Castle Vale wasn’t always a sink estate. In the 1960s it was a modern, well-equipped, and apparently popular place to live. It was also much needed. At the beginning of the 1960s over 50,000 people were waiting for housing in Birmingham.

The built version of the estate was not the original. An earlier masterplan, described by a contemporary account as a ‘miniature garden city’, had been devised in 1961. But it fell by the wayside. One of the critical factors in its demise was an internal dispute at Birmingham City Council. It would be a further three years before work actually began, by which time the vision looked very different.

The second masterplan, the work of Birmingham city architect J R Sherden-Shedden, was arranged in a Radburn Layout, which places ‘superblocks’ of housing, shops, offices, and schools around communal green spaces. The modernist idea, pioneered by Clarence Stein in Radburn, New Jersey in 1929, was to separate pedestrians and vehicles. Stein also believed that a high quality of life was derived from having all day-to-day activities within walking distance.

Chapter 1

The Rise and Fall of Castle Vale, 1964 - 1993

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In scale and composition Castle Vale bears many hallmarks of a new town, albeit with distinctive features. It sits on top of Castle Bromwich Airfield. During the Second World War, Spitfires and Lancaster Bombers were manufactured at Castle Bromwich and tested at the airfield, now the site of a Jaguar factory. The three main roads that run east-west through the estate were once runways.

In its original form the estate comprised nearly 5,000 homes, including 2,000 high-rise flats, two shopping centres, five schools, two churches, a swimming pool, as well as other social and community facilities. There were 34 tower blocks. The largest groupings were the 14 along the Farnborough Road, and a central group of eight. Nobody could have predicted that within a decade ‘Centre 8’ would be a regional synonym for crime and urban squalor.

In the early years Castle Vale was populated by families displaced by large-scale clearance programmes in Birmingham. The majority came from Nechells and Aston, predominantly white, working class areas, with large Irish minorities.

Some people loved it. Sue Spicer’s family moved to a flat in the Centre 8 in 1969. “It was a huge improvement on our house in Aston. We had an indoor toilet, and there was so much green space. Mobile butchers and grocers came to our door. It seemed like Utopia.”

Others weren’t so sure. Pat Smith, a health worker on the estate between 1968 and 1988 recalls that: “People felt unsettled, on edge. Many had come from the old back-to-backs, places with strong social ties. Castle Vale was a shock to the system. The lack of safe play space and the cost of under-floor heating were major bones of contention. People were used to coal fires, which were much cheaper to run. But housing was the focal point of discontent.”
The fall

“The problems began when people were moved here who didn’t want to be here,” says Carole Rafferty, long-term community representative and chair of the Tenants and Residents Alliance (see chapter 2).

The large-scale relocation of communities may have been traumatic, and residents of Castle Vale were at least united by shared experience. Reluctant newcomers began to corrode those bonds.

“By the late 1970s it became evident that drug dealers were working on the estate. Violent incidents began to accumulate, there had never previously been a problem with violence,” says Rafferty.

Lord Cobett of Castle Vale, Labour peer and loyal supporter of the estate of Concorde Tower, the tallest high-rise on the estate, watching the cars racing below. The long straight roads were popular with joy riders.

“Teenagers growing up on the estate would spend evenings at the top of Concorde Tower, the tallest high-rise on the estate, watching the cars racing below. The long straight roads were popular with joy riders.”

Pat Smith recalls the demise of the ‘rent man’. “It must have been in the mid-to-late 1970s when the rent man stopped going from door to door. There had been one mugging too many,” says Smith. “It was closer to 1987. Then the estate was blown shopping centre was a suitably dismal setting for the ritual.”

Another resident, who prefers to remain anonymous, remembers that car theft was a big problem: “At least twice I walked out of the police station in the ground floor was closed down,” says Sue Spicer.

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Winters on Castle Vale were particularly grim. “Because the flat was freezing, with ice on the inside of the windows,” recalls Wendy Walsh. “We had quarterly electricity bills of between £300-500, and another young mother in the early 1990s, who lived in a first floor flat of a maisonette block, recalls: “The flat was above the rubbish chute. There were so many flies in the chute, some sort off deliberately, others caused by garden waste. The flies sometimes took me to canvass as part of that miserable

Animals were another feature of life in Castle Vale. “We knew they were a problem, particularly in the tower blocks,” says Richard Temple Cox, chairman of the Housing Action Trust. “So we advertised for unwanted pets, and worked with schools to use them as an educational tool. The first donation was a donkey, which had been living on the balcony of a ninth floor flat.”

