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# The history and heritage of Lincoln's council estates: local history and 'critical' public history in practice

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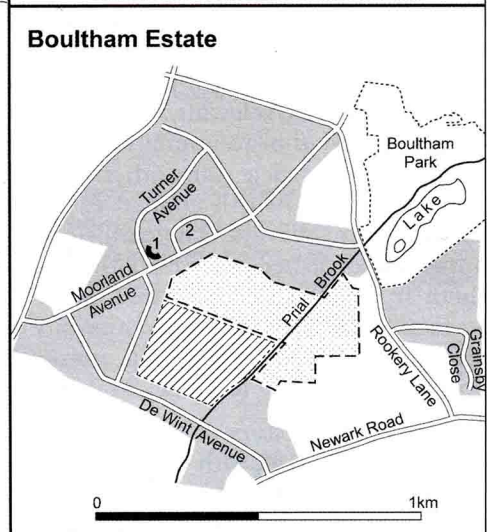
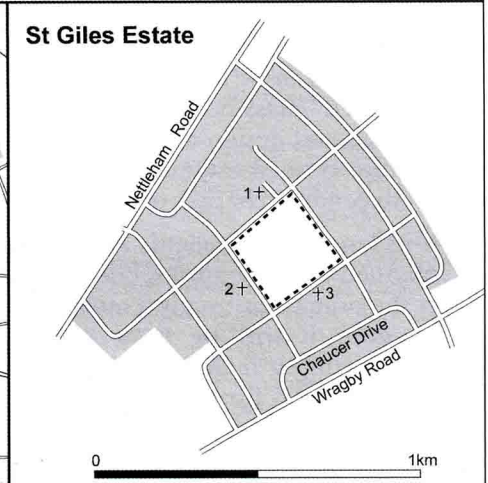
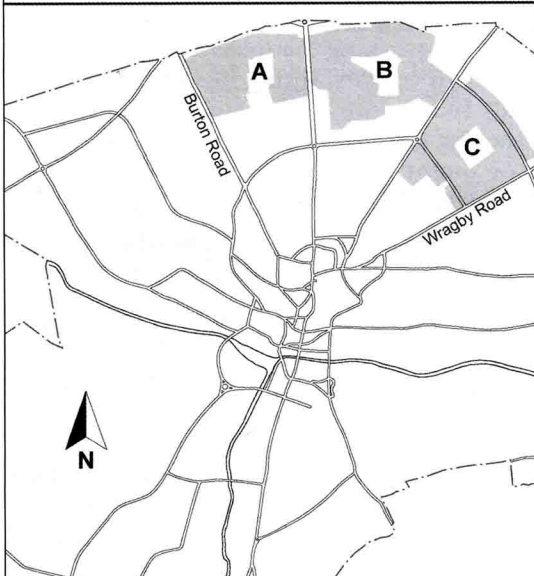
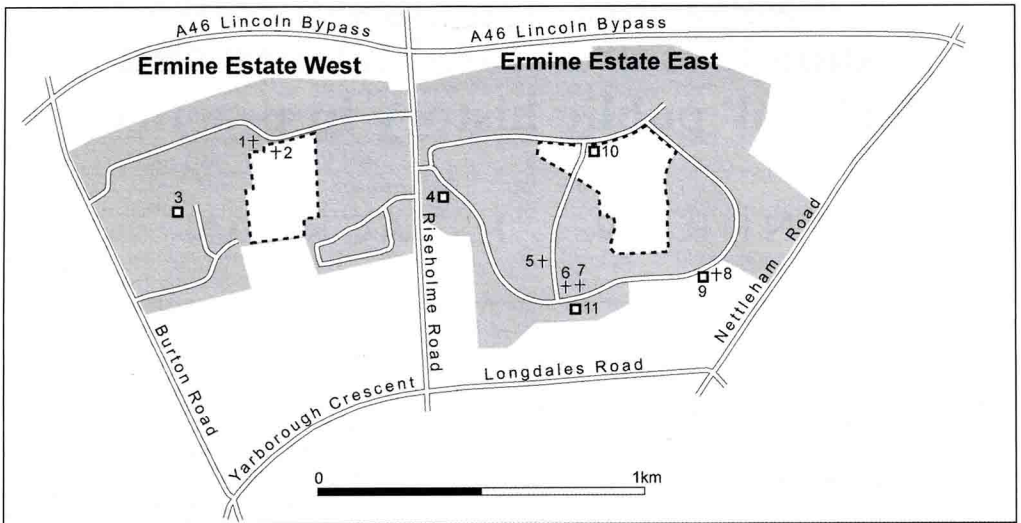
## Introduction: why study council estates?

