

The Chobham Common Camps and the Squatters' Movement in
Surrey,
1946-1958

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Abstract

This dissertation will examine two ex-military camps situated around Chobham Common, in the county of Surrey in Southern England. In the summer of 1946, local civilians began to move into disused military huts on Chobham Common. The area had suffered heavy bomb damage during World War Two and as veterans were being demobilised from the military, the local housing stock could not accommodate the influx of people. Many reunited families were living in cramped single rooms, with no private space. Ex-servicemen and other local families began moving into empty Nissen huts, in a recently vacated military camp on the Common. Another smaller disused Civil Defence Camp, situated nearby, in the outskirts of the adjacent village of Bagshot was subsequently also inhabited by local families in need of housing. The actions of the Chobham and Bagshot camp inhabitants were reflected across Britain and tens of thousands of people responded to the nationwide housing crisis by squatting in disused military camps and other empty properties. There was what was referred to at the time as a Squatters' Movement.

Using the Chobham Camps as a focal point, this dissertation will analyse the Squatters' Movement in the area overseen by Bagshot Rural District Council and across the county of Surrey. The annual reports from the district Medical Officer for Health and minutes from Housing Committee meetings will be used to explore the purpose behind the camps and why people went to live in them. The evidence from

these sources will also be used to explore how the camps were impacted by local housing policy and outline the district council's response to the squatters. Personal accounts from the Chobham camps' occupants and articles from local newspapers will be compared to assess how the camps were organised and why they ended, as well as the extent to which the Chobham squatters were politically motivated in their actions.

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Personal Statement

I declare that this dissertation is my own, unaided work and that I have not submitted it, or any part of it, for a degree at The Open University or at any other university or institution. Parts of this dissertation are built on work I submitted for assessment as part of A825.

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Tables and Illustrations

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Bagshot RDC - Bagshot Rural District Council

MOH – Medical Officer for Health

PoW - Prisoner of War

Introduction

Chobham Common is situated approximately 20 miles South-West of London in the North-West area of the county of Surrey. The Common played an important role during World War Two, with the War Office taking over parts of it in 1942 for the testing and research of military vehicles and military training purposes. There were portions of Chobham Common which were partitioned and used to hold Prisoners-of-War and also a Civil Defence Camp, situated just outside of the nearby village of Bagshot.¹ Both of these camps were comprised predominantly of Nissen Huts, which were prefabricated metal buildings used by the military during the war for storage and housing military personnel. Many of the huts at Chobham and Bagshot were taken over by local people in need of housing after the end of World War Two.

The camps were subsequently monitored and assisted by the district Medical Officer for Health and Bagshot Rural District Council for several years after the arrival of the first squatters, in the summer of 1946. The precise location of Chobham Camp is described by ex-inhabitant Patrick Rolinson² and can be seen in aerial scans of the site.³ The Chobham Camp was referred to by its residents as 'Blue Camp' and 'Chobham Camp' in the 1946 Surrey Electoral Rolls.⁴ After 1948, an adjacent part of the Common separated

1 Graham Webster, 'Man's Influence on Chobham Common', (2015), <<https://chobhamcommon.wordpress.com/>> [accessed 31 December 2022].

2 Patrick Rolinson (2017), 'The Chobham Common Squatters' Camp, 1946-1952', (2017), <<https://valleyend150.wordpress.com/2017/06/25/chobham-camp-squatters-1945-1952-by-patrick-rolinson/>>, [accessed 5 January 2023].

3 LIDAR (laser scan images) of Chobham Camp site, taken by James Rutter, <<https://chobhamcommon.wordpress.com/>>, [accessed 9 January 2023].

4 Surrey History Centre, SHC/CC802, Surrey, England, Electoral Registers, 1946.

from the Chobham Camp by Valley End Road was vacated by the Prisoners-of-War who had been interned there.⁵ This section of the camp was subsequently also used for housing civilians. The Bagshot camp was referred to by some of its inhabitants as ‘Valley Camp’.⁶ Bagshot camp, or the ‘Civil Defence Camp’ and it was situated close to Chobham Common, just outside of the village of Bagshot, on a site where council housing was later built.⁷

This dissertation will explore the purpose of the camps at Chobham and Bagshot and to what extent the camps’ residents considered themselves to be part of a political and social protest. Meeting minutes from the Bagshot Rural District Council Housing Committee and the Bagshot RDC Medical Officer of Health’s annual reports demonstrate the local authority’s response to the post-war housing crisis in the district. These sources also provide an outline for the ways in which the camp squatters interacted with the district council and the extent to which their action affected how local housing policy was enacted. Memoirs and recollections from camp inhabitants depict the camps’ residents and the personal circumstances which led their families to take up residence in the huts. Interviews and reports published by local newspapers and online memoirs help to demonstrate some of the squatters’ motivations and the extent to which they viewed their actions as part of a collective social and political movement, or an expression of self-help and resourcefulness. The camps’ residents formed their own community and also interacted with the wider

5 Webster.

6 Surrey History Centre, SHC/CC802, Surrey, England, Electoral Registers, 1948.

7 Bagshot RDC, *Report of the Medical Officer of Health* (1947), p.22.

communities of the villages surrounding the Common. Oral histories and newspaper articles provide insight into how the camps were organised and managed and the Medical Officer's Reports reveal how and why they ended, as the camps were gradually demolished and their residents were rehomed elsewhere.

While a number of historians have noted the Squatters' Movement in wider discussions of post-war housing, Don Watson's *Squatting in Britain 1945-1955 Housing, Politics and Direct Action* gives an in-depth analysis of those who moved into ex-military sites. Watson questions whether the actions of the squatters can really be considered a cohesive social movement at all, concluding that the squatters 'overriding concern was for housing their own families'.⁸ He discusses the national political and social conditions which led to the military camp squats and describes the inhabitants' experiences of living in them, as well as the ways in which their actions may have prompted or accelerated a response from local and national authorities. Watson also demonstrates how many of the camps became cohesively-run and 'self-regulating' communities, forming camp committees which liaised with local authorities to ensure a minimum standard of amenity for residents.⁹

James Hinton's 'Self-Help and Socialism: The Squatters' Movement of 1946' explores how 'right-wing newspapers were quick to incorporate the squatters' initiative within their own version of self-help', while framing the movement against the leadership

8 Don Watson, *Squatting in Britain 1945-1955, Housing Politics and Direct Action*, (Brecon: The Merlin Press Ltd, 2016), p.183.

9 Watson, p.15.

of a 'reformist' post-war Labour government. Hinton views the actions of the squatters as a 'popular rejection of Labour's beaureaucratic' approach to reconstruction, in which the public were the recipients of housing policy, with a limited role in shaping it.¹⁰ Alison Ravetz describes the squatting of disused military sites as a 'spontaneous invasion'.¹¹ Ravetz similarly references the Squatters' Movement in a wider description of Labour's inefficiency and delay in expanding social housing stock after the end of World War Two. Like Watson, Howard Webber rejects the depiction of the squatters as part a political movement, concluding that they thought of themselves as 'just decent people who wanted a home'. Webber also discusses the squatters' 'eschewing of ideology' and also questions why the movement is not a more prominent topic in popular culture and academic research, suggesting that the squatters' colluded with local authorities to minimise the potential public perception of their action as a political protest.¹²

Local newspapers and oral history in the form of online memoirs form the bulk of the evidence for exploring why the residents moved in, how they experienced living in the camps and also how they were organised and managed. Minutes from the district post-war housing committee meetings can be found in local newspapers, giving insight into how local housing policy was shaped and carried out in the area. The annual district Medical Officer's report is a key source of information in understanding the extent of the post-war

10 James Hinton. 'Self-help and Socialism: The Squatters' Movement of 1946', *History Workshop Journal*, 25 (Spring 1988), pp.100-126 (p.120).

11 Ravetz, Alison. *Council Housing and Culture: The History of a Social Experiment* (London, England: Routledge, 2003) p.159.

12 Webber, Howard. 'A Domestic Rebellion: The Squatters' Movement of 1946', *Ex Historia*, (London: King's College London, 2012), pp.125-146 (p.126).

housing crisis in and around Bagshot and Chobham. It also depicts the development of the camps and how they were used and maintained by the local authority. Local newspapers and online memoirs can be used to give an understanding of how the movement progressed across the county of Surrey, which provides useful comparison for the camps in Chobham and Bagshot. The Squatters' Movement as a national phenomenon is also depicted in national newspapers, the 1946 Mass Observation Report and can also be found discussed in various parliamentary cabinet meeting minutes.

Local and National Housing Policy after World War Two

This chapter will explore the changes in housing and planning policy throughout more than a decade of civilian occupation at the Chobham and Bagshot camps, which provides crucial context for understanding their use.

A severe national housing shortage was already expected by many, prior to the end of World War Two. In 1943, W.G. Holford, professor of Civic Designing at Liverpool University urged for a nationwide aerial survey, arguing that there was an ‘undeniable’ need for authorities to have a ‘complete picture’ in tackling the ‘planning fact’ of an impending housing shortage.¹³ Later that year, proposals for post-war housing released by the Ministry of Health were widely criticised and described as ‘a drop in the ocean’ against the ‘acute overcrowding’ and ‘urgent need’.¹⁴

In Bagshot District, there was already a significant portion of council-built homes in Windlesham, a small village adjacent to the Common where a number of camp occupants were later rehoused.¹⁵ Local resident Mr G. W. Green wrote disapprovingly of the ‘retrograde step’ of Windlesham Urban District Council’s absorption into Bagshot

13 *Liverpool Evening News*, 29 April 1943, p.4.

14 *John Bull*, 30 October 1943, p.5.

15 Nicholas Timmins, *The Five Giants: A Biography of the Welfare State*, 3rd edition, (London: William Collins, 2017), p.209.

Rural District Council in 1933 and noted that there were then one hundred and sixteen council houses and sixty-one 'state-assisted houses' in Windlesham, providing a significant portion of the district's council homes prior to the outbreak of World War Two.¹⁶

By 1943 Chobham Parish Council, which deferred to Bagshot Rural District Council on matters of housing, discussed the local need for more 'houses for the disabled, youth hostel, cottage hospital, parish nurse's home and houses for the aged'. Bagshot RDC accepted a meeting to discuss post-war housing needs for Chobham Parish and agreed that 'a minimum of 45 houses would be required as soon as possible when the war ended'.¹⁷ Both the parish and district council not only severely underestimated the number of homes required, but were failing to predict the impending need of homes for families with children. The minutes from this meeting demonstrate a dated approach towards housing needs, which was at odds with the complete social reconstruction being discussed elsewhere in the country during the war and after it had ended.

