

◆ ‘Scattered squalor quickly defied any concerted plan’¹

SWEET HILL, PATCHAM 1921–1925

By Geoffrey Mead

The early 1920s were a critical time in UK housing provision. Although there were some planned local authority housing schemes, such as Moulsecoomb, Brighton, there were many unplanned landscapes of informal settlement appearing on urban fringes and in rural locations across the country. Sweet Hill, Patcham, was one such. This article explores some of the previously hidden history of this settlement, which would have been mirrored across many of the marginal landscapes of Britain.

INTRODUCTION TO SWEET HILL

Sweet Hill lies to the north-west of Patcham village on the west side of the A23, north of and near its junction with the A27 (Fig. 1). It is on the southern fringe of the South Downs National Park. During the early 1920s this area of open downland rapidly acquired a landscape of shacks and smallholdings that existed for a few years before being compulsorily cleared to protect Brighton’s water supply (Fig. 2). This article outlines this early example of interwar suburban development, a ‘track and shack’ colony, an area of housing the style of which could be found across Britain in the 1920s, the life of some of its inhabitants, and its eventual demise.

SOURCES OF INFORMATION

The value and the drawbacks of employing primary archival material in historical research are encapsulated in the use of the East Sussex Record Office (ESRO) document DM/A1/1; this is the Minute Book of the Clerk to Steyning East Rural District Council (SERDC) covering the period 1921–1923. The purpose of calling up this document at ESRO was to provide background to the development of the housing areas north of Brighton, where dwellings were being constructed on land contiguous to the borough but administered from the far-away offices of SERDC in Southwick Town Hall, adjacent to Shoreham Harbour lock gates. DM/A1/1 is a monthly record of the bureaucracy of running a largely rural area, but one that had the coastal conurbation as its southerly neighbour, a

neighbour whose suburban northern fringe was rapidly expanding into the agricultural hinterland of the South Downs controlled by SERDC. A note in the ESRO list records an important aspect of this document: ‘No other records of the Clerk’s department are known to survive, but files relating to Patcham 1921–28 were inherited by Brighton Borough Council from SERDC Surveyor’s Department and are listed at DB/B57.’¹³

West Sussex Record Office and Mid Sussex District Council were contacted to see whether they held any other volumes (in 1974 the area of SERDC was split between West and East Sussex). None has been located, and it has to be assumed that this is the sole surviving volume. The value of this particular document depends on the purpose to which the factual content is committed. This document was one of many that were consulted for the research of a PhD on suburban housing growth at Patcham between the wars. Although the period the Minutes cover is only 24 months, it is a period crucial to the understanding of one aspect of Brighton’s suburban growth, the more so as it relates to an area of housing that subsequently has almost disappeared.

This was the style known in popular parlance as a shanty-town, in bureaucratic jargon of the interwar as ‘hutments’, and in academic circles today as plotland, track-and-shack or ‘a landscape of informal settlement’. However described, for a brief period in the 1920s a colony of ex-army huts and assorted self-built dwellings sprang up on the thin downland soils of Sweet Hill, connected to each other by rough chalk and cinder tracks, structures erected without permission, and devoid of local authority infrastructure in the form of roads, fresh water supply or sewage disposal. These

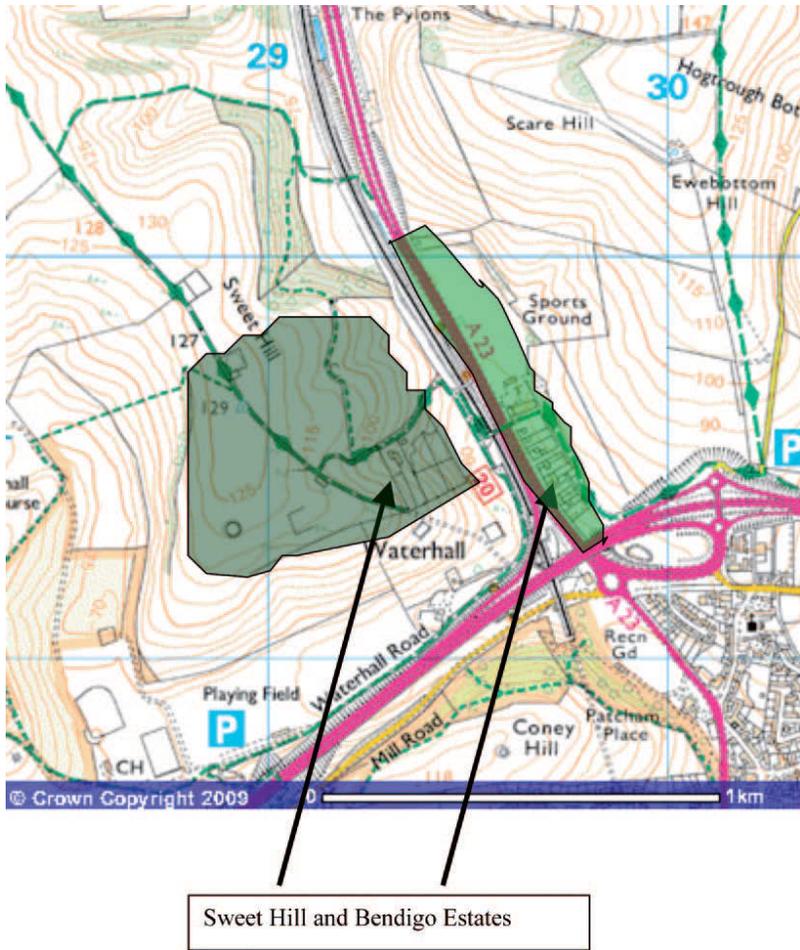


Fig. 1. Sweet Hill and Bendigo (OS) Get-a-Map. © Crown copyright Ordnance Survey. All rights reserved.

plotlands started to appear in the British landscape towards the end of the 19th century, but their main period of development was in the early interwar, and, although planning controls existed, they seem to have been over-ridden in many instances. Largely occupiers of marginal landscapes, the colonies of huts and makeshift dwellings can still be found – albeit in modified later form – along the Norfolk sand dunes north of Great Yarmouth, by the side of Caernarfon Bay on the coastal marshes of North West Wales, and inland in the heavy Midland clays near Coventry and among the Wealden woodlands of Surrey. Around the conurbation of greater Brighton, they appear atop the high and bleak downland at Woodingdean, on

the steep and scrub-covered hillsides of Wild Park, along the cliff tops at Peacehaven, and beside the salt marshes of the Adur estuary.

