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LAND SPECULATION AND URBAN DEVELOPMENT: CONTRASTS IN SOUTH-EAST ESSEX, 1880-1940

HUGH J. GAYLER

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The postwar period in Great Britain has seen the enactment of a number of planning measures, allowing government authorities to control and time the nature and extent of urban expansion. This has resulted in a physical landscape which contrasts sharply, for example, with that described by Marion Clawson (1962) in the United States. There, and also in Canada, without such strict legislation, urban expansion is still largely a discontinuous sprawl of speculative housing subdivisions interspersed with agricultural or unused areas. Very often there is little attempt at integration between housing developments and public and private services. Urban sprawl of this nature was also common in parts of Great Britain before World War II, and some aspects of that development are still having repercussions on the contemporary planning scene.

In Great Britain the Home Counties, especially between 30 and 40 miles from London, were considerably affected by the problems of land speculation and urban sprawl. This paper will look at these developments in south-east Essex where the scale was greatest and the problems are best exemplified. After 1880 a number of factors led to large tracts of land being subdivided into plots and some being developed for housing purposes. However, the excessive supply of land compared with demand and the locational hindrances of parts of the area led to two very contrasting landscapes—the County Borough of Southend and its semi-urban fringe. The former presents few problems today which are specifically related to this earlier period of development. Land speculation here was accompanied by extensive and reasonably good housing development, providing an adequate tax base for the normal public utilities and services and buying power sufficient to support certain private services. There is a need for some urban renewal, although residential areas being demolished also reflect the need for new office and apartment accommodation. Secondly, early speculators designing shop plots along main routes have resulted in ribbon commercial strips causing considerable traffic congestion especially in summer.

The latter area, on the other hand, was little more than a sprawl of substandard shacks and vacant plots. Large areas were completely lacking in public utilities and services of any kind, and the whole was interspersed with wilderness areas of scrub. However, the postwar transformation of these 'plot-land' areas has been such that whilst they still constitute a number of planning problems, their importance is greatly diminished.

The few 'plot-lands' that remain are of two types and receive different actions on the part of government authorities. Firstly, there are the dispersed substandard shacks or vacant plots that are either well isolated from present urban

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areas and surrounded by agricultural land and scrub, or are in physically unsuitable areas. There are often too few properties at too great a distance from existing urban development to warrant the extension of public utilities. Moreover, to extend such facilities would be promoting urban sprawl in many cases. Planning permission is not given for new development, and local authorities are reticent at loaning money for improving properties. Depending on the size of the problem within any one local authority and the money available at any one time, the chief actions are to purchase the shacks and vacant plots and relocate the owners in public housing if necessary. The land is then usually sold for some agricultural use, or retained for public open-space if close to an urban area. The second type of 'plot-land' area remaining is larger and more densely settled, often with better quality homes and some public utilities. Frequently, these areas are either wholly within or adjacent to existing urban areas, close to good transportation facilities and standing in the way of inevitable suburban development. Many of these areas appear on Town Development Plans as awaiting the process of transformation. As new residential, secondary and tertiary development becomes needed, local government permission is given to private developers to buy and build on vacant plots, and the complete range of public utilities is extended. Meanwhile, existing owners can receive loans and grants to improve their properties. Occasionally, the private developer is able to buy even fairly substantial dwellings and clear the whole area before building.

The nature of early land sales, described below, resulted in an area having a multitude of owners. Since much land was never sold or developed, title deeds were lost, people died and inheritors now do not realise they own quite valuable land, the result has been that ownership of many acres of land in the Home Counties cannot be traced. Whilst local authorities can still use their compulsory purchase powers, register the sale and deposit the money for later retrieval, considerable time is often expended and valuable new projects held up whilst owners are being traced. A second problem is that the large number of small plots (many as small as 20 ft. × 60 ft.) results in such a fragmentation of ownership that large-scale new developments are precluded, and piecemeal developments encouraged, unless there can be some form of prior consolidation. This valuable solution has rarely been taken up by local authorities. Except where a handful of plots is involved, local authorities are perhaps fearful of electoral reactions and the expense and time-consuming nature of numerous public inquiries. The job is left to private interests and central government agencies such as Basildon Development Corporation and the Land Commission: one of the duties of the Land Commission is to reconstitute fragmented holdings and parcel them out for redevelopment.[1]

A final, and much broader social problem involves the conflict of interest between central and local government, private developers and 'plot-land' owners over the action to be adopted to upgrade an area. For example, it is difficult for any adjudicator to decide where to draw the line between a dispersed and isolated area requiring the kind of action described above, and a more densely settled area needing a different type of solution. This conflict of interest leads to the type of unfortunate situation seen recently at Hockley, to the north of Southend, where a local government proposal to turn 32 acres of plot-land and 30 properties into public open space was overruled by the Ministry of Housing and Local Government (*The Times* 1969). The Minister's intervention on behalf of residents, however, merely perpetuates existing blight, for the local authority has banned new development and will not extend public utilities. Meanwhile, residents would like to see the upgrading of the whole area, by its inclusion in proposed urban expansion. The unfortunate problem here is the uncertainty faced by local residents in such situations.

[1] As reported in the *Sunday Times* on 20th October 1968, one of the first of such projects involved 400 acres of wilderness 'plot' lands, including 35 occupiers and 200 owners, in Kent.

The agricultural depression

Underlying the massive sale of land for non-agricultural purposes in the Home Counties and its effect on later urban development and planning issues was the depressed state of the farming industry in the late nineteenth century. Throughout the country land had been going out of cultivation since the 1870's, but it was not until the 1890's that the problems were recognised as serious. In 1893 the Government appointed a Royal Commission to inquire into the matter, and in its report the following year it was suggested that three factors were responsible for the depressed state of the industry: the series of wet summers and bad harvests in the late 1870's and early 1880's; the returns on grain and stock were low because of unfavourable foreign competition; and there had been a slight deterioration in the quality of labour (Royal Commission 1894, part 1, p. 7). In Essex the problems were particularly serious. Much of the southern half of the county consisted of heavy London Clay soil, and cultivation was difficult even under the best climatic conditions. Furthermore, the soil was more suited to wheat than any other crop, and it was wheat that was most affected by foreign competition (Royal Commission 1894, p. 47).

The virtual collapse of the farming industry in south-east Essex warranted a special report by an Assistant Commissioner (Royal Commission 1893). The area delineated for the purposes of that report consisted of some 223,000 acres, lying between the Rivers Thames and Blackwater and stretching as far west as a line through Billericay and Stanford-le-Hope (see Fig. 1).[2] Of this area approximately 28,000 acres, or 13%, passed out of cultivation altogether between 1880 and 1893, and it was suggested that more land would go out of cultivation in the next few years. After the Assistant Commissioner had collected his evidence and suggested certain solutions it was noted that once land went out of cultivation it was difficult to restore it to agricultural use (Royal Commission 1894, pp. 250-251). The London Clay land quickly degenerated into a coarse weedy pasture and was later colonised by a low scrub vegetation. In the 1890's the technical knowledge of most farmers was limited, and attempts to make the land suitable for agriculture again were mostly unsuccessful. Furthermore, the high capital cost of the suggested solutions and the prospect of making greater profits by selling the land for building purposes resulted in land-owners giving up any lingering notions of farming.

