

St Marys Close, Shincliffe - An Appreciation, 2009

Origins

St Marys Close was a development completed in 1962 for the Dean and Chapter of Durham. The site was a field between the churchyard, Hall Farm, gardens of houses on the village street and Low Road. It had been the village cricket ground but it was otherwise waste ground that could not be used for agriculture because the steep slope at the only entrance restricted access. The site was in two parts divided by the central line of trees - the lower owned by the Cathedral and the upper, glebe land, owned by the Diocese of Durham. The Chapter undertook to develop both parts for housing to enhance a village that had already changed greatly since building the bypass.

In the 1950's housing in County Durham had scarcely recovered from the slump of the 1930's and any new houses were generally of poor design. The Chapter wanted their new development to be the best of modern design. It was expected to enhance the attractiveness of the village, most of which they owned. It could even be quite revolutionary in concept if the architect wanted.

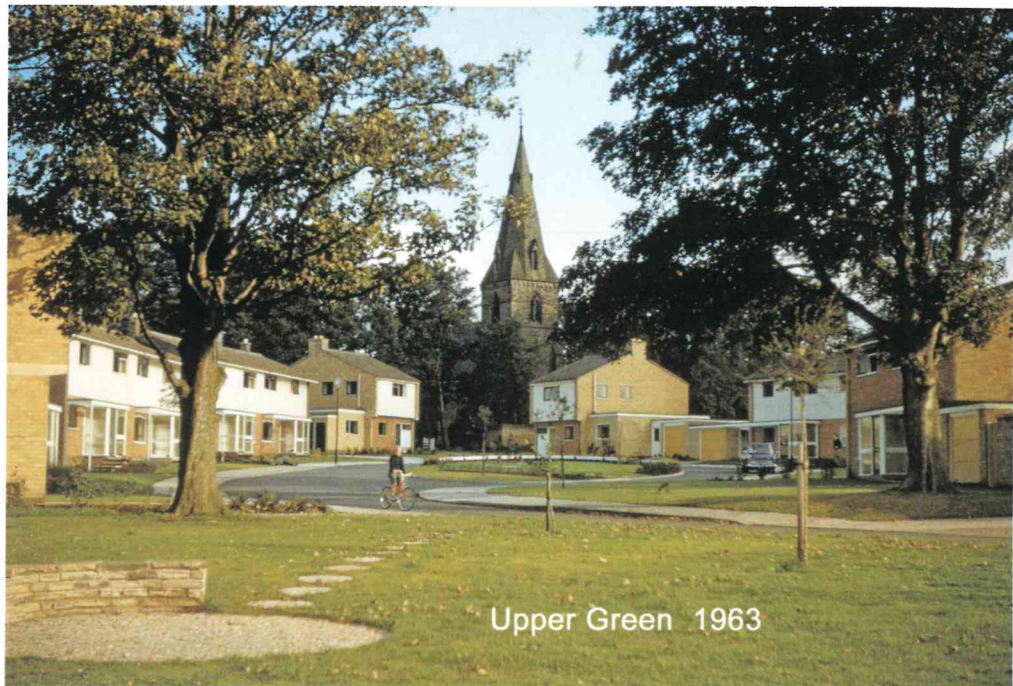
The architect, Donald Insall, FRIBA, MRTPI, was appointed to design low-density housing on the site. At that time it was most unusual to employ an architect to design a housing estate and it still is. The design was to include layout, house design and details and even landscaping.

The company of Donald Insall and Partners has since become highly regarded nationally especially for its work on the restoration of historic buildings including the House of Commons, Windsor Castle after the fire and many famous public buildings. The practice and its founder have been awarded a large number of prizes for architectural excellence.

Design - The Basic Concept

Donald Insall's objective in Shincliffe was to design modern housing closely integrated with the character and atmosphere of the village. The village street was first studied in detail to try to determine what made it so attractive. The key features were found to be its sense of place and community, its harmonious but varied architectural detail and its enclosed greens, trees and planting. The Chapter and the architect wanted to reproduce these characteristics in the layout of the Close.

The site contains two rows of mature sycamore trees, one along the east boundary with the churchyard and the other a parallel row across the middle. The trees would make a natural division of the site with houses arranged around two large green areas called the Middle and Upper Greens. The objective was to give a precinct character to the development.



Design - The Layout

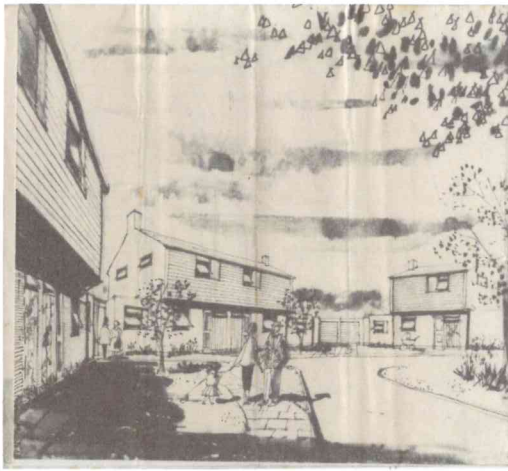
In designing the layout great emphasis was placed on appearance as seen in every direction within the site. The dominant feature was to be the view of the spire at the end of the gentle slope up towards the Church. The houses themselves were designed to look inwards toward the Greens and they are made to feel sheltered by linking them with a continuous ground floor frontage of single storey blocks and garages. This gave a sense of enclosure while leaving gaps at first-floor level positioned to open distant views of trees and woodland.