SWEET HILL: 'A MIXTURE OF WOOD AND SHEET IRON'

Sweet Hill is recorded in the records of SERDC and in the court case papers of the Brighton Water Bill 1924, but, owing to its short occupancy, there is almost no secondary source available. This missing link is more than adequately filled by the wealth of reminiscence obtained during the course of this research. Apart from the now few interviewees who lived there, I was able to meet the children and



Fig. 2. Sweet Hill Estate, Nov. 1923. ESRO.² The 'shack-and-track' developments that were the gateway to interwar Brighton, but before 1928, developing outside municipal control in a neighbouring authority, Steyning East Rural District Council.

grandchildren of some of the settlers. The major source was the account of H. D. Davis, who vividly describes the landscape of his boyhood:

Members of the public were sold small plots of land, many quite small parcels of a few acres in area. Buyers were anxious to establish ownership, and fences were quickly positioned, and there followed frenetic activity to make shacks and shelters ... there seemed to be no restriction regarding building regulations. In consequence, all kinds of structures, shacks, and shelters sprang up dotted over the hilltop landscape with no regard whatever to aesthetic considerations or care for the environment. Scattered

squalor quickly defied any concerted plan; there was no plan or estate management, but a display of individual creative handiworks, mostly displayed in a mixture of wood and sheet iron.⁴

Mr Tyldesley Jones KC, observed in 1924 that: 'The inhabitants of Sweet Hill Estate are I think in many instances interested in fowls and pigs and things of that sort and of course you are liable to get pigstyes, cowsheds, fowl huts and things of that sort.'⁵

The appearance of these makeshift dwellings (Fig. 3) was not unnoticed by the planning authorities, for, though they were sanctioned by central government, their construction created a



Fig. 3. Harrington family, Sweet Hill Estate c.1924. Arlette Hinton's mother and grandparents. (Arlette Hinton)

raft of difficulties for the local planners in the areas bordering Greater Brighton, which in the case of Sweet Hill was Steyning East Rural District Council. The Surveyor's reports in the SERDC Minutes give a clear and precise window into the development occurring on the fringe of the conurbation, one that was being repeated across the country as large estates came on the market to be broken up into smaller units, and as urban fringes became more accessible through improvements in private and public transport. To illustrate the intricate processes involved in SERDC for combating the early post-war sprawl, the correspondence about one dwelling has been chosen for a close study, taking the context in a range from the national picture down to the single cabin dwelling.

Until the 1920s there were no huge problems for SERDC to deal with, their area of responsibility being the rural downland hinterland to the Greater Brighton conurbation, an area of mainly small communities struggling with the long period of agricultural decline that had beset the area. Much of the land encircling Brighton and Hove was in the estate of the Marquis of Abergavenny, and many of the settlements within it were agricultural communities of mills and barns, farmyards and cottages. There was some large detached suburban

housing on the northern fringes of Brighton and Hove, which had spilled over the administrative boundaries along the Dyke Road ridge and the London Road valley, but the workings of SERDC must have been little troubled. Indeed, the area of SERDC was so extensive that some parts of it must have seemed to be out of sight and out of mind; the distance from Southwick Town Hall to the eastern boundary of SERDC at Moulescoomb was the same as that between Hurstpierpoint in the north and West Worthing along the coast: 6.5 miles.

On 8th July 1921, the situation changed dramatically with the sale of 1300 acres of the manorial Abergavenny estate. It precipitated a rush of development that caused SERDC and their officials an immense amount of correspondence and effort in attempting to stem the tide of inappropriate housing that was breaking out on the downland dip-slopes and valleys. The first council meeting recorded in this volume was on 5th July 1921, four days before the Abergavenny sale, and was the start of a turbulent series of Housing Ministry letters, applicants, obfuscations and district surveyors' detailed reports. All these documents revolved around the issue of controlling inappropriate, and sometimes illegal, housing schemes – although 'schemes' is too grand a term

for the bulk of these applications, most of them for individual properties, some of them merely wooden huts.⁶ The *Brighton Argus* contained a small ad on its front page on 26th July: 'Bungalow sites, poultry farms, market gardens, close to main road at Patcham £25 per acre or £10 per ¼ acre plot.'⁷

West of the London Road, beyond the railway line, lay an area of open rising downland, listed in the 1842 Patcham Tithe Survey by the field names of Lambland, Mile Post Piece, Chalk Pit Piece and Craney Bottom, and culminating with the hill-top enclosure of Sweet Hill⁸ – as bucolic a collection of place names as could be envisaged. The name of Sweet Hill would appear frequently in the coming months as dubious plan followed dubious plan, and the roundabout of District Clerk's letters, solicitors' replies, Ministry intervention, SERDC counter-arguments and threats of council demolition grew and grew. Housing in this area was limited. Figures compiled from the archive maintained by Brighton and Hove Building Control (BHBC) show that permissions had been granted for 18 dwellings by the end of 1922, compared with only five for the whole of the period from 1900. It is difficult to come up with accurate housing figures for this period for a number of reasons. This surviving Minute Book contains the detail of applications for only 25 properties in the whole Patcham area during 1921; with a further 59 applications the following year for the same area. The figures compiled from the BHBC are based on information in their Building Control record cards, but these are held only for extant dwellings; there are no record cards for any demolished in the last 90 years. Many of the applications, and subsequent constructions, were in fact demolished; in the case of Sweet Hill, it was virtually the entire estate, so only an incomplete picture can be obtained. The SERDC Surveyor, George Warr, compiled a monthly report for the Planning Committee, and from the first page the housing issues arising in Patcham are prominent, second on the agenda, after sorting out the salary of the splendidly medieval sounding Inspector of Nuisances.