The improvement of rail communications after 1880

The expansion and improvement of railway links from London into the Home Counties were important factors aiding land speculation and hindering improvements in agriculture. In south-east Essex the disintegration of farm holdings was greatest closest to the railway (see Figs. 1 and 2). Moreover, some of the land offered for sale was not even on London Clay soil. Along the coast in the Southend area, for example, the clay is overlain by gravel and glacial loam material, both of them helping to improve the drainage. Farming was not depressed in this area and it was not mentioned in the Assistant Commissioner's Report.

South-east Essex hardly featured in the main phase of railway building in the 1850's. The opening of the London, Tilbury and Southend Railway, from Fenchurch Street Station along the north bank of the River Thames to Southend, between 1851 and 1854, was no more than a panic measure to prevent railways on the south bank from taking all the passengers from the Thames pleasure steamers (E.R.O.a, and Welch 1963, p. 2). In the next twenty years the line was of little benefit to the area. Attempts to promote traffic failed because the line was single track for most of its length, lacked adequate signalling, rolling stock and a good access route to a London

[2] The study area between the Rivers Thames and Crouch forms the southern half of the Assistant Commissioner's report area.

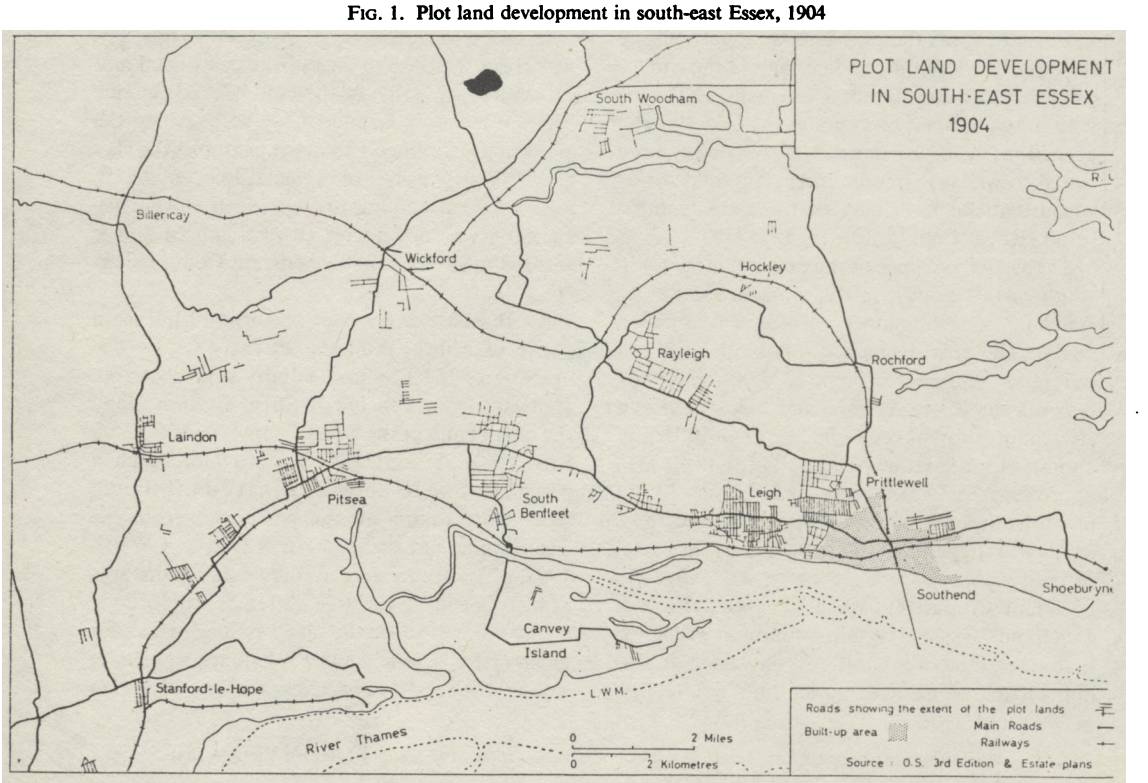
terminal and was inefficiently administered by its parent companies.

Renewed interest in railway development in south-east Essex after the 1870's was not merely to capture traffic from the steamboats. There was a whole new demand for transportation to the coast from the working-class population of the north and east London suburbs, many of whom had never had a holiday, or even a day trip, before. Also, the emergence of a second railway company in the area led to fierce competition for passengers, the results of which were improved services and lower fares. An Act of Parliament in 1882 allowed the London, Tilbury and Southend Railway to build a direct line (avoiding Tilbury) through Laindon and Pitsea, cutting the distance from London to Southend from 43 to 35 miles (Welch 1963, p. 12). The line was completed in 1889. Meanwhile, in 1883 the Great Eastern Railway sought powers to build a branch line (from their main London-East Anglia railway) via Rayleigh to Southend (E.R.O.b). This line opened in 1890. Both companies opened up links with other London suburban railways. South-east Essex became the closest resort area to central London, in time as well as distance; express trains to Southend took only 50 minutes. The close rivalry between the two companies resulted in extensive fare undercutting (*Southend Standard*, 1892). While second-class single fares were approximately 1d. per mile in England in the 1890's, the same fare to Southend was nearer ½d. per mile. Excursion and season-ticket fares were under ¼d. per mile.

