

Chapter 1

The Rise and Fall of Castle Vale, 1964 - 1993



A 1960s view of Castle Vale from a tower block on Farnborough Road showing the newly built Castle Vale Comprehensive School in the distance.

Castle Vale wasn't always a sink estate. In the 1960s it was a modern, well-equipped, and apparently popular place to live. It was also much needed. At the beginning of the 1960s over 50,000 people were waiting for housing in Birmingham.

The built version of the estate was not the original. An earlier masterplan, described by a contemporary account as a 'miniature garden city'¹, had been devised in 1961. But it fell by the wayside. One of the critical factors in its demise was an internal dispute at Birmingham City Council². It would be a further three years before work actually began, by which time the vision looked very different.

The second masterplan, the work of Birmingham city architect J R Sheridan-Shedden, was arranged in a Radburn Layout, which places 'superblocks' of housing, shops, offices, and schools around communal green spaces. The modernist idea, pioneered by Clarence Stein in Radburn, New Jersey in 1929, was to separate pedestrians and vehicles. Stein also believed that a high quality of life was derived from having all day-to-day activities within walking distance. At no stage were prospective tenants invited to comment on either of the masterplans.

The estate was also touched by the enthusiasm for automobiles that

influenced so much economic and physical development in post-war Birmingham. It is easily accessible from Kingsbury Road to the north, Chester Road to the west, and the M6 to the south. Two railway lines and the River Tame also border the estate. The combined effect turned Castle Vale into a well-connected island.

Another unusual characteristic was the mixture of tenure. From the outset approximately 30% of the estate was built for private sale, principally the Park Lane area in the north-east of the estate. In the 1960s it was unusual to find any significant mix of tenure in a large area of municipal housing.

In scale and composition Castle Vale bears many hallmarks of a new town, albeit with distinctive features. It sits on top of Castle Bromwich Airfield. During the Second World War, Spitfires and Lancaster Bombers were manufactured at Castle Bromwich and tested at the airfield, now the site of a Jaguar factory. The three main roads that run east-west through the estate were once runways.

In its original form the estate comprised nearly 5,000 homes, including 2,000 high-rise flats, two shopping centres, five schools, two churches, a swimming pool, as well as other social and community facilities. There were 34 tower blocks. The largest

groupings were the 14 along the Farnborough Road, and a central group of eight. Nobody could have predicted that within a decade 'Centre 8' would be a regional synonym for crime and urban squalor.

In the early years Castle Vale was populated by families displaced by large-scale clearance programmes in Birmingham. The majority came from Nechells and Aston, predominantly white, working class areas, with large Irish minorities.

Some people loved it. Sue Spicer's family moved to a flat in the Centre 8 in 1969. "It was a huge improvement on our house in Aston. We had an indoor toilet, and there was so much green space. Mobile butchers and grocers came to our door. It seemed like Utopia."

Others weren't so sure. Pat Smith, a health worker on the estate between 1968 and 1988 recalls that: "People felt unsettled, on edge. Many had come from the old back-to-backs, places with strong social ties. Castle Vale was a shock to the system. The lack of safe play space and the cost of under-floor heating were major bones of contention. People were used to coal fires, which were much cheaper to run. But housing was the focal point of discontent."



Castle Vale at night - a photograph of the Centre 8 tower blocks taken by resident Steve Wilkie in about 1993.

¹Architect's Journal, 29 July, 1964. ²In the 1960s responsibility for planning at Birmingham City Council was divided between the Public Works Committee and the House Building Committee. Both considered themselves responsible for zoning. The crossover provoked heated exchanges, and a breakdown in communication – the placement of Castle Vale's shopping centre was a particular bone of contention. The garden city concept was lost in the crossfire of recrimination. Ibid.



Farnborough Road 14 tower blocks, 1994.

The fall

“The problems began when people were moved here who didn’t want to be here,” says Carole Rafferty, long-term community representative and chair of the Tenants and Residents Alliance (see chapter 2)³.

The large-scale relocation of communities may have been traumatic, but residents of Castle Vale were at least united by shared experience. Reluctant newcomers began to corrode those bonds.

“By the late 1970s it became evident that drug dealers were working on the estate. And violent incidents began to accumulate, there had never previously been a problem with violence,” says Rafferty.

Pat Smith recalls the demise of the ‘rent man’. “It must have been the mid-to-late 1970s when the rent man stopped going from door to door. There had been one mugging too many.” From then on rent was collected by post or at the neighbourhood office. Another thread of community cohesion had snapped.

