

## INTRODUCTION

The housing estates designed by Herbert Collins are a distinctive feature of Southampton suburbs. Most consist of two-storey houses in a simple Georgian cottage style with low pitched roofs, built in short terraces arranged around a small green or set informally along grass-bordered roads amongst carefully preserved trees. The estates are a welcome relief to the more conventional suburban development around the city and provide homes for a wide range of Southampton people.

The majority of Herbert's housing schemes were built in the 1920s and 1930s, and were highly acclaimed at the time. Pictures of his work appeared in the national architectural journals and in several books on housing design. His fame spread abroad and his work was reported in magazines in Austria and Scandinavia. The Ministry of Health recognised his estates at Bassett Green and Uplands as good examples of housing design and layout, featuring them in its publication *'Houses We Live In' (1939)*. The Swaythling Housing Society's estate was illustrated in the *Ministry of Health's Housing Manual (1944)* and was the kind of suburban development which inspired the better council estates for about ten years after the Second World War. A picture of the Swaythling estates also appeared in an exhibition at Port Said, Egypt, in 1945 intended for servicemen returning home, as an example of the type of housing the British Government planned for post-war rebuilding programmes.

In a feature on Southampton in the *Architect's Journal*, D. Rigby Childs and D. A. Boyne (1953) wrote that Herbert Collins ". . . has designed some of the finest pre-war housing estates in the southern counties, notably Orchards Way." Pevsner's *'Buildings of Hampshire' 1967* refers to his Uplands Estate as "the best piece of suburbia in Southampton".

David W. Lloyd, Architectural Advisor to the Victorian Society and co-writer of Pevsner's *'Buildings of Hampshire'*, delivered a paper on behalf of the Victorian Society to the conference on historic towns and cities held at York in 1968. Entitled *'Sylvan Suburbia'*, it included the work of Herbert Collins.

Of Orchards Way on the Uplands Estate, Mr. Lloyd said:-

"Wherever one looks there are perspectives of variously aligned cottage blocks usually on rising ground, set against and interspersed by trees, forming one of the best early twentieth century combinations of landscape and urbanity in England."

Despite this praise, Herbert's work is now virtually unknown outside Southampton, although much of it is as good as the best of the well known garden cities and suburbs such as Letchworth, Welwyn and Hampstead. When Herbert died in 1975, none of the architectural or planning journals which had earlier featured his work published an obituary but he was remembered locally; the former Southampton City Architect Leon Berger paid this tribute to him:

"He was certainly the most important architect in the housing field that Southampton has ever seen. He was sensitive and sympathetic to the use of building materials in the very highest English tradition."



*The Collins family in the grounds of Rookfield, Muswell Hill (c. 1905) with Herbert seated front, his parents and brothers and sisters: William, Ralph, Ada, Martyn and Ethel.*

## THE MAN AND HIS WORK

Herbert Collins himself was something of an enigma. He was a tall, upright man, with a quiet manner and tremendous composure. He is remembered as idealistic, single minded, resolute and rather reserved. His sense of humour was often so quiet and private as to be missed or misunderstood. Although he could appear frugal in some ways, he was always extremely generous to those in need, as numerous 'anonymous' donations to various projects demonstrate. He remained very modest about his own achievements although he became one of the country's leading architects of inter-war housing.

Herbert Collins was born on 2 February 1885 at Edmonton, North London. His grandfather was a successful bookbinder who founded Benjamin Collins and Sons of London. Although several of his sons entered the family business, Herbert's father, William Jefferies Collins (1856-1939) became a speculative builder in the late nineteenth century tradition. He had a shrewd business sense and made his fortune buying up land adjacent to recently opened railway lines, on which he built houses to meet the needs of the growing and flourishing middle classes moving out to the suburbs of North London.

W. J. Collins married a music teacher, Mary Martin, and they had six children: Ada, William, Herbert, Ethel, Martyn and Ralph. For some years the Collins family lived at 'Fortismere', a large house at Fortis Green, North London, with a lake in the grounds on which Herbert and his brothers went boating. In 1899 their father bought a piece of land to the south of Muswell Hill, including the cottage 'Lalla Rookh', one time home of the poet Thomas Moore, and Rookfield House, the former home of A. W. Gamage, the department store proprietor. About 1900, Rookfield became the Collins family home and Fortismere was demolished, the lake drained and the grounds divided up by W. J. Collins for building.

W. J. Collins operated from an office in Elms Avenue and employed a labour force of about thirty men. The houses were built in straight conventional streets, such as Fortismere, Leaside and Grand Avenues, using standardised narrow frontage plans from an unknown architect. However, the houses are enlivened by generous Edwardian decoration, with ornamental woodwork and plasterwork.