The growth of land speculation

Both railway companies and land speculators

FIG. 1. Plot land development in south-east Essex, 1904



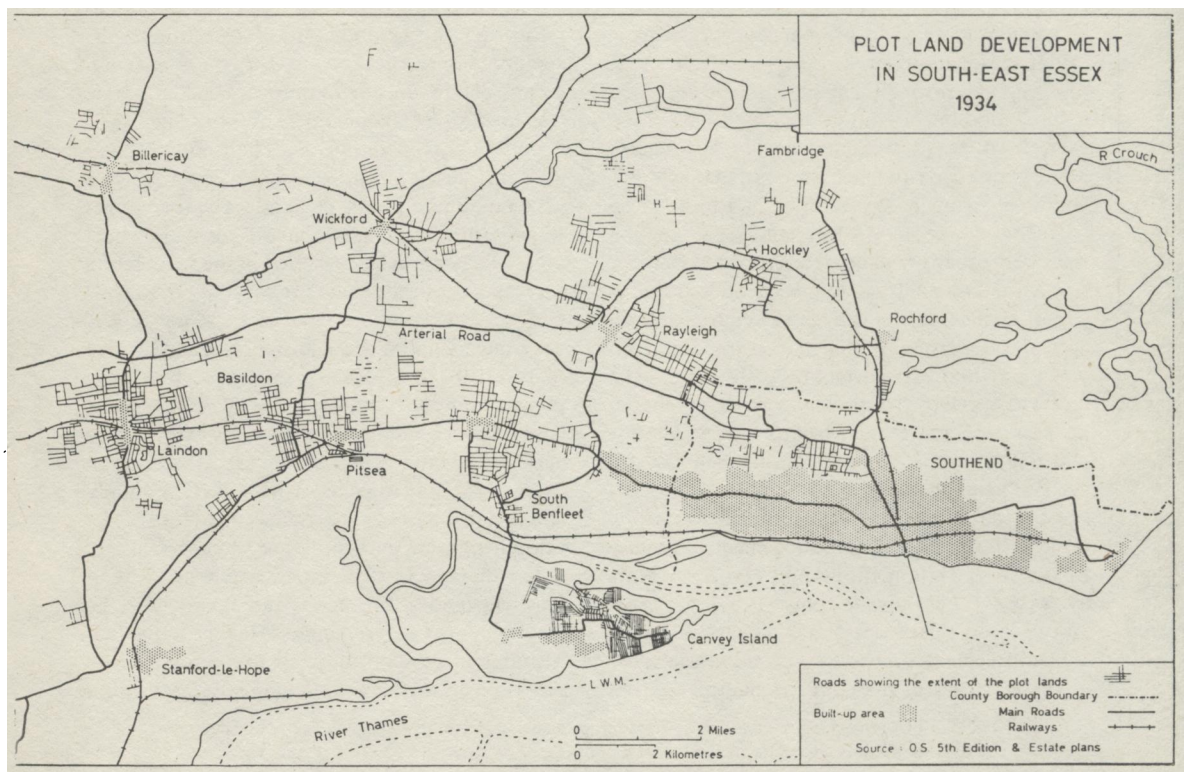
(many of whom were farmers) soon realised that they stood to gain from each other's actions. The railway companies needed an expansion of population to bolster their year-round activities. The speculators needed good rail links with London in order to attract holidaymakers and to persuade people to buy land. In the subsequent land sales there was in fact close co-operation between the two groups.

The extent of the area opened up for building plots can be seen from Figs. 1 and 2, dated 1904 and 1934 respectively. However, both maps concealed the true extent of this kind of development. An estate was only marked on the 1904 map if it could be identified on the ground, i.e. if some form of road pattern or plot boundary had been marked out. The larger extent of plot-land development on the 1934 map did not mean that the estates were opened up after 1904. Most of the land was offered for sale between 1885 and 1910. But supply was so much greater than demand that much of the land was not marked out and sold until the inter-war period. Large tracts of land, especially more than two miles from the railway stations, were never sold and much of it reverted to agricultural uses during the two World Wars. Their existence and approximate position are only known from sale catalogues put out by the speculators.[3]

Those estates which materialised in some form

[3] These sale catalogues can be seen in the Essex Record Office, Chelmsford. Unfortunately the collection is by no means complete, but it is sufficiently large and comprehensive to provide insights on the nature of the activities of railway companies and land speculators.

FIG. 2. Plot land development in south-east Essex, 1934



are largely found within two miles of the railway stations on the two lines into Southend. The Land Company, a private company formed about 1880, purchased or held on behalf of clients most of the potential building land in south-east Essex.[4] Its operations, and also those of the smaller land speculators, had important effects on the nature of settlement growth in the area. Before any area was opened up for sale a plan would be drawn up marking out roads and plots and listing various stipulations and conditions of sale. Most estates had a grid-iron pattern and plot widths varied from 18 ft. to 25 ft. unless the estate was designed for smallholdings. The stipulations and conditions of sale were legal undertakings to see that the buyer paid for the plot, did not build a house below the minimum price indicated and did not engage in any obnoxious trade. The seller thus hoped to control the social level of the estate, encouraging demand and higher land prices.

Speculators tried to prevent land prices from falling to ridiculous levels. They placed a reserve, or minimum, price on each plot and only released a small amount of land at any one time. However, land prices were universally low except along main roads and near the coast in the Southend area. Numerous incentives had to be given to encourage people to buy land. The auction sales were usually held between April and October on the actual estate. After wide advertising in suburban newspapers the railway companies ran special trains from London at a return fare which was lower than the normal excursion fare. The cost was borne by the speculator if one purchased a plot, and there were also free lunches and liquor and free transport to and from the railway stations. Payment was by a 10% deposit, and possession was immediate with no further charges. Besides the more normal inducements, speculators organised competitions and gave away plots as prizes. The railway companies often gave away season tickets. The selling of land often seemed to run second to the social occasion.

The activities of the land speculators and the railway companies were aimed at four distinct elements of the population of the London area. First of all, it was thought that the cheapest land most distant from the railway stations would attract retired people, since good access was no longer crucial to them. Secondly, the areas nearer to railway stations would be utilised by the employed sector of the population for summer and weekend cottages. Thirdly, in the Southend area itself it was hoped to attract building companies who would develop large plots of land for hotels, boarding houses and other tertiary activities. Finally, to overcome the seasonal nature of rail traffic white-collar workers in the City of London were encouraged to live in south-east Essex. The last two interests were promoted together. While the head of the household commuted daily, the rest of the family ran a boarding house. It was the only way of maintaining a large seaside home in the off-season.

The utopias in south-east Essex that the speculators dreamed of at the turn of the century—the smallholdings, cottages and denser urban settlements, set in an environment of fields, parks, tree-lined streets, golf courses and the coast itself —only in part materialised. The supply of land and the development schemes proposed bore little relation to public demand. The urge to get some return on the land that was owned or held on the farmer's behalf resulted in the speculators accepting absurdly low prices (Public Record Office). From the accounts of the Canvey Development Company, for instance, it can be seen that by 1914 the average price of a 15 ft. × 60 ft. plot on Canvey Island was 11s. 6d. Frequently, land sold for building purposes was worth more as agricultural land. Only in a few areas, where the demand for land matched or exceeded the supply and/or local by-laws controlled the nature of development, were the speculators' dreams realised. Often the speculators' interests did not extend much beyond selling land, and thus where the local system of government was lax the individual was able to develop the land in any manner he saw fit. Variations in the demand for land within

[4] The Land Company also had extensive holdings in Kent, at Herne Bay and on the Isle of Sheppey, and smaller lots elsewhere in the Home Counties.

south-east Essex, differences in the subsequent development process and variations in local government activity resulted in the emergence of two very different urban environments—the County Borough of Southend and its semi-urban fringe (see Fig. 2).