In July 1933, a Medical Officer of Health was jointly appointed by Walton and Weybridge Urban Council, Chertsey Urban Council and Bagshot Rural Council.¹⁸ The medical officer for health was responsible for overseeing the maintenance of local medical facilities, the spread of disease and the extent of overcrowding in the district. Housing at this time was monitored by the Medical Officer on the grounds that overcrowding caused diseases to spread more easily and therefore posed a danger to public health. The reports

16 *Surrey Advertiser*, 18 March 1933, p.9.

17 *Surrey Advertiser*, November 20 1943, p.3.

18 *Surrey Advertiser*, 29 July 1933, p.4.

from the Medical Officer provide detailed statistical information about local post-war housing in the local area. Minutes from Bagshot Rural District Council's monthly meetings and local Housing Committee meetings also provide useful context for understanding how national and local housing policy impacted the area.

Alison Ravetz describes pre-war council housing as scarce, with access to it being limited by 'gatekeepers' at the local authority level.¹⁹ Issues of overcrowding were already being discussed at Bagshot RDC monthly meetings prior to 1945. There was a haphazard approach to managing homelessness and overcrowding, due to the financial and practical constraints of the country being at war.²⁰ In one case of overcrowding identified in December of 1940, the council clerk had suggested that 'under the circumstances' the issue should be overlooked. The members of Bagshot Council confirmed that the clerk and the sanitary inspector could 'use their discretion to deal with the more flagrant cases'.²¹

Mr F. J. Wareham, clerk to Bagshot District Council, raised the issue of overcrowding again in 1943, stating that he been 'inundated with requests for houses or accommodation'. However, he believed that most of the applications were from 'temporary residents who would probably return to their own districts after the war.' Wareham continued that the council owned enough vacant land to build 'about 40 houses', but that overcrowding was a national problem and would probably be resolved by private enterprise after the war was over. He then moved that the council should enquire as to

19 Alison Ravetz, 'Housing the People' in Fyrth, Jim (Ed.), *Labour's Promised Land? - Culture and Society in Labour Britain 1945-51* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1995), pp. 159-60 (p.46).

20 *Surrey Advertiser*, 7 December 1940, p.2.

21 *Surrey Advertiser*, 7 December 1940, p.2.

‘probable after-the-war housing requirements’ The motion was received with ‘amused comments on the difficulty of the task’, but carried nonetheless.²² By 1945 overcrowding had become a far more serious national problem than had evidently been predicted by Bagshot Rural District Council. Roughly one quarter of homes in Britain had been damaged by bombing, with a ‘make do and mend’ approach generally adopted during the war.²³ Elsewhere in the country, as stated by Michael Foot, MP for Plymouth and Devonport in 1945, ‘every MP and every councillor was being besieged by the endless queue of the homeless.’²⁴

During the period immediately following World War Two, national housing policy was radically overhauled, with housing being the ‘top priority’ in public opinion polls of 1945.²⁵ It has been argued that there was after the war ‘an emotional desire for a new and better Britain’, including good quality and affordable housing for all.²⁶ Planning responsibility was allocated to larger local authorities after 1945, overseen by a newly formed central government planning agency. Barry Cullingworth describes a post-war ‘positive planning’ system to rebuild the country, which was an enormously difficult task considering the nationwide shortage in labour and materials.²⁷ The difficulties were compounded by the lack of some local authorities’ experience in building and managing council housing. Nicholas Timmins notes that local authorities were the government’s

22 *Surrey Advertiser*, 11 September 1943, p.5.

23 Timmins, p.205.

24 Timmins, p.205.

25 Timmins, p.204.

26 Jim Firth, ‘Days of Hope: The Meaning of 1945’, *Labour’s Promised Land? Culture and Society in Britain 1945-51*, (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1995), p.4.

27 Cullingworth, p.278.

‘chief agents for housebuilding’ and while some had overseen public housing provision, some smaller local councils ‘had hardly ever built a thing’.²⁸

At a national level, ‘comprehensive’ Acts were also passed to ensure that national redevelopment met a higher standard of public amenity.²⁹ The coalition government of 1945 produced a White Paper, laying out an ambitious desire to provide ‘a separate dwelling for every family desiring to have one’.³⁰ However, achieving this would mean higher levels of state planning control and Barry Cullingworth described the initial post-war years as a time of austerity and a ‘truly regulatory era’.³¹ After the war was over there was ‘an initial uncontrolled spurt of private house building’, but with resources and materials diverted to local authorities and under the direction of the new White Paper, the building of council houses quickly became the primary solution to overcrowding and poor quality housing.³²

The annual reports’ opening statements from the Bagshot District Medical Officer of Health demonstrate how pressing local housing need was following World War Two. D.P. MacIver, the district’s Medical Officer of Health wrote that the ‘provision of houses to relieve overcrowding’ was the ‘urgent problem’ facing the Bagshot RDC in 1945³³. He noted that ‘unsuitable conditions at home’ were delaying the release of people from local ‘sanatoria’ and was slowing down the admission of new patients. There were also local

28 Timmins, p.207.

29 Cullingworth, p.278.

30 Timmins, p.206.

31 Cullingworth, p.278.

32 Cullingworth, p.278.

33 Surrey History Centre, Woking, CC171/12 Bagshot Rural District Council, *Report of the Medical Officer of Health* (1945), p.3.

cases of pulmonary tuberculosis which could not be ‘properly isolated at home’.³⁴ He did not mention the local hutted camps in the remainder of the 1945 report, but Maciver does state the council had acquired land and intended to build three hundred and thirty-seven houses in total across the district. The 1945 report also depicts existing housing stock in a poor state, with the results of a national Rural Housing Survey identifying approximately just one quarter of local housing stock as fully fit for habitation, with no need for repair.³⁵

By the following year, MacIver was commending the council on being ‘most active’ in moving to deliver a supply of new homes, but noted disappointment that the ‘actual building’ had been subject to various delays. The 1946 report coincided with start of the nationwide squatting phenomenon and MacIver makes a direct reference to ‘the military camp on Chobham Common and a smaller service camp in Bagshot’ which had been ‘adapted to accommodate over a hundred families’. He noted that housing at the camps could only be ‘a very temporary measure’, but that the health of the camp communities was good despite an ‘arduous’ winter and that there were no cases of infectious disease.³⁶

Later in the 1946 report, MacIver states that ninety families ‘took up residence’ at the Chobham Camp and a further ten families were now living in huts at Bagshot, labelled in the report as a ‘Disused Civil Defence Camp’. The council had already begun work to make the camps habitable, providing toilets and refuse collection.³⁷ Despite noting some progress in laying roads and sewers for new planned communities in the district, during the

34 Bagshot RDC, *Report of the MOH* (1945), p.3.

35 Bagshot RDC, *Report of the MOH* (1945), p.20.

36 Bagshot RDC, *Report of the MOH* (1946), p.3.

37 Bagshot RDC, *Report of the MOH* (1946), p.22.

year of 1946 only twenty-one houses had been built 'by private enterprise' and a further forty were under construction by the council. After the war, a nationwide Rural Housing Survey was carried out to assess the extent of housing need in rural districts. According to the data from the 1946 Rural Housing Survey for Bagshot district, just under eighty percent of existing housing stock had been identified as requiring some level of repair.³⁸

In 1947 a bold new system for infrastructure and housing planning was enacted nationally, but progress was slow due to the nationwide lack of building resources. The new Town and Country Planning Act of 1947 also gave greater control as well as the 'cream of planning talent, idealism and resources' to central government, over local authorities.³⁹ In Chobham and Bagshot by 1947, over one hundred families occupied the hatted camps⁴⁰. According to MacIver during that year 'a considerable amount of time and attention' had been expended on improving the living conditions for camp occupants and their utilisation for temporary housing had 'in some measure eased the overcrowding of permanent houses'⁴¹.

For the Bagshot Camp, further improvements had also been carried out and the land had been earmarked for housing under the district's 'Bagshot Housing Scheme'⁴². MacIver also described 'considerable progress' made by the council during the year, with forty-five families housed in newly built council homes⁴³. By 1947 the district 'Rehousing Program'

38 Bagshot RDC, *Report of the MOH* (1946), p.21.

39 Ravetz, p.168.

40 Bagshot RDC, *Report of the MOH* (1947), p.3.

41 Bagshot RDC, *Report of the MOH* (1947), p.21.

42 Bagshot RDC, *Report of the MOH* (1947), p.22.

43 Bagshot RDC, *Report of the MOH* (1947), p.3.

had seen eight houses completed and occupied in Bisley; twelve in West End, fifteen in Windlesham, and ten in Lightwater⁴⁴. Sixty families had been rehoused across Bagshot District during the year, with forty-five of those families provided with newly built council homes⁴⁵. Private enterprise had also produced six almshouses and a further seventy-three homes either already built, or under construction. The Rural Housing Survey had inspected ninety percent of local homes by 1947 and around eighty percent of local housing stock remained to be in need repair or demolition.⁴⁶

Over the course of the next two years Bagshot council continued to expand their stock of homes, with private enterprise producing the smaller portion. By the end of 1949, one hundred and sixty families had been rehoused in newly-built council homes across the district and a further forty-five homes had been built by private enterprise.⁴⁷ In 1948, the Chobham Camp had been extended to incorporate a previously partitioned ‘Prisoner of War’ area, which had been vacated earlier that year. There were fourteen families in this new section, one hundred and eleven families living at the original Chobham camp site and seventeen families remaining at the Bagshot Camp. Maciver noted again that these camps had been used by the council to temporarily house ‘the more urgent cases’ until they were able to build sufficient houses.⁴⁸ By 1948 the council were actively allocating huts with an

44 Bagshot RDC, *Report of the MOH* (1947), p.20.

45 Bagshot RDC, *Report of the MOH* (1947), pp.20-21.

46 Bagshot RDC, *Report of the MOH* (1947), p.21.

47 Bagshot RDC, *Report of the MOH* (1949), p.15.

48 Bagshot RDC, *Report of the MOH* (1949) p.18.

additional fifty-seven households ‘afforded temporary accommodation in hutted camps’ that year⁴⁹

On a national level, the Labour government enacted the 1949 Housing Act which ‘removed the historic stipulation’ that council housing should be solely for ‘working-class’ people.⁵⁰ Although constraints caused by overcrowding meant that this vision of social equity wasn’t immediately adopted into local housing policy.⁵¹ The Bagshot district Rural Housing Survey which had begun in 1945, demonstrated little to no improvement in the repair of damaged and unfit buildings. By the end of 1949, around eight percent of surveyed dwellings in Bagshot District still remained to be in need of repair or demolition.⁵²

