UNIVERSITY COLLEGE LONDON

FACULTY OF THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT

BARTLETT SCHOOL OF PLANNING

Skelmersdale: The design and implementation of a British new town, 1961-1985

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BA (Hons)

Being a dissertation submitted to the faculty of the Built Environment as part of the requirements for the award of the MSc Spatial Planning at University College London: I declare that this dissertation is entirely my own work and that ideas, data and images, as well as direct quotations, drawn from elsewhere are identified and referenced.

8th September 2020

Word count (main body): 10,992

Word count (appendices): 803

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my supervisor, Professor Michael Hebbert, for all his insights, support and constructive challenge during the dissertation scoping and writing process. His wealth of knowledge about the history of planning, architecture and post-war Britain has been very inspiring.

I would also like to thank the staff of Lancashire Archives and Liverpool John Moores University Special Collections and Archives, who assisted me when I made a preliminary visit to their archive collections in March 2020.

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Abstract

New towns were a cornerstone of the post-war British planning system. They have been both praised and derided, but are, in reality, little understood. Research has mainly focused on the experience of a few iconic examples, such as Cumbernauld and Milton Keynes; other new towns, especially in the north-west of England, have been relatively neglected. This means that there is a lack of understanding of how new towns were designed in very different contexts, and of how their often experimental, modernist designs were implemented over time. Recent proposals to establish new development corporations in the Oxford-Cambridge Arc mean that an examination of new town design and implementation is more timely than ever.

This dissertation responds by assessing the design and implementation of Skelmersdale New Town, near Liverpool, a little-studied example designated in the early 1960s and built out by its development corporation until 1985. The dissertation begins by assessing the town's design, demonstrating how it embodied the priorities of its architect-planner, Hugh Wilson. These priorities – full automobility, urban character and compactness – reflected the context of early 1960s modernism and responded to criticism of earlier new towns, but took limited account of the local context.

The dissertation then discusses Skelmersdale's implementation, arguing that this brought to the fore the development corporation's dependence on central government. The development corporation was able to provide the planned-for housing, industrial premises and road network, as these were government priorities in the early years of implementation. However, it struggled to achieve the affluent urban character planned in the overambitious, sometimes contradictory design. Skelmersdale's experience reveals that while comprehensive modernist planning was a powerful tool in creating housing and infrastructure, it was limited by its inability to fully predict future economic and political conditions.

1. Introduction

"The town is being built for people and we've got to keep their needs absolutely at the forefront of our thinking all the time ... it is the people that will matter at the end of the day"

(Phelps, 1972)

"The problem with utopias is that one person imagines them and everyone else has to live in them"

(Cottrell Boyce, 2016)

The new towns are one of the most distinctive and disputed elements of the post-war British planning system. Those involved in designing and implementing new towns, such as Richard Phelps, Skelmersdale's general manager, often saw themselves as prioritising residents' needs. Others, such as the author Frank Cottrell Boyce, have observed that their paternalistic, utopian approach often failed to deliver on its promises, leading to economically depressed, poorly connected places.

Between 1946 and 1970, over thirty new towns were designated in the UK, most with the goal of providing overspill housing for large cities and preventing urban sprawl (Alexander, 2009; Ortolano, 2019, p. 15). Although the Town and Country Planning Association (TCPA) heralds new towns as examples of successful planning, in the wider public sphere new towns are frequently portrayed as undesirable locations beset with social problems, with blame for this often ascribed to the towns' modernist design. Moreover, despite the intention for new towns to have a mixture of private and social housing, they are often absorbed into a wider history, critique or praise of social housing (Clapson, 2017; Ravetz, 2001; Sandbrook, 2007, pp. 186-187).

Much analysis and debate on new towns has been focused on particularly iconic and famous places seen as being socially or architecturally interesting. Examples include Mark Clapson's social history of Milton Keynes (2004) and John Gold's focus on the experience of Cumbernauld in his study of modernism (2007). There has been relatively little discussion of other new towns, especially those in the north-west of England. In addition to this, a concentration on the initial goals and conception of new towns has meant that analysis of their implementation and evolution over time has been relatively neglected, as noted by Corbin Sies, Gournay and Freestone (2019).

This dissertation assesses the experience of Skelmersdale New Town, in Lancashire, north-west England (figures 1 and 2). It was designated in 1961 to assist with nearby Liverpool's housing shortage, and its development corporation was in operation until 1985. Its design and implementation have been little analysed, despite the comprehensive records held at Lancashire Archives and Liverpool John Moores University. Skelmersdale has often been regarded as a social and architectural failure, but its original design was seen as radical and ambitious (Lock and Ellis, 2020; Llewelyn-Davies, 1966; Liverpool Echo, 1965). An assessment of Skelmersdale's design and implementation challenges our tendency to anachronistically judge the new towns' design and implementation by what we know of their subsequent experience, as well as the tendency to generalise about new town planning while neglecting the importance of local context. With the recent development of a new retail complex in Skelmersdale's town centre beginning to chip away at the town's original modernist layout, it is now a particularly pertinent time to re-examine how Skelmersdale was designed and implemented (Duffy, 2015).

Figure 1: Skelmersdale's national context.

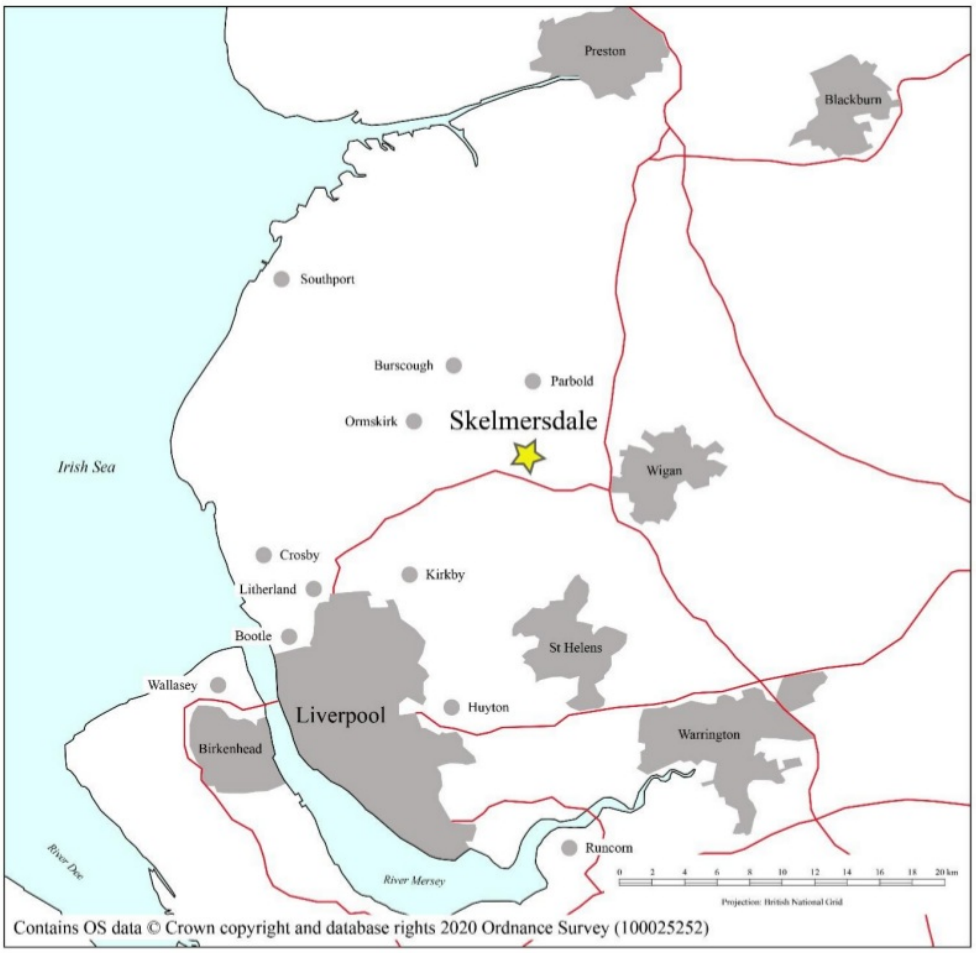

Figure 2: Skelmersdale's regional context.

Skelmersdale's experience shows how comprehensive modernist planning was limited by its inability to fully understand and predict future economic and political conditions. Skelmersdale's master plan set out an ambitious, detailed programme for how the new town would be delivered, and the features it would have. Ultimately, however, its development corporation was most successful at delivering housing, industrial premises and roads; social and commercial infrastructure proved much more difficult to achieve. With new town legislation remaining in force today, and recent indications that the government might establish development corporations in the Oxford-Cambridge Arc, it is timely to consider how this implementation process worked, and why the bold, modernist vision set out in 1961 was only partially achieved (Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, 2020).

1.1. Research question and objectives

The research question I used to examine Skelmersdale's design and implementation was as follows:

How was Skelmersdale New Town's design implemented over the course of its buildout (1961-1985)?

The specific research objectives that enabled me to answer this question were:

1. Investigate how Skelmersdale New Town was designated and designed, and how local and national actors influenced the design process.
2. Identify the key components and particularities of Skelmersdale New Town's design, and how these relate to the design and planning context of the early 1960s.
3. Investigate how Skelmersdale New Town's design was implemented from 1961 to 1985, which local and national actors were involved in the implementation process, and how they influenced this process.
4. Investigate the extent to which Skelmersdale New Town's design and implementation process were flexible and able to respond to the changing social, political and economic context from 1961 to 1985.

I first review the academic literature and historical context relevant to this topic, then discuss my research methodology. I then examine the design and implementation of Skelmersdale New Town in detail and finally provide a conclusion.

2. Literature review

2.1. New towns

New towns were places where new, utopian visions of society could be trialled and implemented at scale, not in theory restricted by existing development. In the UK, they have been viewed as part of the post-war social democratic settlement – Guy Ortolano describes them as the "spatial dimension of the welfare state" alongside the NHS and social security systems. The new towns had significant aspirations, not only aiming to widen access to housing and provide employment, but – especially by the 1960s – to plan for affluence, consumerism and greater leisure time. However, their often experimental, modernist designs and layouts came to be blamed for social problems, and it was argued that by taking people out of established inner-city communities, they caused social isolation – the so-called "new town blues" (Wakeman, 2016; Sandbrook, 2007, pp. 185-191; Kynaston, 2015, pp. 677-679; Ortolano, 2019, p. 3).

The grand visions for new towns had little room for dissenting views or community consultation. The implementation of these visions was facilitated by development corporations, which have been described as "quasi-colonial" due to their centrally imposed nature and disregard for local views. There has been criticism of new towns as soulless places designed by middle-class reformers for the working class, where little thought was given to residents' views. However, others have argued that new towns are in fact places where people are happy to live (Glendinning, 2010, p. 56; Ravetz, 2001; Clapson, 2017).

A large number of studies were carried out of the British new towns programme whilst it was in operation, including officially sponsored publications such as Cullingworth's 1979 *Peacetime History* and the Building Research Establishment's detailed studies of Bracknell, East Kilbride and Washington (Cullingworth, 1979; Hebbert, 1980). However, there has been little detailed discussion of the programme since the last new town development corporations were dissolved in the 1990s. A notable exception is Edwards' article on the implementation of Milton Keynes' design, arguing that the process of mediation and translation caused key elements of the original vision to be compromised and lost (Edwards, 2001). This dissertation responds to this gap in recent research by conducting a detailed assessment of the design and implementation of Skelmersdale. It demonstrates how these processes were reliant on Skelmersdale's particular political, economic and local conditions.

2.2. Modernism in the 1960s

The early 1960s were a time of consensus around the need for large-scale comprehensive redevelopment: architects and planners were given unprecedented freedom to implement their "modernist" visions (Glendinning, 2010). In the planning context, the term "modernism" tends to describe the post-war preoccupation with the use of radical architectural and planning methods and forms, a disregard for the existing historical fabric and large-scale comprehensive redevelopment (Goldhagen, 2005; Saumarez Smith, 2016). Among other factors, the consensus around modernist redevelopment was a result of concern over poor housing conditions, growing affluence and automobility, and a desire among local politicians and the public to bring towns and cities up-to-date in the face of a changing, deindustrialising economy (Kynaston, 2015, pp. 646-659).

By the early 1960s, two key principles underpinned much modernist planning: urbanity and full automobility. The desire for urbanity reflected the evolution of modernist practice: Team X and other architects sought to move beyond the codified, functional model set out by the modernist CIAM group in the 1940s Charter of Athens. They now aimed to recreate the essential urban character of existing settlements and to plan in a more flexible way, moving beyond rigid blueprint planning (Mumford, 1992, 2018). Planning for full automobility, meanwhile, had a wider resonance beyond modernist architectural and planning circles. Increased vehicle ownership and traffic congestion, and the association of car ownership with growing affluence, led to a popular consensus around dealing with the "problem" of the car. This was exemplified by the radical reconstruction of cities proposed in the 1964 Buchanan Report (Gunn, 2011; Buchanan, 1964).

