



Howard Close, Swaythling, designed 1928.

THE SWAYTHLING HOUSING SOCIETY

Herbert had the idea of forming a housing society in the early 1920s, while he was developing the Uplands Estate for his father. During his architectural training in London he had been in contact with the Garden Cities and Town and Country Planning Association which was actively promoting housing societies at that time. Following the First World War there was a shortage of housing and Herbert saw that by forming a society it would be possible to provide houses to let at low rents, especially if he could transfer the building staff from the Uplands Estate.

The Swaythling Housing Society Ltd. was founded in November 1925 by Mr. R. Claude Ashby, a local businessman and youth club worker; Mr. Fred Woolley, an accountant and civic leader; and Herbert Collins. The first shareholders each put up £200 and Herbert's father made a loan of £14,000 to buy land and start building. A loan was also obtained from the Public Works Loan Commissioners and a subsidy of £9 per house for forty years was granted under the 1924 Housing Act.

Eight acres of farmland were purchased at the junction of Wide Lane and Mansbridge Road for a cost of £3,362. A prospectus was issued stating that the rents for three-bedroom houses would be 10s.2d. a week plus rates, and 7s.9d. for two-bedroom flats. Tenants would be required to take £10 of shares in the Society to secure their interest in its affairs and to encourage them to take care of their properties. This share capital would also be available to draw on in case of rent arrears. Shares were available at £1 each, up to a maximum of two hundred per shareholder.

The Swaythling Housing Society was the first of its type to be set up in the Southampton area. Its first housing in Pilgrim Place off Mansbridge Road attracted considerable interest and people travelled from miles around to see it. This consists of twenty houses and twelve flats built in terraces around three sides of a central green. The terraces are two-storeyed with low red pantiled roofs and roughcast walls; they are linked at the corners by connecting walls with round arched openings giving access to rear gardens. The windows were originally simple side-hung cottage casements and the cottage style front doors incorporated small leaded-light openings. Externally, the original paintwork was 'Collins' green and cream; tenant's curtains had to be of certain agreed colours.

The houses are single fronted with a front parlour, rear kitchen/living room and a scullery. The flats are built in the slightly projecting central sections of the blocks, with communal staircases to the first floor rising through arches in the front facade. Simple decorative plaques are set into the wall above the arches and the continuity of the terraces is emphasised by a projecting string course beneath the cills of the first floor windows. Great care was taken to retain existing trees on the communal green and a stable block on the site was converted to a house, Walnut Cottage, set back from the line of houses.

A timber plaque at the entrance reads:

“Pilgrim Place

“These houses and flats were built under the provision of the
Housing Act 1924 by the Swaythling Housing Society a Public
Utility Society.

1925”



Pilgrim Place, the Society's first scheme, built 1925.



Monks Way, Swaythling built in the early 1930's.

Capon Close was built in 1926 in a similar style to Pilgrim Place, and a year later Howard Close was built, named after Herbert's friend Ebenezer Howard, founder of the Garden City movement. There followed a group of six shops and sixteen flats at Westfield Corner, with Georgian style shop windows in the form of wide sliding sashes divided into small panes. Development continued along Wide Lane to Walnut Avenue, which was built in the early 1930's.

The Society employed its own workforce, taken from the Uplands Estate, so no outside contractors were employed and building costs were kept low. Concrete blocks were made on site for the early building schemes. During the Second World War Herbert experimented with *pisé de terre*, or rammed earth, to build a pair of cottages, but these were later demolished. Following the example of the philanthropist Octavia Hill, for many years the Society employed a women rent collector trained to care for the welfare of the tenants as well as management of the property.

Besides providing housing, the Society also aimed to carry out social, recreational and educational work for the benefit of the residents. A tenants' committee was formed and in 1932 Westfield Hall was built as the headquarters of the Swaythling Social Club. The Hall, designed by Herbert and largely funded by his father, included a main hall with stage, a meeting room, billiard room and kitchen. Outside, grass tennis courts, a football pitch, ornamental garden and a bowling green were later provided. Two acres of land were given over to allotments and an annual flower and vegetable show was established. A lending library was set up and classes were arranged in cookery, country dancing and various handicrafts. Herbert envisaged a society in which social classes would be mixed and in which opportunities would be available for community activities.

The aims of the Society were ambitious and income from rents, even with help from subsidies, was insufficient to carry out its building programme. To raise money, a few houses on the estate were sold, including some in Capon Close for £450 each. In 1934 an Advisory Council was set up which approved the policy of building and selling houses to provide additional income, but recommended that houses for sale should not be mixed with houses for rent. The scheme used the Society's own workforce and built houses in Wide Lane on the edge of the Estate in a recognisably different style, using higher quality materials and similar to the Uplands Estate. A ten acre site west of the railway, belonging to W. J. Collins, became the Bassett Green Estate, built by the Society.

Its most active period was the 1930s, when the seventy acre Grange Farm south of Mansbridge Road was bought. By 1936 one hundred and ten houses had been built forming Monks Way and Brookside Way. At the entrance to Monks Way is a seat bearing the inscription:

"Monks Way

The houses on this estate were erected by the Swaythling Housing Society to let at low rents. The first house was opened by Sir Kingsley Wood MP, Minister of Health, on the 3rd of October 1935.

Architects Messrs H. Collins and J. G. Birkett."

The Society's activities extended beyond the boundaries of the Swaythling



Estate. About 1930 Southcliff House was built in Southcliffe Road near the city centre, providing 6 flats for single women. For many years the woman rent collector employed by the Society lived there. In 1933 the unappealingly named 'Utility Flats' were built in Canute Road directly opposite Dock Gate 1. The four storey block was opened by Canon Jolly and the Society received two hundred and fifty applications for the 24 flats. They were chiefly let to casual dock-workers, who needed to be close to the docks to get work. The block was later sold and now, much altered, has been re-named 'Consulate House'.

After the Second World War there were problems of rising costs and shortage of building materials, but between 1950 and 1952 122 houses and flats were built, including Octavia Road. However, the increased costs had to be paid for by higher rents and there was difficulty in finding new tenants able to afford them. Building of the final 34 houses in the scheme was stopped and in 1953 the land was sold to the local authority which then built the houses to Herbert's designs.

Herbert served as chairman of the Society from 1929 to 1938 and afterwards remained an active member of the management committee. However, in the 1960s a difference of opinion occurred between him and the committee when a majority voted to demolish Westfield Hall and the bowling green, which were becoming increasingly difficult to maintain, and to build flats on the site. Later the committee, again by majority, decided to build on the playing field. Since the field had been planned by the founding committee as a permanent amenity, Herbert felt unable to allow himself to be associated with the decision. He resigned his position in 1970 after forty-five years service.

Herbert died shortly before the Society celebrated its fiftieth anniversary in November 1975. At that time it was the largest housing society of its type in the area, with over 700 houses, flats and bungalows covering about eighty-five acres, of which nearly thirty-five acres was open space. There was a waiting list of nearly eight hundred applicants, an absence of vandalism on the estate, and rent arrears stood at less than £100.

In the 1970s the Swaythling Estate underwent a thorough modernisation programme, funded by the Housing Corporation. This provided welcome new kitchen and bathroom fittings, rewiring and the installation of heating systems. However, many of the details and subtleties of Herbert's designs were lost by the wholesale replacement of the original windows, doors and ironmongery.

The Society continues to thrive and expand, with its modern headquarters at Northleigh Corner appropriately named 'Herbert Collins House'.

Opposite: 'Utility Flats', Canute Road built by the Society in 1933 for dock workers. The basement incorporated accommodation for girls and boys clubs.