The 1950 report noted that many of the huts were now approaching condition beyond repair and advised that they should now be demolished as they are vacated. D. P. MacIver, still the Medical Officer of Health, stated that seventy-three families had been housed that year in permanent accommodation.⁵³ A total of one hundred and eighteen families still occupied the camps, with thirteen families rehoused during that year.⁵⁴ Forty-three homes had been constructed by the council and a further twenty-one by private enterprise.⁵⁵ Housing production nationally at this point was being curtailed, due to the

49 Bagshot RDC, *Report of the MOH* (1948), pp.16-17.

50 Ravetz, p.160.

51 Ravetz, p.160.

52 Bagshot RDC, *Report of the MOH* (1949), p.16.

53 Bagshot RDC, *Report of the MOH* (1950), p.1.

54 Bagshot RDC, *Report of the MOH* (1950), p.17.

55 Bagshot RDC, *Report of the MOH* (1950), p.16.

economic difficulties of post-war market fluctuations and this seems to be reflected at the local level, with fewer council homes being built this year⁵⁶

By 1950, the Bagshot district Rural Housing Survey was almost complete and the number of buildings found to be requiring repair had not significantly improved since the survey began at the end of the war. Just over ninety-five percent of all local dwellings had now been inspected, with only around nineteen percent of surveyed housing stock being fully fit for habitation with no repairs or alterations required.⁵⁷

The Chairman for Bagshot Rural District Council stated at a meeting in 1950, that the council would be 'delighted' to 'get some licences through' to allow for an increased amount of building by private enterprise in the district, but that they could not 'make the Ministry see reason'. The minutes from this meeting indicate support from district councillors for the building of houses by private means and the prevention of this by national policy. The Chairman was responding to a prior assertion by councillor Mala Brand, that waiting lists would continue to grow 'longer and longer'.⁵⁸ Miss Brand noted that this was particularly 'hard' on 'young married couples' and gave her opinion that the policy constraints on building by private enterprise were 'leaving families without homes and living under most unhappy conditions.' It was noted at the same meeting that the number of households on the waiting list for housing in the district was four hundred and seventy-eight.⁵⁹

56 Timmins, p.214.

57 Bagshot RDC, *Report of the MOH* (1950), p.16.

58 *Staines and Ashford News*, 10 February 1950, p.8.

59 *Staines and Ashford News*, 10 February 1950, p.8.

The introduction of a new national Ministry of Housing and Local Government in 1951, depleted the powers of regional Medical Officers for Health and created a new and separate ministry for housing.⁶⁰ Michael Timmins notes that the failure to separate housing provision from healthcare and effectively coordinate housing at a national level was later widely seen as Prime Minister Clement Atlee's 'greatest administrative error'. As Timmins states, this was likely to have contributed to delays, as various different ministries negotiated over limited resources.⁶¹

In order to efficiently cover the full lifespan of the camps, the remainder of data is taken from the reports at two year intervals. The 1952 opening statement revealed that the huts in the Bagshot Camp had now been fully demolished and the number of huts at Chobham 'further reduced'.⁶² Thirty-one council homes had been built and twenty-two more were constructed by private enterprise. The Rural Housing Survey had been fully completed and only sixteen percent of existing housing stock had been found to be fully habitable and in no need of repairs or improvements. By 1954 MacIver was describing the temporary hutted accommodation at Chobham Camp as 'substandard dwellings', with the number of huts continuing to be reduced.⁶³ Only forty-eight families remained at the Chobham Camp, as the council continued to rehouse people and reclaim the vacated huts for sale or demolition.⁶⁴

60 Ravetz, p.46.

61 Timmins, p.207.

62 Bagshot RDC, *Report of the MOH* (1952), p.2.

63 Bagshot RDC, *Report of the MOH* (1954), p.3.

64 Bagshot RDC, *Report of the MOH* (1954), p.15.

The number of homes council-built homes began to be reduced between 1952 and 1954 and was by then almost matched by private enterprise. Twenty-eight council homes had been constructed at Bagshot and five more at Windlesham. Twenty-four more homes were provided by private enterprise and a total of sixty-two families had been housed by the council.⁶⁵ Barry Cullingworth notes that after 1953 national ‘private housebuilding boomed’ with the removal of building licensing constraints, but so did council house building as high targets set by the government could only be met by ‘an all-out effort’⁶⁶

The final years of the Chobham Camp coincided with the resumption of ‘slum clearance’ national housing policy in 1954 and a withdrawal of funding at national level in 1957 for state housing provision.⁶⁷ In his 1956 opening statement MacIver again described the Chobham Camp as ‘substandard’ and only sixteen families now remained. The 1956 report introduced a section entitled ‘Unfit Houses’, replacing the Rural Housing Survey and reflecting the shift in approach from post-war local housing policy.⁶⁸ In 1954, national housing policy introduced the Housing Repairs and Rents Act 1954 and in 1956 seventy-four ‘unfit’ homes remained in the Bagshot district.⁶⁹ Fourteen homes had been built during the year of 1956, under the ‘Rehousing Programme’ and eighty-eight homes had been built by private means.⁷⁰

65 Bagshot RDC, *Report of the MOH* (1954), p.15.

66 Cullingworth, p.279.

67 Ravetz, p.173.

68 Bagshot RDC, *Report of the MOH* (1956), p.18.

69 Bagshot RDC, *Report of the MOH* (1958), p.29.

70 Bagshot RDC, *Report of the MOH* (1956), p.18.

The final report in 1958 marked an end to the post-war housing crisis in the Rural District of Bagshot and the issue of housing did not feature in the Medical Officer of Health's opening statement. MacIver also stated that this would be 'the last annual report in which this item will appear'. According to MacIver, Improvement Grants had been 'most useful' at extending the habitability of 'borderline properties'.⁷¹ Building by private enterprise in 1958 was double that of council house production. Forty-four houses had been built under the council's rehousing programme and one hundred and nineteen homes built through private enterprise.⁷² The district council had clearly adapted its approach to housing provision in line with changing national policy and there was an increased emphasis on private housing provision, evident in the reports for 1956 and 1958.

The changes in national housing policy and local authority housing production throughout the decade after World War Two had been significant. Data from the Medical Officer's Reports demonstrate a clear link between changes to national housing policy and how local housing policy was carried out. The population of the camps at Chobham and Bagshot flourished in tandem with the increase in national population and decreased as the government and district council worked to expand housing stock. The statistics in Table 1 provide annual data from 1945 until 1958, depicting the entire lifespan of the hatted camps in Chobham and how they were utilised to provide a temporary solution for overcrowding. There was a sharp rise in overcrowding in Bagshot from 1946 to 1947, in line with the

71 Bagshot RDC, *Report of the MOH (1958)*, p.29.

72 Bagshot RDC, *Report of the MOH (1958)*, p.29.

demobilisation of soldiers following World War Two⁷³. The population of the camp peaked in 1948, with one hundred and forty two families housed there⁷⁴. This provided relief to overcrowding in the local area, with sixty four fewer individuals living in overcrowded accommodation than there had been the in 1947⁷⁵.

Table 1: Overcrowding and Temporary Housing in the district of Bagshot 1945-1958

	1945	1946	1947	1948	1949	1950	1952	1954	1956	1958
Approximate Population	12,660	13,220	13,400	13,810	14,120	14,270	14,460	14,480	14,710	15,340
Dwellings Overcrowded	18	63	62	53	33	41	14	10	3	3
Families Overcrowded	29	89	90	84	43	59	21	16	5	5
Persons Overcrowded	95	444	436	372	224	296	114	72	29	28

73 See Table 1.

74 See Table 1.

75 See Table 1.

Louise Williams								Dissertation		
New Cases of Overcrowding	6	52	34	40	6	15	3	3	0	1
Overcrowding Cases Abated	1	7	35	61	20	24	10	6	1	1
Number of Persons Relieved from Overcrowding		61	283	445	137	180	99	29	8	9
Families Temporarily Housed at Hutted Camps		100	117	142	122	118	73	48	16	9

* Source: Data taken from the Annual Reports of Bagshot Rural District Medical Officer of Health

In 1953 Conservative Minister for Housing, Harold Macmillan celebrated the the ‘300,000th house of the year’ which was ‘symbolic’ for state and private housing provision finally catching up with need for homes.⁷⁶ This was reflected at the local level and by 1954 the number of persons in overcrowded housing had dropped, as families were provided with newly built homes⁷⁷. By 1957, twelve years after the 1945 White Paper statement on housing, the government had succeeded in building seventy-five percent of the four million homes it had deemed necessary to meet national demand.⁷⁸

In summary, it is clear that the camps at Chobham and Bagshot had played a significant role in easing overcrowding and homelessness for Bagshot Rural District

76 Ravetz, p.162.

77 See Table 1.

78 Timmins, p.206.

Council and for the people living within its' borders. It is difficult to ascertain with any certainty the extent to which the squatters' actions had altered the approach taken by the district council, or impacted local housing policy. It may be the case that Bagshot Rural District Council would have chosen to use the huts at Chobham and Bagshot to house families in urgent need, regardless of the squatters' actions. Bagshot District Council did work with the residents to ensure a minimum standard of sanitation during the camps' use and the council also endeavoured to rehouse every occupant before finally closing and demolishing both camps. By the time the camps were fully closed in 1958, the monumental efforts of the Bagshot District Council to provide housing had almost eliminated local overcrowding and homelessness.

The Squatters' Movement in Chobham and the County of Surrey

This chapter will provide a summary of the national squatters' movement and the factors which led to it, as well as analysing the phenomenon in the areas surrounding the Chobham and Bagshot camps and the county of Surrey.

Discussion of the impending national housing crisis began appearing at an increasing rate in newspapers across Britain towards the end of World War Two. Historians have cited a number of convoluting factors, which peaked post-war to produce a severe housing shortage. There were significant demographic changes caused by industrialisation in the 19th century, as people moved in their swathes to urban areas in search of work.