Today, modernist redevelopment is often associated with British inner cities. However, it is the second-generation new towns, with their greenfield sites, that gave the freest hand to architects and planners to implement experimental designs and layouts. For example, the design of Cumbernauld, widely seen as exemplary, sought urbanity by abandoning the "dull" neighbourhood units of earlier new towns, in favour of a compact town centre in a single megastructure. It pursued full automobility by eliminating traditional streets and designing radial roads as urban motorways. There has been much discussion of how the desire for urbanity and planning for full automobility were translated into plans and then implemented at Cumbernauld, and even discussion of how they were developed into an unrealised plan for a new town at Hook (in Hampshire). However, there has been no detailed discussion of the plan

for Skelmersdale, developed in a similar theoretical context, and how the specificities of its local context influenced its design and implementation (Gold, 2007; Saint, 1992; Sandbrook, 2007, pp. 186-187).

2.3. Skelmersdale's location in the north-west

Just as much as the theoretical context, the regional context of Liverpool and the north-west had an important bearing on how and why Skelmersdale was designated, designed and implemented.

Following the Second World War, one of the most pressing issues facing Liverpool was the need to provide additional housing due to overcrowding, slum clearance, bomb damage and a booming birth rate (Sykes et al., 2013). The desire to limit the Liverpool conurbation's outward growth led Lancashire County Council to suggest the designation of a new town under the New Towns Act 1946. However, it was difficult to identify a site for a new town close to Liverpool, given the highly productive Grade 1 agricultural land to the north, and the highly urbanised, industrial region to the east towards Manchester (figure 3). The site eventually chosen was therefore a compromise between the desire to find a site within relatively easy reach of Liverpool, the desire to retain productive agricultural land, and the desire to avoid sprawl and the coalescence of existing industrial settlements (Hall et al., 1973; Natural England, 2014).

Skelmersdale's site was a constrained one, on the edge of the fertile coastal plain but not encroaching into it, and hemmed in to the east by hillier ground which was more difficult to build on. The area already had a population of around 10,000 and contained a declining former coalmining town. Despite the desire to avoid existing large settlements, it was only 6 miles from the nearby town of Wigan, which had a population of 78,690 in 1961. It was therefore far from the blank slate that a new town would ideally present, and its design was constrained by the realities of its location (GB Historical GIS, 2020a; Harwood, 2015; Osborn and Whittick, 1977).

The new town at Skelmersdale also responded to the wider historical and social context of north-west England. The region's population and prosperity had grown significantly in the Industrial Revolution, and its towns and cities were therefore essentially nineteenth-century creations. By the 1960s, in the face of deindustrialisation, town and city councils in the north-west rejected their existing built form. They now enthusiastically sought modernist redevelopment in order to define a new identity not linked to their industrial past, and to present themselves as modern settlements ready to face the challenges and opportunities of rising car

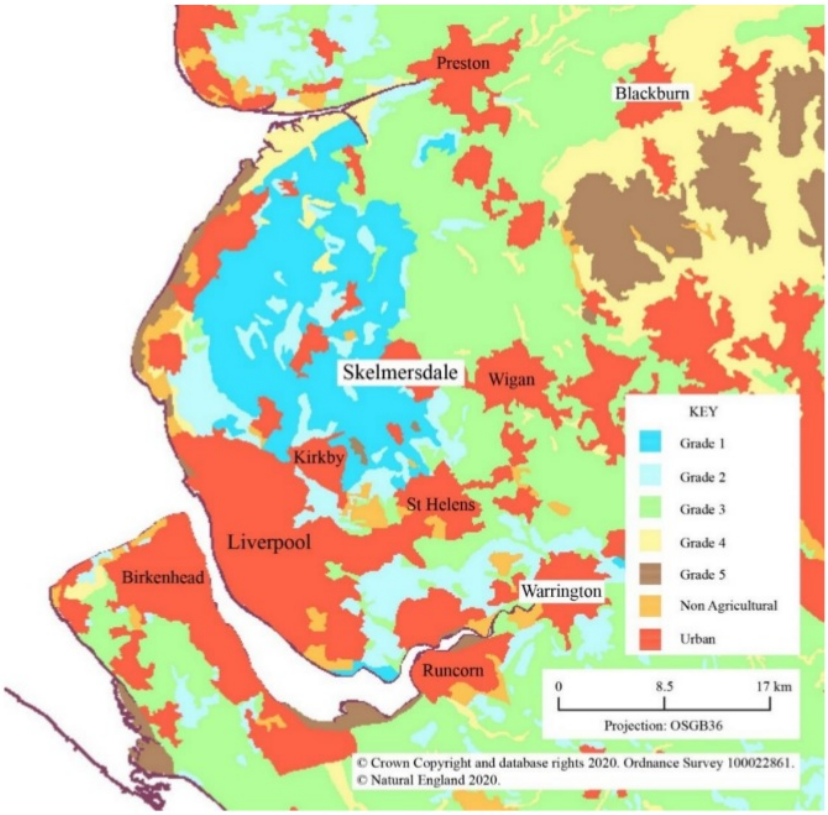

Figure 3: Agricultural land classification surrounding Skelmersdale. Grade 1 is the best quality agricultural land and Grade 5 is the poorest quality.

ownership, growing affluence and a changed industrial landscape. By undergoing modernist redevelopment, they hoped to attract public and private investment (Saumarez Smith, 2019; Kefford, 2015).

Whilst much of this development occurred in the centres of existing towns and cities, new towns such as Skelmersdale were also vital in defining this new identity, but this aspect has been little assessed. There are also relatively few studies on the north-west's role in 1960s modernism: exceptions have included Saumarez Smith's discussion of the redevelopment of central Blackburn and Kefford's thesis on the reshaping of Manchester and Leeds around the future citizen-consumer. North-west new towns are even more peripheral: exceptions include articles by Gosseye, and Couch and Fowles, on Runcorn Shopping City (Harwood, 2002; Saumarez Smith, 2019; Kefford, 2015; Gosseye, 2019; Couch and Fowles, 2006). My dissertation therefore addresses the current lack of literature on new towns in the north-west of

England by demonstrating how this local context was pivotal in facilitating the town's comprehensive modernist design.

2.4. A shifting context

The implementation of Skelmersdale's design took place from 1961 to 1985, a period during which not only the economic and political context, but also attitudes towards town planning, changed fundamentally. Over the course of the 1960s, the consensus around the need for modernist redevelopment disintegrated. It was blamed for the persistence of poverty and unemployment in inner cities: the assumption of affluence which had underpinned many 1960s plans had not been achieved in practice. The clearest evidence of this change in attitude is that some of the very architects who designed the grand modernist visions of the early 1960s had moved to working on inner-city regeneration by the 1970s. By 1977, Hugh Wilson, who had drafted Skelmersdale's master plan and numerous other modernist plans for new towns and town-centre redevelopment in the 1960s, was working on an inner area study of Liverpool which proposed supporting existing communities rather than comprehensive redevelopment (Gold, 2007; Esher, 1983; Saumarez Smith, 2016, 2019; Department of the Environment, 1977).

Few modernist planning proposals drafted at a similar time to those of Skelmersdale survived this changing context; however, Skelmersdale Development Corporation was locked into its original plans for 24 years, with few apparent changes to its master plan over this implementation period. There has been little recent detailed study of how long-term planning proposals such as these were implemented over this time. This dissertation examines the implementation of Skelmersdale's plan, assessing how a plan drafted in the early 1960s fared over the twenty-four years of the development corporation's existence.

3. Research methodology

3.1. Brief outline

In order to address my research question and objectives, I used a qualitative, interpretivist approach, reviewing primary sources from the time period of my research, as well as secondary academic writings covering the history of that period and the role of planning and architecture. I conducted my research from March 2020 to August 2020.

3.2. Limitations due to Covid-19 pandemic

Skelmersdale Development Corporation's records are held at Lancashire Archives in Preston, and its technical library is held at Liverpool John Moores University. When originally planning my dissertation, I had planned to use these records as the basis for my research: I carried out a preliminary visit to the archives in early March, reviewing a number of documents at that time. However, as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, these archives, the UCL library and other libraries were closed from the end of March. I therefore used online newspaper archives and records of parliamentary proceedings, which gave me a deep understanding of how Skelmersdale's development was perceived and discussed in the public sphere. By combining these online archives with materials I had already obtained from the archives and UCL library in advance of the restrictions (particularly the Skelmersdale Basic Plan and Skelmersdale Development Corporation's annual reports), I developed a comprehensive view of Skelmersdale's design and implementation.

3.3. Sources

3.3.1. Skelmersdale New Town Basic Plan (1964)

This is the master plan for Skelmersdale, which sets out the outline for its development and rationale for its design and layout.

3.3.2. Skelmersdale Development Corporation annual reports (1963-1985)

These are the annual reports made by Skelmersdale Development Corporation to central government. They contain details of key milestones and progress made on developing the town each year.

3.3.3. *Skelmersdale Development Corporation archives and technical library (1961-1985)*

Although, as noted above, I was unable to review the development corporation's archives and technical library comprehensively due to the Covid-19 pandemic, I carried out a preliminary visit to the archives in early March 2020. At this time, I reviewed the Lancashire County Development Plan, minutes from the first few years of the development corporation's existence, a number of housing area plans, and the updated basic plans from 1975 and 1981.

These archive documents were particularly useful for understanding the process of Skelmersdale's designation, the circumstances of Hugh Wilson's appointment, and how the basic plan was translated into detailed designs.

3.3.4. *National and local newspaper archives and obituaries (1950-1990)*

I reviewed the national newspapers *The Times*, *The Guardian* and *The Economist* from 1950 to 1990, a slightly longer period than the time period covered by my dissertation, to identify the background and results of events happening within the time period. After conducting a preliminary, high-level review of newspaper archives, I chose to review these newspapers in detail because they discuss the development of Skelmersdale and cover a range of viewpoints across the political spectrum. In particular, *The Guardian* has substantial coverage of Skelmersdale's designation and development, particularly in the new town's early years when the newspaper was based in Manchester. I also reviewed the newspaper obituaries of key individuals involved in the design, development and management of Skelmersdale, in order to understand their career backgrounds and trajectories.

I also reviewed the regional newspaper *The Liverpool Echo* from 1950 to 1990. As the newspaper covering the area from which Skelmersdale's population originated, the *Liverpool Echo* contains much comment on Skelmersdale's development, with more specific detail than in the national newspapers. However, unlike national newspapers, as a local newspaper the *Liverpool Echo* had a particular interest in boosting Liverpool's civic pride, and enthusiastically promoted Liverpool's modernist redevelopment in the 1960s in a relatively benign, non-critical way (Shapely, 2012).

As Bingham (2010) notes, care needs to be taken in using digitised newspaper archives because there are some significant gaps in their coverage. In relation to Skelmersdale, whilst the *Liverpool Echo* has been digitised for the time period of my research, Liverpool's other main

newspaper at the time, the *Liverpool Daily Post*, has not, nor have newspapers covering Skelmersdale itself and the immediate area (Ormskirk and Wigan). Moreover, search terms are a relatively blunt instrument and may not, for example, identify mentions of a subject where different terminology has been used. I therefore kept searches as broad as possible, using a variety of search terms to narrow my research where I encountered a large number of irrelevant results.

3.3.5. Parliamentary proceedings (Hansard) (1950-1990)

I reviewed Hansard, covering both the House of Commons and House of Lords, from 1950 to 1990. This was especially useful for understanding the relationship between the development corporation, the local authority, and new town residents, and for understanding how difficulties with employment affected the development of Skelmersdale.

3.3.6. Government policy and reports (1950-1985)

I reviewed the relevant legislation on the new towns programme and Skelmersdale's designation as a new town, and reports produced for government on the new towns programme, the siting of industry and the regeneration of Liverpool.

3.3.7. Modern and historical mapping

I used modern and historical mapping to understand the development of Skelmersdale over time and to identify how key elements of the design were implemented.

3.3.8. Historic interview transcripts

I reviewed transcripts of interviews undertaken in the 1990s and 2000s with key individuals who worked on Skelmersdale's design and implementation, conducted as part of the *New Towns Record* project.

3.3.9. Secondary literature (1961-2020)

I reviewed secondary literature assessing the new towns programme, modernism, design theory, and the history of the time period, in order to situate my research in relation to existing academic arguments.

3.4. Ethical considerations

My dissertation research is based on publicly available articles, reports, books, newspaper archives and parliamentary records. Over the course of my research, I have not used any

personal data, conducted any online or in-person interviews or surveys, and have not conducted any observational fieldwork. Therefore, after discussion with my supervisor, I believe that my research does not deal with any particularly contentious issues and does not raise significant ethical concerns. During my research, I remained vigilant for any ethical issues and was aware of the channels through which to raise ethical concerns.

3.5. Reflection

I feel that the sources I have used and the way I have analysed them effectively enabled me to answer my research question and meet my research objectives. Using a combination of online newspaper and parliamentary archives, archive material from my preliminary visit to Lancashire Archives and Liverpool John Moores University, the basic plan and annual reports, I have been able to develop a detailed understanding of Skelmersdale's design and implementation.