The expansion of Southend and contrasts with surrounding areas

Before the 1880's there had been three attempts to develop a seaside resort at Southend (1791-1805, 1859-64 and 1868-70), all without much success (Benton 1867, Pollitt 1939). In the first instance Southend had a bad reputation from being adjacent to the disease-ridden Thameside marshes. Moreover, Brighton and Margate, although further from London, were older, more famous and better established resorts. Southend at this time had no new source of holidaymakers to tap; it had to compete with Brighton and Margate. Access to Southend was bad. A mile-long pier was needed so that steamships could draw up at any stage of the tide, but this was not completed until 1846. The railway was of small benefit before the 1870's since it was not much faster than the steamship. From approximately 2,000 in 1800, the population had only risen to just under 8,000 by 1881.

The key to Southend's expansion and to the success of the land speculators were the railway developments in south Essex in the 1870's and 1880's and the ability to tap poorer class holiday-makers from the north and east London suburbs. Measures such as the Bank Holiday Act, 1871 and some firms giving unpaid holidays gave people the necessary freedom. Since most of these people had never been accustomed to holidays away from home and could not afford to pay very much, Southend benefitted by virtue of being nearer and cheaper to reach than any other resort in southern England. The 30 or so years before World War I saw an unprecedented development of land for building in the Southend area, and the population of the present county borough rose from 8,000 to 90,000 between 1881 and 1914. Much of this increase reflected an upsurge in the holiday trades and the demand for tertiary activities. In the same period the number of holidaymakers visiting Southend, most of them day-trippers, rose by about the same percentage (to approximately 1·5 million per year),[5] and the amount of accommodation for visitors rose from 134 boarding houses and hotels in 1890 to 917 in 1914 (*Kelly's Directory* 1890, pp. 318-322 and 1914, pp. 552-578). A second factor underlying the development of Southend was commuting. By 1912 there were about 7,000 commuters from five stations in the borough and a further 1,000 from Leigh.[6] 30 years previously there were probably no more than 500 commuters (*Standard Guide* 1912, pp. 50 & 119).

The strength of the holiday and commuting activities resulted in a much higher demand for land and houses in Southend than elsewhere in south-east Essex, and in turn a more superior form of development. Despite the fact that farming here was not too depressed, there was a bigger profit to be made in selling building land, and between 1890 and 1900 most of the borough was opened up for this purpose (see Fig. 3). Since demand was high and most of the land was controlled by two companies, there were advantages in releasing a small number of plots for sale at any one time. By doing this speculators were able to keep prices artificially high and prevent a sprawl of housing with vacant lots in between. There were few examples of where the land sales were not successful. The only areas where the reserve price of a lot was not reached in an auction were confined to Prittlewell and Eastwood, which could not be advertised as near the sea. Elsewhere demand was such that the reserve prices were more than met. Indeed, reserve prices advertised (£10-£30 for approx. 20 ft. × 80 ft. plots on the back estates and £50-£300 for the larger sea-front and approach road plots) bore little meaning except to differentiate areas of housing development. In Southend speculators stipulated the minimum value of house that was allowed on a plot. This

[5] From counts of arrivals by public transport, in *Southend Standard.*

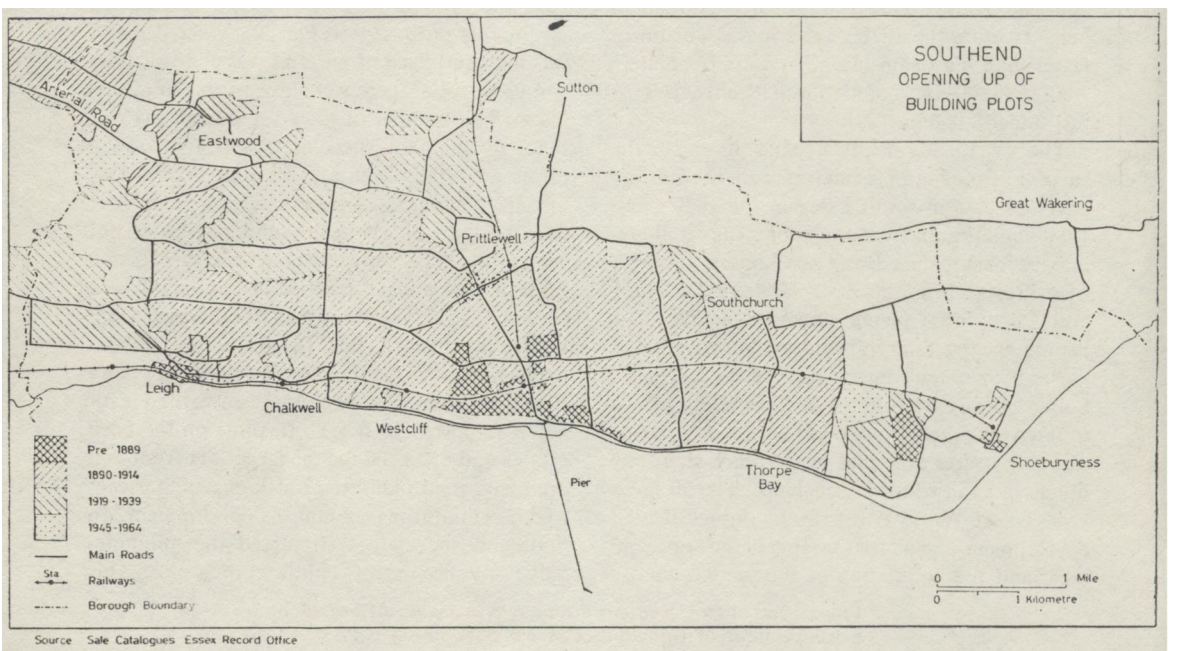
[6] Leigh was incorporated into the Borough of Southend in 1913.

in fact reflected location and demand and was achieved irrespective of the speculator's actions. On the back estates the minimum price allowed before World War I was a £250 terraced or semi-detached villa. Nearer the sea-front the minimum price was between £400 and £600.

The nature of development in the surrounding parts of south-east Essex was very different from Southend. The amount of land offered for building plots between about 1890 and 1910 (approximately 50,000-60,000 acres) was totally unrelated to demand. Except for a few choice locations near railway stations or main road intersections, it was impossible at auctions to reach anywhere near the reserve price of a plot. Speculators even found it difficult to give away plots. First of all many recipients could neither afford to build anything substantial on the land nor pay the railway fare to reach it very often. Secondly, it was found to be comparatively easy just to clear a section of scrub and become a squatter.