Many of the existing housing and sanitation systems in larger towns and cities struggled to cope with the influx of people seeking employment in factories and mills. There was then a general lull in house-building during the First World War and a heavy focus on private enterprise during the inter-war years. A popular ‘levelling-up assumption’ meant that privately-built new homes were generally intended for the middle classes and it was believed that this would free up older homes for those on lower incomes, but this did not come to fruition.⁷⁹

Whilst some early council homes in England were built by local authorities, government-driven housing improvements were mostly concerned with slum-clearance. Those evicted by these schemes were often left to find lodgings in equally poor and overcrowded homes, of their own accord. By the end of World War Two, many areas across Britain had also lost large portions of their housing stock to bomb damage. The return of demobilised soldiers, as well as many thousands of refugees coming to Britain created another sudden swell in the population. At the same time, there was perceived inaction by local authorities as councils allowed empty properties which were sought for requisition to be put up for private sale.⁸⁰

The War Office had been approached by many local authorities across Britain regarding the use of empty military camps for emergency civilian housing. However the department was generally reluctant to release the camps on the basis that they might still be

79. Don Watson, *Squatting in Britain 1945-1955, Housing Politics and Direct Action*, (London, The Merlin Press Ltd, 2016), p. 12.

80 Watson, p. 43.

needed for training, housing prisoners of war and refugees, or other military purposes⁸¹. By the summer of 1946, over forty-five thousand people began moving in to empty Nissen huts and temporary buildings in ex-army camps across Britain in what was referred to at the time by journalists as ‘the Squatters’ Movement’.

Don Watson’s *Squatting in Britain 1945-1955: Housing, Politics and Direct Action* remains the most extensive analysis which is specific to the military camp squatters. Watson concluded that many local authorities either openly assisted or covertly allowed the squatting of army camps in their districts⁸². Many local authorities also responded to the military-hut squatters sympathetically and worked with them proactively to make the camps habitable. Watson makes heavy use in his research of newspaper articles from the period, suggesting that they are as yet a neglected resource for this topic and should be explored further⁸³. Newspapers articles provide a vivid and emotive picture of how these events were perceived by those experiencing them. They also demonstrate some of the differences between local authorities’ responses and how the movement unfolded in different parts of the country.

In February 1944, Lord Portal’s parliamentary speech supporting the use of temporary buildings for housing was received with some apprehension in the *Birmingham Gazette*⁸⁴. A few months later, the *Shipley Times and Express* recounted the findings of a paper on post-war housing produced by Mr P.J. Williams, Senior Regional Architect for the

81 Watson. p. 55.

82 Watson, pp. 85-86.

83 Watson, p. 6.

84 *Birmingham Daily Gazette*, 9 February 1944, p.2.

Ministry of Health, calling for extraordinary measures in response to what he predicted would be ‘far bigger than any other previous crisis’ in terms of housing.⁸⁵

By July 1946, newspapers were depicting a strong public sentiment for local and national governments to act swiftly and properly house returning soldiers. In Northern England, the *Hartlepool Northern Daily Mail* published an impassioned letter, imploring local councillors to ‘get something done at once for the lads who have returned from the war to a worse misery than they have come from’⁸⁶. The sender sympathised with returning soldiers being further separated from their wives and families due to a lack of available housing and felt that it was unsurprising that so many demobilised soldiers felt ‘bitter’⁸⁷. In Southern England during the same month, Maurice Chazottes wrote to the *Bexhill-on-Sea Observer*, calling for the nationalisation of both ‘land and the building industry’. Mr. Chazottes argued that there had remained a housing shortage during World War One and the inter-war period and he believed that it would never be eased ‘until private interests in this form of exploitation are abolished.’⁸⁸

A good number of mainstream newspapers published ‘favourable’ reports on the squatters, fuelling public support. James Hinton has suggested that much of this came from the right-wing press who were keen to frame the squatters’ action as an endorsement of self-sufficiency and independence, noting that a front-page *Daily Mail* article published

85 *Shipley Times and Express*, 12 July 1944, p.6.

86 *Hartlepool Northern Daily Mail*, 18 July 1946, p.2.

87 Watson, p.2.

88 *Bexhill-on-Sea Observer*, 27 July 1946, p.2.

on the 10th of August 1946 sparked a nationwide surge in military-camp squats.⁸⁹ James Hinton argues, there was ‘a growing divergence between what people *desired* from post-war reconstruction and what they *expected* from it’. Hinton refers to the Mass Observation report of 1946, in which public apathy rather than revolt was predicted, as ‘frustrated’ aspirations for societal change and the ‘wartime community-spirit’ devolved into the ‘selfish pursuit of private interest’ with people returning to their personal lives, careers and families after the war had ended.⁹⁰

In the wider county of Surrey, the movement followed a similar trajectory to the rest of Britain. Local religious and political leaders began to fear the extent of the impending homelessness crisis prior to the end of the war. The Diocesan Conference in Guildford, Surrey discussed post-war reconstruction in 1943 and stated that over half of the nation’s population were living in such conditions ‘that home-making was enormously difficult, if not practically impossible’. Mr Sidney Dark, editor of the *The Church Times* expressed concern at the ‘inertia’ caused by ‘vested interests’ and ‘whether the nation would care for the interests of the mass of the people or would allow itself to be victimised by a privileged minority’.⁹¹

Housing need also became a common topic in Surrey newspapers towards the end of World War Two, with the issue raised at various rural and urban district council meetings and committees. Borough councils responded to the crisis with a variety of

89 James Hinton, ‘Self-help and Socialism: The Squatters’ Movement of 1946’, in *History Workshop Journal*, 25 (1988) 100-126, (p.106).

90 Hinton, p.100.

91 *Surrey Advertiser*, 27 November 1943, p.5.

approaches. Councillors were evidently eager to make progress with housing local people, but often struggled to agree on how to move forward. In April of 1946, newly elected chairman of Dorking and Horley Rural District Council, Mr A. Carter declared housing a 'priority' and stated that he knew councillors 'were anxious to see some bricks and mortar laid down' following the 'disappointments and bureaucratic frustrations of the past year'⁹². In Newdigate, the use of ex-army huts for housing was disclosed in February of 1946 as having been refused by the planning committee, on the basis that they would be 'out of harmony with rural planning'⁹³. Conversely, the comments of Councillor Pease of Godstone, Surrey on the 23rd of August 1946 demonstrate how some councils were prompted into action by news of squatters taking over ex-military sites elsewhere in the country. Mrs Pease, a member of Godstone Rural Council, had referred to nearby empty 'Army hutments' as an 'invitation to squatters'. She suggested the council follow the example set in other parts of the country, 'especially Buckinghamshire' and approach the War Office regarding the use of the huts for housing before applicants did 'what had been done in other places and squat'⁹⁴.

Ex-military camp squattings occurred across Surrey in rapid succession. By the end of August 1946, families had begun moving in to a partially vacated camp at Horley, with no resistance from local authorities or the remaining ex-servicemen still living there.⁹⁵ Two weeks later families were declared to be living at camps around Reigate, with rapidly-

92 *Surrey Mirror and County Post*, 26 April 1946, p. 2.

93 *Surrey Mirror*, 8 February 1946, p. 8.

94 *Surrey Mirror*, 23 August 1946, p. 6.

95 *Surrey Mirror*, 30 August 1946, p. 8.

produced scenes of domesticity described; ‘washing and babies’ napkins fluttered from newly-slung clothes lines’⁹⁶. In Banstead, in the borough of Reigate, on 6th September that year, it was reported in the press that families had taken a ‘disused Canadian’ camp of more than thirty huts and the squatters were asking the council to requisition the site. Demobilized Navy soldier Mr Webb of Morden claimed to be the first to arrive at the Banstead camp with his pregnant wife, having overheard someone else discussing the empty huts whilst travelling on a bus. Mr and Mrs Johnson had settled in the camp, having been ‘separated throughout the whole of the war and since because they could not get a house’. One other local married couple by the surname Simmonds had occupied the Officers’ Mess at the Banstead camp, but stated that they were on the priority list for council housing.⁹⁷

By October of 1946 it was apparent that a number of local councils in Surrey had also already been negotiating with the War Office, who had repeatedly refused to release the empty camps for housing. In many places local councils worked proactively with the squatters to make the camps habitable once they had been squatted. Similarly, a number of camp communities in Surrey quickly self-organised and were evidently either tolerated or openly assisted by their respective district authorities and housing committees. On October 4th it was reported in the *Surrey Mirror* that the Housing Committee for Reigate Council had twenty families in four different sets of huts. They noted that Reigate Borough Council

96 *Surrey Mirror*, 13 September 1946, p.7.

97 *Surrey Mirror and County Post*, 6 September 1946, p. 7.

had previously tried to acquire the huts for housing and were now making ‘the squatters as comfortable as the ministry would allow’.⁹⁸

The disparity between the self-organisation of the military camp squatters and the more authoritarian stance of the government was discussed by James Hinton, who asserted that Prime Minister Atlee’s Labour government had a ‘bureaucratic and paternalistic... approach to reconstruction’.⁹⁹ Local councils and housing committees were removed from idealistic social concepts about post-war reconstruction on a national scale and were instead facing the practical difficulties of housing their many homeless and severely overcrowded constituents. This disparity, as well as the sometimes lengthy negotiations between district councils, landowners and government departments, created an unnecessary delay in authorised temporary housing provision. This is exemplified in the notes from a Tenants’ Selection Sub-Committee in Reigate, which had apparently considered a Ministry ‘circular’ requesting that local authorities’ deny the squatters facilities and possibly seek to evict them, a consideration which the sub-committee decided to defer. Shortly thereafter, the committee had received a contrasting report from the Borough Surveyor who was actively considering local huts for housing, as well as proposals by the Ministry for the improvement of another local hut.¹⁰⁰ This example from Reigate depicts how the rapid changes in approach towards the military-camp squatters from central government affected

98 *Surrey Mirror*, 4 October 1946, p.7.

99 Hinton, p.100.

100 *Surrey Mirror*, 1 November 1946, p.5.

local authorities, many of whom seem to have already been considering utilising empty huts for housing.

On the 29th November, almost three months since the ‘squatters movement’ had begun, the use of military huts for housing was still a contentious issue in Surrey. Mr Touche, the Member of Parliament for Reigate questioned the Prime Minister in the House of Commons. Mr Touche’s primary concern was the lack of communication between various government departments and the subsequent delays for planning and housing approvals. Prime Minister Atlee responded with ‘regret’ regarding the delay at Betchworth in Surrey, but insinuated that the delay was reasonable and unavoidable. He argued that the ‘first reference to either department’ had actually been May of that year, with the first ‘tentative proposals’ submitted by the Surveyor for the Dorking and Horley Rural District Council on May 16th 1946¹⁰¹.