4. Design

4.1. Designation and establishment

Local authorities, rather than central government, were the first to propose Skelmersdale as a new town, including it in the 1951 Lancashire County Development Plan to provide additional housing for the city of Liverpool and the surrounding Merseyside conurbation.[1] The Conservative government of the time initially rejected the idea: they instead encouraged Liverpool to work with local authorities in Skelmersdale to create an overspill development under the Town Development Act 1952. However, with little progress made, and with Liverpool's housing crisis only worsening, in September 1960 the (Conservative) Minister of Housing and Local Government Henry Brooke announced that Skelmersdale was in fact to be designated as a new town, with a target population of 80,000 (Cullingworth, 1979; Guardian, 1960a; Lancashire County Council, 1951, 1956; Liverpool Echo, 1959, 1960a).

Local authorities, initially frustrated that the decision had been taken without consultation, soon demonstrated different attitudes to the new town. Skelmersdale Urban District (UD), covering most but not all of the designated area (figure 5), saw an opportunity to revitalise itself after the decline of coalmining and to become "a town of the 1970s". Some Skelmersdale residents were more ambivalent, fearing being "landed with a rough element from Liverpool". Liverpool Corporation, meanwhile, saw an opportunity to combat its housing shortage without spending its own limited funds. However, the County Borough of Wigan, only 6 miles away (figure 4) and with a population of 78,690, saw a threat to its own growth, and landowners and residents of the village of Dalton, north of Skelmersdale, feared their rural idyll would be destroyed. A public inquiry dismissed these objections with the argument that Skelmersdale, despite its disadvantages, was still the least constrained site available near Liverpool (Liverpool Echo, 1962a; Guardian, 1960b, 1961a; Draft Skelmersdale New Town (Designation) Order 1961; GB Historical GIS, 2020a).

[1] Defined as Liverpool County Borough, Bootle County Borough, Crosby Municipal Borough, Litherland Urban District, Kirkby Urban District and Huyton-with-Roby Urban District.

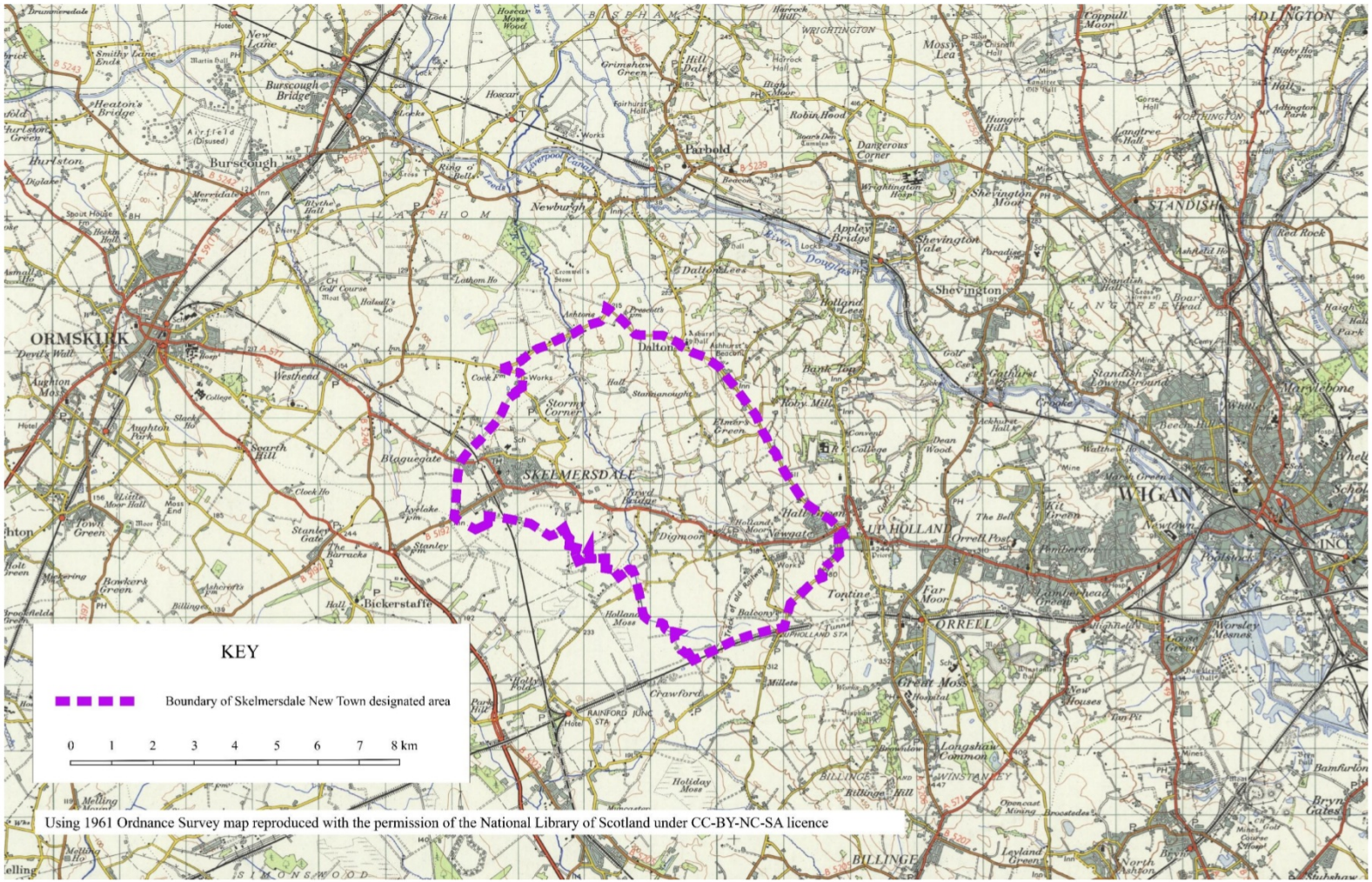

Figure 4: Skelmersdale and surrounding area prior to new town construction. Existing building was mainly confined to the town of Skelmersdale in the far west of the designated area. The proximity of the large town of Wigan to the east can be clearly seen.

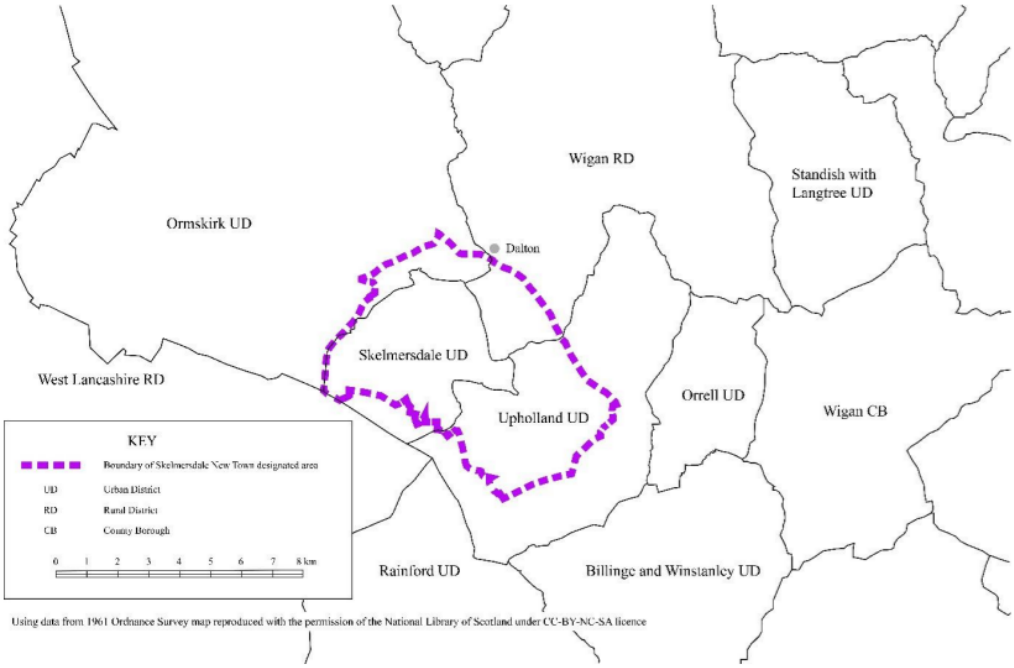

Figure 5: Local authorities in and around Skelmersdale, 1961.

Local authorities and residents were little involved in shaping the design process, which was led by an architect-planner appointed by the development corporation board, under clear central government direction. Following the conclusion of the public inquiry and the designation of the new town in October 1961, Skelmersdale Development Corporation was established in January 1962 (Skelmersdale Development Corporation ("SDC") Annual Report, 1963). Although the development corporation had its own board made up of local industry figures and Skelmersdale, Liverpool and Lancashire councillors (see appendix 1), it was central government that appointed the board members and had a significant influence over its early decision-making (Cullingworth, 1979, p. 291). In April 1962, Evelyn Sharp, permanent secretary to the Ministry of Housing and Local Government and an admirer of modernist design, strongly encouraged the board's chairman A. J. Kentish Barnes to appoint Hugh Wilson to draft the master plan for Skelmersdale as his first independent consultancy project, arguing that "you would be very fortunate indeed to get him". Sharp praised Hugh Wilson as "undoubtedly the most successful architect planner in the new town business", with his work as chief architect at Cumbernauld having "won a wide fame" (Lancashire Archives, 1962-1965). The development corporation board not only appointed Wilson, but also appointed a raft of further individuals who were also working at Cumbernauld to key roles at Skelmersdale,

this time as full employees of the development corporation: the general manager (George G. Watson), chief architect (Derek Lyddon) and chief engineer (David Garside) (SDC Annual Reports, 1963, 1964). Whilst it is easy to see these appointments as impositions from central government with little local consultation, it is worth bearing in mind that Liverpool Corporation and other local authorities in the north-west were actively pursuing modernist redevelopment projects in the early 1960s as a response to deindustrialisation. Moreover, Cumbernauld's design had been widely praised as a bold and effective response to the challenge of rising car ownership and growing affluence (Saumarez Smith, 2019; Wakeman, 2016, pp. 270-274).

4.2. The basic plan

The basic plan for Skelmersdale (Wilson, 1964a, 1964b; figure 6; figure 7 shows the town today) reflects Hugh Wilson's view of the key goals of town planning, much more than it reflects the town's purpose of providing housing and employment. Wilson had laid out his town planning priorities in a number of articles reflecting on the "lessons of the new towns for the old towns", including maximum separation of pedestrians and vehicles, urban character and compactness (Wilson, 1960). In Skelmersdale's case, these principles were to be achieved in a similar way to Cumbernauld: through its main road network, its central area, and the abandonment of neighbourhood units. Less discussed in the basic plan, but still very present, was a functional separation of housing and industrial areas. The plan would be "for people" rather than a "monument" to its designer, and in order to emphasise its flexibility, was described as a "basic plan", as Wilson felt that "the term 'master plan' can have an unfortunate connotation in implying too finite a set of proposals" (Wilson, 1964a, p. 1).

At first glance, the basic plan – with the exception of its strive for urban character – therefore appears largely technocratic and based on apparently rational, functional principles. This is reinforced by the copious appendices of statistics and projections, maps and graphs, and lack of illustrations. This focus on technical justification for the basic plan and lack of ornament appear to be an attempt to convey that the analysis and planning for the town has been done in a neutral, rational way. The basic plan's assertion that it was rational and not aiming at monumentality is however undermined by its focus on the proposed aesthetic quality of the town. Despite the plan supposedly being a high-level basic plan, it delves into great detail about the design and symbolic value of the central area, which was to be "a climax to the town in the social and architectural senses": a "stimulating" place that would provide a range of facilities – from a hotel to an ice rink – that would be fit for an affluent future and attract both residents

and visitors (Wilson, 1964a, pp. 28-30). The plan assesses essentially aesthetic concerns such as whether the central area should be built as a cluster or linear deck (figures 8 and 9). It does not, however, discuss the technical rationale for the town centre's location on a greenfield site: this appears to be driven by the symbolic value of having a town centre in the physical centre of the town, rather than practical considerations. Similarly, landscape is mobilised into this aesthetic vision: the retention of a large open space above the town is justified more because of the view it would give of the town, described in florid style as "forming the man made foreground to the ever stretching plain merging into the great expanse of sky in the sun haze or the mist", rather than because of its usefulness as a recreation area for local residents (Wilson, 1964a, p. 45). Likewise, the retention of the wooded gullies running east-west through the town is proposed, but little consideration is given to how this would interact with the aim for urban character and how it would impact the directness of the proposed footpath network.

The aesthetic quality of the town and its landscape are, however, clearly subservient to the main principle of the basic plan: full automobility. This is set out as the underlying main principle of the plan in the preamble to the document: "Town planning in the 1960s must have regard to a high level of car ownership and car usage and the communications system must be designed accordingly" (Wilson, 1964a, p. 1). The plan describes the specifications for the road network in great detail, and it forms the structure of the town. Whilst elsewhere in the plan landscape features such as wooded gullies are retained, the road network is allowed to have priority over them – for example, the Grimshaw Brook is covered by one of the main town roads. Moreover, there are two and a half pages discussing the road network and only one paragraph discussing the separate footpath network. Despite the footpath network being a vital component of the town's design because no pavements were to be provided alongside main roads (meaning that there would be no streets in the traditional sense), its detailed design is left for individual housing contracts (Wilson, 1964a, p. 30). There is also little discussion of the tension between the large amount of land likely to be permanently needed for the road network and the principle of a compact, walkable town with urban character. The fact that this tension is not discussed emphasises full automobility as the key structuring element and principle of the basic plan.

