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The Buildings, Eastwood

By Martin Wynn and Ian Haywood

A brief account of The Buildings scheme in Eastwood, Nottinghamshire was given in *Industrial Archaeology* Volume 13, No. 2. This scheme, undertaken by Broxtowe District (now Borough) Council, to improve rather than demolish an area of miners' cottages, reflects the concern for the environment and an interest in the past that have become increasingly evident in Eastwood in the past few years.

Yet to the casual visitor, Eastwood may appear much the same as any other of the small nondescript towns which dot the Midlands. Just discernible behind the new shop facades and modern traffic is the original structure of a small hilltop town clustered around the market place where the Nottingham, Mansfield, Derby and Ilkeston Roads meet (Figure 1). A closer study of Eastwood, however, reveals a number of interesting connections with the past. These include the long association of the town with coal-mining and its claim to be the birth-place of the Midlands Railway; and, above all, perhaps, the fact that D.H. Lawrence was born here, in The Buildings, to become the town's most famous, if not most notorious, son.

This article, then, attempts to outline some of the major landmarks in the evolution of coalmining and transport development in the Eastwood area that seem of relevance as a back drop to the construction of The Buildings in the middle of the last century and the recently completed improvement scheme. This scheme is then considered in its more immediate planning context in an attempt to identify the major planning issues involved.

Origins of coal-mining in Eastwood

Local legend dates the origins of Eastwood to a Norse settlement in the 9th century, although the precise location of the earliest settlement is not known.¹ It is, however, perhaps more than coincidental that Eastwood is in the centre of a major outcrop of the Barnsley Coal Seam, that is worked today in East Derbyshire and West Nottinghamshire in a twenty mile wide strip from the Yorkshire border to just north of Derby and Nottingham (the East Midlands Coalfield). Traces of bell-pit markings indicate that coal mining in the area may have its origins in pre-Saxon times. The oldest formal records date mining in the area to 1282 when open-cast and drift mining was taking place at depths of up to 50 yards.

By 1774, two shafts some 35 yards deep, had been sunk which were to establish the future of Eastwood as a mining town. At first, however, the exploitation of coal was limited by the lack of adequate transport to carry coal to distant