Bagshot Rural District Council were responsible for overseeing the housing of constituents in need in the villages surrounding Chobham Common and the post-war housing situation was similarly grim. In April 1946 Mr A. L. Aldridge, sanitary inspector for Bagshot claimed there were ‘1000 people in this area and over 500 of them want houses’, when questioned about a ‘blitzed-out’ family whose meagre home had just burned down. The family’s wooden hut, in which their three month old baby had recently been born, was described by Mr Aldridge as ‘appalling and absolutely unfit for human beings’¹⁰².

101 *Surrey Mirror*; 29 November 1946, p. 7.

102 *Daily News (London)*, 3 April 1946, p. 3.

Chobham Camp inhabitants have depicted the way in which the best available Nissen huts were competitively sought as civilians began to move in. Camp residents Thomas ‘Tom’ and Eva Dench had met Essex in Southern England after the war had ended, where Tom was stationed with the East Sussex Regiment. After marrying in 1946 the couple were living with Tom’s mother in Knaphill and his mother had advised them that there were empty Nissen huts on Chobham Common. Tom and Eva ‘cycled over to have a closer look’ and having chosen their hut, they secured it by locking it with a padlock. Tom and Eva then went promptly to ‘Perrins Store’ in the nearby town of Woking to buy interior furnishings.¹⁰³ Tom and Eva named their hut ‘Hayden’ and lived there with their baby son Alan for two years.¹⁰⁴ In 1949 the Dench family were able to move into a hut ‘with an inside toilet’ in the recently-vacated P.o.W. section known locally as ‘Valley Camp’¹⁰⁵ where they lived for a further four years before being rehoused to one of the local newly-built council estates.¹⁰⁶ In his online memoir, ex-resident of Chobham Camp Patrick Rolinson described how the recently vacated huts on Chobham Common ‘became a goldrush’ for many local families requiring a home¹⁰⁷. Rolinson’s account depicts the competition to secure a hut, as the news of civilians moving into the camp at Chobham began to spread among local people. One of three children to a single mother, he describes

103 Sally Clark, ‘Looking Back To Some Personal Memories of Living in the Nissen Huts at the Former Military Camp on Fox Hill, Windlesham Post WW2’ *The Hitching Rail*, (2013), <<https://windleshamsociety.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Sally-March-2020.pdf>> [accessed 10 January 2023].

104 Surrey History Centre, SHC/CC802, Surrey, England, Electoral Registers, 1949.

105 Surrey History Centre, SHC/CC802, Surrey, England, Electoral Registers, 1949.

106 Clark.

107 Patrick Rolinson, ‘The Chobham Common Squatters’ Camp, 1946-1952’, (2017), <<https://valleyend150.wordpress.com/2017/06/25/chobham-camp-squatters-1945-1952-by-patrick-rolinson/>>, [accessed 8 January 2023].

how an uncle told them about civilians moving into the camp. His uncle had found a hut for them and ‘camped there for several days, keeping guard’ until the family could occupy it¹⁰⁸. Rolinson’s online memoir depicts the Chobham camp through detailed description, photographs and hand-drawn images and notes that there were two separate camps within close proximity to each other¹⁰⁹. According to Rolinson, a portion of the Chobham Camp was partitioned off with barbed wire fencing to house interned German P.o.W’s, shortly after his family had moved in¹¹⁰.

The Prisoners-of-War kept at Chobham reportedly played a role in helping the squatters move in to the camp. On the 22nd August 1946, when a number of families approached the ‘N.C.O’ in charge in a P.o.W. section of the Chobham Common camp, German soldiers happily assisted them in taking over six of the empty huts. It was reported that Chobham Camp’s resident non-commissioned officer refused to help ‘officially’ but allowed the German prisoners at the camp to help voluntarily if they wished. The prisoners ‘scrubbed huts’ and one man was quoted as saying that he was pleased to see the families who had moved in that day and that he wanted to help them¹¹¹.

The Chobham Camp is depicted in detail by Patrick Rolinson, who describes the location of the camps, the evidence of which has now virtually disappeared beneath the surface vegetation of the Common. He identifies the Chobham Camp as West of the Chobham Roundabout and now partly beneath the M3 motorway. Rolinson’s hand-drawn

108 Rolinson.

109 *The Belfast Newsletter*, 23 August 1946.

110 Rolinson.

111 *Belfast News-letter*, 23 August 1946, p.5.

map was produced from memory many decades after leaving the camp; but seems reasonably accurate, with the remains of the air strip and ‘mess hall’ still visible on satellite images and aerial scans of the site. Rolinson also describes returning to the site in the years leading up to 2017, when his online memoir was published and at that time he was still able to locate some remains of the camp and remember its layout. He states that it was ‘easy to spot where the homes were: on areas where trees cannot grow, just leaves and moss’. Features including some of the huts, the roads and pathways, parade grounds, mess halls, communal toilets and wash-rooms, the football pitch, water tower and telephone box are still identifiable ‘if you know where to look’¹¹².

Neil Bartlett, author of an article on another local history website, also describes searching for and finding the remains of the Chobham site back in 2007. Like Rolinson, Bartlett attests to finding concrete roads covered by ‘a few inches of accumulated leaf mould’ as well as the water tank, ‘inspection pit’ and the foundations of some of the huts and buildings. Bartlett’s article also includes a ‘LIDAR’ laser scan image held by Surrey Heath Borough Council which shows some of the remaining evidence of the camp in considerable detail.¹¹³

To conclude, it’s clear from the minutes of local authority meetings that the squatters’ movement in Surrey had unfolded in a similar way to the rest of England. Many of the local councils across Surrey had already considered vacant military camps to house

112 Rolinson.

113 Neil Bartlett, ‘PoW Camps on Old Dean Common and Chobham Common’, <www.bagshotvillage.org.uk/know/pow.shtml> [accessed 17 August 2022].

the most urgent cases of overcrowding and homelessness in their districts. Some of Surrey's district authorities appear to struggled with delayed responses from various government departments as well as an initial blocking of their use by central government, who did not seem to account for the practicalities of coping with the overwhelming and immediate consequences of overcrowding at the local level. Families like Patrick Rolinson's were in most cases able to move in to the camps with little or no resistance from local councils, who otherwise had scant recourse to assist their constituents. Unable to officially sanction the use of the camps due to direction from central government, some district councils appear to have simply allowed the camps to be squatted and then openly assisted the new residents once squatting had taken place. In the squatting of Chobham and Bagshot camps, family members and even interned P.o.W's assisted in moving families in, with military leaders and the district council offering virtually no deterrence.

Figure 1

IMAGE REDACTED FOR COPYRIGHT REASONS

Figure 1: LIDAR (laser scan image) provided by James Rutter on behalf of Surrey Heath Borough Council for Neil Bartlett's online article, 'PoW camps on Old Dean Common & Chobham Common' published by <<https://www.bagshotvillage.org.uk/know/pow.shtml>>, accessed 14/8/2022.

Figure 2

IMAGE REDACTED FOR COPYRIGHT REASONS

Patrick Rolinson's hand-drawn map featuring Chobham Camp, from his online memoir 'Chobham Squatters' Camp 1948-1952', published <<https://valleyend150.wordpress.com/2017/06/25/chobham-camp-squatters-1945-1952-by-patrick-rolinson/>>

The Inhabitants of the Chobham Common Camps and
How They Identified with the National Squatters' Movement

The first part of this chapter will utilise the recollections of the Chobham and Bagshot camp inhabitants' to depict some of the people who lived in the hutments and recount their personal stories. The remainder of the chapter will outline the arguments of Don Watson and James Hinton, regarding the extent to which the squatters saw themselves as part of a national movement, or individuals who were seeking housing. Comparing Watson and Hinton's conclusions to the evidence for the Chobham Common and Bagshot camps will help to demonstrate some of the camp occupants' motivations for squatting. Most of the recollections which have been shared by Chobham and Bagshot camp residents were written by people who lived there as children. Some of the accounts however, do provide insight into their parents' struggle to cope in overcrowded or run-down housing and a few commentators were also old enough as children to remember moving into the camps.

The plight of demobilised military veterans and their families living across the county of Surrey is evident in numerous newspaper advertisements for jobs and homes in the weeks leading up to the beginning of the military camp squatters' action in August 1946. One family wrote 'S.O.S. - Has anyone a home to offer an ex-Army Officer, wife and child?' This family stated that their situation was very urgent and that

they were due to be made homeless that week.¹¹⁴ On the 23rd August another family put a small notice in the *Esher News and Mail* pleading for somewhere to live, which read ‘Demobbed Naval Officer, wife and child badly in need of a home’.¹¹⁵ There are many similar notices, which began appearing in local newspapers shortly after the end of the war.

There is evidence that a significant portion of Chobham and Bagshot camp inhabitants had been enlisted in the British or Canadian military during the War. Frank J.M. Kuntz was a Canadian officer who listed his address as ‘Trenton Ville, Blue Camp’ in the 1947 and 1948 Surrey Electoral Rolls.¹¹⁶ He married a local woman named Daphne May Rapley, who had worked in the ‘local parachute factory’ during the war. The couple reportedly had travelled to Canada, but unable to find housing they had returned to England, where they remained until 1955, raising two children.¹¹⁷ Graham Webster’s article quotes a local resident, who recalled that some Canadian soldiers had already created social connections within the community whilst billeted at Chobham and ‘local women would do their washing in return for sweets, cigarettes and money.’¹¹⁸ Another military resident was John Henderson, who was stationed at the Bagshot camp with the Royal Artillery during the war and who later professed that he

114 *Surrey Mirror*, 7 June 1946, p.4.

115 *Esher News and Mail*, 23 August 1946, p.4.

116 Surrey History Centre, SHC/CC802, Surrey, England, Electoral Registers, 1946.

117 *Daphne Kuntz Obituary*, <<https://mhfh.com/tribute/details/31793/Daphne-KUNTZ/obituary.html>> [accessed 9 December 2022]

118 Graham Webster, ‘Man’s Influence on Chobham Common’, (2015), <www.chobhamcommon.wordpress.com> [accessed 9 December 2022].

had ‘moved into the captain’s quarters as soon as the army left’¹¹⁹.