Council estates are among the most physically extensive and prominent components of a great many British towns and cities. At the same time they are also among the most culturally value-laden of urban environments. Their origins can be traced back to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, to a quest to provide ideal, or even utopian, housing and forms of settlement for working people. The 'fall' of the council estate can be found in the later twentieth century, with a loss of faith in what state-directed mass-housing policy could fulfil and what Modern Movement architecture and design could offer. Nonetheless, the sheer scale of their construction means that council estates are likely to, or ought to, feature prominently in 'The twentieth century' chapter of comprehensive urban histories.

If its lengthy antecedents are included, by the year 2000 council housing just spanned three centuries, but for some years its end had been anticipated and at the time of writing is a more real prospect than ever before. If it does end, however, it will be in a certain sense only—that of ownership. The overwhelming majority of the buildings remain, and will remain for many years to come, providing homes for people as well as a sizeable proportion of Britain's townscapes and built environment.

For Alison Ravetz, writing here at the end of the twentieth century, council estates have secured a place in the general consciousness, albeit mostly a negative one, but understanding of what brought them into being is fading. For younger generations, the 'imminent demise' of the council estate may mean that acquiring a knowledge of their origins is irrelevant, but a duty falls upon historians to reassess the body of evidence and the accumulation of perceptions and associations that exist in the present.<sup>1</sup> This article joins other studies that have sought to explore the origins, rise and fall of the British council estate. Research has ranged from local histories to more general surveys. The historical background to the council estate is not widely appreciated, especially given the challenging associations that typically surround them in general today—those of policy failure, environmental deterioration and societal decline. However, community and micro-historical studies of council estates are opportunities to place the present in historical context, to bring reassessment, and to confront the tendency to stereotype.<sup>2</sup>

In Lincoln the history of the council estate has been receiving full attention. The City of Lincoln Council, with English Heritage, has sought to cultivate an appreciation of state housing development, the city being regarded as a noteworthy example of major provision in a provincial centre. An important outcome of the partnership of the council and English Heritage is the city's Townscape Assessment, which includes



- A Ermine Estate West**  
 1: Church/Community Centre  
 2: Methodist Church  
 3: Trent View Flats
- B Ermine Estate East**  
 4: Lincoln Imp public house  
 5: Ermine Congregational Church  
 6: St John the Baptist Parish Church  
 7: Church/Community Centre  
 8: Roman Catholic Church  
 9: Catholic School  
 10: Community Centre  
 11: Library
- C St Giles Estate**  
 1: Roman Catholic Church  
 2: Church of St Giles  
 3: Methodist Church
- D Boultham Estate**  
 1: Fulbeck House  
 2: Moorland Crescent
- Housing estates  
 Areas set aside for schools shops and recreation  
 Other buildings  
 Places of worship  
 Boultham Moor  
 School

**1 Lincoln, showing the council estates and other places featured in the text and with details of estate layouts (map drawn by Dave Watt)**

among its aims that of giving regard to the historical character of *all* urban districts, including council estates. Moreover, its methodology has included consultation with, and the active and ongoing input of, local residents. Meanwhile, the publications of The Survey of Lincoln project, with support from the council, have also set out to enhance recognition of the historic townscape with valuable overview work on council estates and other changing twentieth-century urban environments. The Survey's contributing team is broadly constituted, comprising academics, heritage and planning officers, and other local historians. In addition, a separate project involving Bishop Grosseteste University has digitised and published the illuminating community archive of one of Lincoln's estates, 'the Ermine'.<sup>3</sup>