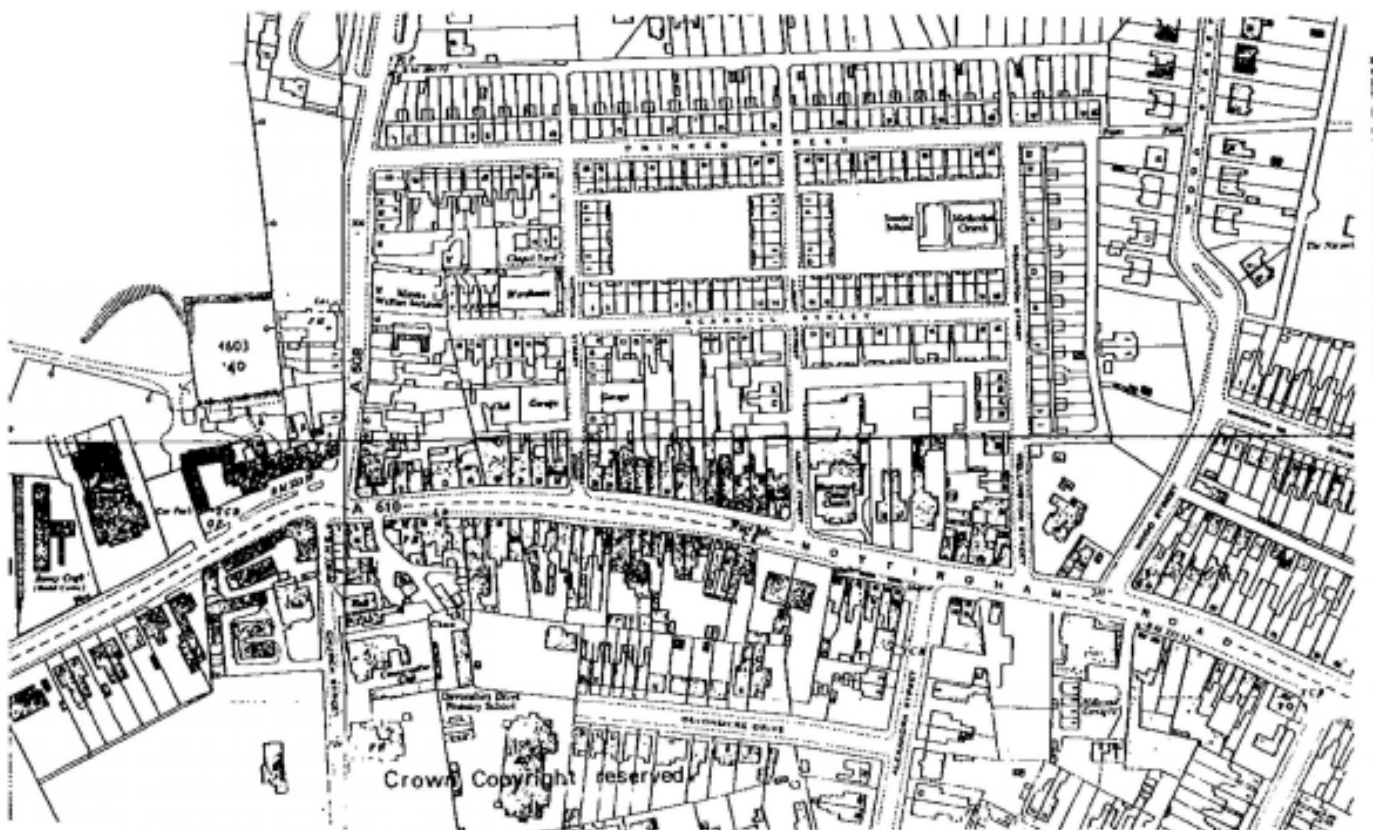


Figure 1: Eastwood Town Centre 1962, showing the quadric layout of The Buildings, just north of the Nottingham Road (A610). Scale 1:5000. Source: Ordnance Survey Plan Sk4646 and Sk4746 and Plan Sk4647 and Sk4747. Edition 1962.

markets. The farmers' carts, used on the farm in summer and for carting coal in winter, could carry only 3 to 4 tons each, which with four horses and two draymen was an expensive and slow means of travel over unmade roads in the winter months.

Coal-mining in the canal and railway ages

Distances coal could be hauled were consequently limited and mines could serve only the immediate neighbourhood and adjacent cities unless they had access to river or sea. Mine-owners and industrialists were quick to realize the potential of water born transport whereby one or two horses could pull 40 tons of coal in a barge with a crew of three or four men, and the capacity could be increased to 80 tons, if a second barge or 'butty boat' was added.

The value of the Erewash Valley coal reserves and the need to connect Eastwood to Nottingham by a canal was readily apparent. The first canal to be opened was the Erewash canal which linked Eastwood to the River Trent and thus to Nottingham (Figure 2). This canal, some 11¾ miles long, was completed in a little over two years and opened to traffic in December 1779. The new canal provided a great impetus to coal-mining in Eastwood, which until about 1770 had taken second place to framework knitting of hosiery². In 1794, the Cromford Canal was opened, running almost 15 miles from a junction with the Erewash Canal just north of Eastwood to the industrial area of Cromford. In 1796, the Nottingham Canal was opened, providing a more direct route into Nottingham from Eastwood, in competition with the Erewash Canal (Figure 2).