SWEET HILL: THE INCIPIENT SUBURB

What does come across from the SERDC Minutes is the relentless surge of new developments, as can

be seen from the entries for one month, December 1921:

- d) a brick built bungalow in the London Road for Mr J. Brown
- e) a reconstructed army hut in the London Road for Mr Ledson [Leason?] Jones
- f) a reconstructed army hut in the London Road for Mr E. R. Roberts
- g) the following on the Sweet Hill Estate ... a store for Mr W Knight on plot 77
- h) a bungalow with rubble walls for Mr Holder on plot 142
- i) a reconstructed army hut for Mr T. D. Detman [Detmarr?] on plot 206
- j) a reconstructed army hut for Mr Greenwood on plot 116-118
- k) a reconstructed army hut for Mr Dickenson plot 19
- l) a reconstructed army hut for Mr A. A. Wilson plot 110
- m) a reconstructed army hut for Mr T. Davies plot 20-21
- n) a reconstructed army hut for Mr G. Thornton plot 16-17
- o) a reconstructed army hut for Mr W. Johnstone plot 207
- p) a reconstructed army hut for Mr Barnard plot 2
- q) a reconstructed army hut for Mr R. W. Ward plot 161
- r) a reconstructed army hut for Mr Dudley Scott [no plot number given, but Plot 27 from another source].⁹

I beg to report that I have had some further correspondence with Mr Gasson the owner of the Sweet Hill Estate ... but without any satisfactory result.¹⁰

This statement by G. W. Warr could serve as a constant for the whole of Sweet Hill's four-year history. The environmental historian John Sheail has written on this assault on the landscape of Sweet Hill. He drew on an extensive archive, mainly from the Brighton Water Bill 1924 documentation held at ESRO, but not the SERDC source. The two sources taken together reveal a classic example of plotland development. This paper will not explore this latter aspect too far, as it has been covered in its national and international forms by Hardy and Ward, looking at the broad picture, and in a localised study by Fry on Binley Woods estate in Warwickshire (Fig. 4). This latter is a useful



Fig. 4. 'Track and Shack' plots, Ferndale Road, Binley Woods, Warwickshire, 4 Jan. 2007 (author).

comparison with Sweet Hill because, unlike the Patcham plotland, it has survived, and evolved into a neat suburb with plot lay-out and street names that all survive from the early 1920s.¹¹

Ferndale Road, Binley Woods emphasises the bucolic nature of road-naming in the suburbs, and belies the harsh existence of the 1920s settlers, [the name] presumably devised by the builders to hint at the romance of the rural wooded surroundings.¹²

In his work Sheail looks in some detail at the development of Sweet Hill. He states that:

the Corporation missed its chance to acquire all the land around the (pumping) station, when further parts of the Abergavenny estate were auctioned in 1921. Although a bid of £1300 was made for Sweet Hill ... the land was withdrawn as being £200 below the reserved price. Before the Corporation representative could be given fresh instructions, it was 'snapped up' by a local estate developer, Mr Gasson, who straight away divided the area of 243 acres into 208 plots of varying sizes, ostensibly for smallholdings, poultry farms, and similar purposes.¹³

Sheail's reading of events here needs a caveat; the typewritten document produced on the day after the sale by Mr Gaisford, steward of the

Abergavenny estate, shows Lot 5 (Sweet Hill) to have been purchased by G. Blake of the Watford Development Corporation for £1450, but in the same bundle of documents is a handwritten sheet of thin blue paper, which shows a slightly different sequence of events:

Lot 5a 238a 3r 29p Thomas Gasson esq. 251 Elm Grove, Brighton

Lot 5b 4½ acres George Blake esq. 36 Camomile St. Bishopsgate EC.¹⁴

As Gasson ended up with the whole of Lot 5, it has to be assumed that he was linked to the Watford Development Corporation. The surveyor was increasingly concerned with the amount and style of property that was being proposed, and he noted in December 1921:

I have also interviewed a deputation from a meeting which was convened of thirty of the plottolders and I am informed that the Brighton Corporation require payment in advance before laying on a supply of water to the Estate as to which no arrangements have been made up to the present. The majority of the plans submitted now comply with the requirements of the Council's Byelaws with respect to the New Buildings, but no plans have been submitted for the construction

of roads, and the plot holders contend they are not and do not intend to lay out new streets. The whole portion with regard to this is most unsatisfactory and I consider it is advisable for the council to consider the plans as a whole and to adopt some definite and well-defined policy with respect to the laying out of the Estate and the construction of the buildings, which it is desired to erect. The total number of building plans deposited up to date is 12 but I am informed that there are at least 22 who wish to erect bungalows on their plots at the present time and that the number will probably be greater still.¹⁵

The wider concerns of the council, the factor that caused the ultimate demise of the whole of the Sweet Hill Estate, are noted in this reference from the Surveyor:

It was also resolved that the depositor of the plans be informed that the proposed Buildings cannot be occupied as dwelling houses until Certificates have been obtained from the Council to the effect that there is a supply of water available within a reasonable distance of the premises ... the Surveyor was authorised to state that if a permanent water supply were laid on to the estate across one or both of the bridges over the railway, so as to be available for use from a standpipe or otherwise, the Council would consider this a sufficient supply of water for a limited number of houses and further that the byelaws with respect to drainage and the construction of watertight cesspools will be strictly enforced on account of the proximity of the Brighton Corporation Waterworks.