A second factor highlighting the distinction between Southend and the surrounding semi-urban area was the development process which followed the land sales. Whilst the nature of selling land was similar, the variations in demand between the two areas resulted in the land sales attracting different buyers. In Southend different locations, with respect to the sea-front, in themselves attracted different buyers. Land nearest the sea-front with high reserve prices and minimum house prices was bought by upper and middle income group people who would then contract with local or London-area builders. This is mainly the area of individual villas, boarding houses and hotels. The second area, behind the sea-front and its approach roads, was frequently bought in large parcels by speculative real-estate and building interests, many still in existence today. Long lines of tunnel-back terrace housing were quickly erected to meet the demand from prospective commuters and workers in the growing tertiary trades. Some of the housing was shoddily built, but seemed to meet the requirements of the local authorities. In many in-

FIG. 3. Southend: Opening up of building plots

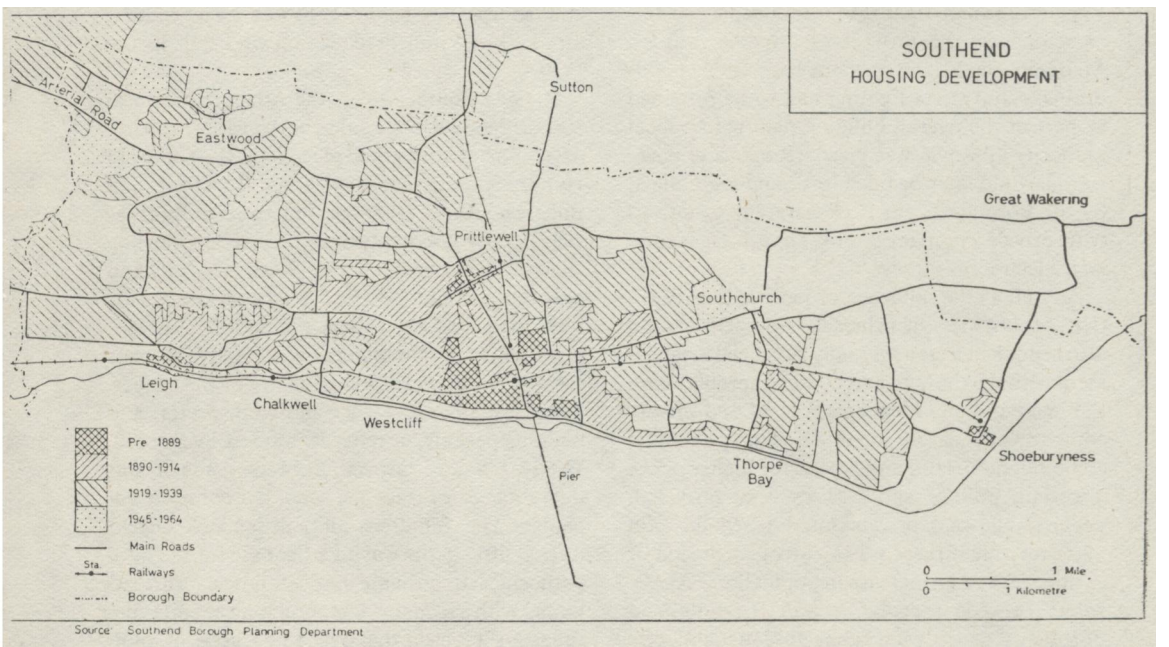


stances the houses were never offered for sale, and high rents induced occupiers to let rooms during the summer period. These speculative interests would develop the land for houses sufficiently slowly to maintain demand and thus higher prices. This accounts for the discrepancies between Figs. 3 and 4. Moreover, land would be sold for non-residential purposes if a higher price could be found, thus accounting for land on Fig. 4 which never was developed for housing. The third area lying further back from the coast around Prittlewell and Eastwood was mostly purchased in small plots by individuals, many of whom were retired or on low incomes but who would also contract, if not immediately, with builders for small villas and bungalows.

The situation in the area surrounding Southend was somewhat different. Frequently land was never owned by the speculators, but they agreed to sell it for a local landowner. Buyers, if they could be found, were almost always individuals from the London area. A few would contract with a local builder, but most either lacked the necessary capital or were too independent in spirit. Most people built their own homes, and these varied from fair to bad. Bus bodies, railway carriages and tents were common, and there were instances of garden sheds being brought from the London suburbs. Unlike Southend the large majority of homes were not occupied permanently until World War II, and therefore the almost total lack of back-up utilities and services did not seem a hardship. Moreover, most of the plotlands that were developed were near the railway stations, in this case also the old village centres, and thus a minimum of services could be gained there. There were two cases of large-scale resort speculation in these rural areas, described in more detail below. However, the schemes were grandiose but not successful.

A third factor underlying the better development of Southend compared with other parts of south-east Essex was the difference in local government activity. Southend had a rapid but orderly rise in local government status from a Local Board centring on the old village of Prittle-

FIG. 4. Southend: Housing development



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well (1866) to Municipal Borough (1892) and County Borough (1914). Substantial housing developments, meanwhile, gave the town an adequate tax base to employ staff and carry out duties under the Local Government Acts. A major duty here was land and building inspection. Despite the fact that high prices for land and housing caused overcrowding among the working classes and an infantile mortality rate that was above the national average, Southend Borough Council encouraged speculators to maintain high reserve prices and minimum house values (*Southend Observer* 1901). All estate plans were approved before land sales were held, and houses were regularly inspected at various stages during their construction. The author suspects too that with the local authority providing basic utilities, speculators and builders were coerced not to drop below certain minimum prices and standards, even though this would be allowed within the terms of the Public Health Acts. For example, not even on the back estates, where demand was lower, can one find the smallest form of terrace house, costing between £150 and £200 in southern England around 1900. A second aspect to this coercion was the provision of public utilities. Made-up roads and pavements, water, mains drainage and street lighting had to be provided as part of the overall building plan before local authority approval was given. Roads and pavements would later be taken over and maintained by the Borough Council. Separate negotiations with private companies took place for gas, and later electricity, supply.

As well as the influence of local authority activity, this aspect of urban development should also be looked at as a mutually beneficial arrangement between the land and building speculator on the one hand and local government and private company interests on the other. The speculators could sell more land and houses for higher prices if certain utilities and services were provided, while public and private interests would gain more revenue if there was an areal expansion of of housing and an increase in population. Agreements between speculators and the Southend Borough Council were often dubious, and perhaps not altogether in the public interest, since speculators were frequently also aldermen and councillors. The opening of a tram route between Southend and Leigh along the main London road in the late 1890's is a typical example of this somewhat dubious co-operation. Land sales on these speculative back estates and the westerly spread of the built-up area would never have been so successful had it not been for this new form of transportation. One speculator, who was also Mayor of Southend, gave land to the Council for the purposes of a tram route, knowing full well that by doing so he would be increasing the value of his own property. Indeed, he bought up the land with the prior knowledge that a tram route was going to be constructed (*Southend Observer* 1902). Co-operation more in the public interest was initiated, for example, between speculators or the local authority and the London, Tilbury and Southend Railway which provided the east-west line through the Borough. Before 1890 there were only stations at Leigh, Southend (Central) and Shoeburyness. Following negotiations, stations were added at Westcliff, Southend (East) and Thorpe Bay before 1914 and a new station at Chalkwell and a relocation at Leigh in the 1930's.

