

Pinehurst: Swindon's garden suburb?

The Pinehurst housing estate stands about two miles north of Swindon town centre, and although its design was the work of Sir Raymond Unwin, the prominent architect and town planner, it has never been acknowledged as a Garden Suburb. Very little has been written about the estate; Pinehurst is almost unknown for its connection to Unwin, and because it has never been recognised for its connection with the Garden City Movement, it has not been protected by the status it might no doubt earlier have attracted as a Conservation Area. Consequently, it has suffered from the blight of modern infill developments, and from the "improvements" to many of its houses resulting from the introduction of the right-to-buy scheme in 1980.

Nevertheless, the origins of Pinehurst as a garden suburb are still evident from its tree-lined avenues and the large central open space known as "The Circle", as well as the solid housing stock. Below is a modern aerial view:



Figure 1

Pinehurst was the first housing estate to be built by Swindon Corporation, and construction began in 1919, to plans laid out by Unwin on his design principle of concentric circles. Dwellings were solely for rent, and did not include any properties for private sale. The first tenants moved in between June and November 1921. The hub of the estate is a large circular open space, out from which roads radiate like the spokes of a wheel, and which are connected by roads describing the paths of ever wider concentric circles. None of these roads forms an unbroken circle, which is rather a shame; only the road predictably named "The Circle" is complete. The Circle itself has been aesthetically compromised by the construction of modern blocks of three-storey flats within the open space of the south-western semi-circle. Below left is an early plan from the Borough Surveyor's office, and right, Pinehurst as shown on a street map of c.1953:



Figure 2

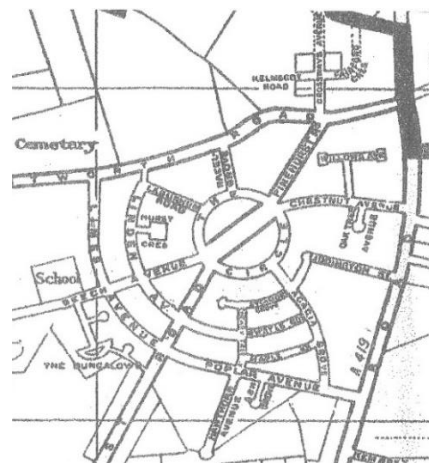


Figure 3

The estate's original building stock comprises mostly two-storey houses, both semi-detached and terraces of four, although there are some semi-detached and terraced bungalows. The high percentage of semi-detached houses was, and remains, unusual on a council estate. There are no maisonettes or flats, except those over the row of shops in The Circle, built in 1932 and since demolished. Flats only appeared with the infill developments of the 1970s and 80s. All of the dwellings have substantial fenced gardens to the front and rear. Whilst the majority of the dwellings are of red brick with slate roofs, a few, all double-fronted semis, are faced in Bath stone, an unusual building material in what is a predominantly red-brick town. The 'monotony' of red brick is relieved by alternate pairs of semi-detached houses or terraces having a roughcast finish to either the lower or upper storey; occasionally they are entirely roughcast. The building style is not noticeably influenced by Howard or Morris, and is probably best described as utility, though not unattractive in scale and composition. A well-known architectural commentator has been more critical. In his chapter on architecture in *Studies in the History of Swindon*, John Betjeman wrote, "*The chief Corporation housing estate at Pinehurst was built at this time [after the First World War] and laid out by Sir Raymond Unwin, though he was not responsible for the rather dull houses with which the estate was adorned.*"¹ There is certainly no suggestion of the Arts and Crafts houses of Hampstead Garden Suburb or Birmingham's Moor Pool estate, but Pinehurst's houses and bungalows, as originally built, are solid and functional. Below is an image of the Borough Surveyor's plans for one house type, showing the external elevations and internal layout; only two pairs of these attractive houses were ever built. Note the unusual interlocking parlours and bedrooms:



Figure 4

Examples of three different Pinehurst house types, all semi-detached, are shown below:



Figure 5



Figure 6



Figure 7

¹ Betjeman, J. *Architecture* in Grinsell, Wells, Tallamy and Betjeman *Studies in the History of Swindon* (Swindon Borough Press 1950) p. 177

Pinehurst Road is the main estate road leading from the town centre, and it is likely that it was a 'catalogue' for all the different house types, four more of which are shown here:



