment through the scheme to each other. The enthusiasm and belief is evident.

In October a major topic is where to build. The group have been introduced to central Birmingham estate agents Shipway and Doble, who by December 1950 have identified two possible sites. Reg remembers that he and Harry favoured the Northfield site, because they lived on that side of the city, but the others didn't; by and large, they lived closer to Solihull. The decision had been taken by January, 1951.

Solihull Urban District Council had to be asked for the precious licences to build. The council was initially wary of this new way of building, but the decision had been taken out of their hands. A grant of licences by central government for the whole authority in the first part of the year allowed no additional licences for the self-builders. More are promised. Somebody smiles on the Association - in April ten licences are forthcoming from a new grant to Solihull.

Now it's Ebrington Avenue and the real prospect of building houses!



Original Surveyor's Plan left, showing 'block 5', the last of the three groups of plots which Silver Birch acquired. The other two are also coloured pink . Building started in the lower of these at the bottom of the block, in April 1951.

Evershed and Tomkinson were the association's solicitors.

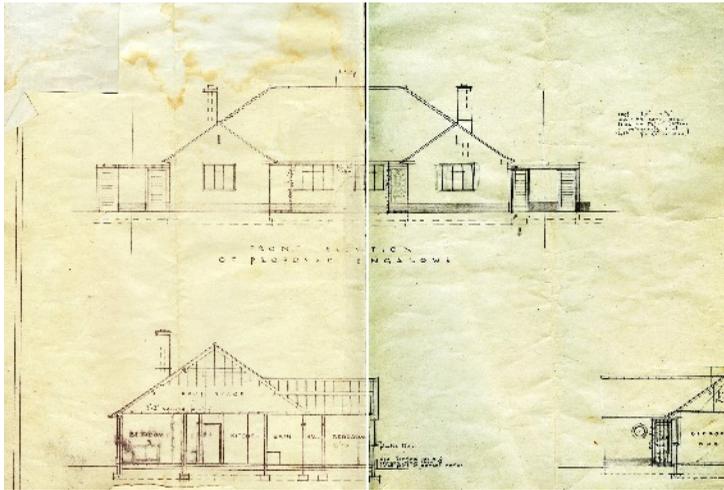
... and Money.

Another early discussion concerned money. Norman Rose had started the ball rolling when at the August 14th meeting he proposed that members should contribute £1 and thereafterwards 2/6 a week.

The August meeting elected Ken Quiney as Chairman (he worked for the Post Office), Joe as Treasurer and Reg as Secretary. Together they approached the Bradford and Bingley Building Society for financing, which was to be agreed. The Association also needed to fund the buying of building materials and equipment, to ensure the confidence of the Lender. So it was decided on August 24th that members should each make a total initial contribution to the Association of £45 including the first payments, already overtaken by events.

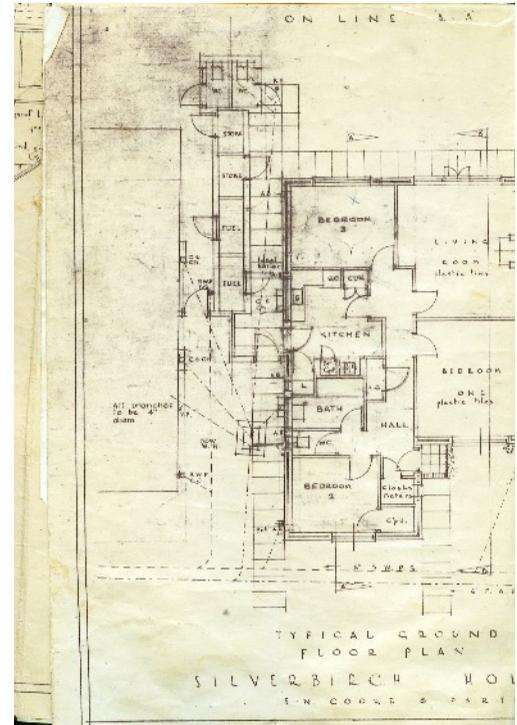
Equipment could now be bought. The Head Postmaster, Sam Longford, had been very helpful to the builders. As part of the civil service, public money could not be given to assist, but the Post Office could help with redundant equipment. The December 1st meeting agreed to buy a 35 cwt. lorry at £57/10s.³ from the Post Office and 50 shovels, forks, spades and picks at the amazing price (even then) of 1s. each.