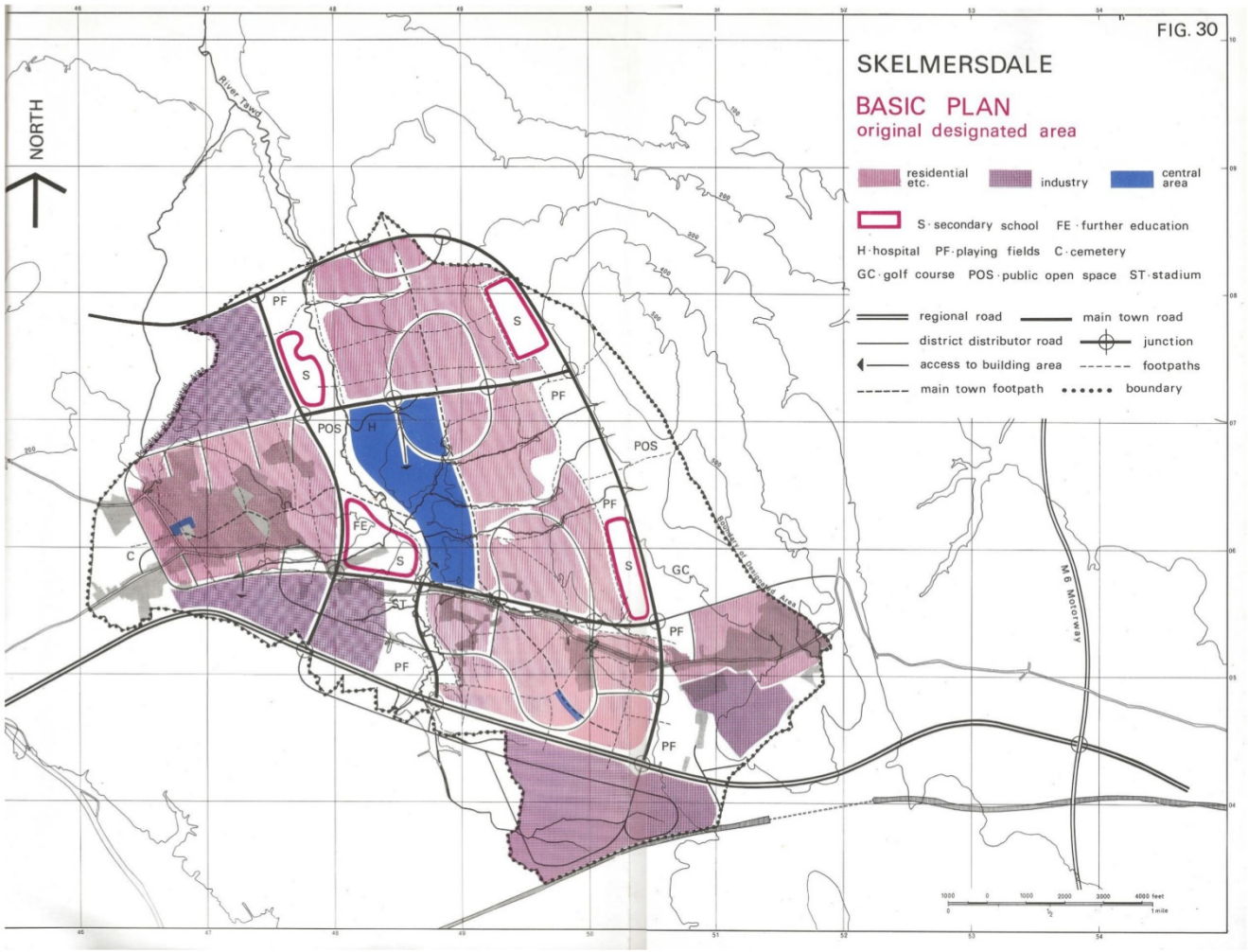

Figure 6: Skelmersdale Basic Plan, 1964, showing the proposed main road network and functional separation of housing and industry.

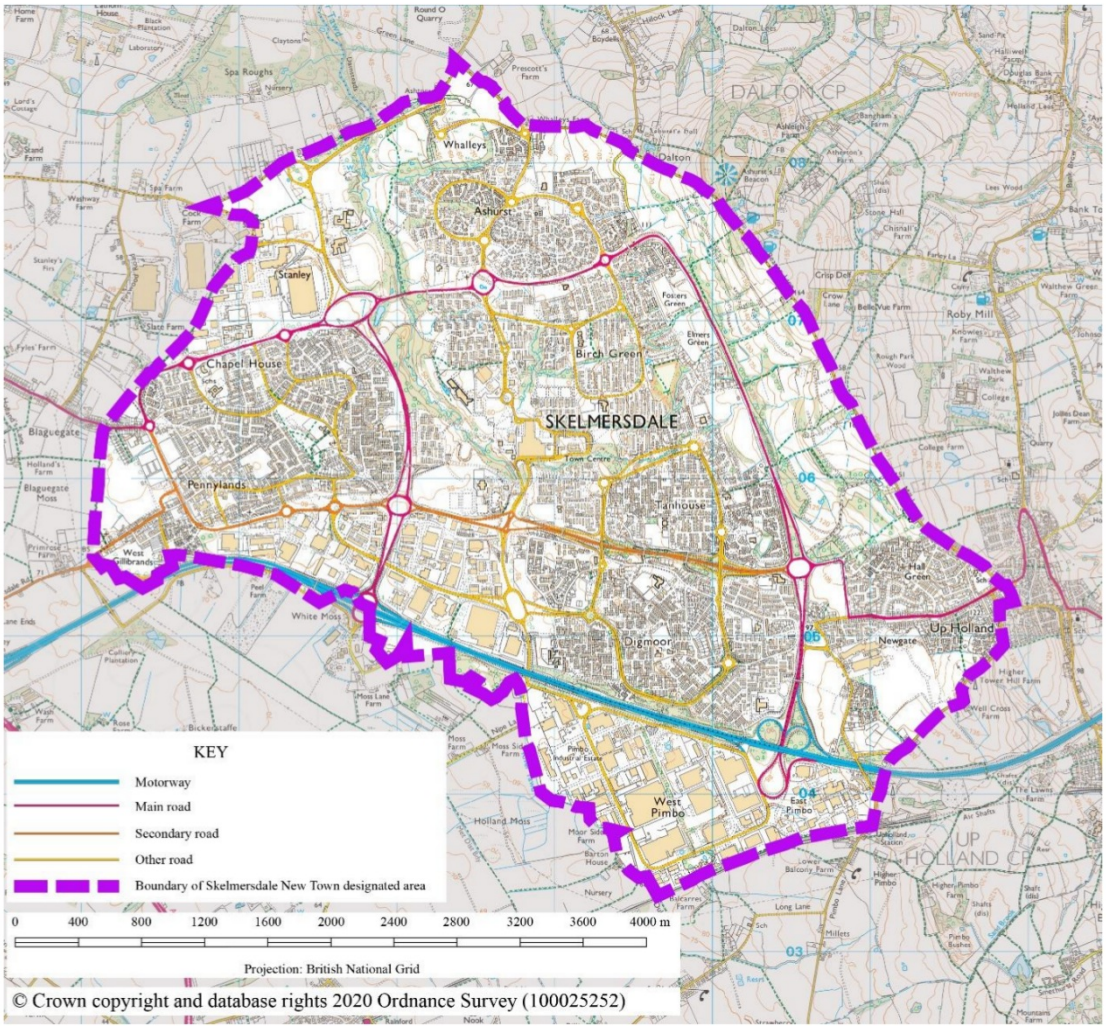

Figure 7: Skelmersdale town plan, 2020. The town's hierarchical road network and strict separation of housing and industry closely follow that set out in the basic plan.

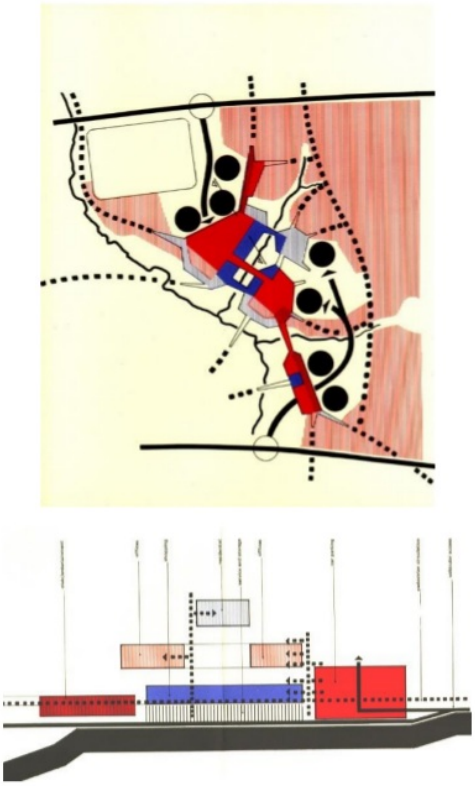

Figure 8: Cluster town centre.

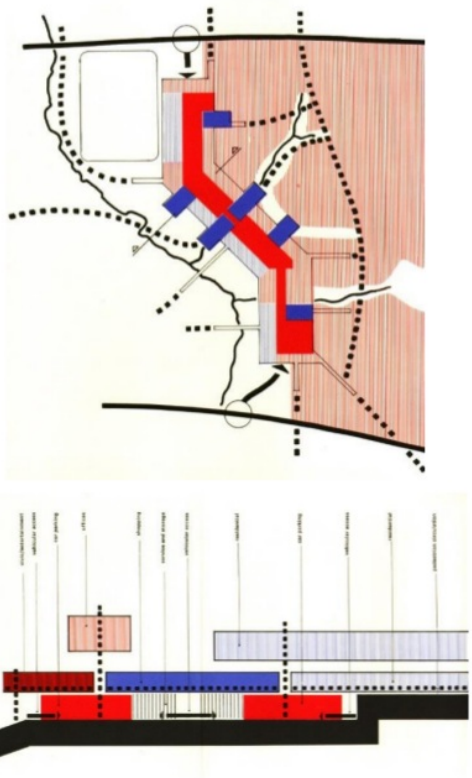

Figure 9: Linear town centre.

4.3. Local influence

The basic plan does not appear to have been significantly influenced by the views of local authorities or residents. Although versions of the plan were presented and explained to local authorities and the basic plan was exhibited publicly once complete (SDC Annual Reports, 1964-66), there is little evidence that any local suggestions were taken on board. The main principles of the basic plan reflected those which were put forward by Wilson before Skelmersdale had even been designated as a new town. This lack of local input reflects Skelmersdale UD's diminutive stature as a local authority (representing a population of only 6,309) and the fact that it, like other local authorities in the north-west, was keen to gain the benefits of modernist redevelopment in order to mitigate the effects of deindustrialisation and attract new investment. In pursuit of this goal, Skelmersdale UD was content to leave the experts to work and to be informed of the results: the local council leader stated that he had "great faith in this Development Corporation" which "comprised eminent men, all experts" and

that he looked forward to "getting some very definite news from the Development Corporation as to what was actually involved" (Liverpool Echo, 1962a). It also reflects Liverpool Corporation's ambivalent attitude towards the new town. Skelmersdale was only one of many methods that Liverpool Corporation was using to address its housing crisis, and it feared that the loss of population would lead to a loss of local tax income (Guardian, 1963; Liverpool Echo, 1959, 1960b; GB Historical GIS, 2020b).

Moreover, the plan only responds to its local geographical context in a limited way. It contains detailed analysis of the natural landscape and proposes retaining many of the wooded gullies flowing through the designated area, with the exception of those that are in the way of road proposals or the town centre. However, it ascribes little value to the existing built landscape of the town of Skelmersdale and the surrounding scattered cottages and farmhouses. The plan presents these as functionally obsolete and even proposes the destruction of the hamlet of Stormy Corner (figure 10) to provide land for an industrial area, merely noting that it consisted "mainly of old houses in poor condition which should be demolished" (Wilson, 1964a, p. 27). The shopping facilities in Skelmersdale's existing town centre (figure 11) also appear not to have been taken into account when deciding where to locate the new town's central area. The local built environment therefore appears not to have been compatible with either the functional vision for the new town or the aesthetic vision: the declining mining town of Skelmersdale represented the decay of nineteenth-century industry rather than the modern, affluent future.