The seeds of discontent blossomed throughout the 1980s. The banks, solicitors and weekly markets all disappeared. The schools were failing. People were increasingly ashamed of the estate. More

than one resident remembers that people would shuffle their feet and mumble ‘Erdington’ or ‘Minworth’ when asked where they came from.

Lord Corbett of Castle Vale, Labour peer and loyal supporter of the Housing Action Trust, first witnessed the depths to which Castle Vale had sunk in 1983. “I was Member of Parliament for Erdington at the time, and went to the estate to canvass as part of that miserable election campaign. I was absolutely appalled by what I saw, an estate of tower blocks like giant battery cages. It was a civic pigsty. It was clear that Birmingham City Council didn’t have the funds to make the necessary improvements.”

Another resident, who prefers to remain anonymous, remembers that car theft was a big problem: “At least twice I walked out of the front door to watch my car being driven away.”

Teenagers growing up on the estate would spend evenings at the top of Concorde Tower, the tallest high-rise on the estate, watching the cars racing below. The long straight roads were popular with joy riders.

Paul Hill, an artist, who has lived in Castle Vale since the early 1970s, recalls the departure of the last bank as the time the rot set in. “I think it must have been around 1987. Then the estate was

really in trouble.” After that, loan sharks were the only option available to people in need of financial support.

Every Thursday morning money lenders would congregate outside the Post Office armed with their clients’ books. They would take their share of the money, and return the following week. The bleak wind-blown shopping centre was a suitably dismal setting for the ritual.

As the years went by the quality of life continued to deteriorate. Tenants no longer expected the council to respond to their complaints. “I lived at Cranwell [one of the ‘Centre 8’ tower blocks]. I don’t think it received any investment for 18 years. The lift kept breaking down. But things really began to go down hill when the police station in the ground floor was closed down,” says Sue Spicer.

Winters on Castle Vale were particularly grim. “Because the maisonette blocks were so badly built they were almost impossible to heat. We had quarterly electricity bills of between £300-500, and still the flat was freezing, with ice on the inside of the windows,” recalls Wendy Walsh, who was bringing up two young children in the early 1990s⁴. “It seems amazing to think of it now, but we spent entire winters in the living room, to keep warm. I used to bath the children in a paddling pool.”

Another young mother in the early 1990s, who lived in a first floor flat of a maisonette block, recalls: “The flat was above the rubbish chute. There were so many fires in the chute, some set off deliberately, others caused by garden waste. The fire services took ages to respond, if they responded at all. I remember once, eight months pregnant with my second child, standing in the smoke-filled hallway with a fire extinguisher trying to put out a fire.”

Animals were another feature of life in Castle Vale. “We knew they were a problem, particularly in the tower blocks,” says Richard Temple Cox, chairman of the Housing Action Trust. “So we advertised for unwanted pets, and worked with schools to use them as an educational tool. The first donation was a donkey, which had been living on the balcony of a ninth floor flat.”

Unsurprisingly, the quality of life had a terrible impact on the health of the local population. A Health Needs Assessment published in 1992 revealed that life expectancy was only 68.3 years (the national average was closer to 76⁵), and the estate had among the highest rates of infant mortality in the West Midlands. “From the mid-1970s there were growing numbers of children with upper respiratory problems, particularly those living in the flat-roofed maisonette blocks,” recalls Pat Smith. The report also showed that 1,517 heavy drinkers and over 650 substance



View of Castle Vale in the 1960’s showing Chivenor House/School in the distance.

³In 2000 Carole Rafferty was awarded an MBE for services to the regeneration of Castle Vale.

⁴In 2004 Wendy Walsh was appointed chair of Castle Vale Community Housing Association (see chapters 3 and 9). ⁵In 1991 the expectation of life at birth across the United Kingdom was: 73.2 years (male), and 78.7 years (female). Source: Office of National Statistics.



View of Concorde tower and the Sopwith Croft area in about 1993.



Typical 1960s built walk-up block of flats.



Castle Vale shopping centre precinct, c1994.



View of Farnborough Road tower blocks from southern perimeter, c1994.

abusers lived in Castle Vale⁶. Unemployment was another problem. In 1993 it was running at 26%, with limited potential for improvement. By then Castle Vale was notorious throughout the West Midlands. Job applications marked with a B35 postcode went to the bottom of the pile.

Standards of educational attainment were poor. There are four junior schools and one secondary school in Castle Vale. All had unsustainably small student populations. “Some of the parents treated us as a free child-minding service,” says Steve Holloway, head teacher of Chivenor Junior School. “Aspirations were very low.”