Memories of the P.o.W’s held at Chobham Common which have been shared by people on local history websites are brief, but numerous. There are many examples which suggest that some of the prisoners interred at Chobham Common were able to assimilate into the local community after the war had ended, sometimes securing employment with local businesses and creating social connections. Graham Webster has published quotes from local commentators who have stated that what was referred to in Patrick Rolinson’s memoir as ‘Valley Camp’ had once housed German Prisoners-of-War. One of Webster’s contributors noted that there were still German prisoners in some of the huts, ‘safely wired off in a separate compound.’ Another commentator shared that their father was a German soldier who had served in a ‘Panzer’ regiment before being captured. He had been on a train from Liverpool bound for Hull, on his way to be repatriated. The train was diverted and to Kempton Race Course, from which their father was sent to Chobham Camp. This contributor notes that their father laboured at ‘Hillings’ nursery, ‘like lots of other POW’s’ interned at Valley Camp.¹²⁰

Ron Little wrote in 2017 that some of the German P.o.W’s housed at Valley Camp eventually stayed and settled in the area around Chobham and Bagshot, having

119 Patrick Rolinson, ‘The Chobham Common Squatters’ Camp, 1946-1952’, (2017) <<https://valleyend150.wordpress.com/2017/06/25/chobham-camp-squatters-1945-1952-by-patrick-rolinson/>>, [accessed 4 January 2023].

120 Webster.

‘met local girls whom they married’.¹²¹ Rolinson also described acts of kindness between local people and the German P.o.W.’s, despite insinuating that he had initially felt some hesitancy about living in such close proximity to the prisoners. Rolinson wrote that in the winter of 1947, two guards knocked on the door of his family’s hut and handed them all presents which had been made by the prisoners. He described how as ‘things began to change’, they were ‘invited into the Mess Hall on several occasions to eat with the PoW’s’. Patrick Rolinson also noted how some of the prisoners eventually assimilated into the camp communities and the later the local area, working alongside and developing friendships with local people.¹²²

Prisoners-of-War appear to have been viewed as cheap or ‘spare’ labour by Surrey business owners and by local authorities, with one member of Godstone Parish Council suggesting that ‘there was plenty of spare P.o.W. labour available’ to carry out tasks like demolishing a local air-raid shelter.¹²³ On August the 25th 1945, shortly after the War had ended, it was also reported in the *Surrey Advertiser* that Surbiton Council had made an unsuccessful application for ‘German prisoner of war labour’ to aid in the ‘preparation of sites’ for new housing. The bid had been ‘rejected by the Government authority’, which left Surbiton Council with housing schemes at an ‘advanced stage’ of planning but unable to proceed due to a shortage of labour, despite a growing waiting

121 Neil Bartlett, ‘The Prisoners of War on Chobham Common’ (2017), <<https://valleyend150.wordpress.com/2017/06/18/the-prisoners-of-war-on-chobham-common-by-ron-little/>> [accessed 10 January 2023]>

122 Rolinson.

123 *Surrey Mirror*, 21st June 1946, p.5.

list for housing.¹²⁴

Ex-resident of Chobham Camp, Keith Sutton provided a detailed account of his family members' occupations, providing an example of camp inhabitants' numerous and varied occupational connections within the wider local community.¹²⁵ Keith's parents' address was listed in the 1947 electoral roll as 'The Haven, Hut 17 Blue Camp'¹²⁶ and then 'Hut 30, Flat 3' in 1948.¹²⁷ He was born in 1945 and lived for two years at the camp with his parents as a baby. The Sutton family had extended kinship and occupational links to the area around Chobham Common. Keith's father Cyril 'drove tanks at Longcross', while his mother Vera was a 'hairdresser at Seeney's, Chobham'. Keith's grandfather was a local builder and his sister-in-law had 'worked at the metalizing factory on the common'. The family were later housed in Elm Drive, Brookleys Estate, nearby by to where Patrick Rolinson and his relatives had lived after leaving the camp.¹²⁸ Camp residents Tom and Eva Dench similarly had occupational links to the communities around Chobham Common, with Eva working for a nearby 'scientific instrument company, Negretti and Zambra and then later in local retail fashion stores'. Eva's husband Tom worked for the Ministry of Defence, also predominantly in the local area.¹²⁹

124 *Surrey Advertiser*, 25 August 1945, p.5.

125 Rolinson.

126 Surrey History Centre, SHC/CC802, Surrey, England, Electoral Registers, 1947.

127 Surrey History Centre, SHC/CC802, Surrey, England, Electoral Registers, 1948.

128 Rolinson.

129 Sally Clark, 'Looking Back To Some Personal Memories of Living in the Nissen Huts at the Former Military Camp on Fox Hill, Windlesham Post WW2' *The Hitching Rail*, (2013),

A large number of the huts were occupied by families. Patrick Rolinson recalls the camp as being inhabited predominantly by families ‘and many children’. Patrick states that he, his mother and two other siblings ‘were one of many families that required to have a place of our own’. He was eight years old when they moved into a hut in the Summer of 1946 and he is able to recall the earliest days of the camp at Chobham. There were a purportedly a small number of brick structures at the Chobham and Bagshot camps, but most families had to take lodgings in Nissen Huts. Photographs of the Chobham huts are pictured in the Rolinson online memoir, showing simple rounded structures with corrugated metal roofs. The Rolinson family spent two years living in a Nissen hut at the camp and he describes some of the ‘alterations’ the family immediately set about making, building timber partitions to create two bedrooms for the children and a larger room with the fire, where the family ‘relaxed’ and their mother also slept. The huts had a door at each end, with a net-curtained window each side of both doors. Many of the huts at Chobham were surrounded by ‘make-do’ fencing, which were erected by the new civilian inhabitants and in which some were able to grow small vegetable gardens.

Helen Humphries published a description of her experience in response to Patrick Rolinson’s memoir, sharing that too she had lived in a hut at one of the camps, with her parents and a brother. Her mother had given birth to ‘two more babies’ whilst

<<https://windleshamsociety.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Sally-March-2020.pdf>> [accessed 10 January 2023].

they were living there.¹³⁰ Helen attended the local Valley End School, ‘walking there with the other children from the Camp’. Her family were later ‘given a lovely new house’ in West End, one of the new local council estates in which many camps residents were rehoused. Humphries notes that her family had been living with grandparents while her father was away at war. She stated that squatting seemed to be the only route to housing which could accommodate her reunited family after her father’s demobilisation, writing that ‘the only way we could get a council house was to become squatters’. Like the Rolinsons’, the Humphries family’s hut had two plywood partitions ‘fashioned into bedrooms’, a cement floor and a stove. Humphries depicts ‘vivid memories’ of her time at the camp, including a description of the ‘noisy and scary’ communal toilets, which were flushed every few minutes by a main flow system, connected to ‘the water tower on the hill’¹³¹. Dave Hewson similarly described his own childhood memories of living at the Chobham camp, noting that it ‘was a great place for kids. We used to climb the big water tower and also made hideaways in the small towers by some of the empty huts.’¹³²

Newspaper articles from the month of August 1946 demonstrate a good level of public support for the post-war military camp squatters across England. ‘Joan’ wrote for the *Derby Evening Telegraph* on August 22nd, arguing that the military camp inhabitants were ‘settlers not squatters’. She described some of the ‘settlers’ at the

130 Rolinson.

131 Rolinson.

132 Rolinson.

‘Kingsway’, describing the term ‘squatter’ as ‘an ugly word, not at all popular with the people so called’. Joan stated that she admired the young mothers living there:

“... the courage and spirit of these women who had gathered their goods and had carried their children from overcrowded houses to the freedom, fresh air and uncertainty of what they were determined to call homes.”¹³³

She also noted that the inhabitants of these huts were predominantly families with young children and recorded her conversation with a demobilised military officer, as well as a number of mothers with children. She described a sense of community effort, where ‘the whole community turned out’ to help others with a furniture delivery. As with many of the reports of these early military camp squatters, Joan expressed sympathy rather than judgement. It was a common view that the squatters had no choice but to break the law. Joan asked the readers of the *Derby Evening Telegraph*, ‘who can blame them?’¹³⁴

Having examined the military squatters and the Squatters’ Movement, Don Watson concluded that the political affiliations and motives of the camp squatters was rarely noted and many of the camps were apparently formed through individuals’ direct action, without any political leadership or assistance.¹³⁵ He argues that although described at the time as a ‘movement’, the military camp squatters were not part of a

133 *Derby Evening Telegraph*, 22nd August 1946, p.3.

134 *Derby Evening Telegraph*, 22nd August 1946, p.3.

135 Don Watson, *Squatting in Britain 1945-1955, Housing Politics and Direct Action*, (London: The Merlin Press Ltd, 2016), p.182.

nationally organised effort to affect political change. Discussing the political impact that the squatters had regardless of their intention, Watson asserts that their action ‘changed government policy over the use of surplus service accommodation’ and ‘seems to have motivated Bevan to set housing targets’, as well as encouraging the use of requisitioning powers by local authorities.¹³⁶ Watson argues that whilst the military squatters’ intention may not have been to make a concerted political statement in favour of state-funded housing programmes, their ‘wide imaginative horizons’ and collective resourcefulness, ‘challenged not so much the authority of the government as the assumption that it knew best.’¹³⁷

James Hinton draws a similar conclusion to Watson, describing the squatters’ ‘self-help’ as the antithesis to Labour’s ‘bureaucratic’ approach to post-war reconstruction.¹³⁸ Hinton analysed the movement from the perspective of a national political post-war landscape and asserted that right-leaning media outlets were quick to ‘claim the squatter’s initiative and spirit of improvisation for their cause’. Local Conservative councillors, Hinton argued, who were ‘less concerned to uphold minimum standards’, were also among the first to suggest use of the camps.¹³⁹ This may have applied to the approach of Bagshot Rural District Council, which remained under Conservative leadership with Captain Arthur Marsden voted in as the Chertsey

136 Watson, pp.183-184.

137 Watson, p.184.

138 James Hinton. ‘Self-help and Socialism: The Squatters’ Movement of 1946’, *History Workshop Journal*, 25 (Spring 1988), pp.100-126 (p.100).

139 Hinton, p.116.

Division's Member of Parliament in 1945, despite an otherwise landslide national general election in Labour's favour.¹⁴⁰

There is a good amount of evidence that the subsequent wave of squatters who moved into luxury properties, predominantly in London, were widely publicly viewed as an entirely separate movement. The *Shields Daily News* reported on the 11th September that the military camp squatters had been part of 'spontaneous' movement driven by social need, where the London squattings were 'distinct' from the military camp ones in that they were 'organised, not out of sympathy with those who have genuine housing needs but as a sinister blow to the government'.¹⁴¹ At one September 1946 meeting of the Conservative and Unionist Association at Lewes, in the county of Sussex in Southern England, M.P Major Tufton Beamish described the Squatters' Movement as a 'clever Communist move' and the political and social values of the reformist post-war Labour government as a 'slow poison', which threatened 'democracy and liberty' and eroded 'people's self-respect and pride'.¹⁴²

At a Reigate and Redhill Communist Party meeting on the 30th August 1946, 'sympathy was expressed with the action of the "squatters" as a temporary solution' and it was urged that other local camps be similarly utilised by local authorities for housing.¹⁴³ Local Labour leaders may not have expressed the same level of support for

140 *Liverpool Daily Post*, 29 November 1945, p.1.