Skelmersdale's designation and design were therefore shaped by the priorities of central government and the architect-planner Hugh Wilson. The design reflected little influence from local interests in either Skelmersdale or Liverpool, and little accommodation of the existing built environment. To a certain extent, this experience was similar to that of other 1950s and 1960s new towns, such as Cumbernauld, where architect-planners also planned in a comprehensive way which aimed to implement a particular vision of urban life, rather than responding to local interests (Gold, 2006). However, Skelmersdale's experience underlines the importance of the local context of the north-west in its design. Unlike many (although not all) of the other new towns designated up to that point, the designated area for Skelmersdale already had a substantial population and built environment, which stood in the way of any comprehensive vision for a new settlement: this made the lack of local influence starker than it might have appeared in less developed sites. Plans for other new towns had often preserved existing settlements in their designated area, even where a new town centre was being created. This was the case at Cumbernauld, where separate proposals were prepared for the existing

Figure 10: Stormy Corner, c. 1960.

Figure 11: Sandy Lane, main shopping street in Skelmersdale
before construction of new town, c. 1960.

village (Cumbernauld Development Corporation, 1959). Skelmersdale, however, was a declining industrial settlement, and in the context of the deindustrialisation of the north-west, its local authorities were particularly eager to let planners design as they saw fit. This specificity

of the local context gave Wilson even more control over the design than he might otherwise have had, and the opportunity to design in an even more totalising, comprehensive manner.

I now examine how Skelmersdale's design was implemented by the development corporation over the course of its existence, until its dissolution in 1985.

5. Implementation

5.1. Early successes

Following the publication of the basic plan in December 1964 and its approval by the Minister in May 1966, Skelmersdale Development Corporation implemented the new town's design, led by its board, chief architect and general manager.

Until the mid-1970s, the development corporation excelled in fulfilling the stated purpose of the new town: relieving Liverpool's housing crisis. It quickly constructed its own housing for social rental and attracted new residents: the new town grew from a population of 8,500 in 1961 to 23,560 in 1970 and 41,500 in 1976 (Wilson, 1964a, p. 2; SDC Annual Reports, 1963-1976). To begin with, prospective residents needed to be currently resident in Merseyside and have a job in the new town, but this requirement was relaxed in 1970, when the amount of housing began to outstrip the industrial employment created. From then on, residents were allowed to move to Skelmersdale but to continue to work in Merseyside (SDC Annual Report, 1970). It was relatively easy for the development corporation to gain funding for housing because of central government interest in demonstrating that it was taking action to provide housing (Saumarez Smith, 2019, pp. 38-40). The housing attracted new residents because of long waiting lists for social housing in Merseyside, as the former Chief Legal Officer Tim Bradbury noted in an interview conducted as part of the *New Towns Record* project in the 1990s: "we marketed Skelmersdale in Liverpool through the housing offices of the various local authorities and they were, of course, very prepared to come for housing if they had no prospect of getting housing in Liverpool". The significant number of new jobs that were being created in Skelmersdale was an additional attraction. However, central government support for housing came at a cost: planning proposals needed to be approved by the Ministry of Housing and Local Government, which used housing cost yardsticks to strictly control the amount that could be spent, leading to greater density. Moreover, central government controlled the overall direction of the development corporation's housebuilding programme, which had a consequent effect on the layout of the town. Housing layouts remained similar as each area of the new town was built out, until a central government drive for more owner-occupation from the 1970s led to layouts which more closely resembled those of private builders (figures 12 and 13) (SDC Annual Reports, 1963-1978; Bradbury, n.d.).

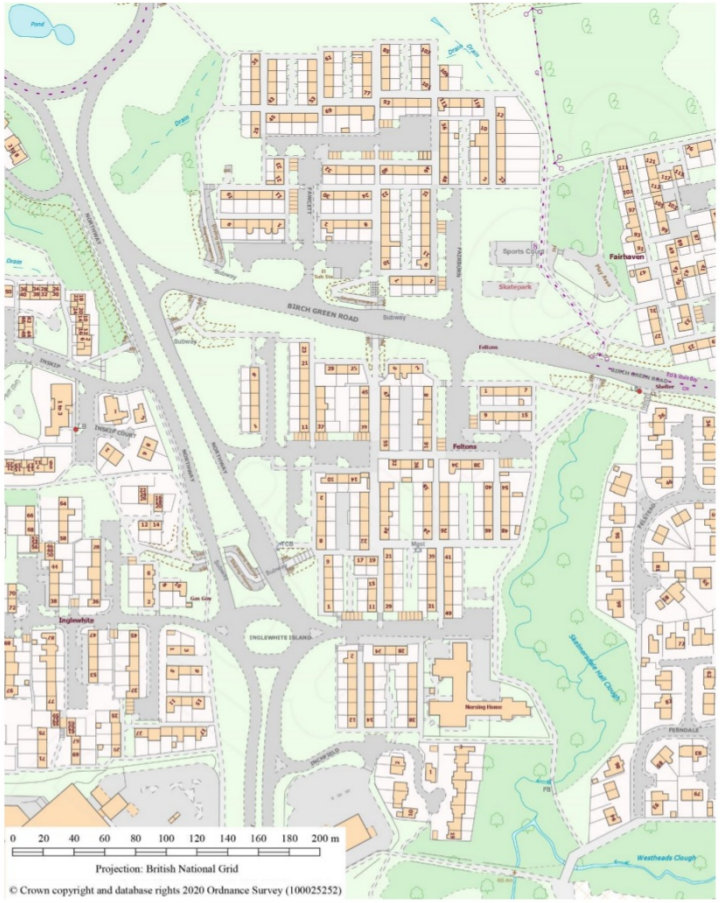

Figure 12: Birch Green 4 & 8, completed in 1976. Its layout in rows and courtyards is similar to the earliest development corporation housing.

Figure 13: Ashurst 3A, completed in 1978. Designed for rental or sale to encourage greater owner occupation, its layout in closes and cul-de-sacs is closer to that of private builders than previous development corporation housing.

Whilst the construction of social housing proceeded apace, the development corporation struggled to attract interest from private housebuilders. When private housebuilding did occur, it was in some of the peripheral areas of the town which had been suggested for private housing in the basic plan. The result of this, and of the need to satisfy central government housing cost yardsticks, was that the majority of the town was monolithic in design. This remained the case despite the changes in chief architect over the lifetime of the development corporation (see appendix 2 for full details of these changes). The development corporation's rapid delivery of housing until the mid-1970s therefore demonstrated the effectiveness of the development corporation model in delivering housing quickly, but also its dependence on central government.

The creation of industrial premises was another area of success for the development corporation until the mid-1970s: industrial areas were funded by central government and built quickly in order to provide employment for the new population. Industrial firms were easily attracted because of the incentives given to them to settle there: they could effectively have a new factory on a greenfield site but under the same incentive and approval conditions as in Merseyside (which had much less space for industrial expansion) because Skelmersdale was treated as part of the Merseyside "development area". This gave Skelmersdale an advantage over nearby towns such as Wigan, which had similar geographical advantages but were not eligible for these incentives (Hunt, 1969). Moreover, the development corporation's board represented the concerns of industry: it was chaired by the Liverpool industrialist A. J. Kentish Barnes until 1969 and at least three members of the board were always representatives of local industry (see appendix 1), reflecting the basic plan's aspiration for the new town to be an industrial "growth point" (Wilson, 1964a, p. 1). Despite its main purpose being the provision of housing, Skelmersdale therefore also had the goal of acting as a spur to the region's industry. However, this industrial purpose was not explicit when the new town was first designated and was never its formal goal, unlike other new towns such as Washington (Hole, Adderson and Pountney, 1979). In Skelmersdale's case, the emphasis on industry flowed from the need to provide employment for its new population.

The town's road network – a key principle of the basic plan – was also built out quickly because it was required to support this large-scale housing and industrial construction in the way laid out in the basic plan, which disregarded the existing road network. Until the mid-1970s, the development of the road network was also aided by a wider consensus around the need for large-scale road construction (Gunn, 2018). The rapid development of housing, industry and

road infrastructure gave the new town a certain dynamism. Media comment was generally positive: there was some criticism of the lack of social facilities in the town (Brough, 1969), but this was outweighed by glowing assessments of the town's development, especially in the *Liverpool Echo*. A 1968 Guardian article referred to Skelmersdale as an example of how the north-west was modernising, whilst a 1970 Echo article described Skelmersdale as "bursting with trees, blooms – and vitality", claiming that "Liverpudlians have settled down happily" (Minogue, 1968; Cummings, 1970). The town seemed to be booming (figures 14 and 15), and any fragility of the town's position due to its dependence on central government was barely discussed.

5.2. Contradictions of the basic plan

From an early stage, however, the implementation process also revealed some of the contradictions and assumptions of the basic plan. For example, the implementation of the footpath network demonstrated that it had not been adequately provisioned for in the basic plan: rather than being direct, paths frequently run under overhanging houses and through the wooded gullies retained during the construction of the town (figures 16 to 19). Rather than fulfilling the basic plan's aspiration for an aesthetically pleasing naturalistic environment, the paths were avoided by residents because their secluded nature made them feel unsafe. The lack of safety on the footpath network was partially blamed for the death of a teenager in 1978, which led to calls from residents and councillors to provide pavements alongside main roads "so that pedestrians are not faced with lonely winding paths" (Kenyon, 1978). These tensions between the footpath network, natural landscape and road network were unresolved in the basic plan and remained unresolved in implementation. Together with the difficulties with the development of the town centre, the lack of a coherent footpath network also made it impossible to achieve the basic plan's goal of compactness. The goal of compactness was also rendered unachievable by the large amount of car parking and road infrastructure built in the housing areas, and the large land take required for the main town roads, in line with the basic plan's strive for full automobility.

Figure 14: The new town from the south-west, 1971, with the Gillibrands industrial area in the foreground and the Tanhouse housing area behind. All the construction in this image had been undertaken since new town designation in 1961.

Figure 15: Courtaulds weaving mill, Pimbo industrial area, 1971. The largest factory in Skelmersdale when constructed (600,000 sq ft), it closed only 5 years later.

Figure 16 (above): Footpath network in Birch Green, Skelmersdale, 2020. The footpaths are indirect, with much more convoluted routes than the road network.

Figures 17-19 (to the right) show how the footpaths in the Tanhouse area (built shortly before Birch Green) looked on the ground shortly after construction in 1971, running through housing estates, under roads and through wooded areas.

Figure 17: Footpath through housing, 1971.

Figure 18: Footpath across wooded gully, 1971.

Figure 19: Footpath passing through underpass and wooded area, 1971.

5.3. Urban character and compactness

Whilst the development corporation succeeded in rapidly delivering housing and industrial premises, it was much more difficult for it to create the urban character and compactness which had been a key goal of the basic plan (Wilson, 1964a, pp. 44-45). This was because of difficulties in creating the town centre, from which the urban character and compactness were supposed to emanate. This was the case even though the town centre, like the road network, had been specified in the basic plan in great detail. The difficulties in developing the town centre were initially due to the ambitious nature of the basic plan's proposals for the central area, which had to be reworked and reduced in scope by the development corporation due to central government concerns over their viability (despite the Minister of Housing and Local Government, Richard Crossman, having approved the basic plan in 1966). The final plans for the town centre were not approved by the then Minister, Anthony Greenwood, until 1970, and the first town centre facility, a shopping centre, did not open until 1973, four years after it had originally been supposed to open (SDC Annual Reports, 1962-74). As new town residents had become accustomed to accessing commercial and public facilities in other locations, this delay reduced the attractiveness of the town to commercial and public investment (Bradbury, n.d.). These initial difficulties demonstrated the development corporation's dependence on central government for key decisions, and also how flexibility in implementation was forced by external circumstances outside the development corporation's control.

To obtain the range of civic facilities and commercial amenities that were required to provide the town centre's planned urban character, the development corporation needed to negotiate with other public sector actors and the private sector. This negotiation was important because, unlike for housing or industry, there were limited political and financial incentives for public and private actors to invest in town centre facilities in Skelmersdale rather than in other towns in the area. However, the development corporation did not cultivate the good relationship with these actors that it would need to fund town centre facilities: in particular, it failed to maintain a good relationship with the local authority covering the entire new town from 1968 to 1974, Skelmersdale and Holland UD[2] (Chartres, 1973). These difficulties with convincing external actors to invest in the town centre were compounded by the fact that it was on a greenfield site, remote from existing housing, meaning that the town centre did not have a pre-existing

[2] Skelmersdale and Holland UD was created in 1968 from Skelmersdale UD, Upholland UD and the parts of Ormskirk UD and Wigan RD that were within the new town designated area, bringing the whole new town under one local authority. In 1974, Skelmersdale and Holland UD was merged into the larger West Lancashire District (SDC Annual Reports, 1967-1975).

customer or user base in the new town's early years. Moreover, the sequencing of housing development also negatively impacted the town centre's early prospects. The first new town housing areas were built away from the town centre because of uncertainty around the final extent of the town centre, and how it would interact with surrounding housing areas (see, for example, the initial planning proposals for the Hillside area (SDC, 1965)). In turn, the distance of the initial housing areas from the town centre further weakened the impetus to decide on the final form of the town centre and to begin its construction.