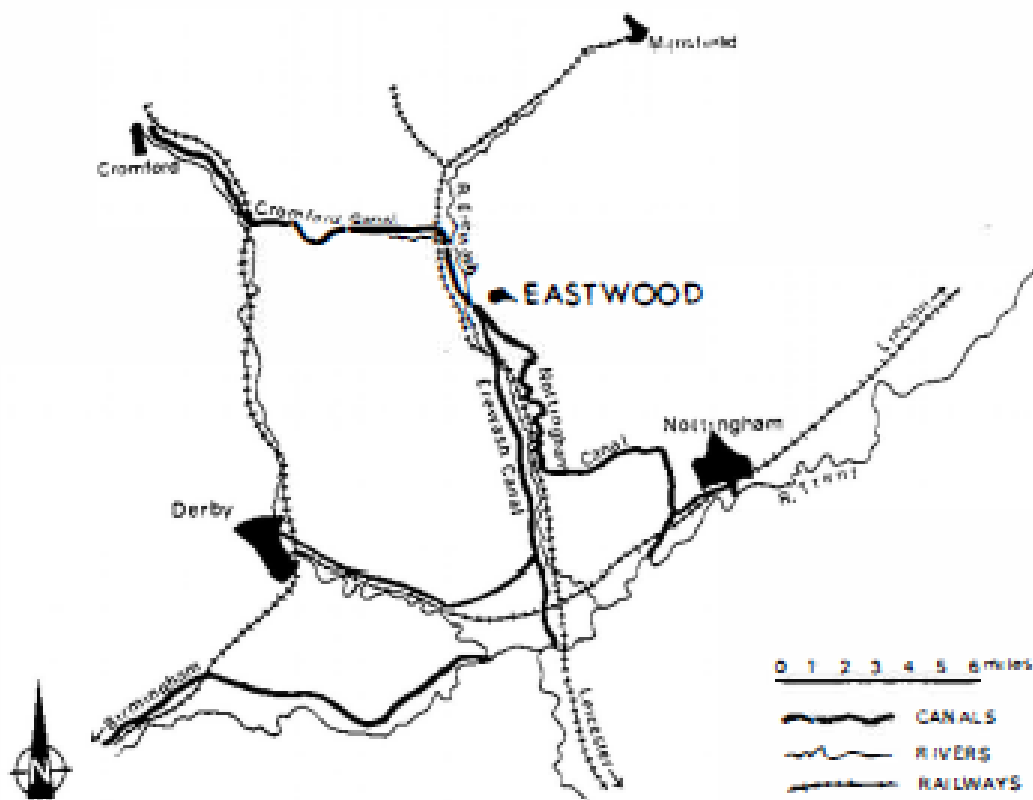


Figure 2: Major canal, river and rail links used in the Eastwood coal-trade up to 1850

The early 1800s saw the growth of Barber, Walker & Co. as the principal mine owners in Eastwood and the rapid expansion of coal mining. In 1838, they took over a mine, sunk in the early part of the century by a Dr Manson, to form part of the Eastwood mine. A further mine at Moorgreen within a mile of Eastwood centre, was sunk 30 years later with twin 13 foot diameter shafts to a depth of 286 yards, working the main 'Deep Soft' and 'Deep Hard' seams. The Eastwood mine was later to close in the 1880s, but Moorgreen Colliery remains in production today.

Coal from the early mines was transported to the canals by means of tramways and horse-drawn trucks until private railways were built in the 1830s. In 1832, John Ellis of Leicester opened a new line from Swarnington (in the North West Leicester coalfield) to Leicester, so breaking the monopoly of the Leicester market enjoyed by the Erewash coalmasters since the opening of the canals in the late 18th century.

In August of the same year, following a meeting at the Sun Inn in Eastwood, the Erewash Valley coalowners decided to build a new line to connect the Erewash Valley with Nottingham, Derby and Leicester, with Barber, Walker & Co. putting up 30% of the initial capital needed to form a company (The Midlands County Railway Company) and present the necessary bill in Parliament. Owing to pressure of parliamentary business and opposition from canal and other

railway interests, passing of the bill was delayed and the company was subsequently broadened to include financiers from Liverpool and Manchester. When the act was eventually passed, it provided for new lines between Nottingham, Derby and Leicester but excluded the essential link with the Erewash Valley as originally conceived. The Nottingham-Derby-Leicester lines were opened in 1839, and following the amalgamation of the Midland Counties, North Midlands and Birmingham & Derby Railway Companies in 1844 (to form the Midland Railway Company), the Erewash Valley branch line was finally constructed in 1847, so giving modest substance to Eastwood's claim to being one of the originators of the Midland Railway Company (Figure 2).