Reg remembers that the lorry was also extensively serviced before they took delivery, another discreet 'perk' from their Post Office patron.



The same Architect's Plans, with alterations of scale and internal layout, were used by several self-build associations in the area until around 1955.

In Ebrington Avenue/Charingworth Road/Glenside Avenue these were the Silver Birch, Sparkhill, Tyburn and U-Built-It Housing Associations; of which Silver Birch was the first of these to build and the first to finish.



Building.

They started work on April 28th, 1951. Membership was now 28. Eventually the Association had 28 plots on which they could build. Only 10 building licences had been granted at this stage - more would be applied for.

The first day the site was a quagmire - saturated. Reg and Harry remember that potatoes had been stored in clamps on the road surface (the road was laid pre-war) by the local farmer the year before and they stank to the heavens. Harry found the blocked drains; they put up with the potatoes for the time being. Work began.

The decision had been to build bungalows. Harry had said that this was far better option than building houses, particularly as regards costs and scaffolding/working access, and plans had been produced by local architects S.N.Cooke of Bennett's Hill, Birmingham. The bungalows were to be three-bedroomed in pairs, semi-detached.

Starting on the left-hand side of the Avenue close to Charingworth Road, footings were dug out for the first, drains laid and concrete poured. Within a few days the base for the first pair of bungalows was complete. A possibly sceptical building inspector called, and robustly tested the work. He pronounced it good.

An early hesitant relationship with the inspectorate became one of shared admiration over time.



Above: May or June 1951 - drains for the first 10 bungalows, the first stage of building.

Jack Rogers was the man for drains. He wasn't a 'builder', working for the Post Office; where his job included ducting for cables. For the site he was ideal.



Left: bungalow platforms complete and awaiting walls, bricks stacked ready. These are not facing bricks so for internal walls only.



Reg Smith is the bricklayer here.

The method of working proved good too. Each member was committed to twenty hours a week on the site, including six hours on Sundays. Although the routine took a little while to 'bed in', in practice it meant that the Post Office workers, who by agreement did the labouring duties, kept the tradesmen going while the latter did the brickwork, carpentry, plumbing and electrical installation.

These distinctions began to blur a little in time as Post Office workers gained confidence. They laid concrete, built foundations and internal walls, constructed the lower chimney brickwork, coped with erratic deliveries. All the while Harry kept a close eye on the standards of everybody and everything. He would not tolerate anything less than 'just right'.



Practical carpentry by Charlie Josebury (who was a bricklayer).

Timber was in short supply in the late '40s and early '50s. Careful use was a priority.

The site buildings are in the background and the houses in Hobs Moat Road beyond.



The first pair of bungalows in late summer 1951. The first of the pair, right - N^o 72, was to be awarded to Harry, so he could keep a closer eye on the site. His next door neighbour, at N^o 70 - left, was to be plumber Ken Robotham and wife Margie, with two children.



Bungalows being roofed;
Jimmy Thompson (upper left)
laying bricks in the
foreground..

Left: Harry Pestridge jauntily
takes a rest.

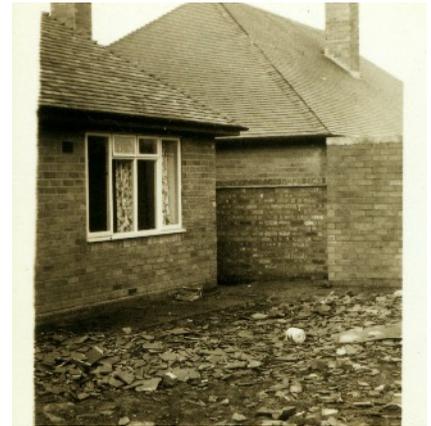
Right: a bungalow almost
complete.