The relationship between the development corporation and Skelmersdale and Holland UD was poor and lacked mutual understanding, which impacted the plans for the town centre and entire town. Local councillors felt that the development corporation acted in a condescending manner towards them and that it was not interested in their concerns: the council leader is quoted as describing their regular meetings with the development corporation as a "charade" and as stating that "very little that we have suggested has ever been implemented" (Chartres, 1973). The development corporation's general managers and chief architects were generally individuals who had worked at other new towns and government agencies, with no local connections (their specific roles and employment histories are detailed in appendices 2 and 3). This was common in new town development corporations, where chief architects moved on regularly, and where general managers often came from roles in the diminishing Overseas Civil Service (Gosseye, 2019; Craggs and Neate, 2017). The development corporation's board, despite having substantial local authority representation, was heavily weighted towards industrialists and other public figures from the north-west and beyond with little connection to Skelmersdale. Local councillors on the development corporation board were even accused by other councillors of having a conflict of interest because of the different priorities of the two organisations, and were called upon to resign from the development corporation (Liverpool Echo, 1972a).

The conflict between the development corporation and local authority was essentially caused by very different views of how the town should develop. The development corporation was keen to concentrate commercial and civic development in the town centre, whilst the local authority did not want to lose existing facilities in the existing town of Skelmersdale. For example, the local authority set up its own open-air market in the existing town of Skelmersdale in defiance of the development corporation (and in competition with the new shopping centre in the town centre), and refused to relocate its town hall to the new town centre (Liverpool Echo, 1972b, 1972c, 1973a). The changes in the relationship between the development

corporation and local authority are indicative of how the development corporation's fixation on fulfilling the basic plan clashed with the priorities of the public and private actors it relied on.

Conflict between development corporations and local authorities was common in the new towns (Department for Communities and Local Government, 2006). What is striking in Skelmersdale's case, however, is how the local context of deindustrialising north-west England influenced the local authority's changing attitude towards the new town and development corporation. Representing a declining industrial settlement, Skelmersdale and Holland UDC was quite different to the local authorities in previous new towns in south-east England, such as Stevenage, which were largely rural and saw little to gain from new town development (Cullingworth, 1979). During Skelmersdale's design phase, Skelmersdale and Holland UDC's predecessor, Skelmersdale UDC, was supportive of the new town, attracted by the possibilities it might bring, and was therefore happy for planners to design the new town as they saw fit: this may have been a factor in the plan's disregard for local context. Conflict with the development corporation only arose during implementation, as it became clear that the development corporation had little interest in the local authority's views.

Ultimately, the town centre's facilities developed slowly, and it did not attract the range of amenities that had originally been proposed (figures 20 to 22). The difficulties with the development of the town centre and urban character demonstrate the development corporation's dependence on other public and private actors. These difficulties also demonstrate the development corporation's unwillingness to compromise and negotiate, particularly with the local authority, leading to a relative lack of agency over the town's social and commercial development. The lack of progress on social and commercial development was a stark contrast to the development corporation's swift delivery of housing and industrial premises.

5.4. Difficulties from the mid-1970s

The development corporation's dependence on external actors was brought to the fore by the economic and political difficulties suffered by the town from the mid-1970s. Skelmersdale had low unemployment compared to the rest of the region until 1976, which saw the closure of the town's two largest employers – the Courtaulds weaving mill and Thorn television tubes factory (only opened in 1970 and 1971 respectively), due to difficulties in the wider manufacturing sector and, as claimed in some media sources, "bad industrial relations" (SDC Annual Report,

1977; Economist, 1976). Compounding this, in 1977, Labour's Secretary of State for the Environment, Peter Shore, announced that along with seven other English new towns, Skelmersdale Development Corporation was to be wound up within five years (Hansard HC Deb., 5 April 1977). The actual dissolution date was confirmed as 1st April 1984 in 1979 when the development corporation submitted a timetable for completing certain facilities in order not to leave the local authority with an "undue burden". The date was then deferred by a year in 1981 when it became clear that this timetable could not be met (SDC Annual Reports, 1979, 1981). With Skelmersdale's population now stagnating and its target population reduced to 61,000, and a shift in government focus away from new towns, public interest in the town dried up. What little private interest there had been ebbed away. A planned northern extension to the town was rejected, plans to build public facilities such as courts and a hospital were delayed or cancelled, the road programme stopped, and the housing programme slowed considerably (SDC Annual Reports, 1976-1985). Skelmersdale now became symbolic of the alleged failure of the new towns programme and of the industrial decline of the north-west, with local and national press now critical of the development corporation, in stark contrast to their previous enthusiasm. It was flippantly referred to as "Skelmersdole"[3] in reference to its high unemployment, and was described as demonstrating "the vulnerability of new towns to economic depression and social malaise" (Waterhouse, 1978; Ely, 1982). However, the slow progress of the town centre even in the most dynamic years of the new town's development showed just how precarious its earlier apparent success had been. Whilst Skelmersdale's precipitous decline from the mid-1970s seemed such a contrast to its previous rapid growth, it merely highlighted the dependence of the town and development corporation on central government interest.

The development corporation's response to these difficulties was to continue its focus on fulfilling the basic plan, making few changes. Despite the shifting context, a 1981 version of the basic plan (figure 24) looks remarkably similar to a version issued in 1975 (figure 23), particularly in its optimistic plans for the completion of the northern section of the road network. Whilst the development corporation's main objective was now to attract industry in order to create employment for the town's existing population, it made no radical changes to the overall plan. Little further development occurred, and the development corporation began to shift its focus to making minor cosmetic improvements to parts of the town that would now never be completed. From 1983, the post of Chief Architect and Planning Officer ceased to

[3] "Dole" being a colloquial term for state unemployment benefit.

exist, the planning department being folded into the engineering department (SDC Annual Report, 1984). On 30th June 1985, Skelmersdale Development Corporation was dissolved, its assets and liabilities were transferred to the Commission for the New Towns, and a new chapter in Skelmersdale's history began (SDC Annual Report, 1985).

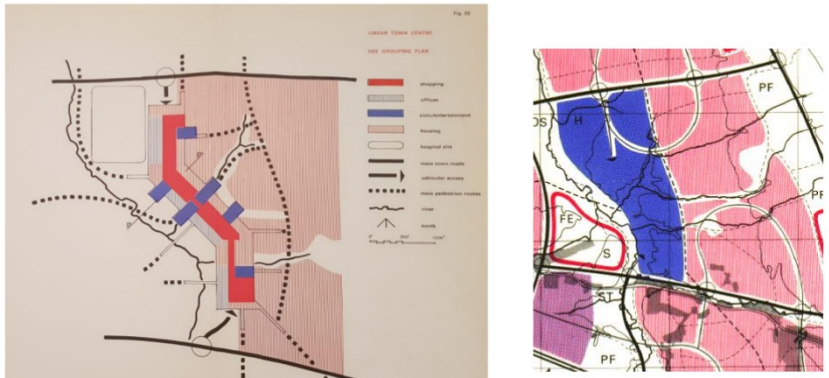

Figure 20: Linear central area as proposed in the basic plan, 1964, a single megastructure stretching between two of the main town roads. The map to the right shows its location (in blue) in the overall basic plan.

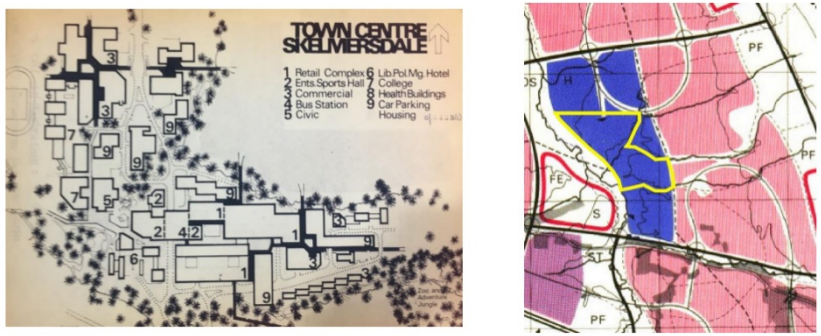

Figure 21: Revised town centre proposals, 1969, confined to a smaller area (roughly the central third of the original proposals) and now a set of separate buildings, rather than a megastructure. The map to the right shows its location (outlined in yellow) compared to the originally proposed central area.

Figure 22: Town centre as implemented, 1983. It consists of a shopping centre and scattered civic facilities, surrounded by surface car parking and undeveloped land, and separated from the surrounding housing areas by wooded gullies.

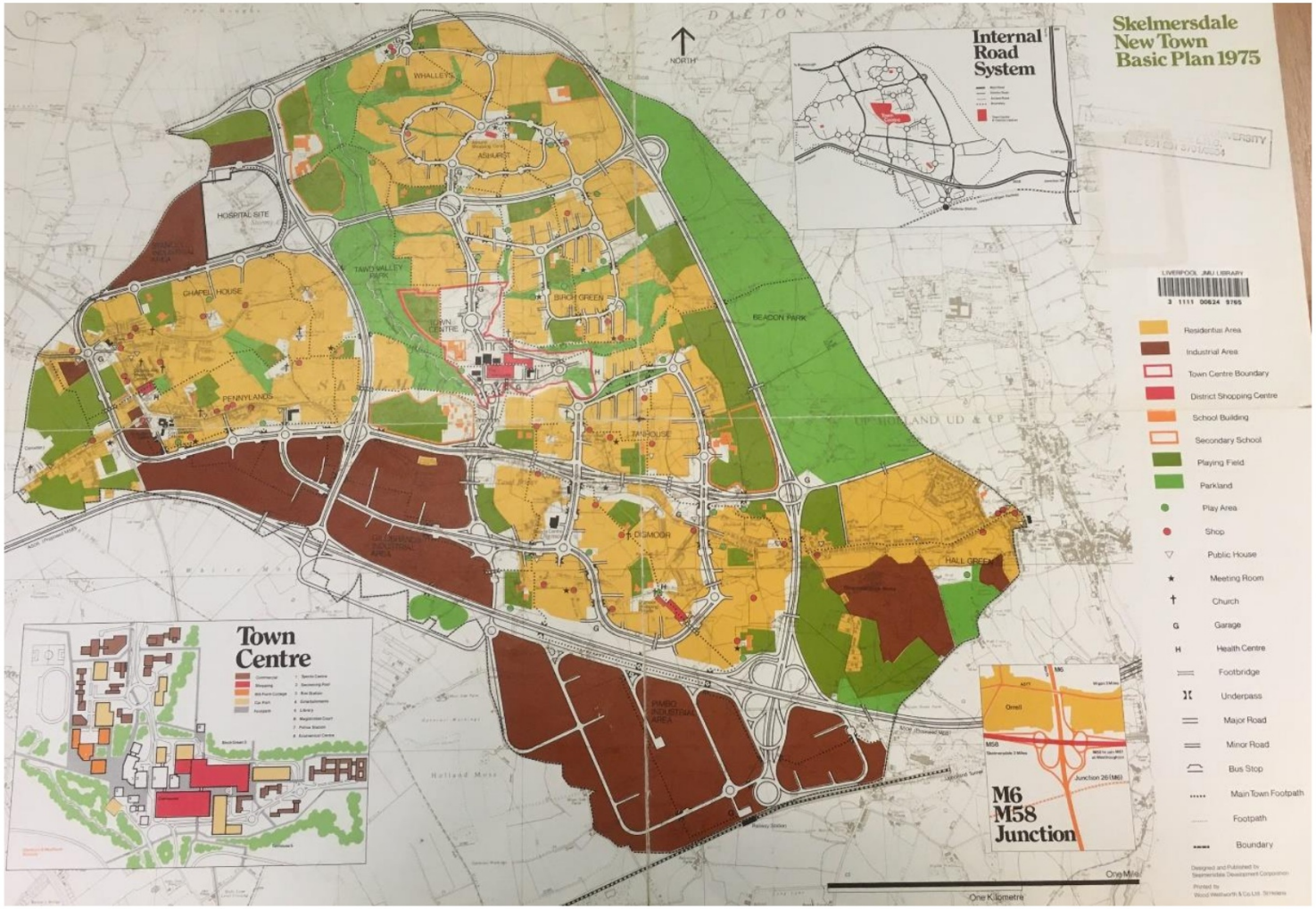

Figure 23: Skelmersdale New Town Basic Plan 1975.