The estate’s reputation also made it difficult to attract teachers. “I remember interviewing for Birmingham Education Authority and asking Non-Qualified Teachers where they’d like to work. Invariably the answer was, ‘anywhere but Castle Vale’. And there was the time we had an Ofsted. I took the advisor to the shopping centre to get some lunch. He was genuinely scared,” says Holloway.

Newcomers to Castle Vale couldn’t fail to pick up on the atmosphere. “When I arrived in 1991 they gave me a flat on the 14th floor of Concorde Tower. There was no front door, no back door. The wind whistled right through. There was no community spirit whatsoever. You just kept your mouth shut. The only people you

knew were the people on your own floor. I hated it,” says Beatrice Lunn (see introduction).

Jez Lilley moved to Castle Vale after leaving the army in 1986. “I lived like a hermit for the first two years. The army cares about you. Here nobody talked to me. I was terrified to be honest.”

For years Birmingham City Council had been aware of the gravity of Castle Vale’s problems. Final confirmation came in 1991 when a chunk of concrete fell from one of the tower blocks. There was nobody underneath, but Castle Vale was falling apart.

The revival

In July 1991 Derek Waddington, then director of housing at Birmingham City Council, heard about the Housing Action Trust in North Hull. He wondered whether a similar approach could work in Castle Vale. After a fact-finding visit to Hull, Waddington recommended the model to Dick Knowles, then leader of the council. The prospect of a large Labour-controlled local council cutting a deal with a Conservative government known for its antipathy to local authorities seemed unlikely. But Waddington persevered.

He was assisted by Stan Austin, a local resident and chair of housing

⁶At the time the estate had a population of around 10,000.



One of the unpopular maisonette blocks, c1994.

at the Council. Their alliance was instrumental in lobbying the Labour Group at Birmingham City Council for Castle Vale's Housing Action Trust status.

One night in the autumn of 1991 Waddington was summoned to a meeting of the Labour Group. "I was asked to make a presentation on the possibilities offered by the HAT model. I told them that in my opinion it represented Castle Vale's last and best chance."

After discussions late into the night Waddington's recommendation was carried. The next day Birmingham City Council opened negotiations with the Department of the Environment on how to approach the establishment of a Housing Action Trust in Castle Vale.

The news was made public in December 1991 when Michael Heseltine announced to Parliament that Castle Vale was the latest candidate for Housing Action Trust status.

By then the people of Castle Vale already knew. The morning of the announcement everyone had been sent a letter explaining what was happening. "We knew that the tenant ballot, which would decide whether or not the Housing Action Trust happened, might be a way off, but it was essential to get the tenants on board from day one," says Waddington.

This determination to consult the public was in part a reflection of negative responses to the Housing Action Trust model, which had struggled for support since 1988. In their original incarnation, tenants did not have a vote on Housing Action Trusts. They were to be imposed by a central government increasingly synonymous with privatisation.

This and other bullish Tory tactics meant that early attempts to establish Trusts in Lambeth, Tower Hamlets, Southwark, Leeds, Sandwell, and Sunderland were met with extreme scepticism. Ultimately a Labour amendment in the House of Lords was required to ensure that tenants would have a vote in future Housing Action Trust proposals.

The furore meant that the policy went quiet for a while. When it re-emerged it was in a much more palatable format. Second time round there was also increased pressure for Housing Action Trusts to be a success.

Richard Temple Cox⁷, a prominent Birmingham architect, was appointed shadow chairman of the Housing Action Trust in the autumn of 1992. "I was charged with persuading the estate to vote for the HAT. I was given one government minder from London to work with," he recalls.



View of Farnborough Road from Vulcan House c1979.



View of Farnborough Road low-rise homes in the 1960's.



View of Centre 8 in the early 1990s.

⁷In 2002, Richard Temple Cox was awarded the CBE for services to regeneration in Birmingham.



A number of pubs were demolished to make way for new developments.



Patrick Allen, of the Department of the Environment, was seconded to Birmingham City Council in November 1992. He had a rude awakening. “The first day I was there, working from a converted pram shed at the bottom of Concorde Tower, there was an armed robbery at the Post Office,” says Allen⁸.

Public meetings were held to introduce the idea of the Housing Action Trust. Temple Cox recalls: “The residents looked malnourished and tired. In some faces there was barely a vestige of hope.”