A series of preconditions for council estate construction emerged through the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The organisation and extent of philanthropic and charitable intervention gathered momentum in response to widening concerns surrounding the condition of much urban housing. At the same time the administrative structures and remit of local government expanded. Enabling legislation encouraged local authorities to consider municipal schemes, while housing association tenement blocks and 'model' industrial villages and cottages provided inspiration for early public provision. The First World War brought about a crisis in housing supply and fear of working class unrest, which prompted the introduction of central financial support. Policy aspirations became less idealistic as the inter-war period wore on, with uncertain economic conditions determining and tempering outcomes. Nonetheless, the scale of construction through the 1920s and 1930s is very impressive. Furthermore, demographic pressures, wartime damage, new town development, and demands for an enhancing of the nation's housing stock generated a subsequent round of major council house construction through the 1950s and 1960s.<sup>4</sup>

In Lincolnshire local authorities reacted with varying levels of enthusiasm to general government initiatives. Lincoln was the most political and culturally amenable of the local authorities, as well as the most prompt in taking action, and even before the outbreak of the First World War it had received approval in principle for a housing scheme as well as securing a loan to fund land purchase. The city saw an attempt to develop Swanpool, a private garden suburb scheme, planned just after the First World War, but it is questionable whether this gave any inspiration for the plans of the local authority, for it was financially ill-fated and largely aborted. Moreover, state direction of housing provision had already been accepted locally, and the city's first council estate, St Giles, had already been conceived. Between the wars Lincoln went on to propose major housing developments as part of a grand development plan and after 1945, when the political consensus relating to large-scale housing provision was well established and accepted, Lincoln's expenditure on this area of municipal responsibility stood out in a county where local policy restraint was the norm. Nationally, the adoption of council estate schemes was somewhat inevitable, a product of deterministic central-local relations, but local political cultures, as in Lincoln, were clearly significant in determining the scale and speed of policy implementation.<sup>5</sup>

### **Beginnings: the St Giles Estate**

The St Giles estate occupies a large part of the north-east quarter of the city of Lincoln.<sup>6</sup> Some of it was after 1945 but most construction took place in the 1920s and 1930s. The estate is located in an area of land wedged between two major radial

routes, the Nettleham and Wragby roads, and its design drew for inspiration upon the planning principles of the Garden City Movement, giving a scale and character that are readily appreciated today. The origins of the estate lay in local and national demands for improvements to the supply and quality of housing. Lincoln responded quite promptly to early-twentieth century permissive legislation encouraging progress via the drafting of town planning schemes. By the end of 1913 the council had approved in principle a development of some 900 homes covering about 65 acres along Wragby Road. The site was within the city boundary and would be served by a cheap bus connection to ensure good links with areas of industrial employment. In 1914 the 65 acres were purchased by the Council. The First World War delayed construction but after 1918 development was rapid, prompted by the Housing, Town Planning, &c Act or 'Addison' Act of 1919, which was instrumental in creating much inter-war public housing.

The rectilinear design of the estate reflects the form of the post-enclosure landscape, with some of the roads and associated building-plot lines aligning with erstwhile field boundaries. One central enclosure was reserved as an open square at the heart of the estate, and on or around it were areas for schools, plots for shops, and parcels set aside for Anglican and Roman Catholic churches and a Methodist Chapel. Elsewhere the plan allowed for public gardens and allotments and, at the edge and just inside the city boundary, 'Children's Homes'. The influence of the 'Garden Suburb' movement in the design is readily identified, with its grass verges, regular tree planting, and ample front and rear garden provision, together with a number of cul-de-sacs, crescents and circular greens. The houses themselves can be divided into broad categories. One comprises the 200 houses built around 1920. These, fronting Wragby Road and Chaucer Drive (see figure 2), are among the more visually elaborate: the Arts and Crafts Movement resonates here, with Mansard roofs reaching down to the first floor, swept-out lower roofs leaving deep eaves, large chimney stacks, small ground-floor level diamond-shaped windows, and partially rendered facades. The 308 houses built under the 'Addison Act', and most of the other dwellings from the 1920s and 1930s, form the second and most extensive



2 Early council housing, Chaucer Drive, St Giles estate, Lincoln

category. They show some variety in positioning, scale and design, but most apparent is their plain brick-built appearance, two-story height, and semi-detached or row-of-four groupings. The earlier Addison houses had slightly larger gardens. During the inter-war period a third category of housing was built—the private development of a limited number of detached and semi-detached dwellings. The few examples of these are more decorative, featuring orange-red, polychromatic and quoined brickwork. After the Second World War the estate also included semi-detached prefabricated bungalows at its north-easterly extreme.