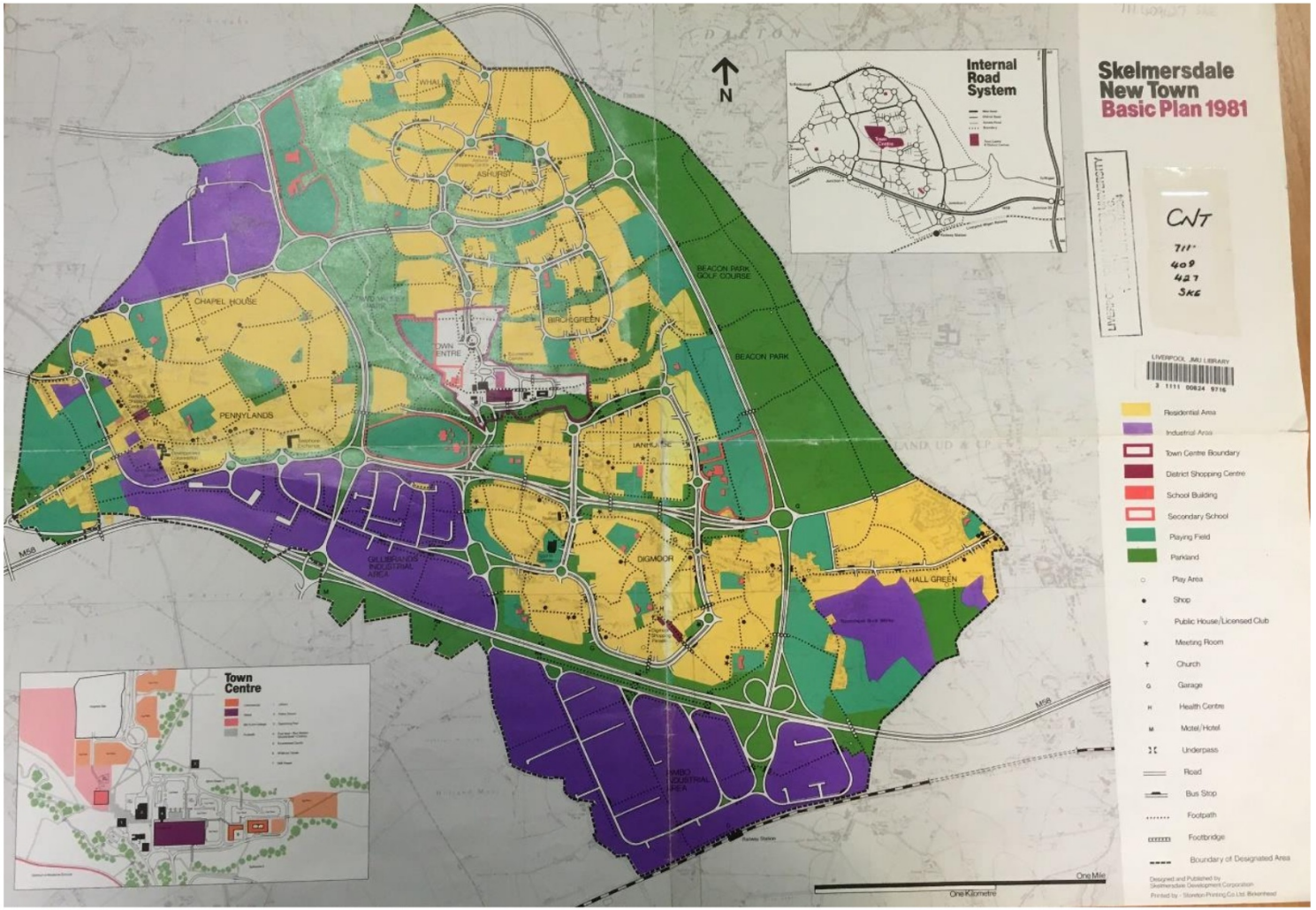

Figure 24: Skelmersdale New Town Basic Plan 1981. This is strikingly similar to the 1975 plan, with the main changes relating to the relocation and reduction in size of the proposed hospital, less specificity about the buildings in the town centre, and the replacement of some free-flowing highway interchanges with at-grade roundabouts.

6. Conclusion

In Skelmersdale's basic plan, published in 1964, Hugh Wilson set out a vision for a self-contained town of 80,000 that he wanted to be an exemplar of successful planning "for people" – a compact place with urban character, built around full automobility, and flexible enough to respond to changing circumstances. By 1985, when the development corporation was dissolved, a cursory look at the layout of the new town would suggest that this vision had been fulfilled. The clear lines of the main road network defined the structure of the town as set out in the basic plan; the town centre, housing and industrial areas were all in their planned locations. However, a deeper examination would reveal that the compactness and urban character sought by the basic plan were largely lacking. The town centre lay mostly empty, with a shopping centre surrounded by only a few scattered civic facilities. The town's population had reached barely half the numbers anticipated.

The experience of Skelmersdale's design and implementation can tell us much about the value of and difficulties in comprehensive modernist planning and the development corporation model. The design and implementation of Skelmersdale created a place that – with the exception of its population target – met many of the functional and physical requirements set out in its basic plan, but failed to deliver on the less tangible goals of compactness and urban character.

Skelmersdale was essentially created by central government and its appointed architect-planner Hugh Wilson. Wilson was vested with the power to design the new town as he saw fit, in line with the principles he had advocated and put into practice at Cumbernauld: full pedestrian/vehicle separation, compactness and urban character. The plan was ultimately as grandiose in its ambitions as the earlier planning visions it criticised. Its modernist vision was totalising and often exclusionary, ascribing little value to the existing built landscape and to the views of local authorities and residents. The comprehensive nature of the design was assisted by the local context of the deindustrialising north-west: as elsewhere in the region, the local authority was happy to leave planners to sweep away the remnants of declining nineteenth-century industry, in the hope of creating a more secure economic and social footing for the town.

Responsibility for translating this vision into practice once Wilson's commission had ended lay with the development corporation, an organisation set up by central government with the sole purpose of building the new town. The implementation process laid bare both the power

and powerlessness of comprehensive planning and of the development corporation itself. The development corporation was always dependent on government interest and funding, which was never entirely secure, even when the new town was growing rapidly and appeared successful. Until the mid-1970s, these essential tensions were masked by the rapid growth in population and employment in the town. They were brought to the fore by significant factory closures and the government's abandonment of new towns policy in the late 1970s, which ended the prospect of significant future public investment: from then on, Skelmersdale essentially remained static in form and population until the development corporation was dissolved in 1985. The implementation process also brought to the fore the contradictions and gaps in the basic plan, including contradictions between the footpath network and landscape policy and the selectiveness of the supposedly high-level, flexible nature of the basic plan.

Ultimately, Skelmersdale's experience is evidence of the possibilities and limitations of comprehensive modernist planning, and of planning's dependence on its geographical and economic context. Whilst government funding was forthcoming, the basic plan and development corporation were effective in developing Skelmersdale's hard infrastructure and on ensuring that this infrastructure was sufficient to support its new population and industry. The design fulfilled modernist principles of full pedestrian/vehicle separation and functional separation of uses, but not modernist aspirations to urban character and compactness. Once government interest waned and economic conditions changed, the development corporation – and town – was left chained to a plan that it could not fully implement, with large amounts of unused land that would never be developed. Merely drafting a plan which set out a vision for an affluent future and urban character, and setting up a development corporation to achieve this goal, did not guarantee that it would be fulfilled.

There are a number of lessons we might draw from Skelmersdale's experience for the design of new large-scale settlements today. The key lesson is that long-term planning is limited by its inability to fully predict future economic and political conditions and that any such plan therefore needs to be reassessed and modified at regular intervals. In addition, long-term planning is always moulded by its local context, even when it appears that designers have the power to bring about comprehensive visions. In Skelmersdale's case, the relative absence of the local authority during the design process gave free rein to planners and designers to plan the new town as they saw fit. However, as difficulties arose, the local authority demonstrated that it retained power over aspects of the town's development that were vital to fulfilment of the plan. Regarding social and commercial infrastructure, with hindsight it appears that in

Skelmersdale it may have been more effective to use an existing settlement as a basis and add facilities incrementally, rather than attempt to create an entire town centre on a greenfield site: this may also be the case for future large-scale settlements. In addition, funding for this infrastructure was never secure, with the development corporation spending much of its time unsuccessfully lobbying: funding mechanisms for social and commercial infrastructure should therefore be agreed at an early stage, and should be treated with equal importance to the funding of housing, employment and road infrastructure. On a more specific design note, it is clear from the implementation of Skelmersdale's footpath network that if pedestrian movement is to be prioritised, it needs to be fully considered and given the same level of thought and priority as the highway network.

My research has examined how the design of Skelmersdale came about and was implemented over the lifetime of its development corporation, throwing light on the experience of a new town that has until now been on the periphery of academic study. It acts as a springboard for the further research which remains to be done on British new towns in this period – particularly as it seems likely that further new towns will be created. In relation to Skelmersdale itself, further research in the development corporation's archive and the archives of central government departments would deepen our understanding of the design process, of how key decisions were made, and of the development corporation's relationship with other public authorities. In addition, there are several other new towns whose design and implementation have not been examined in detail, for example Redditch (also designed by Hugh Wilson) and Central Lancashire (to which several members of Skelmersdale Development Corporation staff moved). Their experiences, in very different contexts to that of Skelmersdale, could enrich our understanding of the new town development process and provide useful lessons for developments today. In addition to this, while my research has brought to light the influence of the architect-planner Hugh Wilson on Skelmersdale's design, the evolution of his career has not been researched in its totality, despite his involvement in a large number of new towns and urban redevelopment projects (Times, 1985).

Since the dissolution of the development corporation in 1985, Skelmersdale's population has decreased slightly, to 38,378 (Office for National Statistics, 2011). Its extensive physical infrastructure appears to be little valued: for example, new housing schemes and retail developments either ignore or disrupt the footpath network (Duffy, 2015). The town centre remains largely as it was at the dissolution of the development corporation, with significant unused space, although the shopping centre, now privately owned, has been extended, and a

supermarket opened in 1999 (Burton and Joyce, 2002). Recently, significant new housing construction in the northern part of the town – where development corporation construction stopped in the 1980s – has demonstrated interest on the part of private housebuilders (Brown, 2016). The legacy of the basic plan and development corporation is therefore a small, but viable settlement, with ample physical infrastructure and space to expand. The grand modernist vision may not have been fully realised, but a functional new settlement was created.

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Appendix 1: Skelmersdale Development Corporation board members, 1962-1985

Name	Role	Background	Representing	1962	1963	1964	1965	1966	1967	1968	1969	1970	1971	1972	1973	1974	1975	1976	1977	1978	1979	1980	1981	1982	1983	1984	1985
Mr A. J. Kentish Barnes	Chairman (1962-1969)	Director of Liverpool Cotton Exchange; Chairman of Liverpool Chamber of Commerce	Industry	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■																
Geoffrey Heywood	Deputy Chairman (1962-1969); Chairman (1969-1975)	Chartered surveyor from Manchester; president of RICS from 1962-63	Technical	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■										
John Ainsworth		Liverpool City Treasurer	Liverpool	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■																
Herbert M. Allen		Liverpool City Councillor (Conservative)	Liverpool	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■										
Mr G. C. Bamforth		Upholland UDC councillor	Skelmersdale			■	■	■	■	■	■																
Albert Davies		Lancashire County Councillor (Labour) and Skelmersdale UDC councillor	Skelmersdale			■	■	■	■	■	■																
Tom Farrimond		Chairman of Skelmersdale UDC	Skelmersdale	■	■																						
Mrs G. A. Kemball (Mrs M. M. C. Kemball)		Lancashire County Councillor (Conservative), representing Eccles, near Manchester)	Lancashire	■	■	■	■	■	■																		
Mr B. H. Park		Wigan industrialist	Industry	■	■	■	■	■	■																		
William Smyth		Liverpool City Councillor (Labour); Chairman of Liverpool City Council Housing Committee	Liverpool			■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■														
Winifred Kettle		Lancashire County Councillor, from Westhoughton, near Wigan	Lancashire						■	■	■	■	■														
Robert Foulkes	Deputy Chairman (1969-1977)	Lancashire County Councillor (Labour); Vice chairman of Lancashire county planning committee Agent for Harold Wilson in Huyton constituency (to 1961); Agent in Ince constituency, which covered Skelmersdale (from 1961)	Lancashire								■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■								
Kenneth Taylor		No details identified	No details identified							■	■	■	■														
Sir Hubert Newton		Chairman of Leek and Westbourne Building Society	Industry								■	■	■	■	■	■	■										
Henry Swire		Skelmersdale and Holland UDC councillor	Skelmersdale								■	■	■	■	■	■	■										
Len Nuttall		Skelmersdale and Holland UDC councillor (Labour)	Skelmersdale									■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■
Lady Elizabeth Mott		Wife of Dr Sir John Mott, living in Liverpool												■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■
Kenneth Gayton		Resident director of Hartwood Hosiery (subsidiary of Courtaulds), Skelmersdale, living in Southport	Industry											■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■		
Alan Waterworth	Deputy Chairman (1979-1985)	Director and later chairman of Everton Football Club; former chairman of greengrocer chain	Industry											■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■
Donald Parr		Chairman and managing director of clothing company William Baird	Industry														■	■	■								
John Prunty		Lancashire County Councillor (Labour), representing Skelmersdale	Skelmersdale														■	■	■								
Don Steele		Member of West Lancashire District Council, chairman of former Skelmersdale and Holland UDC	Skelmersdale														■	■	■	■							
Arthur Taylor	Chairman (1975-1978)	Former CEO of Sefton District Council (Merseyside) and former town clerk of Bootle, Merseyside	Liverpool														■	■	■	■							
Bill Windham	Deputy Chairman (1978-1979) Chairman (1979-1985)	Managing director of Guinness at Runcorn; former member of Runcorn Development Corporation board	Industry																	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■
Basil Jeuda		Accountant from Macclesfield, Cheshire; stood as a Labour candidate in UK general and European elections																		■	■						
Lawrence Baxter		Lancashire County Councillor (Conservative), representing Skelmersdale and Holland	Skelmersdale																		■	■	■	■			
Robert Hodge		West Lancashire District Councillor and Chairman of the Housing Services Committee; later leader of West Lancashire District Council	Skelmersdale																		■	■	■	■	■	■	■
Donald Forster		Chairman of textile firm B. Forster and Co. in Leigh, Lancashire; became chairman of Warrington and Runcorn Development Corporation in 1982 and then chairman of Merseyside Development Corporation in 1984	Industry																			■	■	■			
J. G. Powell		No details identified	No details identified																			■	■	■	■	■	■
Lord Shuttleworth		Lancashire chartered surveyor	Technical																					■	■	■	■
P. Edwards		No details identified	No details identified																							■	■

