

NELSON • LANCASHIRE

What future for mill housing?

English Heritage is preparing for a Compulsory Purchase Inquiry over the issue of whether terrace housing in an historic urban environment in Nelson, Lancashire, should be regenerated rather than cleared for redevelopment

The Calder Valley in north-east Lancashire witnessed very significant levels of population expansion in the late 19th century due to the growth of cotton manufacture and weaving in the area. Nelson, which took its name from the Nelson Inn, was the fastest growing town in the county during this period. This was particularly so after the formation in 1864 of the Local Board which controlled street planning, building-plot layout, construction of houses and mills, and was closely involved in the provision of public services, such as gas works, water works, reservoirs and sewerage plants. The Board's work led to a standardisation of the urban fabric, specifically to improve the general health of its occupants and to guard against the worst effects of unregulated building. Before 1890, much development was piecemeal, with terraces resulting from a number of phases of construction by small-scale speculators. This is particularly true in the Whitefield area of the

town, where terraces show staged construction and, as a result, subtle differences of form and finish. Elsewhere, in the later parts of the town, the grain of development is larger and a more uniform appearance results from the grid of the streets.

Conservation or clearance?

Areas of terrace housing adjacent to St Mary's Church (Grade II) were designated as a conservation area by Pendle Borough Council in March 2000. However, the council has declined to designate an extension to the conservation area, and the core of terrace housing between this and the Leeds and Liverpool Canal has been declared a Clearance Area by the local authority. The council had concluded that unsatisfactory living conditions are best dealt with by wholesale demolition and redevelopment. Using its powers under the Housing Act 1985 and the Acquisition of Land Act 1981, the council is seeking to use



Shops at Nelson, East Lancashire, serving the Bangladeshi community

compulsory purchase as the first step towards clearance and redevelopment.

The proposals raise serious issues about the value of the built environment for the local community - in this case a closely-knit Asian community, the majority of whom wish to remain, many having invested significantly in their properties. It also raises questions about the local authority's reluctance to explore a more balanced approach that would allow improvements to be stitched into the existing built environment, allowing it to retain its character. The council believes that the condition of the housing is worse than elsewhere in its renewal area and that property values mean that the cost of repair outweighs the end value. In its view, a certain scale of clearance is necessary in order to encourage the private sector to invest.

Compulsory Purchase Inquiry

English Heritage has registered its formal objections to the clearance and is preparing for a Compulsory Purchase Inquiry that is likely to be held in the autumn of 2001. English Heritage's Architectural Investigation Team, under the guidance of Nicola Wray, has undertaken a

detailed study of the clearance area's development, form and importance, while the council's condition survey and economic arguments are both being subjected to detailed examination. A wider context for Nelson's housing will in due course be provided by the Lancashire Extensive Towns Survey, being undertaken by John Darlington at Lancashire County Council. A range of other bodies has also indicated their willingness to support English Heritage's case, from the North-West Heritage Trust, who themselves own property in the clearance area and are working closely with the local residents, to national amenity societies.

The inquiry is likely to be charged, not least because of recent disturbances in the North-West. The issues need to be discussed in the light of the continuing debate surrounding the wider social context of the historic environment. It is worth reflecting on a recent article in *The Independent*, 'Whites on the top of the valley, Asians at the bottom. Is Nelson another town ready to blow?' (30 June 2001), by North of England Correspondent, Ian Herbert:

As in Oldham and Burnley, Nelson's Pakistanis and Bangladeshis pass up social housing and instead huddle together in hopelessly poor Victorian terraces that have been changing hands for £5,500 and provide both back-to-back security and the space large families need to stay together.

This appears to reflect deeply-held prejudices about terrace housing in the North-West, a problem that extends to many other surviving elements of the industrial landscape. It entirely ignores the value placed on the terraces by the local community and the potential for improvement to properties within the existing urban grain rather than replacement. The North-West is said to have one of the highest densities of 'unfit' housing in England. The draft Regional Planning Guidance suggests that as many as 75,000 pre-1919 terrace properties may have to be cleared to stimulate social and economic regeneration. There is a clear need, however, for public debate on whether wholesale clearance is the only approach and whether the problem lies with the image of terrace housing rather than its ability to be sensitively and effectively adapted. □

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