The historic fabric of the St Giles estate has undergone change and in some cases deterioration. A number of the brick-built frontages have been clad or rendered and painted, and many original windows have been replaced. Walls, fences or railings have taken the place of some of the privet hedging, and in other areas verges have been intruded upon by vehicular access and hard-standing. Nonetheless, the landscape retains a distinctiveness and overall coherence, and the estate constitutes a sizeable element in the city's inter-war expansion.

### **Midway: the Boultham Estate**

The Boultham Estate is one of the most extensive council estates in Lincoln. Its creation was protracted, and reflects both the inter-war and post-1945 phases of council estate construction.<sup>7</sup> It is also perhaps the most spatially fragmented today. The main part of the estate has three large components. As a result, it lacks the visual compactness of other major estates in Lincoln, such as Ermine East and West, and St Giles. The disjointed plan of the estate was determined by the inclusion of undeveloped areas which remained as public open space: the surviving expanse of Boultham Park to the north east and, more centrally, part of Boultham Moor that became the site of the neighbourhood's secondary school. The main components of the estate are adjacent to Rookery Lane in the north east, De Wint Avenue in the south west and, linking these two roads and prominent in the townscape, the wide Moorland Avenue. Along Moorland Avenue the striking curved form of Fulbeck House gives something of a visual centre for the estate. The composite appearance is emphasised by the marked contrast in street layouts, between the geometric lines of earlier developments off Rookery Lane and Moorland and De Wint Avenues, and the sinuous pattern either side of the later Turner Avenue towards the western edge of the estate.

The slow development of the Boultham housing estate began at the north-east. During the inter-war period, and in the immediate post-war years, it was extended in a relatively homogenous manner along the length of Moorland Avenue and associated connecting roads. The plot and street pattern is geometric, adhering in part to former drainage, track and field boundary lines. Most building is of red brick although in this part of the estate Harling roughcast coating was also employed. Regular runs of four or semi-detached houses add to the general uniformity of appearance, apart from some bungalows around Moorland Crescent. The houses in the Boultham estate were more restrained in their detailing than those in the nearby Swanpool Garden Suburb and in the early houses on the St Giles estate. Nonetheless, referencing the 'garden suburb' movement is still apparent in some of the architecture—for example, the use of setbacks, arched alleyway entrances, and the placing of small upper windows under relatively deep eaves and high-pitched roofs.

A little later in the inter-war period construction of the easternmost component of the estate began. This is off Rookery Lane, south of Boultham Park, and some of the

boundaries and surviving trees are a legacy of the earlier landscape of parkland and enclosure associated with Boutham Hall. This part of the housing estate has two parts. The first, and larger, comprises local authority housing akin to that found in much of the St Giles estate: the relatively plain red brick of the 1930s. There are still echoes of 'garden suburb' vernacular in, for example, the steeply-pitched roofs, high-set first-floor windows and gable end frontages. Most of the houses were in rows of four or six, although a few were semi-detached. But in marked contrast this area also has prefabricated bungalows, along Grainsby Close. Post-war modernist planning dictated more spacious building plots, and the bungalows were set back more informally from wide open greens and a winding service road. Later refacing in brick and render has allowed these 'pre-fab' structures to survive into the early twenty-first century.