It was after one of these meetings that residents interested in playing a role in exploring the Housing Action Trust proposal further were asked to make themselves known. Twenty-five stayed behind. They became the Community Action Team.

It was agreed by all members that they would not come to any decisions until they were in possession of all the facts.

“We visited some of the other Housing Action Trusts, where we saw for ourselves the difference they could make,” says Bev McQuoid, one of the original members, who moved to Castle Vale in 1978. “We wanted everyone to know as much as possible. We were battling against apathy.” But that wasn’t the only problem.

Carole Rafferty, leader of the Community Action Team, remembers: “The council offered security. People knew what they were going to get. The idea of transferring to an unknown organisation, which at the time didn’t even exist, did worry a lot of people. But we weren’t blind to the problems on the estate.”

After 18 months working on the Housing Action Trust proposal, the Community Action Team agreed to give it their backing, although they did have some reservations.

One of the Community Action Team’s main concerns was to ensure that, in the event of a yes vote, the voice of the people would be heard. “That’s why we dug our heels in about the number of residents on the Board,” says McQuoid.

The original proposal of a ten-strong Board, composed of three residents, three local authority nominees, three independent members, and a chairman, was deemed unacceptable. The Community Action Team wanted five resident representatives, which the Department of the Environment balked at. In the end a compromise saw the Board increased to 12, with four resident reps, three local authority councillors, and five independents.

Campaigning went on throughout the autumn of 1992. A Portakabin was set up in Reed Square, where Department of the Environment, Birmingham City Council, Community Action Team, and members of the shadow Housing Action Trust Board would answer questions and soothe concerns. Meetings and road-shows became regular features of life on the estate. There was even a free video delivered to every household. This was pretty fancy stuff in the early 1990s, an indication of the government’s commitment to securing a positive vote.

In December 1992, one year after the Housing Action Trust had been proposed for Castle Vale, Tony Baldry, Minister for Housing announced the ballot date – 18 March 1993. What followed was three months of lobbying, with local councillors, government officials, and the shadow board all trying to make their case to residents.

From the Housing Action Trust’s perspective the work of John Thompson would be vital to a successful campaign. “He was an architect with a high reputation for community involvement,” says Temple Cox. Between January and March 1993 Thompson and his team ran a series of neighbourhood meetings, where residents were invited to express their concerns and aspirations about a range of issues, including crime, housing, and education.

The idea was to get residents to imagine what life could be like. “It was quite tough to get people to dream, to envisage a different world. We found that a lot of people had never left Castle Vale,” says Thompson.

But the events served a purpose. “They helped to galvanise people, changing attitudes from, ‘we’ve had people like you here before’ to something much more positive,” says Temple Cox.

Not everybody was happy. “There was a well-organised left-wing faction, who rallied behind a local Labour councillor [see chapter 2]. Their view was that if the HAT was really about community empowerment they should be handling the budget. It took a couple of years to get through their opposition. It was a disruptive and painful experience. It took time, but we knew we had time,” says Temple Cox.

Another Labour Councillor, Marje Bridle, led a council group to prevent similar organisations being set up elsewhere in Birmingham. “I was angry that Castle Vale was getting so much money. I felt that it should have been shared around. Looking back I’m not very proud of that,” says Bridle, who became deputy chair of the Housing Action Trust in 2002.



Evidence of graffiti and grime in the early 1990s.



In the early 1990s Castle Vale had a very poor environment. Fly tipping and rubbish dumping were common occurrences.



Opposition and public disinterest meant that there were no guarantees of success. “It was an uncertain time. The vote was always in the balance,” says Patrick Allen. It is a recollection that makes the results seem remarkable. The ballot produced a turnout of 74%, of whom 92% voted in favour of the Housing Action Trust. Baldry announced the good news on 15 April 1993.

The residents of a 1960s experiment in social housing had voted to be part of a social engineering experiment in the 1990s. It was a leap of faith.

Castle Vale

Where is it?

The roughly rectangular 481-acre island site is five miles north-east of Birmingham city centre. It is bordered by Chester Road to the west, Kingsbury Road to the north, and a railway line to the east. The River Tame runs through the south of the estate. The M6 is visible, and audible, on the other side of the river valley. The estate occupies the site of the former Castle Bromwich Airfield. During the Second World War, Spitfires and Lancasters produced at Castle Bromwich (now a Jaguar plant) were tested there. This heroic legacy has imbued an otherwise rootless and isolated estate with a much-needed sense of identity. Even the name ‘Castle Vale’ is new. It was selected in a public competition during the early 1960s, soon after the airfield was proposed for development.