At the January 1922 meeting the Surveyor presented his monthly list of applications and resolutions, increasingly for huts to be used as dwellings, six on Sweet Hill, three in Bendigo, one with a garage and bungalow accompanying:

In the case of buildings upon Sweet Hill Estate approval has been given in similar cases subject to the building being removed at any time after the receipt of 6 months' notice ... similar buildings in other parts of the District have been approved for a period of 10 years, at the end of which period the matter would be reconsidered.

On the 14th February 1922 at the monthly meeting, the Clerk read letters from the Ministry

of Health which were a reflection of the wider concerns of Central Government about the burgeoning suburban sprawl and the potential future problems with regard to water supply and waste water disposal:

With reference to arrangements for water supply and disposal of sewage in connection with the development of the Sweet Hill Estate, and forwarded for the information of the Council ... resolved that the full facts respecting arrangements for water supply and disposal of sewage on the estate be submitted to the Ministry of Health.

Still the applications came in, for three bungalows in Bendigo, an army hut on Sweet Hill and possibly the earliest application for a barn conversion in Sussex yet recorded, on February 14th 1922, at Sweet Hill Barn. The council had grave misgivings about this whole scheme. The Surveyor listed problems of access, road provision, number of proposed plots and the general ramshackle nature of it all. It was everything the social commentators of the period objected to: an exposed hillside, adjacent to and highly visible from a major highway, in a social landscape which was developing a conscience with regard to 'environmental issues'.

Not all the Sweet Hill residents were ramshackle plotlanders. Herbert Weightman at The Sentinel (Fig. 5) lit his hen-houses with electric light from a generator, owned the first car on the hill, and sent his daughter (Marguerite Verrall) to Kendrick House private school at Preston Park, Brighton.

At the end of the Surveyor's report, it was clear that this February meeting was getting to grips with an issue - water - that in a curious twist of fate, as an effluent problem, would bring about the virtual extinction of the settlement:

With reference to the communications received from the Ministry of Health respecting the erection of houses upon the Sweet Hill Estate I beg to point out that a report was presented upon this matter at the meeting on the 6th December last, in consequence of which the whole question of the development of this Estate was fully considered. Up to the present no plan of the proposed layout of this estate has been submitted for the approval of the Council, but a copy of the estate plan has been obtained unofficially from the Architect to



Fig. 5. The Sentinel, Sweet Hill estate c1930. (Mrs M. Verrall)

the Estate. An inspection of this plan shows that access to the Estate is obtained by means of two narrow accommodation bridges over the railway. A number of proposed roads are shown chiefly contouring the steep hillside and although no levels are indicated the gradient must in many cases be considerable. The layout is extremely unsatisfactory the sole object being obviously to obtain as many separate plots as possible; there are eight dead ends to the various branch roads shown on the plan. It is very evident that the Estate cannot be developed for building purposes except at a prohibitive cost, and that under present conditions it is a practical impossibility that the Byelaws with regard to new streets can be complied with. At present there is no means of water supply available upon the Estate and I have been informed by the Brighton Waterworks Engineer that he estimates the cost of providing and laying the necessary water mains at £6000.

This latter point, on the availability of drinking water, was recollected in some detail by H. D. Davis. He remembered that, when he was a boy, his father was approached by men from the developers who enquired how much water the family would need to buy from the company. Mr Davis senior told them 'none' as his plot [numbered 14 in Fig. 1]

was adjacent to the dewpond. The company men returned that night with crowbars and let all the water out of the dewpond, thus forcing the family to buy their drinking water from Mr Gasson, the developer.

One of the pumping stations of the Brighton Corporation Water Company closely adjoins this Estate and I believe the adits run very near to if not actually under the Estate itself. It is therefore of the greatest importance that should any houses be erected thereon, the means of drainage should be into water tight cesspools and even then there will always be a certain risk of pollution. It is very unlikely the Brighton Corporation will grant any facilities for the development of this Estate for building purposes. For these reasons the Council desire to prevent the formation of any new streets upon this Estate by the gradual erection of independent buildings. At the same time in view of the acute housing shortage and of the unfortunate position in which some of the ploholders are placed the Council did not feel justified in entirely vetoing the erection of building on the Estate, but in order to retain a certain amount of control and to limit the number of houses as far as possible they have adopted the expedient of approving a limited number as temporary buildings.²⁰

THE SCOTT FAMILY... OCCUPYING
A HUT AT SWEET HILL

This policy of allowing these temporary buildings was a way around the chronic housing shortages of the early 1920s. The Housing and Town Planning Act 1919 allowed for local authorities to grant 'Temporary Building' status, which meant that the Council retained a six-month clearance order for the building, a fact that did nothing to ensure a decent standard of housing; rather, it achieved the opposite. The Council conceded here that the estate developers were the culprits, not the actual occupants of the assorted shacks. District councils had another weapon in their armoury of measures to ensure a steady flow of housing that met Ministry of Health regulations. This was the Temporary Relaxation of Building Byelaws Regulations 1920, which allowed a council to sanction a building but still retain rights of removal after 10 years. One case in particular stands out from the mass of local authority terminology and legal niceties, and that is the case of the Scott family, who occupied two nearby sites on the south-west corner of the estate, plot numbers 23 and 27 – 'buildings occupied as dwellings and market garden'.²¹