In the south-west portion of the estate, along De Wint Avenue, there are also houses which are 'later inter-war' in style. Some of this development was planned and laid out by the end of the 1930s, but most was completed in the years following the Second World War (see figure 3). The street layout is relatively geometric, with some reference to pre-existing roads, tracks and field boundaries, while although the houses in some parts are relatively plain, distant resonances of 'garden suburb' forms may be seen in the roofing styles, chimney heights, eave depths and the presence of smaller upper windows. In other roads, though, the architecture is noticeably more austere and regimented. A tour of the Boutham estate is concluded in the west, off lower Moorland Avenue and Turner Avenue, where the curving road lines and broad greens and verges are a conspicuous departure from the geometric appearance of the rest of the estate. Pre-existing boundaries were largely disregarded and this part of the estate is far more typical of the post-1945 period—largely in the later 1950s and the 1960s. Vehicular access to, and through roads through, this area of municipal housing were limited and in consequence, traffic is relatively 'calmed'. There is just a slight sense of the vernacular, with some irregularly shaped houses in corner plots, most of the design tends towards forms of modernism. The rows of houses are very plain, with lower roof pitches and chimneys, and more uniform window patterns than elsewhere on the estate. There are some low-rise apartments which give some variety to the austere appearance in their projecting brick-end patterning.



**3 Mid-twentieth-century council houses, De Wint Avenue, Boultham estate, Lincoln**



**4 Fulbeck House, from Turner Avenue, Boultham Estate, Lincoln**

The age of 'mass' council house building of the twentieth century coincided with the slow and reluctant departure from the 'English' vernacular tradition towards the adoption of the modern movement's guidance on architectural forms, motifs and materials. This is realised most conclusively and prominently in the most distinctive building on the estate, Fulbeck House (figure 4). This tightly curving building, wrapped tightly within a corner formed by the junction of Moorland and Turner Avenues, is a three-storey construction of apartments above shops. The shop fronts 'sweep' round the building visually, unified by a blending of moulded wall surrounds, projecting triangular window hoods, continuous glass overhang, and vertically arranged 'porthole' windows.

### **Endings: the Ermine Estate**

'The Ermine' is one of Lincoln's largest council estates, a significant legacy of the city's final phase of local authority housing construction, mainly constructed between 1952 and 1958 to meet the pressing housing shortages after the Second World War.<sup>8</sup> The two halves of the estate, 'Ermine East' and 'Ermine West', lie on either side of Riseholme Road, part of the Roman 'Ermine Street'. Today the estate comprises 9 per cent of Lincoln's built-up area and occupies much of the north-west quarter of the city, but its scale goes largely unnoticed. From the north, along the A46, views of the estate are masked by embankments and trees. From the south, the views are obscured by much inter-war housing and other buildings. Only by travelling south along part of the Riseholme Road, from its junction with the A46 to the 'Lincoln Imp' public house, can a reasonable impression be gained of the estate's extent.

In 2007 English Heritage devoted an edition of its *Conservation Bulletin* to the significance of the architecture of 'modern times'. One section considered the place of post-war housing in the English landscape and included an article on 'the Ermine'. For the article's author, David Walsh, the estate is indeed significant for its scale, and the proportion of the Lincoln townscape which it accounts for, but also for its important contribution to the major post-war growth of the city. He refers to the Lincoln Townscape Assessment programme, and its aim of raising awareness and appreciation of such neighbourhoods, giving an overview of their historical





**5 Apartment block, Ermine East estate, Lincoln  
(The World Cup, 10 June 2010)**

development and character.<sup>9</sup> The design of the estate almost entirely disregarded the enclosure field pattern which dominated the landscape until the 1950s. Field boundaries helped to mark the outer limits of the estate and some of the plot shapes, but had little influence on street lines or housing layout. The few access points to the estate were intended to limit the through flow of traffic, but the sinuous roads with their wide verges and 'village greens' were to provide good sight lines for vehicles. The estate displays strong visual coherence but it also has variety and distinctiveness. Its planning allowed for a wide mix of housing, with bungalows, terraces, semi-detached houses and small blocks of flats. Like much inter-war design the housing is generally small in scale and low in profile but, unlike the domestic buildings associated with the '20s and '30s, those of the Ermine are plainer and more modernist. Buildings materials add some variety to the townscape: red-brown brick for much of the terracing, semi-detached houses and bungalows; yellow brick for the apartment blocks (figure 5); and, for a few semi-detached 'pre-fabs', concrete walls and mansard roofs.