Right: replaced tiles. Contractor Rudders and Paynes' tilers have unceremoniously thrown the defective ones on the ground.

Bottom: 8 of the first 10 bungalows complete. The floodlight in the foreground is for after-dark working.

There were no real problems with the first bungalows; the remainder of the scheme went just as well. The method of assignment was on perceived priority of each family as bungalows became available. Materials' supply could be difficult, but they established a good working, personal relationship with suppliers, who 'looked after them'. A problem with the tiles was soon dealt with by Harry. Concrete tiles were rejected by the council and the supplier, who quoted clay tiles for the rest of the development, was soon found to be supplying defective ones. Harry had the matter put right - at no additional charge to the scheme.



Building continued until Autumn 1953.

With the first group of bungalows approaching completion the builders awaited further licences anxiously. It was now the end of 1951. But times nationally were improving. They had the support of the local authority, too, which had gained confidence in them.

A final grant of licences followed a further grant in the Spring and in August 1952 the allocation was complete.

Work continued as it had started. Everybody throughout gave absolute commitment and, at twenty hours a week on site, the effort of each builder was immense. Each had a full-time job; and travelling made their working week not far short of eighty hours. It's little wonder that the Association's minutes became less frequent at this time and a little briefer.

Of the next 8 of the first 10 bungalows No 68 went to Post Office worker Jimmie Clayton and wife Jean, with two children . The remaining seven (66 - 54) were awarded by lottery to couples with one child. To Reg and Dot's intense embarrassment they drew the winning ticket for the first of these, No 66.



A stack of bricks and a pretty little girl. Who would notice that these are facing bricks - in short supply at the time? Reg and Dot's eldest daughter, Tina, 1952.



A curious consequence of self-building is recalled by Dot. Parties of people used to turn up on Sundays, tourists, unannounced, for guided tours of these most interesting self-built bungalows. When she had completed her task she then had to clean the shiny new floors!

Sam and Avis Marfleet's bungalow in around 1954/55. It looks like there was no loft insulation!

The last pair of bungalows, street numbers 65 and 67, were completed by early autumn 1953, twenty-eight months after work began. Other self-build schemes had been started locally as well, but it was the Silver Birch group which finished first. As trail-blazers for everybody they had set the standards for efficiency.



Left: Joe and Margaret Debney's family in April 1955 - Alison, James and baby John.

Above: Ken Quiney, Chairman of the Association. He and Pauline were one of the last couples to receive a bungalow, in summer 1953.



Oscar and Pat Rowson - left - were also towards the end of the bungalow allocation. They both worked for the Post Office.

Right: Dan Ready - he and wife Marion had to wait for their bungalow, too. Dan had been anxious to join the scheme because Marion would not marry him until they had a house!

The Silver Birch builders took no credit for their effort. Their intention had been to build houses when none had seemed possible, and it was a remarkable thing to do. They see nothing remarkable in their efforts to this day. They got on with their lives.



One of the semis, mature, with a spacious front garden and intensely private back garden. It is comfortably set in a quiet law-abiding community, the achievement of its builders.

Legacy.