It was also resolved that the Clerk write to Mr Scott who has erected and is occupying a wooden hut at the Sweet Hill Estate, which does not comply with the provisions of the Byelaws of the Council with respect to the construction of new buildings and request him to show cause why the said hut should not be forthwith removed or pulled down or proceedings taken against him under Section 103 and 104 of the said Byelaws.²²

Mr Scott, and his seemingly more resilient wife, were to cause the Clerk and Surveyor of SERDC a lot of work over the coming months, and the Scotts serve as a good example of the complexities of the 1920s housing picture seen at the level of an individual property. The Scotts were no nearer to obtaining permission to dwell on Sweet Hill:

The Inspector of Nuisances reported that Mr Henry Scott was still in occupation of a certain dwelling house situate at Valley Farm, Sweet Hill Estate and that the notice served on Mr Scott on 17 March 1922 to vacate the premises had not been complied with (no water certificate). Scott had committed an offence ... in respect to the New Streets and Buildings by erecting a new building at Valley

Farm, Sweet Hill Estate without submitting plans ... and which building is constructed in such a manner as not to comply ... and by occupying ... before the same has been certified by the Surveyor to be in his opinion fit in every respect for human habitation ... resolved ... notice be served on Mr Scott requiring him on or before 3 June 1922 ... to show cause why such work should not be removed, altered or pulled down.

The Scotts had not moved.

... considered notice served on Mr Scott of Valley Farm, Sweet Hill ... Estate ... notice to be adjourned for one month.

Unexplained in the Minutes, the correspondence to the Scotts was now all directed to and from Mrs Scott:

[L]etter from solicitors of Mrs Scott stating that (she) is prepared to undertake in the event of her not being able to obtain a water certificate in the meantime to vacate the building which she and her husband and family are now occupying upon the Sweet Hill Estate within six months from the 27 June 1922. After consideration ... period is too long ... will permit occupation temporarily for a further 3 months.²³

Mrs Scott went on the offensive, taking legal action against the District Council, as it turned out to an unsuccessful conclusion:

[P]roceedings taken against the Council by Mrs Scott dismissed by justices ... proceedings taken against Mrs Scott by Council for occupying without a proper water supply – convicted, fined 10/- or 6 days imprisonment.²⁴

Mrs Scott was still obdurate and showed no signs of vacating the downland slopes; again the Clerk was instructed to take further legal action:

Letter to Mrs Scott's solicitors giving her two weeks to reply to the undertaking of 5th July ... the council will give instructions for the dwelling now in the occupation of Mrs Scott and family to be pulled down.

Letter from Mrs Scott's solicitors that she will undertake to vacate premises on Sweet Hill Estate within period specified by council. Resolved to have Mrs Scott sign a formal undertaking to that effect.²⁵

The Surveyor was well aware of the chronic

situation that had built up in the distant downland surrounding Patcham, and he was increasingly concerned that his powers to control the plotlands were limited by the lack of a central planning document. The following passage from 29th August 1922 notes how rapidly this situation had developed, the time-lapse from agricultural land to urban fringe suburbia being barely eight months:

I beg to direct the attention of the Council to the extent to which the land north of the village of Patcham is being developed for building purposes apparently without any definite plan or much consideration having been given to possible requirements in the future. Up to the latter end of last year this district was a purely agricultural one with no indication of probable development for building purposes. The land has now been sold and certain blocks have been bought up by speculators, which have been divided into comparatively small plots, a large number of which have been sold for building purposes. Since December of last year a large number of plans have been submitted for house and bungalows to be erected upon these plots, the number of plans approved are as follows:-

On the Sweet Hill Estate 14

On the Bendigo Estate 21

The greater number of these plots are outside the area of the Town Planning scheme, which is in course of preparation ... in my opinion it is desirable to extend the area of the scheme so as to include this portion of the district. I also strongly recommend that steps be taken to approach the landowners concerned with a view to the preparation of a definite scheme for the future layout and development of the area upon consistent lines. If this is not done there is a danger of the frontages upon the existing roads being built up in such a way as to prevent through communication in the future.²⁶

The 'shack and tracks' were massing on Sweet Hill and Bendigo, and their untoward appearance and chaotic assemblage were defying all attempts by Mr Warr to stem their flow, but the Scotts still took up much of his administrative time:

A letter was received from Messrs Graham Hooper and Betteridge forwarding undertaking given by Mrs Scott to vacate certain premises on Sweet Hill Estate Patcham

on or before the 5th October 1922.²⁷

The Council were no nearer removing the Scott family, as Mrs Scott had found yet another ploy to side-step the legal process of removal:

[A] letter was read from Mrs Scott of Valley Farm, Green Deane and Sweet Hill, stating that she has been unable to obtain residential accommodation and asking to be allowed to remain in residence on her premises for dwelling purposes for a further period. Resolved ... Council permit Mrs Scott to continue ... for a further period of three months expiring on the 10th January 1923.²⁸

Belatedly, Thomas Gasson was moving in the direction of the District planners with tentative proposals to bring his hillside settlements into the SERDC administrative fold:

The Surveyor submitted plans received from Mr Thomas Gasson for the proposed layout of the Sweet Hill Estate under the provisions of the Housing, Town Planning etc. Act and it was resolved that Mr Gasson be informed the Council are willing to consider his proposals with a view to incorporating the same in the Town Planning Scheme which is being prepared for a portion of the district subject to Mr Gasson undertaking to pay all reasonable costs and expenses incurred by the Council in preparing the necessary plans in connection with the matter. The Council considered the application of Mr HA Davis for a water certificate in respect of a bungalow on Sweet Hill Estate ... resolved that the application be refused on the grounds that the proposed means of water supply from a rainwater tank is considered unsatisfactory.²⁹ ... The owner of Sweet Hill Estate has agreed to pay the cost of preliminary levels and surveys up to an amount not exceeding ten guineas and I hope to present a further report in respect of this estate at the next meeting of the Council.³⁰

The H. A. Davis referred to above is the father of the H. D. Davis whose unpublished memoir has provided much local colour to this article, not least his epithet 'scattered squalor'.