Unsurprisingly, the quality of life had a terrible impact on the health of the local population. A Health Needs Assessment published in 1992 revealed that life expectancy was only 68.3 years (the national average was closer to 70), and the estate had among the highest rates of infant mortality in the West Midlands. “From the mid-1970s there were growing numbers of children with upper respiratory problems, particularly those living in the flat-roofed maisonette blocks,” recalls Pat Smith. The report also showed that 3,517 heavy drinkers and over 650 substance

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In 2004 Wendy Walsh was appointed chair of Castle Vale Community Housing Association (see chapters 3 and 9). In 2009 the expectation of life at birth across the United Kingdom was: 73.2 years (male), and 78.7 years (female). Source: Office of National Statistics.
abusers lived in Castle Vale. Unemployment was another problem. By 1993 it was running at 20%, with limited potential for improvement. By then Castle Vale was notorious throughout the West Midlands. Job applications marked with a B35 postcode went to the bottom of the pile.

Standards of educational attainment were poor. There are four junior schools and one secondary school in Castle Vale. All had unsustainably small student populations. “Some of the parents treated us as a free child-minding service,” says Steve Holloway, head teacher of Chivenor Junior School. “Aspirations were very low.”

The estate’s reputation also made it difficult to attract teachers. “I remember interviewing for Birmingham Education Authority and asking Non-Qualified Teachers where they’d like to work. Invariably the answer was, ‘anywhere but Castle Vale’. And there was the time we had an Ofsted. I took the advisor to the shopping centre to get some lunch. He was genuinely scared,” says Holloway.

Newcomers to Castle Vale couldn’t fail to pick up on the atmosphere. “When I arrived in 1991 they gave me a flat on the 14th floor of Concorde Tower. There was no front door, no back door. The wind whistled right through. There was no community spirit whatsoever. You just kept your mouth shut. The only people you knew were the people on your own floor. I hated it,” says Beatrice Lunn (see introduction).

Jez Lilley moved to Castle Vale after leaving the army in 1986. “I lived like a hermit for the first two years. The army cares about you. Here nobody talked to me. I was terrified to be honest.”

For years Birmingham City Council had been aware of the gravity of Castle Vale’s problems. Final confirmation came in 1991 when a chunk of concrete fell from one of the tower blocks. There was nobody underneath, but Castle Vale was falling apart.

The revival

In July 1991 Derek Waddington, then director of housing at Birmingham City Council, heard about the Housing Action Trust in North Hull. He wondered whether a similar approach could work in Castle Vale. After a fact-finding visit to Hull, Waddington recommended the model to Dick Knowles, then leader of the council. The prospect of a large Labour-controlled local council cutting a deal with a Conservative government known for its antipathy to local authorities seemed unlikely. But Waddington persevered.

He was assisted by Stan Austin, a local resident and chair of housing authorities. At the time the estate had a population of around 15,000.
at the Council. Their alliance was instrumental in lobbying the Labour Group at Birmingham City Council for Castle Vale’s Housing Action Trust status.

One night in the autumn of 1991 Waddington was summoned to a meeting of the Labour Group. “I was asked to make a presentation on the possibilities offered by the HAT model. I told them that in my opinion it represented Castle Vale’s last and best chance.”

After discussions late into the night Waddington’s recommendation was carried. The next day Birmingham City Council opened negotiations with the Department of the Environment on how to approach the establishment of a Housing Action Trust in Castle Vale.

The news was made public in December 1991 when Michael Heseltine announced to Parliament that Castle Vale was the latest candidate for Housing Action Trust status. By then the people of Castle Vale already knew. The morning of the announcement everyone had been sent a letter explaining what was happening. “We knew that the tenant ballot, which would decide whether or not the Housing Action Trust happened, might be a way off, but it was essential to get the tenants on board from day one,” says Waddington.

This determination to consult the public was in part a reflection of negative responses to the Housing Action Trust model, which had struggled for support since 1988. In their original incarnation, tenants did not have a vote on Housing Action Trusts. They were to be imposed by a central government increasingly synonymous with privatisation.

This and other bullish Tory tactics meant that early attempts to establish Trusts in Lambeth, Tower Hamlets, Southwark, Leeds, Sandwell, and Sunderland were met with extreme scepticism. Ultimately a Labour amendment in the House of Lords was required to ensure that tenants would have a vote in future Housing Action Trust proposals.

The furore meant that the policy went quiet for a while. When it re-emerged it was in a much more palatable format. Second time round there was also increased pressure for Housing Action Trusts to be a success.

Richard Temple Cox, a prominent Birmingham architect, was appointed shadow chairman of the Housing Action Trust in the autumn of 1992. “I was charged with persuading the estate to vote for the HAT. I was given one government minder from London to work with,” he recalls.

In 2002, Richard Temple Cox was awarded the CBE for services to regeneration in Birmingham.
A number of pubs were demolished to make way for new developments.

Public meetings were held to introduce the idea of the Housing Action Trust. Temple Cox recalls: “The residents looked malnourished and tired. In some faces there was barely a vestige of hope.”