Herbert attended nearby Mill Hill School between 1897 and 1900. He is remembered as an all-round sportsman, winning the swimming prize and representing the school in the 2nd XI and in diving, fives and gymnastics. Although he and his elder brother William showed considerable talent at art they were not allowed to continue their education as their father put them to work in his building business. They started at the bottom, working alongside his men as carpenters. Herbert obtained City and Guilds certificates in carpentry and brickwork in 1903, and a year later passed a Board of Education building construction examination at South Kensington. Although Herbert and his brothers disliked the practical work at the time, it must have profoundly influenced their handling of building materials and attention to detail in their later careers. Herbert and William became architects, Ralph became a builder, but Martyn was tragically killed in Flanders during the First World War.

W. J. Collins encouraged his sons to travel widely: Herbert spent holidays in Scandinavia and Europe and in about 1910 visited South Africa. After working for their father by day, Herbert and William attended evening classes in architecture. Herbert studied history of architecture under Banister Fletcher and obtained University of London certificates of merit for courses held between 1914 and 1919 at the British Museum, the Victoria and Albert Museum and the Central School of Arts and Crafts. He also studied part-time at the Architectural Association School of Architecture, and records show that he passed his third year certificate in 1919. By this time he had already built many houses on his father's estate and was trading under the name of 'Herbert & Company'.

W. J. Collins produced a site layout for the development of the Rookfield Estate and in about 1901 started building on the boundaries in Muswell Hill and Etheldene Avenue. As on the Fortismere Estate, the houses were built with narrow frontages in long straight terraces to make maximum use of the site. However, their design, with smallpane casement windows and simple hooded front doors, was influenced by the then fashionable 'Queen Anne movement' and hint at what was to become the 'Collins Style'. W. J. Collins soon turned his attention to other parts of his estates and left Rookfield for his sons Herbert and William to develop.

'Herbert & Co.' were responsible for the development of the west side of Rookfield Avenue. Building started at the northern end in 1906, when Herbert was twenty-one. Already showing a departure from his father's work, the houses are more varied with wider frontages, built in shorter terraces along a curving road with carefully preserved trees. The houses incorporate fashionable architectural features of the time — roughcast walls, corner windows, small-paned casements, large gables, and 'battered' brickwalls to the front porches. Herbert was no doubt influenced by the work of such architects as Parker and Unwin, Voysey, Baillie Scott and Lutyens who were involved with Hampstead Garden Suburb being built at the same time less than two miles away.

The whole of the west side of Rookfield Avenue was completed by 1911 and the four and five bedroom houses were sold for about £450 leasehold. From 1909 to 1922 Herbert and his first wife Ann Squire Holman, a farmer's daughter from Oxfordshire, lived at No. 31 Rookfield Avenue. The complicated design of the houses, some incorporating semi-basement tradesmen's entrances and backstairs for servants, contrast with the order and simplicity of Herbert's later work.

In 1911 his father moved to Southampton and the house Rookfield was demolished to make way for further building. His brother William founded the Rookfield Garden Village Co. Ltd. in 1912 and was responsible for most of the remaining development of the site. William's houses are carefully detailed and designed in styles derived from late seventeenth and early eighteenth century traditional buildings. Cranmore Way and Rookfield Close are characteristic of his work, with a communal green and trees retained from the grounds of 'Rookfield'. Herbert later adapted many features from his brother's designs for his own housing schemes around Southampton, and they kept in close touch with each other, exchanging advice and ideas.

In 1913 Herbert wrote a short article in the *Hornsey Journal* in which he made a



*Rookfield Avenue, Muswell Hill, the first houses designed by Herbert Collins (1906-1911). His own home, No 31, second from left.*



*Rookfield Close, Muswell Hill, designed by Herbert's brother William, who was responsible for most of Rookfield Garden Village.*

East, West, North, South

W.C.

Sept 20 1923

My dear Herbert,

I am very glad to hear that you & Clara have got into close touch with one another. The work of the Guild & of the Red Down Trust will I know appeal strongly to you. I am so very very glad you are now a member of the Board - partly for the personal reason that I shall probably see more of you, but chiefly because I know how essential it is that the spirit that must be behind the movement if it is to be really effective is the spirit that animates you so strongly. You will be interested to hear - if you did not know already - that Horace H. Piggott of 13 Rockfield Ave. has subscribed for £200 in donations. G. B. Shaw subscribed recently for £2500 - both of these amounts were included in the figures given last Thursday.

Very many thanks to you both for all you have done about the Carson. Ann is quite right in thinking that the wife pined a bit about its passing away from her control, but I believe she will really be the happier.

With best love to you both

Ben Howard

How to get Tom's handwriting?

Letter to Herbert from Sir Ebenezer Howard on his appointment to the Board of Welwyn Garden City.

plea for 'attractive roads' with four foot grass verges planted with trees between the road and the footpath. He pointed out that such roads were not permitted under the current bye-laws and appealed for a change in the law to encourage such a layout. However, his plea went unheeded and the local authority refused to adopt the roads on the Rookfield Estate, which therefore became the responsibility of the residents.