Figure 8



Figure 9



Figure 10

Bungalows were built on just two of Pinehurst's roads, Acacia Grove and the uninspiringly named The Bungalows. Two types are shown below:



Figure 11

The estate was originally outside Swindon's borough boundary, and was not incorporated within the borough until the boundary was extended in 1928. Until the late 1920s, Pinehurst suffered from a complete lack of facilities, with no shops, schools or churches, and only a sporadic bus service into the town centre. Eventually, in 1932, a row of six shops, with flats above, was built on the north-western side of The Circle; the estate was now provided with a post office, grocer, butcher, greengrocer, newsagent and tobacconist, and fish and chip shop. The photograph below was taken shortly before their demolition in 2013; note the date on the central gable:



Figure 12

With the arrival of the shopping parade, The Circle had become the social hub of the estate, with its two churches and a community hall. The Church of England mission church of St.James, pictured below left, closed in the late 1950s, and later became a branch library, in use until a new library was built on the opposite side of The Circle. Note the spirelet, still surmounted by a cross. The building served briefly from 2013 to 2014 as a temporary shop, and still stands, currently unused, on the corner of The Circle and Pinehurst Road North. Below right is Pinehurst Methodist Church; built in 1928 on the south-east side of The Circle, it closed in the early 1970s and served as a Scout hut until its demolition early this century. New social housing now stands on the site.



Figure 13

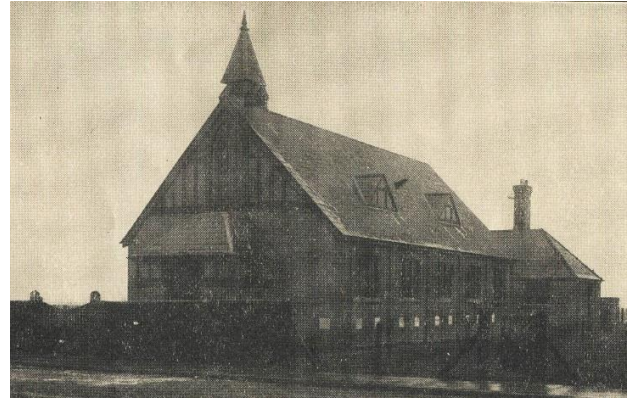


Figure 14

Pinehurst lacked a permanent school building until 1934, when the infants' and junior schools opened in 1934, followed a year later by the secondary school. All three schools occupied the same site immediately to the west of the last house in Beech Avenue. The entire site was demolished in 2010 and replaced by a new building housing an all age academy school. The original schools are pictured below, with the infants' school, which also contained a clinic, on the right, the junior school on the left, and the secondary school, with clock tower, beyond:

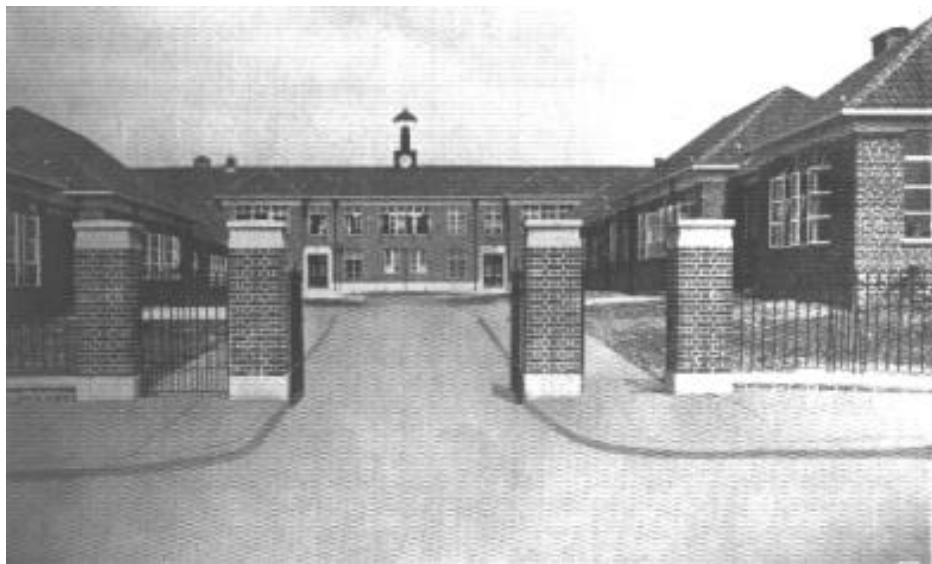


Figure 15

The photograph below is of The Circle in the 1950s, looking southwest from Chestnut Avenue towards Beech Avenue, right, and Pinehurst Road, left. The road dividing The Circle in two was the very first dual carriageway in Swindon. The bus in the distance is beginning the long descent down Pinehurst Road on its route to the town centre. The shops of 1932 are on the right.