After 18 months working on the Housing Action Trust proposal, the Community Action Team agreed to give it their backing, although they did have some reservations.

One of the Community Action Team’s main concerns was to ensure that, in the event of a yes vote, the voice of the people would be heard. “That’s why we dug our heels in about the number of members, and a chairman, was deemed unacceptable. The original proposal of a ten-strong Board, composed of three residents, three local authority nominees, three independent members, and a chairman, was deemed unacceptable. The Community Action Team wanted five resident representatives, which the Department of the Environment balked at. In the end a compromise saw the Board increased to 12, with four resident reps, three local authority councillors, and five independents.

Camping went on throughout the autumn of 1992. A Portakabin was set up in Reel Square, where Department of the Environment, Birmingham City Council, Community Action Team, and members of the shadow Housing Action Trust Board would answer questions and sooth concerns. Meetings and road-shows became regular features of life on the estate. There was even a free video delivered to every household. This was pretty fancy stuff in the early 1990s, an indication of the government’s commitment to securing a positive vote.

In December 1992, one year after the Housing Action Trust had been proposed for Castle Vale, Tony Baldry, Minister for Housing announced the ballot date – 18 March 1993. What followed was three months of lobbying, with local councillors, government officials, and the shadow board all trying to make their case to residents.

The idea was to get residents to imagine what life could be like. “It was quite tough to get people to dream, to envisage a different world. We found that a lot of people had never left Castle Vale,” says Thompson.

But the events served a purpose. “They helped to galvanise people, changing attitudes from, ‘we’ve had people like you here before’ to something much more positive,” says Temple Cox.

Not everybody was happy. “There was a well-organised left-wing faction, who rallied behind a local Labour councillor [see chapter 2]. Their view was that if the HAT was really about community empowerment they should be handling the budget. It took a couple of years to get through their opposition. It was a disruptive and painful experience. It took time, but we knew we had time,” says Temple Cox.

Another Labour Councillor, Mary Bridge, led a council group to prevent similar organisations being set up elsewhere in Birmingham.

“I was angry that Castle Vale was getting so much money. I felt that it should have been shared around. Looking back I’m not very proud of that,” says Bridge, who became deputy chair of the Housing Action Trust in 2002.
The Rise and Fall of Castle Vale, 1964 - 1993

In the early 1990s Castle Vale had a very poor environment. Fly tipping and rubbish dumping were common occurrences. Many came from Travellers and migrants who had migrated to this area in the early to mid 1990s.

Chapter 1

The Rise and Fall of Castle Vale, 1964 - 1993

The residents of a 1960s experiment in social housing had voted to be part of a social engineering experiment in the 1990s. It was a leap of faith.

The ballot produced a turnout always in the balance," says Patrick Allen. It is a recollection that guarantees of success. "It was an uncertain time. The vote was an uncertain time. The vote was an uncertain time. The vote was an uncertain time. The vote was an uncertain time."

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What's the population?

The estate was built between 1964 and 1969. Birmingham city architect J R Sheridan-Shedden devised the masterplan based on the Radburn Layout, a system that orientates large blocks of housing, shops, and schools around open green space. Castle Vale was a post-war housing estate. It has a population of approximately 9,000, with 4,000 households.

The roughly rectangular 481-acre island site of the former Castle Bromwich Airfield. During the Second World War,八卦 and Lancaster planes were built here. The name 1950s was in an industrial road system in the Park Lane area, to the north-east of the estate. The majority of private properties were built in the Park Lane development. A post-war housing estate. It has a population of approximately 9,000, with 4,000 households.

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What is a Housing Action Trust?

Housing Action Trusts were an innovative approach to regenerating areas with multiple deprivation. The Government in 1987. The intention behind the Trusts was to help those areas to become mainstays of urban regeneration. However, it is true that they often failed.

Housing Action Trusts also made the case that Social action Trusts were an expensive means of urban regeneration. They also had the right to return to the council at the end of the Housing Action Trust’s term. In chronological order: North Hull, Badger (Leeds), Smethwick, and Castles. The experiment failed, and rents would be frozen.

Housing Action Trusts were first proposed in a Department of the Environment White Paper in 1986. They were set up between 1991 and 1994, and lasted for 8-12 years. Stonebridge will be the last to end in 2007.

Why did the early attempts to establish Housing Action Trusts fail?

Why did the early attempts to establish Housing Action Trusts fail? They were designed to help those areas to become mainstays of urban regeneration. However, it is true that they often failed. Housing Action Trusts were an expensive means of urban regeneration. They also had the right to return to the council at the end of the Housing Action Trust’s term. In chronological order: North Hull, Badger (Leeds), Smethwick, and Castles. The experiment failed, and rents would be frozen.

If Housing Action Trusts have been so unsuccessful, why were they really only a success?

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