Outside Southend, on the other hand, local authorities had little influence on the property development that took place. In 1894 the old Hundreds were constituted as Rochford and Billericay Rural Districts, but these authorities were totally ill-equipped to prevent a sprawling mass of substandard shacks. Each authority had only one building inspector to encompass a wide rural area, and there were the added disadvantages of bad communications and wilderness areas of scrub which hid so many of the shacks. Large areas never saw a building inspector, and building permits, or refusals, were easily ignored. Where building inspections were made it was then difficult to trace the often temporary occupants. The hundreds of substandard shacks offered little in the way of a tax base for the local authorities to provide basic utilities. Furthermore, with so many temporary occupants and squatters it is clear that over whole areas of 'plot-

land' rates were never paid. Living on the plot-land areas presented a grim prospect. Apart from the main (pre-1880) roads the 'plot-lands' consisted almost entirely of mud tracks, and because of the London Clay soil were often impassable in wet weather. Sewer lines were completely lacking, and water supply was little more than a tap near a main road. Since much of the area was only occupied in summer and on weekends there was little demand from people for expensive utilities; water was felt to be the only necessity. Moreover, speculators were only interested in getting rid of land as best they could. They either did not care or could not control conditions of sale and stipulations about building.

Resort speculation in south-east Essex

Apart from the more general land and property speculation in south-east Essex, there were a number of specific resort and recreational schemes designed to attract both holidaymakers and further capital resources. Many of the speculators in southern England had notions similar to Ebenezer Howard, concerning new garden cities and attracting people from the disease-ridden suburbs, such as the East End of London, to the better life in the country and on the coast.

One unsuccessful attempt to promote a comprehensive resort development was on Canvey Island. A land speculator, Frederick Hester, bought up a considerable portion of unused agricultural land on the eastern side of the Island in 1899 with the intention of developing a health resort (*Daly* 1902, p. 28). However, his motives were merely ones of quick profits, selling land for building plots and developing grandiose amusements for holidaymakers. Canvey was not physically suited for major urban development. It consisted of marsh and summer grazing at or near sea-level, criss-crossed by drainage ditches and heavily diked to prevent flooding. Hester, however, incorporated Canvey's physical features into his plan. Roads followed a grid-iron pattern, 120 ft. apart, giving plot depths of some 60 ft. Plot widths were 15 ft., and sales were usually in minimum blocks of four, called a Canvey Plot (see Fig. 5). Since roads either paralleled a ditch or ended abruptly if one was met, the overall plan was one of numerous physically separate estates linked to the main roads that ran along the internal dikes. Hester emphasised Canvey's uniqueness among seaside resorts by advertising it as a little Holland or Venice.

An attempt was made to promote commercial developments and capture holiday trade from Southend. But considering Hester had capital resources of only £2,000 in 1899 and attracted no other speculators, his unconventional schemes can be described in no other way than absurd (*Southend Observer* 1905b). Projects which were commenced between 1901 and 1905 included: a 25-ft. wide, 6-mile long glass-covered winter garden with exotic plants, aviaries, bazaars, restaurants and an electric tramway (1,200 yds. in various stages of construction before demolition); a horse-drawn mono-metal tramway from the Winter Garden to the proposed pier (completed); and gondolas on the lake and 'canals' (in operation). The tramway to Leigh, pier and amusements were never started. The lack of success in selling land resulted in there being no capital for financing commercial developments. In 1905 Hester went bankrupt, and a trustee was appointed to wind up the estate, which included the dismantling of existing projects (*Southend Observer* 1905a). The already heavily commercialised resort of Southend was too strong a rival. Furthermore, Canvey Island was physically unattractive for housing development and lacked adequate connections with mainland roads and railways.

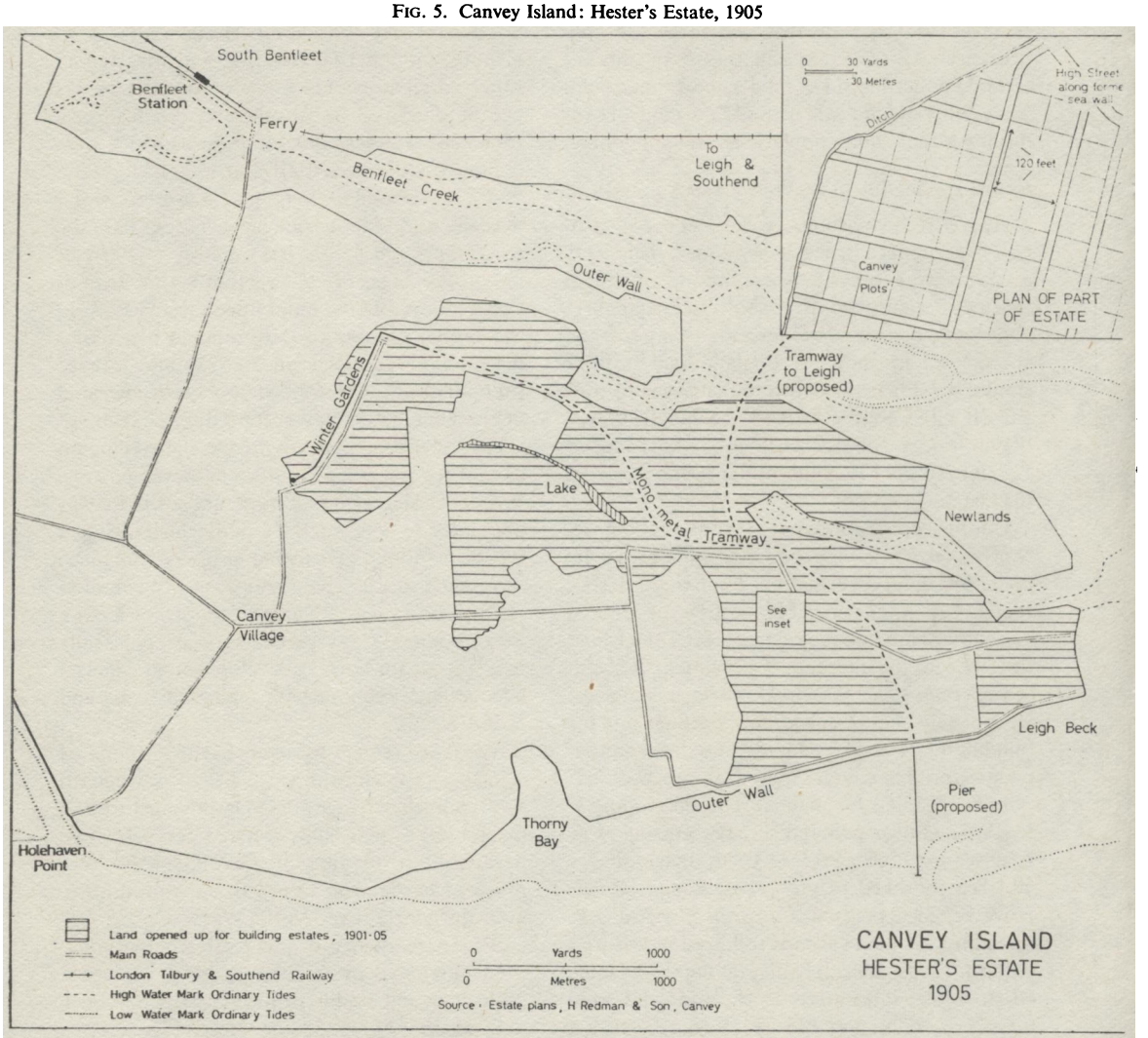
The failed resort of Canvey Island exemplified a further problem which was faced elsewhere in this semi-urban fringe area. Despite the fact that most of the 'plot-lands' offered for sale were never sold at this time, it was difficult for very much of the land to return to agricultural use, even during the two World Wars. Once roads had been marked out and scattered plots had been purchased or squattered on, it was often difficult or impossible to have a workable farm unit again. None of the Hester Estate, for