Figure 16

Below are two recent pictures of The Circle, the first taken from approximately the same viewpoint as the 1950s photograph above. Note the new shops, replacing those of 1932. The 'new' fish and chip shop, furthest left, is in the same location as before, the only one of the six original shops, its use unchanged, which survived until demolition. The attractive planting has gone from the central reservation, but the trees have matured splendidly. The second picture is a view from the other end of the dual carriageway, towards the junction of Pinehurst Road North, left, and Chestnut Avenue, right. The former St. James's church, with its spirelet, can be seen in the distance. Note the pair of semis facing along the dual carriageway, mirroring those at the other end. Note also how the aesthetic integrity of Unwin's great Circle has been compromised by the modern blocks of flats. None of the houses in either view have remained as built, and some have lost their bay windows in modern 'improvements'.



Figure 17



Figure 18

Building continued throughout the 1930s, but was disrupted by the outbreak of war in 1939. After hostilities ceased, construction resumed in the streets bounded by Poplar Avenue and Acacia Grove, which had been laid out before the war. The urgent need for post-war housing was met, in Pinehurst as elsewhere, by the provision of prefabricated bungalows in these streets – Cherry Tree Grove, Maple Grove, Sycamore Grove and Myrtle Gardens – and also in The Circle, which saw the entire south-eastern semi-circle filled with AIROH² aluminium prefabs. In addition, an entirely new estate

² Aircraft Industries Research Organization on Housing

of prefabs was built as a western annexe of Pinehurst, to the south of an extended³ Beech Avenue. These were all of the two-storey Howard and BISF⁴ type, designed by Sir Frederick Gibberd, and were intended to be permanent. Gibberd's Pinehurst prefabs are still very much in use, although all those still in council ownership⁵ have had their asbestos cladding removed, and have been reroofed, refaced and had double-glazing installed. The AIROH bungalows were only ever intended to be temporary, however, and have all long since been swept away and replaced with modern permanent houses of traditional build. The illustrations below are of a BISF house in Cunningham Road, left, still standing, and now demolished AIROH bungalows of two different types in Sycamore Grove, centre, and Maple Grove, right:



Figure 19



Figure 20



Figure 21

The illustration below shows a pair of Howard prefabs in Beech Avenue, much improved since they were first built. Note that the house on the right still has its asbestos roof.



Figure 22

It is unlikely that Swindon Corporation's planners and borough surveyors of 1918 had ever intended that Pinehurst be conceived as a garden suburb, despite the connection with Sir Raymond Unwin, but it was simply the first council estate in the town. Unlike the building of the Cutteslowe estate in Oxford, Pinehurst was not built to rehouse those displaced by slum clearances, as Swindon - possibly uniquely amongst large industrial towns - had never had slums. The estate has suffered down the years from social problems, as have most council estates, but never because of poor housing. The borough council has invested huge sums in improvements to the original housing stock,

³ It had obviously never been the original intention to extend Beech Avenue westward, as the house numbering starts at the western end and progresses eastward to no. 31 at The Circle. The avenue's extension has resulted in no.1, an "Unwin" house, being next door to no.33, a Gibberd house.

⁴ British Iron and Steel Federation

⁵ As with any other council houses, these have been popular purchases in the Right-to-Buy scheme.

such as the installation of double glazing and central heating. The houses of Pinehurst, though they may be “rather dull”, have stood for nearly a century, and will probably stand for a century more.

The final illustration shows Pinehurst Road, looking towards the town centre, with the mature trees in full leaf; this view is what sets Pinehurst, the garden suburb that never was, apart from all other council estates in Swindon.



Figure 23

Acknowledgements:

Francis Frith: Fig.16
Google Maps: Figs.17, 22-23
Pinterest: Figs.1, 12-13,18
Swindon & District Directory and Year Book 1952-3: Fig.3
Swindon Libraries Collection: Figs.2, 4-11, 14-15, 19-21

Michael Enright
Mob: 07427 640490
Email: enright78@btinternet.com