

# Firm foundations

Not all homes built for soldiers returning from World War One have survived the march of time, but those that have are a source of community pride. **Caroline Thorpe** reports

Temple Square enjoyed an auspicious start with the lord mayor of the city cutting the first sod of earth with a spade that even now is on display in Manchester town hall. Today the properties stand proud and demand for them is high. A plaque commemorating their origins sits in the centre of the square

'Homes fit for heroes to live in.' This, along with 'hang the Kaiser' was Prime Minister David Lloyd George's battle cry as he headed into Britain's 1919 election campaign.

He won the election and, along with it, a mandate for the 1919 Housing Act that included plans to build homes for service personnel returning from the horrors of the First World War.

Lloyd George's plans were not merely a patriotic vote puller, but a dire necessity. Prior to the war, affordable housing meant Victorian slums rife with overcrowding and poor sanitation. The homes for heroes pledge laid the foundations for large scale, state sponsored social housing in the 20th century.

The homes themselves have endured a mixed fate. Pockets remain throughout the UK, though their futures appear largely determined by the original standards to which they were built. It seems there was no such thing as a nationwide blueprint for housing heroes.

Northwards Housing, Manchester's arm's-length management association, manages two sets of homes originally built for returning soldiers. Paul Maidment, asset and procurement manager, worked on the refurbishment of 78 homes built in 1919 in Temple Square in the Cheetham area of the city. He says the two and three bedroom flats are 'very, very high quality in terms of design and space', something he attributes to the fact that they were built as a reward to those who had sacrificed so much.

'These really have stood the test of time,' he says. 'They are traditionally built in brick, with rosemary roof tiles. They are the first properties to have been built with a concrete foundation and concrete staircases at the rear.' Though the staircases were replaced in 2002 as part of the refurbishment programme, the foundations stand strong. Besides a public space at the centre of the square, the homes also boasted private back gardens and inside toilets – a far cry from the pre-war terraced properties slated for slum clearance.

Temple Square enjoyed an auspicious start with the lord mayor of the city cutting the first sod of earth with a spade that even now is on display in Manchester town hall. Today the properties stand proud and demand for them is high following their modernisation, which won a National Home Improvement Council award. A plaque commemorating their origins sits in the centre of the square. But it wasn't always so.

Prior to their redevelopment, lack of investment had seen the properties fall into disrepair, far from the noble ideals that

prompted their creation. Drug abuse, prostitution and anti-social behaviour blighted the square. Tenancy turnover was high compared with other parts of Manchester, almost a fifth of the homes were empty and talk of demolition had begun.

'A decision had to be made,' says Maidment. 'Should they be cleared and replaced with new build?' What saved them, he argues, was a combination of their solid foundations along with 'a real community' that was prepared to fight for them.

'There is a really diverse community in Cheetham. They are really proud and they didn't want demolition.'

'One of the very, very good things about the refurbishment was the level of community involvement. Residents formed a steering group and they really did want to be involved.' Those residents included a 93 year old lady whose father had been one of the returning soldiers initially housed in the square.

## End of an era

Lloyd George's vision hasn't proved as robust elsewhere. Last year a regeneration partnership between Norwich Council, Broadland Housing Association and Wherry Housing Association, part of Circle Anglia, demolished the last of around 500 homes for heroes in Norwich.

Mark Jones, managing director of Wherry Housing Association, refers to the 84 homes as 'the concrete block homes' and says that poor construction left them with no choice but to send the bulldozers in. 'The concrete method of construction which was used for these properties was considered ultra modern at the time, but later it was found to be flawed.'

'The quality of concrete used at the time was sprawling. The 1985 Defective Dwellings Act classifies the homes as defective. The only remedy to sort it out was to pull them down, and the most cost effective means was to replace them with high density housing.'

The majority of the properties were two to three bedroom houses with reasonable size gardens. But, says Jones, that was just about their only redeeming feature. 'They were defective. They were hard to heat. People didn't want to live in them.'

Their replacements – 117 new affordable, high density eco homes 'that people do want to live in' – are under construction. Jones acknowledges that the demolition of the last of the city's 1920s stock represents the end of an era, but unlike Manchester, it is the ending of an era residents would rather forget. His claims that the scheme is proving 'incredibly popular'

are backed up by supportive column inches in the local press.

As Royal British Legion Industries' director of operations, David Jessop is responsible for housing today's ex-service personnel and veterans at the Royal British Legion village in Kent. He considers that the homes for heroes programme was about far more than ensuring the bricks and mortar were in place to house returning servicemen. 'It was very successful in raising the profile of people returning from perhaps one of the worst conflict ever endured. It was an effective way of capturing the desire to look after returning military personnel.'

He says a similar programme would be unfeasible today, since the volume of those returning from conflicts is obviously far smaller than the flood of veterans returning to Britain in 1918.

That is not to say the need is not there. 'There's big demand for good low cost housing [for veterans] that people can afford in a good location. Out waiting list is more or less in three figures. Last year we had over 200 applications.'

Though not part of the homes for heroes programme, the origins of the legion's village lie in the First World War. In the early 1920s it was one of two centres for soldiers who had returned from the front with tuberculosis. In 1925 the organisation bought the 60 acre site from the government, developing a hospital with some nursing accommodation. The hospital began to offer respite care for veterans, followed by housing and even factories in which patients would undertake 'work therapy'.

Today veterans and their families live in 81 properties, and the factories are still going, producing, among other things, railway signs. Some residents have lived in the village, which has its own amenities, for more than 50 years. Others are veterans of the Falklands and Gulf conflicts.

While the face of homes for heroes may have changed, Jessop says the argument for such accommodation remains strong. Besides affirming a nation's gratitude for the sacrifices made by ex-service personnel and veterans, providing services for them is often vital as they come from a very supported background.

'When they are forced to leave, especially if they have suffered physical or mental trauma, the village continues to provide that level of support that allows an individual to make that transition from a very strong community and allow people to get back on their feet.'

Though the story of the original homes for heroes is a faltering one, like those who first lived in them, their legacy endures.