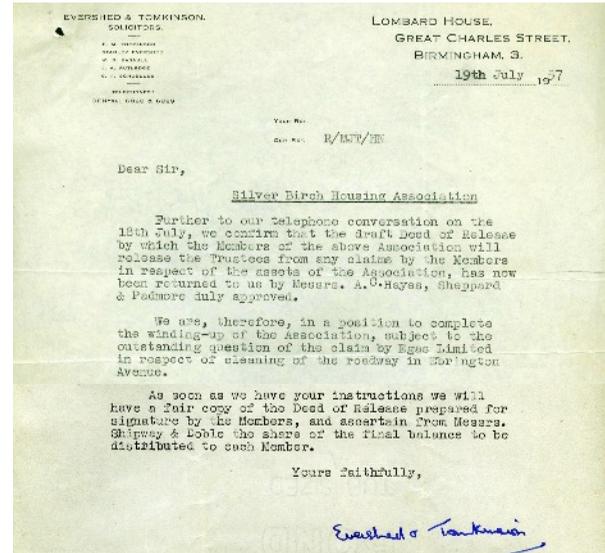
The minutes of the Association become more matter-of-fact from 1953, more simply 'business'. It's a matter of pavements being made up, odds and ends addressed and accounts' keeping. Early on Joe had put together an arrangement whereby the Bradford and Bingley Building Society progressively funded the Association; now this had translated into rent payments for the members at 35/- per house. The Association was in balance.

It was not the end. It was not dreamed of at the beginning, but already in the minutes of August 1953 a suggestion had been made. It was asked if it was possible for the members to buy their houses from the Association, to own them independently. Fourteen members requested the Secretary to investigate.

In the end the enquiry took over three years and government advice had to be given, and legal opinion sought. In 1957 members bought their own houses, a thing unthinkable in 1950.

They were leasehold, paying ground rent, but having individual mortgages from the 'Bradford and Bingley'. In the early 1970s the members were able, even, to buy the freeholds.

Land Registry title.



Ends and after.

In 1957 the association was dissolved and the tenants now paid a mortgage to buy their houses and ground rent to the landowner. In 1973, legislation allowed them to buy the freehold and so to own the land outright.

Electrician Dan Ready's land certificate.

Epilogue.

The Silver Birch story reached its end. The individual members, who had no hope of a home of their own twenty-five years earlier, now truly owned, lock, stock, barrel and land their bungalows, the houses they had built themselves.

It had been an amazing story, one set against the local post war backdrop of Austerity and absolute lack of opportunity. It also had national significance. Against all the odds the Silver Birch members had built their own houses, and changed their individual futures. The government grappled with the problem of housing throughout the '50s, slowly adjusting from the lure of command-style building to a freer market. In slight measure the self-builders had helped this process along. The government discreetly noticed their activities.

They weren't the only ones to have the self-build idea, but other such schemes in the early days were few and far between. The builders of the Silver Birch Association had done something astonishing.

Housing associations, and the right to buy, is an idea politically active even in our own time.

Hansard.

We'll leave the last word to Martin Lindsay, MP for Solihull at the time, who made this statement in Parliament in an Adjournment debate on February 29th 1952.

Mr. Martin Lindsay (Solihull). . . “It happens that there are more self-help housing groups in my own constituency of Solihull than in any other. This is partly because (of) the first of these associations, that of the Post Office workers, (which) started in Birmingham.

. . . I want the Minister to realise, if he does not already, what an immensely valuable building potential these groups are at a time of great national labour shortage. . . What these men are doing is most impressive, working at weekends and in the long summer evenings, or, at the present time, by arc lamps until 8 o'clock on Sunday nights”.

The Silver Birch Housing Association faded quietly, its story almost unacknowledged even by its own members.

The Silver Birch Families.