While qualifying in architecture, Herbert came into contact with the Garden Cities and Town Planning Association. For about eighteen months he was involved with the initial development of Welwyn Garden City and was appointed to the board of directors. The work inspired Herbert with the idea of setting up his own garden city. After his father moved to Southampton, Herbert often visited the town and pursued his interest in sailing. He saw the potential for a garden city on the western side of Southampton Water around the village of Marchwood, bordering the New Forest. In 1921 he approached Ebenezer Howard, founder of the Garden City Movement, with the idea and they visited the site together.

Unfortunately, in spite of enthusiastic encouragement from Howard and the promise of £25,000 from his father to cover the cost of the land, nothing came of the scheme. However, Herbert remained committed to the ideal of a garden city in that position for the rest of his life.

Following their initial meeting over the proposed garden city Herbert and Ebenezer Howard became close friends and often visited each other. Howard was a great inspiration; for many years Herbert had a photograph of him above his desk.

William Collins never officially qualified as an architect, but in 1921 Herbert passed the entrance examination of the Society of Architects and became a member. The following year Herbert and his wife left Rookfield and moved to Southampton to help his father to develop his estates there. At first they lived in the lodge cottage of W. J. Collins' house, 'The Wilderness' at West End. The main house has since been demolished but the brick and tile lodge cottage still stands in West End Road. In 1925 Herbert joined the RIBA as a licentiate, was elected as associate in 1926 and the following year also became an associate of the Town Planning Institute.

Late in 1922 Herbert and Anne moved into number 11 (now renumbered 59) Brookvale Road, one of the first houses he built on the Uplands Estate. For a while Herbert & Co. practiced from an address in newly built Highfield Close, but moved to a permanent office at 30 Portland Street in the town centre in 1927.

John G. Birkett, a qualified architect and planner, joined Herbert's office in about 1930 and they became partners. Birkett, who lived on the Bassett Green Estate, is remembered primarily as a planner, with Herbert retaining control over matters of design.

Herbert evolved his own distinctive style of building. His first houses in Rookfield Avenue were a complicated assembly of various 'arts and crafts' features. However, his first simple terrace of houses on the Uplands Estate in 1922 clearly shows the influence of the time he spent at Welwyn Garden City and the neo-Georgian style of the city's architect, Louis de Soissons. Unlike de Soissons and his architects who were responsible for building thousands of houses in a

relatively short time, Herbert was able to refine the style and to develop the potential of his sites to the full. He paid great attention to details, probably the result of his early practical training. The same small labour force, employed by his brother Ralph, were moved around the different sites as necessary, building houses at Uplands, Swaythling and Bassett Green.

About 1930 Herbert built himself a new house at 38 Brookvale Road, on a plot almost directly opposite his former home. In October 1935 he also moved offices from Portland Street to 32 Carlton Crescent. The move was well-timed, as his former offices were destroyed by bombing in the Second World War. About 1938, the partnership with Birkett ended; he later went on to work in the regional planning office at Reading. When J. Norman Calton came to work for Herbert as an assistant in 1939 he was then the only other member of staff. Mr. Calton came from Sussex, where he had been articled to a Hastings firm, and moved into a house designed by Herbert in the 1920s in Thornhill Park Road — where he has remained ever since. At the outbreak of the Second World War Mr. Calton joined the Royal Engineers.

Herbert was elected a fellow of the RIBA in 1940, and in 1941 became a fellow of the Royal Town Planning Institute. During the war Herbert's first wife, Ann, died and he set up a plaque to her memory in the loggia of his house in Brookvale Road. He met his second wife, Doreen, through the local branch of the League of Nations Union of which they were both active members. She shared his interest in music and art and was for sometime a music teacher and carpet designer. They had two children, Julie and Nigel.

After the Second World War, Mr. Calton rejoined the office and became a partner. As in his earlier partnership with Birkett, Herbert still remained in overall charge and work was carried out in the well established 'Collins' style. There was a maximum of six staff in the office during the partnership: Herbert, Mr. Calton, Mrs. Painter the secretary, and up to three assistants, including Peter Whitworth, who worked in the office from 1946 until 1954, when he left to work for the Council for Industrial Design.

In 1956 the partnership ended. Mr. Calton went on to work for the Southampton City Architect's Department, where he was responsible for the restoration and conversion of several of the city's historic buildings. About the same time, Mrs. Painter left. Herbert joined the list of retired members of the RTPI in 1957 when he was seventy-two. However, he still kept on the office at 32 Carlton Crescent and employed a new secretary, Mrs. Lee. In the late 1950s and early 1960s he undertook a number of design projects entirely by himself, besides being involved in the administration and day-to-day running of his various housing estates around Southampton. Herbert continued to work part-time in his office right up to his death in 1975, in his 91st year.





*Herbert, left, with fellow students on the roof of the Architectural Association School of Architecture, Bedford Square, London.*