example, returned to agricultural use (see Fig. 2). (Very much the same problem is seen below in Basildon New Town in the postwar period.) Creditors, local farmers and small speculators took over Hester's land, and small plots were sold off at rock-bottom prices over the next 35 years. Canvey could still claim to be a seaside resort by virtue of its position, but its subsequent development was more akin to the mainland villages such as Laindon and Pitsea than to the other seaside resorts in Essex.

An even wilder scheme was promoted by the Land Company in the early 1890's at Laindon at the western end of these 'plot-land' developments.[7] The company neither owned the land nor had any direct interest in resort or recreation-

[7] From sale catalogues in the Essex Record Office.

FIG. 5. Canvey Island: Hester's Estate, 1905



al development. It hoped only to promote ideas, attract speculators who had capital and sell land on behalf of local farmers, thus taking a percentage share of any sale. The idea was a recreational suburb for London close to Laindon Station, with a first class race track, golf courses, parks and other sports facilities for Londoners, in addition to homes for commuters. The scheme did not go beyond the promotion catalogue stage. Instead an extensive area of substandard shacks developed around the old village centre.

Contrasting very sharply with Canvey Island regarding the nature of development, although similar from the point of view of its success at the time, was the plan to develop a non-commercial resort at Thorpe Bay on the eastern side of Southend (*Standard Guide* 1912, p. 110). An estate was laid out in 1909, a railway station was opened the same year and a tram route connected the proposed resort with Southend. However, the company responsible abandoned its plans shortly afterwards. At a time when the demand for houses in Southend exceeded the supply of building land (*Standard Guide* 1912, p. 46), the attempt to create a new suburb, superior even to Westcliff, Chalkwell and Leigh, floundered. At Thorpe Bay the company had overreached itself. The freehold of the land could not be bought by the house owner, and house prices from £550 to £1,050 and ground rents from £35 to £65 per annum were perhaps too high in 1912. Building development before World War I was negligible, and by the mid 1930's only the western part of the proposed suburb had been completed.

Planning issues in the postwar period

By 1945 the problems of the 'plot-lands' with their substandard shacks and few public utilities could be ignored no longer. During and immediately after World War II the effects of the bombing in London, the lack of new housing and the need for more family units with soldiers being demobilised resulted in a critical housing shortage. In south-east Essex it saw the permanent occupation of the large majority of substandard shacks. Between 1945 and 1947, for example, the population of Canvey Island increased twofold to 10,000 and the Pitsea-Laindon area of the now Basildon U.D. (and the designated New Town area) increased threefold to 20,000.[8] Since whole areas were lacking sewers and running water, the likelihood of a serious health problem, perhaps of epidemic proportions, was very strong. The fire hazard to properties was great because of the unconventional forms of heating and lighting used and the impassable nature of the mud tracks for most of the year. The influx of population put pressures on public facilities, such as schools and hospitals, at a time when there was insufficient money to make up for even normal wartime neglect. Although many people still kept their jobs in the Greater London area, there was an increase in the already high local unemployment rate. Making up for sixty years of neglect and ineptitude has been a slow and costly affair in the postwar period. Although the political machinery has been there, in the form of building and health codes, Planning Acts and so on, the lack of financial resources has delayed the transformation of the area.

The most drastic physical change, from 'plot-lands' to Basildon New Town, was a fortunate political accident (Basildon D.C. 1965). In the Greater London Plan, published in 1944, Patrick Abercrombie suggested the decentralisation of industry from the Metropolitan area to a ring of new towns up to 30 miles from the centre. Three possible sites were proposed in Essex: Harlow, Ongar and Margaretting. Following the passing of the New Towns Act, 1946, the sites at Ongar and Margaretting were rejected because of their value as agricultural land and proximity to existing urban development respectively. Essex County Council and Billericay (now Basildon) Urban District Council then lobbied the Ministry of Town and Country Planning to designate that part of the local authority including Laindon and Pitsea for a New Town. The local argument in favour of such designation was that the prob-

[8] Local authority estimates.

lems presented by the vast expanse of 'plot-lands' were beyond the physical and financial capabilities of the local authorities. Support for the New Town was given by the County Boroughs of West Ham and East Ham (now the London Borough of Newham), who were looking for space to take their excess population. The designation of Basildon as a New Town in January 1949 was for the twofold purpose of taking overspill population and industry from the Metropolitan area and upgrading or eradicating areas of inferior quality development. The local authority was thus relieved of the major burden of improving the area. Under the New Towns Act, the central government, through the Basildon Development Corporation, would carry the chief development costs including purchasing land and buildings and constructing roads, drainage lines, houses, shops and even small industrial units. The local authority would provide back-up services such as schools, clinics and libraries as the town expanded. By agreement other public and private facilities, such as hospitals, industrial plants and gas and electricity supply, would be introduced as they were needed.