(SDC Annual Reports 1963-1965; Charters, 1973; Craig, 1979; Desmond, 1984; Financial Times, 1984, 1986; Guardian, 1961b, 1962a, 1962b, 1972; Lancashire Archives, 1968-1971; Lashmar, 1988; Liverpool Echo, 1961, 1962b, 1963a, 1963b, 1964, 1966, 1969a, 1969b, 1969c, 1972a, 1972d, 1972e, 1973b, 1973c, 1975a, 1975b, 1977a, 1977b, 1978, 1979, 1984)

Appendix 2: Skelmersdale Development Corporation Chief Architect and Planning Officers, 1963-1983

Name	Career outline	In post
Derek Lyddon	To 1963: Deputy Chief Architect and Planning Officer, Cumbernauld Development Corporation 1963-1967: Chief Architect and Planning Officer, SDC 1967-retirement: Chief Planning Officer, Scottish Development Department	1963-1967
Richard William Colwell	To 1967: Deputy Chief Architect, Washington Development Corporation 1967-1971: Chief Architect and Planning Officer, SDC 1971-1977: Chief Architect and Planning Officer, East Kilbride Development Corporation	1967-1971
John Desmond Procter	1963-1971: Unspecified roles at Skelmersdale Development Corporation 1971-1974: Chief Architect and Planning Officer, Skelmersdale Development Corporation 1974-?: Chief Officer for Physical Planning, Central Lancashire Development Corporation	1971-1974
Rae Evans	To 1972: Chief Architect, London Borough of Lambeth 1972-1974: Director of Development, Northern Ireland Housing Executive 1974-1983: Chief Architect and Planning Officer, Skelmersdale Development Corporation 1983: Retired in post at Skelmersdale Development Corporation	1974-1983

There was no Chief Architect and Planning Officer from 1983 until the dissolution of the development corporation in 1985.

(SDC Annual Reports 1963-1985; Central Lancashire Development Corporation, 1974; Dictionary of Scottish Architects, 2020; Lowry, 1972; McCrone, 2015)

Appendix 3: Skelmersdale Development Corporation General Managers, 1962-1985

Name	Career outline	In post
George G. Watson	To 1962: Secretary and Legal Advisor, Cumbernauld Development Corporation 1962-1966: General Manager, Skelmersdale Development Corporation	1962-1966
Richard W. Phelps	To 1967: Senior Administrator, Hampshire County Council 1967-1971: General Manager, Skelmersdale Development Corporation 1971-1986: General Manager, Central Lancashire Development Corporation	1967-1971
Ian Gray	To 1971: Director for Wales, Department for Trade and Industry 1972-1976: General Manager, Skelmersdale Development Corporation 1976-1983: Managing Director, Welsh Development Agency	1972-1976
Edgar Bradbury (Tim Bradbury)	1960-1963: Town Clerk, Deal, Kent 1963-1976: Chief Legal Officer, Skelmersdale Development Corporation 1976-1985: General Manager, Skelmersdale Development Corporation	1976-1985

(SDC Annual Reports, 1963-1985; Central Lancashire Development Corporation, 1986; Guardian, 1967; Liverpool Echo, 1963c; Times, 1983)

Appendix 4: Risk Assessment Form

RISK ASSESSMENT FORM

FIELD / LOCATION WORK

The Approved Code of Practice - Management of Fieldwork should be referred to when completing this form

http://www.ucl.ac.uk/estates/safetynet/guidance/fieldwork/acop.pdf

DEPARTMENT/SECTION	**THE BARTLETT SCHOOL OF PLANNING**
LOCATION(S)	**UK (WORKING FROM HOME)**
PERSONS COVERED BY THE RISK ASSESSMENT	**Thomas Szydlowski**

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF FIELDWORK

Internet and book-based research from home for MSc Spatial Planning dissertation

Consider, in turn, each hazard (white on black). If **NO** hazard exists select **NO** and move to next hazard section.
If a hazard does exist select **YES** and assess the risks that could arise from that hazard in the risk assessment box.
Where risks are identified that are not adequately controlled they must be brought to the attention of your Departmental Management who should put temporary control measures in place or stop the work. Detail such risks in the final section.

ENVIRONMENT	**The environment always represents a safety hazard. Use space below to identify and assess any risks associated with this hazard**
e.g. location, climate, terrain, neighbourhood, in outside organizations, pollution, animals.	*Low risk:* *I will be working from home using online resources and books, and will not be conducting any fieldwork outside my home.*

CONTROL MEASURES	**Indicate which procedures are in place to control the identified risk**
	work abroad incorporates Foreign Office advice
	participants have been trained and given all necessary information
	only accredited centres are used for rural field work
	participants will wear appropriate clothing and footwear for the specified environment
	trained leaders accompany the trip

	refuge is available
	work in outside organisations is subject to their having satisfactory H&S procedures in place
X	OTHER CONTROL MEASURES: please specify any other control measures you have implemented: *No additional control measures implemented – home working only*

EMERGENCIES	**Where emergencies may arise use space below to identify and assess any risks**
e.g. fire, accidents	*Low risk:* *I will be working from home using online resources and books, and will not be conducting any fieldwork outside my home.*

CONTROL MEASURES	**Indicate which procedures are in place to control the identified risk**
	participants have registered with LOCATE at http://www.fco.gov.uk/en/travel-and-living-abroad/
	fire fighting equipment is carried on the trip and participants know how to use it
X	contact numbers for emergency services are known to all participants
X	participants have means of contacting emergency services
	participants have been trained and given all necessary information
	a plan for rescue has been formulated, all parties understand the procedure
	the plan for rescue /emergency has a reciprocal element
X	OTHER CONTROL MEASURES: please specify any other control measures you have implemented: *No additional control measures implemented – home working only. Should any emergencies occur, I will contact the appropriate emergency services and inform my supervisor and department.*

EQUIPMENT	**Is equipment used?**	**NO**	**If 'No' move to next hazard** **If 'Yes' use space below to identify and assess any risks**
e.g. clothing, outboard motors.			

CONTROL MEASURES	**Indicate which procedures are in place to control the identified risk**
	the departmental written Arrangement for equipment is followed
	participants have been provided with any necessary equipment appropriate for the work
	all equipment has been inspected, before issue, by a competent person

	all users have been advised of correct use
	special equipment is only issued to persons trained in its use by a competent person
	OTHER CONTROL MEASURES: please specify any other control measures you have implemented:

LONE WORKING	**Is lone working a possibility?**	**NO**	**If 'No' move to next hazard** **If 'Yes' use space below to identify and assess any risks**
e.g. alone or in isolation *lone interviews.*			

CONTROL MEASURES	**Indicate which procedures are in place to control the identified risk**

	the departmental written Arrangement for lone/out of hours working for field work is followed
	lone or isolated working is not allowed
	location, route and expected time of return of lone workers is logged daily before work commences
	all workers have the means of raising an alarm in the event of an emergency, e.g. phone, flare, whistle
	all workers are fully familiar with emergency procedures
	OTHER CONTROL MEASURES: please specify any other control measures you have implemented:

ILL HEALTH	The possibility of ill health always represents a safety hazard. Use space below to identify and assess any risks associated with this Hazard.
e.g. accident, illness, personal attack, special personal considerations or vulnerabilities.	*Low risk:* *I will be working from home using online resources and books, and will not be conducting any fieldwork outside my home. There is an increased general health risk currently due to the Covid-19 pandemic but my risk is not increased by my dissertation research.*

CONTROL MEASURES	Indicate which procedures are in place to control the identified risk
	an appropriate number of trained first-aiders and first aid kits are present on the field trip
	all participants have had the necessary inoculations/ carry appropriate prophylactics
	participants have been advised of the physical demands of the trip and are deemed to be physically suited
	participants have been adequate advice on harmful plants, animals and substances they may encounter
	participants who require medication have advised the leader of this and carry sufficient medication for their needs
X	OTHER CONTROL MEASURES: please specify any other control measures you have implemented: *I will keep up to date with latest government guidance on Covid-19 pandemic and comply with this guidance.*

TRANSPORT	Will transport be required	NO	X	Move to next hazard
		YES		Use space below to identify and assess any risks
e.g. hired vehicles				

CONTROL MEASURES	Indicate which procedures are in place to control the identified risk
	only public transport will be used
	the vehicle will be hired from a reputable supplier
	transport must be properly maintained in compliance with relevant national regulations
	drivers comply with UCL Policy on Drivers http://www.ucl.ac.uk/hr/docs/college_drivers.php
	drivers have been trained and hold the appropriate licence
	there will be more than one driver to prevent driver/operator fatigue, and there will be adequate rest periods
	sufficient spare parts carried to meet foreseeable emergencies
	OTHER CONTROL MEASURES: please specify any other control measures you have implemented:

DEALING WITH THE PUBLIC	Will people be dealing with public	NO	If 'No' move to next hazard If 'Yes' use space below to identify and assess any risks
e.g. interviews, observing			

CONTROL MEASURES	Indicate which procedures are in place to control the identified risk

	all participants are trained in interviewing techniques
	interviews are contracted out to a third party
	advice and support from local groups has been sought
	participants do not wear clothes that might cause offence or attract unwanted attention
	interviews are conducted at neutral locations or where neither party could be at risk
	OTHER CONTROL MEASURES: please specify any other control measures you have implemented:

WORKING ON OR NEAR WATER	Will people work on or near water?	NO	If 'No' move to next hazard If 'Yes' use space below to identify and assess any risks
e.g. rivers, marshland, sea.			

CONTROL MEASURES	Indicate which procedures are in place to control the identified risk

	lone working on or near water will not be allowed
	coastguard information is understood; all work takes place outside those times when tides could prove a threat
	all participants are competent swimmers

	participants always wear adequate protective equipment, e.g. buoyancy aids, wellingtons
	boat is operated by a competent person
	all boats are equipped with an alternative means of propulsion e.g. oars
	participants have received any appropriate inoculations
	OTHER CONTROL MEASURES: please specify any other control measures you have implemented:

MANUAL HANDLING (MH)	**Do MH activities take place?**	**NO**	**If 'No' move to next hazard** **If 'Yes' use space below to identify and assess any risks**
e.g. lifting, carrying, moving large or heavy equipment, physical unsuitability for the task.			

CONTROL MEASURES	**Indicate which procedures are in place to control the identified risk**

	the departmental written Arrangement for MH is followed
	the supervisor has attended a MH risk assessment course
	all tasks are within reasonable limits, persons physically unsuited to the MH task are prohibited from such activities
	all persons performing MH tasks are adequately trained
	equipment components will be assembled on site
	any MH task outside the competence of staff will be done by contractors
	OTHER CONTROL MEASURES: please specify any other control measures you have implemented:

SUBSTANCES	Will participants work with substances	NO	If 'No' move to next hazard If 'Yes' use space below to identify and assess any risks
e.g. plants, chemical, biohazard, waste			

CONTROL MEASURES	Indicate which procedures are in place to control the identified risk

	the departmental written Arrangements for dealing with hazardous substances and waste are followed
	all participants are given information, training and protective equipment for hazardous substances they may encounter
	participants who have allergies have advised the leader of this and carry sufficient medication for their needs
	waste is disposed of in a responsible manner
	suitable containers are provided for hazardous waste
	OTHER CONTROL MEASURES: please specify any other control measures you have implemented:

OTHER HAZARDS	Have you identified any other hazards?	NO	If 'No' move to next section If 'Yes' use space below to identify and assess any risks
i.e. any other hazards must be noted and assessed here.			

CONTROL MEASURES	Give details of control measures in place to control the identified risks
N/A	

Have you identified any risks that are not adequately controlled?			
	NO	X	Move to Declaration
	YES		Use space below to identify the risk and what action was taken

Is this project subject to the UCL requirements on the ethics of Non-NHS Human Research?	NO

If yes, please state your Project ID Number	

For more information, please refer to: http://ethics.grad.ucl.ac.uk/

DECLARATION	The work will be reassessed whenever there is a significant change and at least annually. Those participating in the work have read the assessment.

Select the appropriate statement:

X	I the undersigned have assessed the activity and associated risks and declare that there is no significant residual risk
X	I the undersigned have assessed the activity and associated risks and declare that the risk will be controlled by the method(s) listed above

NAME OF SUPERVISOR **Michael Hebbert**

FIELDWORK **5** May 2010