141 *Shields Daily News*, 11 September 1946, p.3.

142 *Sussex Agricultural Express*, 27 September 1946, p.1.

143 *Surrey Mirror*, 30 August 1946, p.5.

the military-camp squatters and instead reiterated the point being made by the Labour government, that maintaining military sites would slow the building of decent and permanent council homes. One Surrey Labour ex-minister Mr Garnsworthy echoed some of the points being made a national level by Labour politicians, stating that the ‘panic measures are dreadfully wasteful’ and that materials and labour being diverted towards a local squatted ex-military camp would be better spent on permanent housing.¹⁴⁴ Regardless of the general opinions expressed by local leaders, there does not appear to be any evidence suggesting collaboration or endorsement of military-camp squatters across the county from any of the political parties operating in Surrey in 1946.

Local historian Sally Clark wrote that ‘Taking matters into their own hands, families, mostly headed by ex-servicemen, illegally occupied the camps as ‘squatters’.’¹⁴⁵ It appears however that many of Chobham Camp occupants did not regard themselves as squatters, or as children may have been unaware of the legal implications of the camps’ unauthorised habitation by civilians. As Dave Hewson, who lived at the Camp from 1948 until 1950 stated, ‘I never realized that we were deemed squatters’.¹⁴⁶ Although, by the time the Hewson family had moved into the camp, Bagshot District Authority were actively leasing the huts and so his family would not

144 *Surrey Mirror*, 25 October 1946, p.5.

145 Sally Clark, ‘Looking Back To Some Personal Memories of Living in the Nissen Huts at the Former Military Camp on Fox Hill, Windlesham Post WW2’ *The Hitching Rail*, (2013), <<https://windleshamsociety.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Sally-March-2020.pdf>> [accessed 10 January 2023]

146 Rolinson.

have been squatting there. Patrick Rolinson described the occupation of the camps in 1946 as a 'goldrush'. He stated that none of the squatters were prevented from moving into the huts by the authorities, writing that 'To us all it seemed we had been given permission.' Patrick notes a strong sense of community amongst camp inhabitants and acknowledges that the term 'squatters' was widely used to describe the occupants of the camp;

'We were known then as Camp Squatters, and we all got on very well. If you had it, you gave it to those who did not, a bit like the old Eastenders.'¹⁴⁷

Another Nissen-hut occupier at Chobham, Rose Denton wrote in to *The Daily Mirror* that she was 'proud' to give her address and 'to ask people in'.¹⁴⁸ Her letter demonstrates a sense of pride in the resourcefulness and self-reliance which has been depicted by many of the ex-residents' testimonies and newspaper articles regarding the squatters. Mrs. Denton moved in to Chobham Camp in 1947 with her husband John and stated that their address was 'The Cabin, Blue Camp'.¹⁴⁹ The couple had lived there for 'nearly seven years' and 'had never been so happy' when Rose wrote to *The Daily Mirror* in 1953. Rose expressed that she and her family felt that they had more 'comfort and freedom' than when they had lived in 'tied cottages'. Expounding her point, she wrote 'A home is what you make it. It takes effort on the part of the family,

147 Rolinson.

148 *The Daily Mirror*, 5 March 1953, p.7.

149 Surrey History Centre, SHC/CC802, Surrey, England, Electoral Registers, 1947.

but it can be done.’¹⁵⁰

In conclusion, as in the examples noted by Watson and Hinton, many of the Chobham and Bagshot camps were ex-servicemen.¹⁵¹ A large portion of the camps’ squatters were also families with young children.¹⁵² The Chobham and Bagshot camps housed Prisoners-of-War, some of whom had assisted first squatters at Chobham and many of whom later assimilated into the camp communities and in the village communities surrounding the Common. Oral history does not depict the squatting of the Chobham and Bagshot camps as an example of politically-driven collective action. There is no direct statement from any of the Chobham or Bagshot camp inhabitants which demonstrates any politically rebellious motive for moving into the camps, nor any evidence that they were assisted or organised by political groups. There are no public recollections from inhabitants making any mention of their own or their family members’ political beliefs or motivations. In fact a number of the personal testimonies note that the writer’s did not consider themselves to be, or know that they might be considered to be squatters. Others, like Rolinson, acknowledge that the camps were known locally as squatters’ camps but also discuss the desparate housing conditions which motivated their families’ choice of action.

150 *The Daily Mirror*, 5 March 1953, p.7.

151 Hinton, p.100.

152 Watson, p.65.

The Organisation and Management of the Chobham Common Camps and How They
Came to an End.

The first part of this chapter will examine the organisation and management of the camp communities using appointed camp wardens, who liaised with Bagshot Rural District Council and the Medical Officer for Health to help maintain an acceptable standard of amenity for residents. Secondly the chapter will explore how and why the camps ended, using oral histories to understand residents' experiences of moving on to their new homes and the response from local residents regarding the newly-built housing estates in their community.

Don Watson suggests that self-organising resourcefulness may have been seen to attract a more sympathetic response from local councils. Watson writes about one camp at the North Hylton Aerodrome in Sunderland in the North of England, being a 'self-regulating community... determined to see that no damage was done'. Representatives from the North Hylton camp had met with a

member from Sunderland Rural District Council and described themselves as ‘law-abiding citizens’. The camp was duly supplied with water by the council and ‘officially recognised’, given that they were ‘undertaking conversion work themselves’ rather than at the council’s expense.¹⁵³

The deliberate employment of a resident camp warden was one tactic used by many county councils in England to deter lawlessness, although the level of confidence in the efficacy of a camp warden was debated amongst representatives of some local authorities. At one camp in Alton in the county of Sussex in the South of England, the employment of a caretaker or warden was suggested by the council following theft of doors and seats at the camp. The surveyor for the site responded that camp occupants ‘could not be controlled even by a warden’.¹⁵⁴

In the neighbouring county of Berkshire, a camp warden was appointed at the Bucklebury Camp to oversee the provision of basic sanitation and amenities. Whilst the district council agreed to recognise existing squatters as official tenants, the remaining vacant huts would be allocated by the local Housing Tenancies Committee and it was recommended that ‘steps be taken’ to

153 Don Watson, *Squatting in Britain 1945-1955, Housing Politics and Direct Action*, (London: The Merlin Press Ltd, 2016), p.15

154 *West Sussex Gazette*, 10 October 1946, p.2.

prevent any further huts from being squatted.¹⁵⁵ Eton Rural District Council, also situated in the county of Berkshire, similarly appointed a camp wardens to manage the squatted ex-military camps in the district. It was reported that eight camps had been taken over by the Ministry of Health on a strictly temporary basis and that ‘the existing tenant committees’ would retain ‘a degree of self-management’, with a housing manager and a resident camp warden to oversee them. Eton Rural District Council were keen to avoid diverting supplies to the maintenance of the camps in their district and ‘hoped’ for the squatters to voluntarily assist in necessary on-site demolitions. The council reportedly stated that ‘the provision of new houses locally’ would not be compromised by any diversion of materials and labour and that on-site buildings which were found to be unsuitable for human habitation would be demolished ‘using Prisoner-of-War labour, and in some cases it is hoped, by the cooperation of these squatters’.¹⁵⁶

Eton Rural District Council’s approach towards the squatters in their district was decidedly stricter than that of Bagshot Council. The Housing Committee for Eton, in the county of Berkshire, stated that their recommendations were ‘an attempt to meet as fairly as possible the difficulties created by the squatters themselves’ and the council was not accepting any

155 *Reading Standard*, 15 November 1946, p.2.

156 *Uxbridge and West Drayton Gazette*, 18 October 1946, p.3.

liability for their housing. Equally, the squatters at Eton were informed that they would have no additional priority for council housing. The council agreed that if they could ‘delegate’ a ‘reasonable measure of self-management and control to a properly constituted camp committee’, it would be in the best interests of both the public and the squatters. The squatters at Eton were told they would also be required to rent, and ‘in respect of rate liability’ would need to pay for the removal of refuse, the supply of electricity and any other required council services. Eton council stated the intention for a ‘code of rule’ to be put in place, which would be implemented by the warden and any misconduct or poor behaviour could result in eviction from the camp.¹⁵⁷

Eton council noted that a ‘Squatters Committee’ had already been formed for some of the district’s camps and the council would be approaching this committee to secure ‘their whole-hearted support in the satisfactory administration of the camps and the remedying of nuisance.’¹⁵⁸ In the county of Berkshire, squatters from multiple camps across the county joined together in 1946 to form the ‘Berkshire Federation of Squatters’. During a meeting held in the parade ground of Tilehurst camp, members from seven camps across Berkshire agreed to contribute ‘7s 6d’ per hut weekly for rent and a further ‘6d’

157 *Uxbridge and West Drayton Gazette*, 18 October 1946, p.3.

158 *Uxbridge and West Drayton Gazette*, 18 October 1946, p.3.

per week for refuse collection.¹⁵⁹ It is possible, although not explicitly stated in this article, that Eton council were referring to the Berkshire Federation of Squatters.

The camps at Chobham and Bagshot similarly had wardens, who were responsible for liaising with the district council and maintaining order.¹⁶⁰ The first mention of the camps in the Bagshot RDC Medical Officer's Report for 1946 does not refer to a camp warden, but states that the council had conferred with the Ministry of Health and ensured that the huts had access to clean water, toilets and electricity.¹⁶¹ By the following year, 'a resident warden was appointed for care and maintenance duties' for the camps at Chobham and Bagshot.¹⁶² In 1948 and for most of the reports covering the remainder of the camps' occupation, the resident wardens were credited by the medical officer as having carried out 'minor improvements', including the 'provision of partitions' and 'general maintenance duties'.¹⁶³ By 1950 the Chobham camp's sub-committee was managing its own waiting list for huts, telling members of Bagshot Rural District Council's Housing Committee that the sub-committee intended to close the waiting list for new applicants and also remove those with

159 *Reading Standard*, 13 September 1946, p.5.