Yet more correspondence was taking place with the Scott family as they settled in for another winter stay. It was nearly a year since the legal process had started. Bearing in mind that this

dwelling was an old army hut, nearly 400ft up on an open downland slope, the winter must have been a trying time. The hillside was not wooded, and the supply of coal must have been both difficult and sporadic; the nearest supply was obtainable a mile away down the steep hill in Patcham village.

A letter was read from Mrs Scott of Valley Farm, Sweet Hill Estate applying for permission to continue in residence at the bungalow erected by her on her premises. Resolved that the Medical Officer of Health and the Inspector of Nuisances visit the premises and report upon the proposed means of improved water supply to the bungalow ... a report was received from the Medical Officer of Health with reference to the water supply at Sweet Hill Estate and the consideration of the same was deferred. Surveyor's report – that numerous applications continue to be made for the erection of buildings on Sweet Hill Estate. In my opinion the only way in which this difficult matter can be satisfactorily dealt with is by the means of a Town Planning Scheme, which I consider should be prepared and submitted by the owner. Resolved – that the owner be requested to prepare and submit to the Council for consideration a Town Planning Scheme for the Sweet Hill Estate.³¹... that Mrs Scott be requested to show cause why the building at present in her occupation temporarily, should not forthwith be removed or pulled down.³²

It was now April, and 16 months had elapsed since the start of proceedings on the Scott family and there was no resolution in sight:

[A] letter was read from Mrs Scott of Valley Farm, Sweet Hill Estate with reference to the premises in her occupation ... it was resolved that Mrs Scott be informed that unless proper plans are submitted to the District Council on or before the 4th June 1923 in regard to the said premises and in compliance with the Byelaws in force in the rural District, the District Council will take proceedings against her for contravention of the Byelaws.³³

The rigours of army hut life during a downland winter were going to be a thing of the past, because at the June Council meeting the following proposal was submitted:

[A] letter was read from Mrs Scott forwarding

plans for the erection of a bungalow on Sweet Hill Estate. Resolved that Mrs Scott be informed that the plan does not appear to be in order and has been formally disapproved by the Council and requested to submit further particulars in regard thereto. Surveyor's report – ... the district is now developing so much more rapidly than in the past that the further development of the proposed (Town Planning) Scheme is becoming very necessary.³⁴

The lone SERDC Minute book tantalisingly ends here, and with it the detail of the housing situation on Sweet Hill. The Patcham Parish Council Minutes held at ESRO for the period under study are rather curiously devoid of any comment on the situation, and, as they are restricted for research by their poor physical condition, only material up to July 1923 is accessible. Sheail's *Southern History* paper reconstructs the later events from the archive of the Brighton Borough Council. Disturbed by the prospect of uncontrolled housing and inadequate provision for domestic sewage removal, the Brighton authorities applied for a Bill in 1924 to enable compulsory purchase of the land and compensation for the settlers when the clearances occurred. The settlers did not give up easily; two simple typed letters from the shack dwellers to the House of Lords testify to their efforts to remain in their rural idyll. The viewpoint of the settlers is one that is not contained in any archive material yet accessed. The existence of the Sweet Hill protesters' viewpoint came to light only when one of the few existing hill occupiers revealed a typescript contained in their legal papers. The property had been occupied by George Harrington, an early and long-lived settler, and it must be assumed that these documents were part of his protest. Mr Harrington was a true frontiersman; as well as living far out on the urban fringe, he shot rabbits from his window, grew, dried and smoked his own strong black tobacco, and had an illicit whisky still on his smallholding! The plea to the Lords ended with a reminder that the Great War was only too vivid a memory to those seeking a new downland life:

Our sentimental side of the matter in having the pleasure of our own freeholds, little places whereon, after the turmoil of the last few years, we may settle down in peace and security as our own masters until the end of

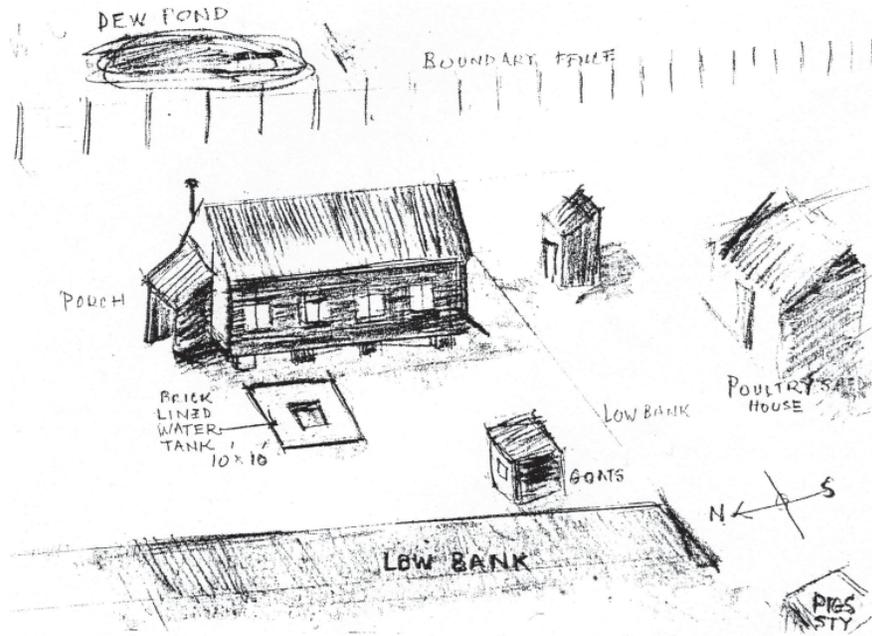


Fig. 6. Plot 14 Sweet Hill estate sketch.³⁹ (H. D. Davis)

our days ... before you decide the issue, you will keep the vision of our humble selves, our misfortunes and struggles during the last three years, many of us ex-service men with wounds and other [sic] equally unfortunate in civil life.³⁵

