

Account of Purley on Thames

Our very own Shanty Town

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This article was published in a Reading paper around 1973 and raised a furore of protest from the residents.

This is our very own shanty town. They call it Purley Park Estate and it's right on Reading's doorstep, only a stones throw from the main Oxford Road. From a nearby rubbish tip you can see more than 300 homes - ranging from an old railway carriage with a thatched roof to a modern brick-built two storey house - in what used to be a Berkshire beauty spot. It's a community of contrasts: dozens of wooden huts and prefabs, some caravans; a few appalling slums, some perfectly decent brick built bungalows. The roads are unsurfaced, churned up and neglected. Main drainage was completed only last year.

In 1964 a Ministry of Housing and Local Government inspector called it "an extremely unsightly shanty town" and said the local planning authority ought to think about removing it sooner or later and developing the riverside site in a less offensive way. Yet only 30 years ago there were open fields here - and a few weekend visitors who came from London to fish in the Thames and find peace.

What happened? The land, which had changed hands several times in the preceding decades, was bought by a property company, divided into small parcels and sold off at £5 a time freehold. During the war, London evacuees bought plots of land and built their own homes - mostly simple one-storey wooden affairs. Purley Park gained its first permanent residents. Since then it has grown - unplanned and unlvely - and now prefabs change hands at anything from £1000 to £3000.

Mr Clifford Newman, a retired Post Office Engineer, said that the riverside estate used to be a lovely place in the old days when there were only holidaymakers and middle-aged, decent, respectable people" "The class of people has deteriorated" he said "They're just layabouts. Half are on public assistance" He agreed that Purley Park was deteriorating into a shanty town and he didn't see much prospect of its improving.

But Mrs Marjorie Clarke, who came to Purley Park 12 years ago and now runs a newspaper kiosk on the estate, disagreed strongly.