In performing its twofold task the Development Corporation faced a burden which was not met to anywhere near the same extent in other New Towns. Of the designated area of 7,818 acres, approximately 4,500 acres consisted of 5,600 substandard shacks, wilderness scrub areas and 78 miles of unmade roads. Land and buildings constituted 30,000 ownerships, and in the period between 1949 and 1966 28% of the 4,790 acres of land parcels purchased by the Development Corporation were from unknown owners. In the 1965 Master Plan the Development Corporation recalled that the social and legal problems of purchasing and clearing existing buildings was (and still is) one of the major undertakings in the development of the Town. However, skilful negotiation (and no doubt the thought of a substantial, if publically owned, house on the part of the owner!) has resulted in the number of disagreements taken as far as a public inquiry being fewer than twenty, one fifth of one per cent of total purchases.

Not only was the designated area of the New Town relevant to the problems of a sprawling slum, but the implementation of the first Master Plan was closely governed by the need to reaccommodate an existing population of up to 25,000 in a socially and economically better urban community. The development Corporation successfully argued against the recommended 50,000 final population figure for the New Town. It was stated that 80,000 people were needed if the existing communities of Laindon and Pitsea, 3½ miles apart, were to be joined, thus giving unity to the Town and reducing uneconomical lengths of roads and service lines.[9] The focus of the New Town was chosen between Laindon and Pitsea in the more rural hamlet of Basildon. Between the proposed town centre and the Southend Arterial Road (the northern boundary of the designated area) would be public open-space and industrial land. To the south, west and east would be a number of neighbourhoods, some of them focussing on old shack communities and each having local shopping, schools, clinics and recreational facilities. Surrounding this would be further open space, some of it already owned by the County Council, and farmland.

With the exception of Pitsea in the south-east corner of the designated area, neighbourhoods have been developed in roughly an east to west sequence. In fifteen years of development the difference between neighbourhoods can easily be seen in building materials, dwelling densities, architectural styles and accommodation for the automobile. Another difference reflects the initial inability to eradicate some of the 'plot-land' development at the eastern end of the Town. In the early 1950's the severe housing shortage and lack of funds resulted in the Development Corporation not being allowed to demolish all the substandard shacks and only acquiring the

[9] This figure has subsequently been increased to 106,000 and 140,000. Considerable attention has been given to the location of new development in order that this unity should not be lost in an elongated east-west sprawl.

property that it needed to meet immediate requirements. The first neighbourhoods had to be planned piecemeal with modern developments interspersed with a variety of pre-war housing. As problems regarding acquisition eased in the late 1950's, subsequent neighbourhoods saw the eradication of all former shack development. The expansion of the neighbourhoods, however, did not simply involve building properties and moving people to them from the next area to be eradicated. Part of the skilful negotiation included agreeing to the desire of owners to live in the same proximity to their friends and relatives. (The same was true of people moving to the Town from Greater London.) Thus, the new neighbourhoods were often the old communities transferred to new 'quarters'. As a result, unlike many new housing areas, many problems, such as the lack of community cohesiveness, loneliness and strife, are faced to a much lesser extent.

A further issue reflecting the problems of pre-war 'plot-land' development was the original plan to convert some 40% of the designated area to agricultural use. In this area nearly 1,000 shacks would be bought out and demolished, and plots would be amalgamated to form workable farm units. This seemed very practical in the light of immediate postwar food shortages. However, economic changes in agriculture, the poor quality of the London Clay soil, the high cost of clearing scrub and the difficulties of obtaining sufficient money to form workable farm units resulted in few farms being established. By 1965 some 860 shacks still existed in these agricultural areas, mostly to the west of Laindon. The implementation of the plan for 140,000 population will see the much faster eradication of these shacks for urban development and public open space. The remaining 1,800 shacks, mostly on the west side of the Town, were already destined for demolition under the plan for 106,000 population, and to date many of these properties have been eradicated and road systems altered to fit new neighbourhood plans.

Elsewhere in south-east Essex there has not been such a comprehensive or drastic answer to the problems of the 'plot-lands', and in the immediate postwar years all the local authorities surrounding Southend faced the need to upgrade the areas of plot-land development. The problems of transformation were best exemplified on Canvey Island. Although the extent of the problem here was not as severe as at Laindon and Pitsea, from a local financing viewpoint it was much worse. Canvey Island U.D. was treated the same way by both central and county-level government as any other local authority. Moreover, since side roads and mains drainage were the local Council's responsibility, the cost had to be either borne by local rates or passed on to the owner. The Urban District Council was faced with the seemingly impossible task of making up 50 miles of side roads and laying mains drainage over almost the same distance. Furthermore, the nature of settlement was not dispersed enough even to allow any roads to be phased out, let alone whole parts of the former Hester Estate. As is normal when the local Council takes over private roads, the cost of improvement is borne by the property owner. Even though the most rudimentary type of road possible was built (with grass verges instead of pavements), the cost to the individual householder was still about £165 in 1955 for a 60 ft. frontage (a usual Canvey plot, see Fig. 5). An even higher charge was often made for mains drainage. There was no doubt that such costs caused hardship amongst the many retired and poor property owners, especially those who were also forced to upgrade their substandard shacks. The costs borne by property owners, however, forced the subdivision of large plots, increased the density of houses and encouraged owners to sell to private building firms. The general shortage of building land everywhere in south-east Essex added a new dimension to answering the problem. It has put a premium on selling and demolishing old and poorly-built properties and replacing them at higher residential densities. This naturally has improved the local tax base and enabled the local authority to carry out further improvements. The work of the local authority and private developers and the pressures exerted on the 'plot-land' owner have resulted in an almost complete

transformation of Canvey Island from a wilderness area of shacks to a reasonable urban environment. The outlying Winter Garden area, with less than five homes per acre, is one of the few areas in south-east Essex where the 'plotlands' can be seen in their original state. Lacking sewers, running water and even roads in places, this last remaining part of 'old' Canvey is due for renewal and expansion under the Town Development Plan in the next five years.

Summary

The same processes have been seen to underlie the initial land speculation in Southend and the surrounding areas of south-east Essex, including the Agricultural Depression, the development of rail communications and the desire to capture holiday and commuter traffic. But differences in demand, the subsequent development process and local authority activity resulted in the emergence of two very contrasting urban areas. The problems that this earlier period of development caused in Southend after World War II were few and largely insignificant compared with the surrounding semi-urban area. However, in twenty years or so the problems of substandard shacks, miles of unmade roads, the lack of public utilities and financially-weak local authorities in these areas have largely been solved. Problems which occur today mostly concern the establishment of ownership of many areas of undeveloped plot land and the consolidation of small undeveloped plots with numerous owners. A final, and more unfortunate, problem (unfortunate because it could be avoided or lessened) is the conflict of interest which often develops between various public and private bodies over how existing plot lands should be phased out. A protracted battle only delays change and prolongs personal hardships on the part of owners. Such plot land remnants that exist can either now be eradicated without causing too much personal hardship or can be incorporated in the normal course of suburban expansion, both in south-east Essex and elsewhere in the Home Counties.

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