This letter exemplifies the case with much historical research; there are only glimpses to be obtained into the past, and when they are taken from the volumes of local government minutes or other official sources there can be a curiously detached air to the reported events. For example, a major theme of this section was the long-running dispute with the Scotts and their hut on the hill, yet there is no known Scott archive to balance the SERDC view. Similarly, the printed evidence of the Brighton Water Bill needs the opposite view of the shack and track dwellers to give it some perspective.

LIFE ON SWEET HILL ... 'FOWLS AND PIGS AND THINGS OF THAT SORT'

As a result of a fortunate series of enquiries, I was able to obtain a typewritten account of life on Sweet Hill in 1923. The original was dictated by Mr H. D. Davis to the late Mrs E. M. Gorton in the 1990s, 75

years after the events occurred. The Davis account is a unique personal view of Sweet Hill life in 1923, and brought all the tedious SERDC Minutes and accounts to life. It takes up 12 typewritten pages, and is told as the life of a small boy in the raw hillside colony. It provides the view from the hill to counterpoint the view from the Council committee rooms of SERDC. Mr Davis evokes the life of the settlers, portraying an existence akin to that of frontier settlers in the colonies (Fig. 6):

Buyers were anxious to establish ownership and fences were quickly positioned, and there followed frenetic activity to make shacks and shelters ... there seemed to be no restriction regarding building regulations ... all kinds of structures, shacks, and shelters sprang up dotted over the hilltop landscape with no regard whatever to aesthetic considerations or care for the environment. Scattered squalor quickly defied any concerted plan; there was no plan or estate management, but a display of individual creative handiworks, mostly displayed in a mixture of wood and sheet iron. The wind-swept downs fostered many dreams, most of them thwarted by lack of the required skills, or simply by lack of funds to

build; those who did build homes and live in them were few. We were one of the few who built and lived to enjoy only the short time left before the crunch in 1924. My father had ideas of self-sufficiency; he had bought a very fine plot on top of the hill ... sometime before occupation my father had bought an ex-army hut, and the hut was in pieces and sections after demolition ... they were transported to our plot on Sweet Hill. Men who were skilled in assembly of Army huts quickly erected ours on an elevated position ... there was no sink or running water, all our water was collected in a deep tank from rainwater collected from the corrugated iron roof ... (structures) were built to house poultry, goats and pigs ... our new abode was given the name 'The Highlands'; this became our permanent address ... frequently building materials were delivered to a plot belonging to a plot owner who was not living there, but would pay a visit at the weekend. Thieves had ample opportunity, even in broad daylight, to spirit away any item that took their fancy. Suspicions and accusations were not far away; but after all, the gypsies were not far from the hill of course, it was not possible to identify one's goods, but some of the stolen materials could be seen incorporated in a building structure in progress on another plot ... there was a lovely dewpond within a few yards of our boundary fence ...³⁶

The minutes of evidence taken at the public enquiry into the Brighton Corporation Water Bill in 1924 contained the damning comment from Mr Tyldesley-Jones KC that 'the inhabitants of Sweet Hill Estate are I think in many instances interested in fowls and pigs and things of that sort and of course you are liable to get pig styes, cowsheds, fowl huts and things of that sort.'³⁷

Mr Davis's sketch confirms the King's Counsel view of Sweet Hill, although the listing in the Bill of 'store room, garage and tennis courts' for plot 44 perhaps indicates a less plebeian aspect of 'track-and-shack' than is generally apparent.³⁸

THE END OF THE SWEET HILL ESTATE

Sweet Hill is now part of the South Downs National Park, apart from two isolated dwellings, a ruined

barn and some rough tracks; there is little evidence of what had been a burgeoning suburb. The clearance of the land by Brighton resulted in the occupants being given compensation. Many were re-housed in the new SERDC council housing at Patchdean, Patcham; others moved out of the area. The use of the land for smallholdings was allowed with no domestic occupation, a factor ignored by many smallholders. During WWII the area was used for training by the Canadian forces, and much damage to property ensued. Post-war, much was returned to agriculture, and two dwellings survived on the southern fringe. In the 21st century, something of the early settlement re-appeared around Sweet Hill with the occupation by numerous 'traveller' convoys of the adjacent Waterhall valley, Dyke Road ridge and Braepool sports ground. The palimpsest of the Sweet Hill landscape continues to evolve.

Figure 6 is a sketch by H. D. Davis of his family abode and smallholding. Note the dewpond in the background that served the Davis family as a water supply – until it was destroyed by Thomas Gasson's hired hands, ensuring that the Davis's paid for the company water. Echoes of a 'Wild West' lifestyle.