Construction of The Buildings

Coal mining affected an area in many ways. Not only was there the physical intrusion of the mines and the railways but also the general need to provide housing and other facilities for the influx of people attracted to mining. The early miner lived in very much the same sort of one-roomed thatched cottage he had inhabited in the rural areas he came from; but as the scale of mining increased and became more demanding in its labour requirements, so it became imperative to make proper provision for the housing of the new urban mine worker.

In the mid-19th century, Barber, Walker & Co., as major mine owners in Eastwood, set in hand a construction programme to build houses for their employees. Between 1854 and 1860, they constructed houses on a 300 x 100 yard site to the north of the main Nottingham Road (Figure 1). The development comprised 213 two-storey terraced houses, each consisting of two or three bedrooms, a living room, kitchen, larder and outside scullery and w.c. They were constructed of red brick made locally from colliery shale with slate roofs and stone lintels.

The new houses were formally known as the 'New Buildings', but were often referred to locally as 'the Squares' because of the way the central terraces were grouped around common courtyards or squares.

D.H. Lawrence

David Herbert Lawrence was born at No. 8A Victoria Street in the New Buildings on September 11th, 1885. It was a small corner shop where his mother sold haberdashery. Family connections with coal-mining went back to his paternal grandfather, John, who had been a tailor employed by Barber, Walker & Co., making moleskin trousers and vests for miners. His own father, Arthur, described himself as a 'coalmine contractor'. In practice, he was a 'butty' which meant that he was employed to take charge of a section of the coal face called a 'stall', worked by himself and two or three 'day men'. He was paid by the week for the coal he and his team extracted, and he then paid his 'day men'. It was generally secure, though dangerous, employment, and relatively well paid for a comparatively short working day from 6 am to 4 pm.

D.H. Lawrence had two brothers and two sisters, but none of them went into mining, perhaps as a result of their mother's efforts to steer them into a better way of life. David, anyway, was considered a rather effete and puny child and after gaining a scholarship to Nottingham High School he took up teaching. By the time he started to write in the early 1900s, the family had moved up the social scale and away from 'The Squares'.

As a family they were never really poor in 19th century terms. They came from a respectable working class community with strong traditions of mutual aid. Lawrence drew his inspiration from this community and its harsh existence enmeshed in an industrial working town. There were always problems, whether it was poor wages because the workings were difficult, or the continual conflict between his father as a stolid miner and his mother as a woman with greater aspirations for her children.

Today many of the references to Eastwood in Lawrence's novels are clearly identifiable although much of the industrial squalor has gone. Moorgreen Colliery became 'Minton' in *Sons and Lovers*, and the Moorgreen Reservoir serving the Nottingham Canal appears in his novels as 'Willey Water' and 'Nethermere'. The Squares were described as 'sordid and hideous' although in the alleyways 'children played and the women gossiped and the men smoked'.

The Buildings in the 1970s – Redevelopment vs Rehabilitation

The New Buildings, or The Buildings as they are now more commonly known, remained by and large unchanged until the 1970s, inhabited by local miners and their descendants. After the nationalization of the coal mines in 1947, The National Coal Board took over most of the dwellings in The Buildings. Although these were solidly built, they lacked basic amenities and the tight layout around The Squares was considered unacceptable by modern standards. In 1970, the area was earmarked for clearance by Eastwood Urban District Council, which in 1971 and 1972 bought up the miners' cottages from the National Coal Board and private owners. Planning consultants were officially engaged to draw up a redevelopment plan in 1973, by which time 80 of the dwellings, including most of The Squares and one of the chapels had been cleared (see illustration page 337 and Figure 3). The remaining houses seemed destined to be demolished in the wholesale redevelopment of the area.