The steep slope at the entrance to the Close had to be reduced for access. It was bordered by single storey houses so as not to distract from the view inwards. The houses are stepped up the slope and set at an angle to the road to provide a link with the village. The low pitched roofs were designed to avoid an intrusive skyline.

The houses around the Middle Green have views on to a planted area for children's play with seats and paths backed by the line of trees. The houses around the Upper Green are deliberately stepped and angled to give two continuous visual crescents leading the eye up to the view of the Church. This is further emphasized by the steadily rising line of the white weatherboarding above mellow red brickwork at ground floor level and by the alignment of first floor windows top and bottom.

Architectural Design

The houses are of four main types but with many unifying features giving variety within a coherent appearance to the whole estate. They were planned to be simple and village-like rather than suburban. Visually the main features of the front elevations are simple rectangles and squares throughout. Ground floor building was in rectilinear blocks - garages, kitchens and white painted glazed porches of uniform sizes. Bricks were carefully selected for texture and colour to contrast with the white horizontal boarding of most of the upper frontages. Square and rectangular windows with white frames and black openers were another unifying feature.



The Concept, 1959



50 Years Later

Some of the houses were designed with the kitchen at the front so as to look out to one of the Greens - another break with tradition for that time. Internally, variations could be made in the room layout and Numbers 10 to 13 were designed individually by the architect but still within the constraints of the overall concept. Most garages were set back to leave driveway spaces for parking without cars being visible. Hardrow tiles on low-pitch roofs were another unifying feature.

Landscaping

A great deal of attention was paid to landscaping and planting of the common areas designed by the landscape staff under the County Planning Officer. Front gardens were to be open and planted to emphasize the unity of the design - again quite unusual at that time. Details such as paving and street lighting were carefully considered.

Building

The houses were built by the Durham company of Bell and Ridley Ltd. When we arrived in Oct 1960 a few had been completed and numbers 1, 9, 15, 16 and 27-29 were shortly to be occupied. The detached house, No 1, was interesting as it deviated from the original plan - instead of being half of one of the semidetached pairs planned for Nos 2-7 the buyer preferred half of the design of Nos 23-28 and this was accepted. As a consequence Nos 8 and 9 were made the same type to keep the balance in the design of the Upper Green.

No 8 was not ready for occupation until Oct 1961 but by Oct 1962 all houses were almost complete.

The Impact

The Close was immediately recognised as a groundbreaking development. During the 1960's and 70's it attracted many visitors and a great deal of interest locally and even nationally through articles and photographs that were also used in County and Regional publicity brochures. It achieved two prestigious Awards for its coherence and modernity - unusual for a housing scheme both then and now. Similar design principles are now adopted by house-builders all over England but usually in a debased form. However the Close was a pioneering design and in the early 1960's it was quite revolutionary particularly in County Durham where house building was only just reviving after many years of neglect. It is probably the best unchanged example of 1960's design in the County.



The Rising Lines of White Weatherboarding in the Upper Green

Conservation

The houses were originally on 99-year leases which protected the appearance through a highly restrictive Covenant agreed willingly by the first owners. This required owners to maintain the landscaping, house painting, etc and it prohibited TV aerials and similar additions. However the Covenant lost its legal status with changes in Leasehold Law in 1967 and 1974. All the houses are now freehold but there remains some confusion about ownership of the common areas that is still not fully resolved although the Council do maintain them as a concession.

On the whole the frontal appearance of the Close has not changed greatly in nearly 50 years. Most houses have changed hands and new owners may not always have been made aware of the Conservation status and restrictions. The appearance of one house has recently been allowed a considerable change and several others have had small changes. Many have been extended at the back without affecting the general views.



**View of Church from Middle Green in 1963
now only visible from the Upper Green due to growth of trees**

Many smaller changes to the appearance have occurred - wooden weatherboarding and window frames have been replaced by UPVC, many of the black frames of window openings are now white, gray steel guttering has been replaced with white PVC, UHF TV aerials have become essential, roof tiles are being replaced, the paving has deteriorated and drives have been resurfaced in different materials. The trees have grown, some of the original shrubs have been removed but others still grow vigorously. They are all now covered by Tree Preservation Orders

On 30 November 1976 the whole of Shincliffe Village was designated as a Conservation Area - one of 93 in the County. The DCC Unitary Authority policy is that these are areas 'the character and appearance of which should be preserved or enhanced'. It is still to be seen how this policy is implemented in practice. Each Conservation Area in the County should have a written assessment giving reasons for its status. However, this has still not been produced for Shincliffe, raising difficulties for the determination of Planning Applications for the Close.

In spite of this official uncertainty the original concept of St Marys Close has survived well for nearly 50 years and hopefully its appearance will be preserved without major changes for many more years to come.

Martin J Morant, 19 May 2009

In writing this account I have referred to original documents and an article in *Housing Review*