CONCLUSION

ESRO DM/A1/1 offers a narrow window onto a little-known settlement and the process of urban encroachment, albeit for 24 months. The SERDC decisions taken before July 1921 and those taken after 1923 are lost to researchers, leaving a tantalising gap in local history. On its own, the document is a useful tool for understanding suburban growth, but devoid of the human elements of hope and desperation that were the lot of many of Sweet Hill's colonists. By linking these bureaucratic passages with the personal recollections of some of the settlers and the legalistic account noted in the Brighton Water Bill papers, it has been possible to recreate on the chalk tracks and windswept hillsides of Patcham a process that was being repeated across Britain, from Sea Palling, Norfolk, to Dinas Dinlle, Caernarvonshire, from Dungeness, Kent, to Binley Woods, Warwickshire. The plotlands of the interwar, so reviled by planners and architectural aesthetes, have largely evolved into 'much sought after' dwellings. Their location, secured by war-time building restrictions and the powers of the Town & Country Planning Act 1947,

has ensured that they have few competitors beyond the urban fringe. However, one of their attributes attractive to the original settlers, their rapid and cheap construction, has meant that, 90 years on, many plotland structures are ramshackle and their site is more important than the building itself. Redevelopment of plots has seen many original buildings disappear, and this process can be seen near Sweet Hill at the former Bendigo estate, now Braepool Lane, Patcham. Coastal erosion has removed many along the East Sussex cliffs, especially at Fairlight Cove. Defence measures in WWII cleared many such coastal settlements. Their often wooden construction has seen losses due to fire, as occurred above Wild Park, Brighton, but others have been resurrected into their pre-plotland existence, where old railway carriages used as homes since the 1920s have been ‘rescued’

by heritage railway lines and restored for use on the Bluebell Line, among others. In 2011 a Seaford plotland carriage was taken north to a new home on the Embsay and Bolton Abbey Steam Railway in Yorkshire.⁴⁰

The Sweet Hill settlers of the early 1920s have provided, with their colonisation and subsequent removal, an example of a little-studied facet of British housing history, one that exhibits the key landscape concepts of continuity and change. The palimpsest of landscape change is evident through continued use of the name ‘Sweet Hill’ when all the other appellations in the 1842 Tithe Survey – ‘Lambland’, ‘Mile Post Piece’, ‘Chalk Pit Piece’ and ‘Craney Bottom’ – have disappeared from use. It is ironic that ‘Lambland’ has slipped from the South Downs National Park history, while the site of Mr Davis’s, ‘scattered squalor’ is now remembered.⁴¹

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NOTES

- ¹ Davis H. D. (n.d.). The Sweethill (sic) settlement: an account of the settlement at Sweethill, Patcham in the year 1923 and its abandonment the following year. Typescript edited by E. M. Gorton (1).
- ² East Sussex Record Office (hence ESRO) QDP/748/1. Brighton Water Bill 1924.
- ³ ESRO DM/A1/1. Preface to list.
- ⁴ Davis (1).
- ⁵ ESRO DB/B1/15 (9). Brighton Corporation Water Bill paper 1924.
- ⁶ ESRO ABE 18/0; ESRO DM/A1/1 (1–4).
- ⁷ *Brighton Argus* 26 July 1921 (1).
- ⁸ ESRO TD/E 46. Patcham tithe survey.
- ⁹ ESRO QDP/748/1 map.
- ¹⁰ ESRO DM/A1/1 (41); ESRO DB/56/2; ESRO DM/A1/1; Brighton and Hove Building Control (BHBC) file card archive, Hove Town Hall.
- ¹¹ Hardy D. & Ward C. 1984. *Arcadia for all: the legacy of a makeshift landscape*. London: Mansell Publishing; Fry, D. (2000) Binley Woods: a Warwickshire example of Inter-War ‘Shack and Track’ development, *Local Historian* **30** (3) 139–49.
- ¹² Fry, 141.
- ¹³ Sheail J. (1992). The South Downs and Brighton’s water supplies. *Southern History* **14**, 94.
- ¹⁴ ABE 18/0; ESRO DM/A1/1, 42.
- ¹⁵ ESRO DM/A1/1, 42.
- ¹⁶ ESRO DM/A1/1, 43; ABE 18/0; ESRO DM/A1/1, 43.
- ¹⁷ ESRO DM/A1/1, 51.
- ¹⁸ ESRO DM/A1/1, 61.
- ¹⁹ M. Verrall, pers. comm. 20 Feb. 2006.
- ²⁰ ESRO DM/A1/1, 61.
- ²¹ ESRO DB/B1/15.
- ²² ESRO DM/A1/1, 69.
- ²³ ESRO DM/A1/1, 94, 95, 98, 99.
- ²⁴ ESRO DM/A1/1, 100.
- ²⁵ ESRO DM/A1/1, 107, 117.
- ²⁶ ESRO DM/A1/1, 118.
- ²⁷ ESRO DM/A1/1, 123.
- ²⁸ ESRO DM/A1/1, 13, 140, 141.
- ²⁹ ESRO DM/A1/1, 149, 150–1.
- ³⁰ ESRO DM/A1/1, 164.
- ³¹ ESRO DM/A1/1, 189, 206
- ³² ESRO DM/A1/1, 216–7.
- ³³ ESRO DM/A1/1, 226.
- ³⁴ ESRO DM/A1/1, 236, 238.
- ³⁵ Mrs W. Davis [Harrington’s grand-daughter], pers. comm. 31 July 2007; Mrs Arlette Hinton [Harrington’s grand-daughter], pers. comm. 6 June 2007; Mrs Rita White [present site owner] pers. comm, 22 Sep. 2005; typed petitions (a/b) to House of Lords from Sweet Hill residents 1924. In possession of Mrs Rita White.
- ³⁶ Davis, 1, 3. 3.
- ³⁷ ESRO DB/B1/15.
- ³⁸ ESRO DB/B1/15.
- ³⁹ Davis, 13.
- ⁴⁰ *Sussex Express*, 2 Jan. 2011.
- ⁴¹ The thesis from which this article is abstracted is in the University of Sussex Library: Scattered squalor and Downland Homes; interwar housing at Patcham, Brighton.