In April 1973, however, councillors had been elected and staff subsequently appointed to the incoming Broxtowe

District Council, which was to take over responsibility for local planning and housing in Eastwood in April 1974, following Local Government Reorganization in Great Britain (see Figure 4). Many of the officers worked in nearby Local Authorities and knew of The Buildings and Eastwood UDC's proposal to redevelop the area. Broxtowe Councillors toured Eastwood in September 1973 to get a first hand impression of The Buildings and, above all, the wishes of local residents who had not been consulted in the formulation of Eastwood UD's redevelopment proposal. A formal request was made to Eastwood UDC that no further demolition take place whilst the feasibility and desirability of improving existing dwellings was considered as an alternative to demolition and redevelopment. In December, members of the Broxtowe Planning Department carried out a social survey amongst residents of The Buildings; significantly, 63% indicated their preference to stay in their current homes rather than move to new houses.

By February 1974, the incoming Broxtowe Planning Department had drawn up the outline of a fully comprehensive scheme that included proposals for redevelopment of the cleared area and improvement of the majority of the 133 miners' dwellings that remained.³

In an exhibition held in Eastwood in March 1974, both schemes - that of the planning consultants employed by Eastwood UDC and that of Broxtowe DC - were presented to local residents, 88% of which subsequently indicated their preference for the scheme of improvement and partial renewal drawn up by Broxtowe DC. Following this over-whelming vote in favour of the 'improvement' option, recommendations that the scheme be used as the basis for further action in The Buildings were approved by the full Broxtowe Council in June 1974. The remaining miners' dwellings were to be improved in a scheme that was later to win recognition as one of the best of its kind in Europe.

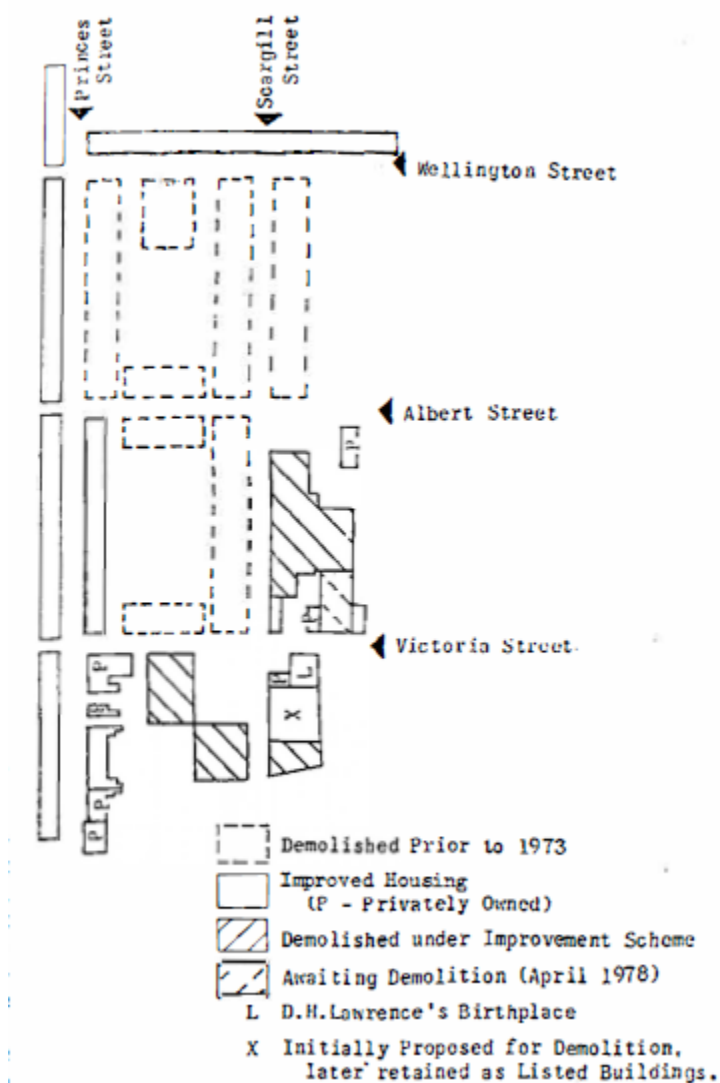


Figure 3: Major changes in The Buildings in the 1970s.