What’s the population?

Castle Vale is Birmingham’s largest post-war housing estate. It has a population of approximately 9,000, with 4,000 households.

Who lives there?

There is increasing ethnic diversity in Castle Vale but the vast majority of the population has always been white – the 2001 census revealed that only 8% of residents were from black or minority ethnic backgrounds, up from 5% in

1991. In the early days the majority of residents were families displaced by Birmingham’s clearance programme. Many came from Nechells and Aston, traditionally working class areas with large Irish populations.

When was it built?

The estate was built between 1964 and 1969. Birmingham city architect J R Sheridan-Shedden devised the masterplan based on the Radburn Layout, a system that orientates large blocks of housing, shops, and schools around open green space. Castle Vale was a post-war new town in all but name. As well as 34 tower blocks the estate included 3,400 low-rise homes (a mixture of detached, semi-detached, and maisonette dwellings), two shopping centres, five schools, two churches, a swimming pool, and other social and community facilities. Unusually, around 30% of the estate was built for private sale. The majority of private properties were built in the Park Lane area, to the north-east of the estate.

Housing Action Trusts

What is a Housing Action Trust?

Housing Action Trusts were Non Departmental Public Bodies set up by central government to address problems of poor housing, economic deprivation, and social decay in urban areas. They were first proposed in a Department of the Environment Consultation Document in 1987. The intention behind the Trusts was listed in Clause 60 (5) of the 1988 Housing Bill. The role of each Housing Action Trust was to: “Carry out a major programme of renovation in consultation with the residents, bring empty council properties back into use, improve the way estates are looked after and generally help improve the economic, environmental and social condition of the area”.

Why did the early attempts to establish Housing Action Trusts fail?

The original Housing Action Trust legislation was substantially different from the model that we know today. The key difference is resident involvement. Originally Margaret Thatcher’s government proposed that areas in desperate need of assistance would be removed from the control of local authorities and transferred to Housing Action Trusts. That prospect angered residents and local authorities in the six areas proposed for Housing Action Trusts – three in London, and one each in Leeds, Sandwell, and Sunderland. Many resented the imposition, and suspected back-door privatisation. The hostile reaction led to a Labour amendment in the House of Lords, stating that tenants

must have the opportunity to vote on whether their estate would transfer to a Housing Action Trust (6 November 1988). For the next three years Housing Action Trusts slipped off the political radar. They re-emerged in a more acceptable format. This time tenants had the right to vote. They also had the right to return to the council at the end of the Housing Action Trust, and rents would be frozen.

What was new about Housing Action Trusts?

Housing Action Trusts were an innovative experiment in addressing symptoms of multiple deprivation. Several of the methodologies that underpinned the Housing Action Trust approach have subsequently become mainstays of urban regeneration policy. These include:

- 1) Approaching estate-based regeneration from an holistic perspective. That is to say, issues of poor housing, low educational attainment, and high crime rates were treated as related problems, requiring head teachers, the police force and housing managers to work in partnership to find solutions.
- 2) Insisting that residents take a lead role in formulating regeneration strategy.
- 3) Ensuring that the benefits of regeneration were sustainable beyond the Housing Action Trust’s life-time.
- 4) Housing Action Trusts also made the idea of Stock Transfer acceptable. Today the transfer of authority for public housing is common practice, but in the late 1980s and early 1990s it was considered to be radical action.

How many were there?

There were only ever six Housing Action Trusts. In chronological order: North Hull, Waltham Forest (East London), Liverpool, Tower Hamlets (East London), Castle Vale, and Stonebridge (North London). All were set up between 1991 and 1994, and lasted for 8-12 years. Stonebridge will be the last to wind up in 2007.

If Housing Action Trusts have been so successful, why were there only six?

Their detractors claim that Housing Action Trusts were an expensive means of housing management. Their supporters say that this misses the point. Housing Action Trusts delivered much more than housing. The cost incorporated a range of community development services – including health, education, and community safety – alongside traditional housing management. However, it is true that compared to previous regeneration programmes they were expensive. As a consequence only a certain level of investment could be justified (£200 million was originally allocated for all six; the final amount was around four times that amount). In order to learn as much as possible from the Housing Action Trust experiment it was decided to pilot them in six very different areas. In Liverpool 48 tower blocks ‘pepper potted’ across the city were transferred to the Trust. North Hull is a 1930s cottage estate. Castle Vale was the only island estate.



The dumping and burning of cars was a frequent occurrence in the early to mid 1990s.