Civic and commercial buildings were placed at prominent road junctions on the estate, often in large plots. Such buildings appeared throughout the '50s and '60s, ranging from the 'Lincoln Imp' pub off Riseholme Road in Ermine East, via centrally placed plots for the combined community hall and Anglican church, the later parish church, the Ermine Congregational Church, the library, a shopping parade, Infants and Junior schools, a Catholic foundation school, and a Catholic church, to (in Ermine West) shops, a second combined community centre and Anglican church, and a Methodist church. Ermine West was less well served than its eastern counterpart and has since seen the closure of its two church buildings.



**6 St John the Baptist Parish Church, Ermine East estate, Lincoln**

The development of the Ermine delivered two structures of particular significance to the city's heritage. The approach to the city from the south and west gives views of Lincoln Edge, with a series of striking forms: the cathedral, the castle, a water tower and the Sobraon barracks. To these were added a feature in the centre of Ermine West, that classic of post-war architecture, a 'high-rise' residential tower block—the 17-storey brick and rendered concrete 'Trent View' of 1964. The other unique building is the surprising structure of the church of St John the Baptist, Ermine East. The building, completed in 1963, was designed as 'Lincoln's church of tomorrow' by the local architect Sam Scorer (see figure 6). The 'hyperbolic paraboloid' roof shape evokes that of a tent pitched in a desert. The interior is dominated by a dazzling coloured glass window by Keith New, on the theme of the 'Revelation of God's plan for man's redemption'. Inside there is an arrangement of curved pews, set on a gently inclined slope, facing down towards and encircling a raised altar. The font is placed symbolically at the very centre of the floor plan, and is a substantial concrete form in a 'primitive' style.<sup>10</sup>

### **Conclusion: local history and public history**

The pursuit of local history is diverse, complex and dynamic. Local historical activity, broadly defined, is mutable, spontaneous and responsive, as much as it is bound by custom and convention and culturally deep-rooted. Studies of council housing in Lincoln draw partially and variably from what the long accumulation of thought and practice in local history has to offer. To date, what has been published is generally at the 'place-focused' end of the spectrum of local history research, with a particular interest in the boundaries, lines, patterns, forms and structures that can be 'read' in

the landscape, and the political, social, economic and cultural processes that explain their creation and passing away. These council estates invite further work, turning more towards the 'people-focused' approach which is associated with community history, enriched by the gathering together of contemporary media sources, memorabilia, and oral testimony. The research on council estates in Lincoln also reflects how local historical activity overlaps with the agenda of heritage, and certain concerns which are held in common: the proper recognition, designation and conservation of vulnerable historical environments; the appreciation, celebration and promotion of places and people; and the development of local attachment, neighbourhood pride and community identity. Here the practice of local history is also public history, where progress is dependent upon engagement with heritage resources and professionals, and requires community and collective endeavour. Moreover, the subject matter—council estates—opens up an additional and more critical context in which local history also becomes public history: that is, where historical research prompts confrontation with issues of political debate, past and present, and in this instance, specifically, that of state housing policies.<sup>11</sup>

On 9 August 2013 the *Lincolnshire Echo* reported on proposals for the construction of the first council houses in Lincoln for about twenty years, and saw it as appropriate to refer to the city's active council-house building tradition and the roots of this 'heritage' in the early twentieth century. There are parallels to be drawn between the social and political circumstances that brought forward the municipal housing schemes of the inter-war and post-1945 periods, both locally and nationally, with those in the present. The shortages claimed in the number of 'affordable' houses available to rent or buy, and in particular the lack of accommodation of certain physical and tenure types, that are evident today can perhaps help in understanding the historical context that prevailed for some six decades of the last century and gave rise to an age of 'mass' public housing. Concerns surrounding the capacity of the private housing sector to meet market and societal demand, the annual home-building 'targets' that need to be set to meet shortfalls, and calls upon the state to intervene echo political questions once posed and policy responses once proposed.

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