The Buildings scheme in its planning context

The two major elements of Broxtowe DC's proposals for The Buildings were the improvement⁴ of 90 of the existing council-owned houses and the construction of 96 new dwellings, of which approximately one-third were 5-person family dwellings and the rest one and two person flatlets, (Fig. 5). The scheme, however, also included other important

It is, however, perhaps worth drawing attention to other aspects of the scheme that relate more specifically to its form and objectives from a planning point of view. From the start, every effort was made by Broxtowe DC to involve residents in decision-making relating to The Buildings scheme. It was the residents' initial vote in favour of Broxtowe DC's alternative to Eastwood UDC's redevelopment proposal that led to the decision to improve rather than demolish existing dwellings. A Residents' Committee was subsequently formed and consulted on a series of matters from road closure procedures to the design of new front doors, and all residents were kept informed of progress in the project through the Buildings Newsletter issued every two or three months by Broxtowe DC. This was very much in keeping with the dictates of the 1969 and 1974 Housing Acts which made central government subsidies available for house improvements in community-based projects like The Buildings scheme. In 1974, The Buildings were declared a General Improvement Area (GIA), thereby securing further Department of the Environment and County Council moneys for house and environmental works. Yet because of the unusual circumstances in which The Buildings scheme was conceived (in the middle of Local Government Reorganization), residents had very little say in the initial planning of the scheme, and public participation all along tended to consist of choosing between alternatives rather than direct involvement in the formulation of planning proposals.