| | | | | | |
|----|----------------------------|------------|----|--------------------------|-------------|
| 72 | Harry and Joan Pestridge | Foreman | 44 | Ken and Marge Foster | Labour |
| 70 | Ken and Margie Robotham | Plumber | 42 | George and Edna Spittle | Bricklayer |
| 68 | Jimmie and Jean Clayton | Labour * ^ | 40 | Ron and Betty Mason | Labour * |
| 66 | Reg and Dot Harvey | Labour * ^ | 38 | Charlie and Kath Moseley | Labour * |
| 64 | Reg and Joan Smith | Bricklayer | 49 | Denis and Rita Foster | Labour * |
| 62 | Charlie and Ivy Josebury | Bricklayer | 51 | Jim and Norma Thompson | Bricklayer |
| 60 | Arthur and Lil Crutchley | Bricklayer | 53 | Oscar and Pat Rowson | Labour * |
| 58 | Bob and Rene Roberts | Labour | 55 | Jeff and Noreen Walker | Labour * |
| 56 | Sam and Avis Marfleet | Carpenter | 57 | Dan and Marion Ready | Electrician |
| 54 | Bill and Dot Morgan | Labour * | 59 | Harry and Dorothy Foster | Electrician |
| 52 | Reg and Ann Thorp | Mechanic | 61 | Ken and Pauline Quiney | Labour * |
| 50 | Joe and Margaret Debney | Labour ^ | 63 | Jack and Dot Rogers | Labour * ^ |
| 48 | Bill and Sheila Sterenberg | Labour * | 65 | Horace and Jo Plume | Various |
| 46 | Norman and Beryl Rose | Carpenter | 67 | Sid and Beryl Steadman | Plumber |

* Post Office workers

^ Reg Harvey was Secretary of the Association, Ken Quiney Chairman, Joe Debney Treasurer; Jimmie Clayton was also a carpenter and Jack Rogers supervised drains' laying.

Footnotes.

1. George Lavender worked as a Post Office engineer from its Fordrough Lane facility in Birmingham. His insight was to see that permissions to build houses did not depend inflexibly on the rules for licences/ social housing that people generally thought applied at the time. A house was then built by co-workers to prove that it was physically possible for non-builders to build houses - they paid a bricklayer out of their own money to train them to do so. Subsequently, in and around Sheldon and Garrett's Green, around fifty houses (bungalows) were built by this group, but it was always essentially a local arrangement for these workers: they built in almost a hobbyist way, taking several years longer than Silver Birch to do so. George left the Post Office during this time and founded the Central Association of Self-Help, and then his own building enterprise. He was a mercurial character who became controversial over time.

2. Contractors. Almost all the building work was done by the Silver Birch members themselves, but it was found quite soon that some work could most expediently be done by outside contractors. Tiling was one example. After having tiled the first two bungalows themselves with concrete tiles - rejected by the local authority as an unsuitable type - they found that clay tiles could be better supplied, more cheaply and fitted, by suppliers Rudders and Paynes. Defective tiles from Rudders and Paynes were replaced by the contractor at no additional charge to the build. Plastering too could be undertaken more cheaply and better by an 'outsider'. A charming Irishman with a wonderful singing voice plastered each bungalow in turn at a fixed price per bungalow.

3. Currency: £ - pounds, s - shillings and d - pence; 20 shillings in a pound, 240 pennies. A £ in 1950 has the same value as £32 today; i.e. the £45 Silver Birch members deposit = ca. £1300 today.

Thank you!

My thanks go to Reg and Dot Harvey without whom this record would not exist, and who would live somewhere else; to Harry Pestridge and Joan who talked to me this summer - Harry's contribution to Silver Birch cannot be over-estimated; to Ken Quiney for his gentle recollection of times long ago and his photographs, and to Dan Ready for the same and for his documents - his son Martin and grand-daughter Aimee made me most welcome; to Pat Rowson for another afternoon in wonderful company well spent; to Rex Marfleet for his excellent humour and for being so helpful, and prompt, in supplying photos of Sam and Avis and the bungalows. My last thanks go to my 'auntie' Beryl Turner formerly Rose, ever sparkling, ever interesting - she remembered much more about the bungalows than she assured me she did.

Any mistakes in the record are entirely my own. The privilege of recording this story has been mine.

James Debney,

November 2015.



A pair of bungalows as they are now, little altered and much sought-after when they become available.

There's more about this,
and the booklet to download, at

www.self-built.uk

Written and presented by James Debney. Research by James Debney and Jean Debney. 2015.