

Herbert Collins & the Garden City

Second Year History Project | Group 14 | 2012 - 2013

Architect, philanthropist & worker for peace

'The Garden City Movement...Highfield's leafy suburbia'; these were both phrases we as a group of undergraduate historians had heard before. Yet their connection to Herbert Collins was something of a mystery. This project has sought to discover who he was and why his properties remain a key piece of our city's history.

Herbert Collins was an architect who began his career in Southampton during the early 1920s. His housing projects were influenced by both world wars due to a rapid growth in the nation's population. The constant need for affordable homes alongside Collins' interest in the concept of a garden city - prevalent at that time - saw him create properties that met the demands of a populace and offered green

open space as an escape from the grime of an industrial port.

His work featured in an exhibition by the Ministry of Health in Port Said, Egypt in 1944 for the returning soldiers. The Ethelbert Avenue estate in the north of the city remains an example of such a housing scheme.

Throughout his lifetime he designed over 1500 homes with his brothers William and Ralph creating iconic properties recognisable by their wide front doors, large windows and neo-Georgian design set in picturesque green spaces. The ethos of an architect keen on providing peaceful coexistence has seen these houses remain practically unchanged since their initial beginnings over ninety years ago.



Who was he?

Born in London in 1885 Herbert Collins, a builder's son, soon became involved in architecture.

Working initially for his father he soon qualified first as a builder and then an architect developing his iconic estates in Southampton's interwar period. Influenced by friend and fellow architect Ebenezer Howard and the Garden City Movement, Collins' work is distinctive for its incorporation of greenery and open space - a lasting legacy to his work in Southampton. He died in 1975, aged 91.

Our Research

This project was undertaken by a group of six second year history students at the University of Southampton. During the research process we trawled through the city archives, collected oral history accounts and collated all available information surrounding the aptly labelled "enigmatic" Herbert Collins. This project has helped us understand the impact Collins' architecture had on the history of Southampton and deservedly his recognition in the historical record.



The Garden City Movement: Collins' legacy today

Whilst the Garden City Movement never launched in Southampton, the conceptual ideas behind it thrive in Collins' houses today.

With large open windows, wide hallways and spacious rooms typical of the interior of a Collins' house, the design connects seamlessly with their surrounding landscape. The typical view outside of a Collins' home is one of wide boulevard pavements, green open spaces and open plan gardens - all designed to promote nature and create a harmonious location for the inhabitants.

“There is something about Collins' architecture that once you've lived with it you sort of stay with it”

Oral history interview, resident of Glebe Court

These features account for their popularity. Despite the restrictions of heritage including the limitations on installing double glazing and the strict uniformity of door and window frame colours, the houses are renowned for flying off the market as soon as they

enter - a great achievement in today's financial climate!

It is true that the residents of such homes have grown very attached to them, some preserving documents in connection to the heritage of the site, a tribute to the works of the Collins family.



Glebe Court, Highfield

Herbert Collins' legacy today may not be widely listed in the history books, or architectural journals, but is thriving in the very foundations of the houses he built. The pride held by residents suggest that Herbert Collins succeeded in his aims, creating beautiful garden suburbs in our city.



Orchards Way, Highfield



Glebe Court, Highfield

The importance of oral history

Oral history is a process of collecting our historical past first hand through the recording of interviews.

This process is essential to the preservation of primary accounts of those who have lived through such events. It helps historians understand an interviewee's personal connections to a subject and may reveal historical accounts otherwise inaccessible. This process therefore helps retain our past and present for future generations.

If you would like to find out more about the oral histories of Southampton please visit the city council archives

For more information:

We would like to thank Robert Williams for his invaluable research undertaken on Herbert Collins architecture and his subsequent publications, available in the Southampton City Council archives

Image: Herbert Collins portrait in: Herbert Collins 1885-1975, Architect and Worker for Peace, Robert Williams (Southampton: Paul Cave/City of Southampton Society, 1985); all other images are the collective authors own.

If you would like to know more about this project please email us at: herbertcollins.project@outlook.com