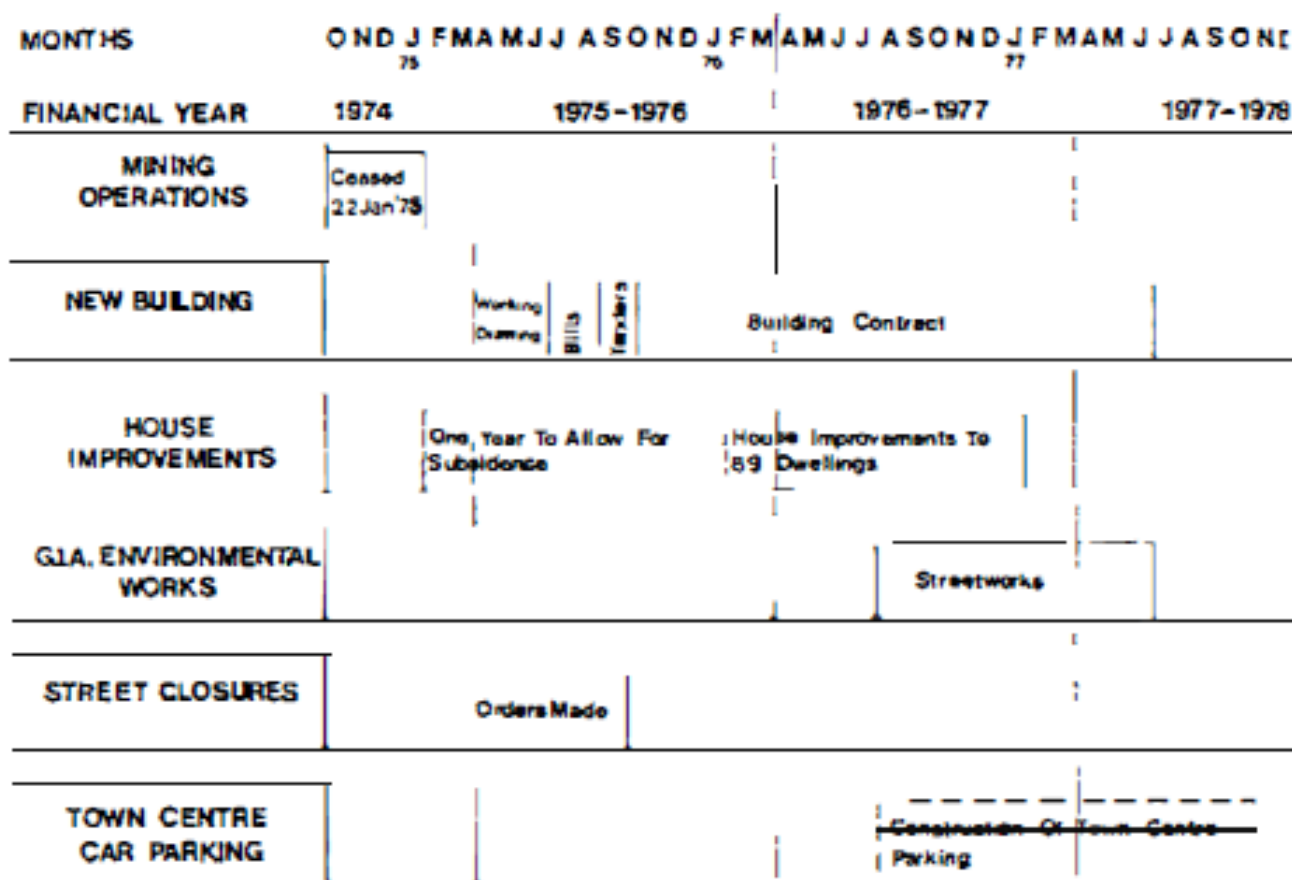


Figure 6: The Implementation Programme for The Buildings Scheme, 1974 – 78. Source: Broxtowe Borough Council.

It is also worth noting that it needed the human, financial and technical resources of a Local Authority of the size of Broxtowe DC to successfully carry through such a complex scheme. Even then, with so many administrative processes involved and three contractors working on site at the same time (see Fig. 6), problems were created for Broxtowe DC that put considerable strain on resident-Council relations. Ironically, nearby coal-mining activities, which had been the *raison d'être* of The Buildings over 100 years previously, held up the start of operations for a year in 1974-75 (to allow for subsidence), somewhat damaging public morale and confidence in the scheme.

Above all though, it is perhaps the social achievement of preserving a strong local community with a unique industrial history that should be stressed. This was underlined in 1977 by Broxtowe DC's designation of Eastwood town centre and The Buildings as a Conservation Area, so ensuring stricter controls on demolition and in October, 1977, The Buildings scheme was selected as one of two British entries in the 'Concours Européen De L'Habitat' a housing scheme competition for EEC countries. Today, with the recently opened D.H. Lawrence centre in The Buildings an important tourist attraction, the surrounding area of miners' houses seems destined to remain for many years to come.

Notes

1. In the Domesday Book, Eastwood is recorded under the name ESTEWIC, at which time it probably had a population of about 150 people supported by eighty to a hundred acres of cultivated land around a ford over the River Erewash.
2. Framework knitting became an established industry in Eastwood in the early 17th century and reached its zenith around 1790, after which time it went into steady decline as coal mining grew as a source of employment.
3. Of the 213 houses in The Buildings in 1971, 80 had been demolished by 1973. Of the 133 remaining, 90 Council-owned houses were improved in The Buildings scheme and 19 others – either owned by the Council or attained by compulsory purchase – were demolished. A further 4 dwellings in Scargill Street had also originally been earmarked for demolition but were reprieved in 1977 because of their ‘context’ value lying adjacent to Lawrence’s birthplace in 8A Victoria Street, which had been opened in June 1976 as a Lawrence Centre. This left 19 privately owned dwellings most of which have been improved on the initiative of their owners to whom 60% Council Grants are available for such work.
4. Improvements carried out in the 90 houses included rewiring, replastering, replacing doors and windows, installation of central heating, a refitted kitchen, conversion of a bedroom into a bathroom, injection of a damp-proof course and brick cleaning of the front elevation.

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