160 Bagshot RDC, *Report of the Medical Officer for Health*, (1948), p.18.

161 Bagshot RDC, *Report of the MOH*, (1946), p. 22.

162 Bagshot RDC, *Report of the MOH*, (1947), p. 21.

163 Bagshot RDC, *Report of the MOH*, (1948), p.18.

‘no points’ as per the council’s requirements for local residents. The Chobham Camp subcommittee also planned to make a ‘fresh survey’ of the camp and ‘divide huts into good and bad’. Having closed the waiting list, they decided to move residents into the better huts as they became available.¹⁶⁴

Other camps were self-organised, forming their own committees and appointing their own leaders even at the earliest stages of camp occupations. At the ‘New Settlement Camp’ in Hartlepool in Northern England, ‘pioneer and unofficial warden’ Mr Albert Squisby decided with his unauthorised committee to evict one family whose hut was in an unsatisfactory state of repair. The family were advised by their fellow camp residents simply to seek accommodation elsewhere.¹⁶⁵ At another Cheshire camp, Mr G.L. Stubbs was ‘regarded as Squatter No.1’ and ‘a self-appointed warden of the camp’. Mr Stubbs was ‘anxious’ to prevent damage and to keep civil order at the camp until an official committee could be formed in cooperation with the local council.¹⁶⁶

Personal accounts offer a different perspective. Patrick Rolinson recalls that his family had to find the timbers themselves for the partitions which were

164 *Surrey Advertiser*, 9 December 1950, p.5.

165 *Hartlepool Northern Daily Mail*, 16 August 1946, p.4.

166 *Crewe Chronicle*, 24 August 1946, p.6.

erected in their hut. In another memory he writes about the particularly cold winter of 1947 and that snow ‘up to six feet deep in places’ had made it difficult to get to the communal washrooms and toilets. This winter was so cold that the pipes froze and at times Patrick and his siblings would have to collect snow in buckets to melt and use for ‘washing, cooking and even drinking’. Rolinson notes that some local businesses provided supplies and services. According to Rolinson there was a vegetable vendor and a ‘fish and chip van’ which came to the camp on certain evenings and ‘made life a little easier’ for their parents.¹⁶⁷

Local historian Sally Clark has published two personal accounts written by Chobham camp residents. One of these accounts is provided by Kathy Nemestothy, who lived at the Chobham Camp as an adult with her husband and son. By Kathy’s account the ‘best Nissen huts were reserved for service officers, mainly Canadians who were working at the military tank factory’ in the nearby village of Longcross. She recalls that the remaining military officers ‘did marvellously well at DIY, installing dividing walls, decorations etc.’ Kathy wrote that the camp had ‘fresh water, electricity and regular coal deliveries’ and the huts were kept warm by a ‘coal fired range’, which also provided hot water. Clark quotes another camp resident who recounted that her father ‘and other

167 Patrick Rolinson (2017), ‘The Chobham Common Squatters’ Camp, 1946-1952’, <<https://valleyend150.wordpress.com/2017/06/25/chobham-camp-squatters-1945-1952-by-patrick-rolinson/>>, [accessed 10 January 2023].

men worked together' to put a door in the partition of their hut.¹⁶⁸ In separate article, Clark describes how many of the squatting communities in disused army camps quickly drew together 'management committees' to oversee the collection of rents, which they felt was essential to securing continued public support.¹⁶⁹

Clark notes that 'local tradesmen very quickly started regular deliveries of milk, bread and coal'. She also states that 'plenty of material was available from army store huts on site' for the refurbishments that were carried out. According to Clark, some residents had stoves built by local builders to help them cope with what she describes as the particularly harsh winters of 1946 and 1947. Providing further illumination to how the camp was organised and managed, Clark reports the 'the squatters formed an association amongst themselves', which hosted parties and social evenings in the on-site former army recreational hut.¹⁷⁰

In a separate and slightly differing account, local resident Fred Gillam

168 Sally Clark, 'Looking Back To Some Personal Memories of Living in the Nissen Huts at the Former Military Camp on Fox Hill, Windlesham Post WW2' *The Hitching Rail*, (2013), <<https://windleshamsociety.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Sally-March-2020.pdf>> [accessed 10 January 2023].

169 Sally Clark, 'Looking back to 1946, Former Military Camps used for Housing', *The Hitching Rail*, (July 2013), <<https://windleshamsociety.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/Sally-July13-Military-camps-used-for-housing-2.pdf>> [accessed 10 January 2023]

170 Clark, 'Looking back to 1946'

recalled being asked by his foreman to rewire one of the camps whilst working for the Ascot Gas and Electricity Company. Gillam states that the camp inhabitants could not afford an electrician and that he was told to 'keep it quiet'. Fred had to utilise 'most of the wiring that was existing' and stated that he also worked with the local builder 'to help install partitions in some of the huts.'¹⁷¹ Gillam's comment suggests that local businesses and tradesmen were also called upon to assist unofficially in the maintenance of the camp and provision of amenities.

The Medical Officer's Reports give an insight to the practical dismantling of the camp. The Medical Officer notes that there was an annual reduction in the number of huts being inhabited at each camp until 1958, which he states would be the final year that the camps would feature in the annual report. D.P. Maciver states that by 1958 it was 'becoming increasingly difficult to sell these huts as new temporary structures of an improved type were now readily available'. The report goes on to describe the closure of the camps, which had played an important role in easing the severe housing crisis in the district. D.P. Maciver's final statement on the camps notes that it was with 'some feeling of relief, no

171 Neil Bartlett, 'PoW camps on Old Dean Common & Chobham Common', <www.bagshotvillage.org.uk/know/pow.shtml> [accessed 13/12/2022].

doubt shared by all members' that the camps' use had finally come to an end.¹⁷²

Patrick Rolinson recalls how members of his family and others' were rehoused in 'Brookleys Estate', where 'today many of the children of those parents still live, or even their children.' Patrick's uncle, an aunt and his grandparents were all also housed in council houses nearby.¹⁷³ He depicts a small new community, with strong kinship links among residents and many ex-residents from the Chobham and Bagshot camps.

Many of the commentators from the Chobham camps note which of the local council estates they were later housed in and their recollections depict a sense of sentimentality for their childhood years at the camps. Sally Clark notes that the first council homes were built in Windle Close, in the adjoining village of Windlesham. According to Clark, the new council homes were allocated on a points basis, with extra points for ex-servicemen and women, those born locally and families with children. Like Rolinson, Clark notes that many of the residents from both camps moved on to form part of the new council estate communities.¹⁷⁴

Waiting lists, 'queue jumping', high rents and increased local rates were among the points of contention raised by constituents in the county of Surrey, by district councillors and local people. Woking Council addressed two of these points

172 Bagshot RDC, *Report of the Medical Officer of Health* (1958), p.28.

173 Rolinson

174 Clark, 'Looking back to 1946, Former Military Camps used for Housing', p.21.

in one meeting in 1950, where one local constituent complained of ‘too many favoured classes’ and accused the council of allowing ‘queue-jumping’ for housing sanitary inspectors and policemen. The affordability of new council homes was raised in the same meeting. Councillors stated that prospective tenants were being interviewed in their current homes prior to being offered a council house and in cases where rent was found to be too high they were being offered an older, cheaper council home instead.¹⁷⁵

There was similarly some contention from county rate-payers at what they regarded as an increase in financial burden being put upon them. One Surrey resident, Mr Vernon Wood had raised the issue with the financial officer for Dorking and Horley Rural District. Wood argued that some ratepayers were subsidising council house rents through rates and taxes when they themselves were ‘in worse financial circumstances’ than the new tenants.¹⁷⁶ District councillor Mala Brand raised a similar point of contention with the Chairman of the Bagshot District Housing Committee, arguing that ‘sooner or later council house building must come to a halt, both in the interests of the ratepayers and of council tenants’.¹⁷⁷ Miss Brand noted that each council house cost ‘£5 10s’ and a further ‘£16 10s’ annual subsidy per house, stating that the cost was ‘all borne by the rate-payers and

175 *Surrey Advertiser*, 14 January 1950, p.3.

176 *Surrey Mirror*, 8 November 1946, p.2.

177 *Surrey Advertiser*, 8 July 1950, p.5.

taxpayers'. Councillor Brand argued that it was 'folly' to state that 'every family will get a home' and that this was untenable in the long term. Chairman of the Housing Committee Mr J. Barrington Styles had agreed, stating that:

'I don't think the problem we are facing to-day is the problem we were facing a few years ago, when large numbers of local people were needing homes. There is a great deal of truth in that we should go on to a point where it would be impossible to burden the ratepayers further.'¹⁷⁸

As new council houses were built, competition to be housed in them was fierce and local housing committees may have had some difficulty in deciding which of the many local residents on their waiting lists' were in the greatest need. In one 1945 meeting of Reigate Town Council, Alderman Bacon was admonished by another councillor for questioning whether those on the waiting lists were 'getting a square deal'. Alderman Bacon believed that there were 'strangers coming into town and getting Council houses'. The Alderman requested to know when certain recent council tenants had applied and how long they had lived in the borough.¹⁷⁹

There were similar disputes raised in Chobham and Bagshot in 1950, when Bagshot District Councillor, Miss Mala Brand had questioned the allocation of a new council house to 'a grown-up family of three at Chobham'. The response was

178 *Surrey Advertiser*, 8 July 1950, p.5.

179 *Surrey Mirror*, 2 November 1945, p.7.

given that there had been only two applications considered and the other had lacked necessary information, so the house was consequently awarded to the household of three adults. Two councillors asserted that ‘the Council’s principles governing allocation had been adhered to’, while another agreed with Miss Brand that they did not appear to ‘making the best use’ of available accommodation. The subject of council home rents was also raised at this meeting, with Mr. Fromow, Vice-Chairman of the Housing Committee stating that some ‘levelling of the rent charges between comparable houses on different sites would also be necessary.’¹⁸⁰

The extent to which local people objected to or supported new council homes being built locally is difficult to ascertain, but there is evidence that some local homeowners did not want large council estates being built too close to their property. In Caterham, Surrey, local homeowners joined forces with property developer Messrs. J. Gerrard and Sons to protest a planned council estate, which was being built on land bordering their homes. Nearby residents argued that it would ‘lower the value of their property’ and another local, Mr Albert E. Ward admitted that the new houses were of good quality, but ‘once a Council house, always a Council house.’¹⁸¹ Ward’s disdain at the potential social and economic status of his new neighbours was reflected in the local allocation policies in some

180 *Staines and Ashford News*, 10 February 1950, p.8.

181 *Caterham Mirror*, 26 October 1951, p.5.

parts of Surrey, where a requirement remained for new council house tenants to prove their good character and social standing. In nearby Esher, in Surrey ‘satisfactory references’ were still necessary in order to be considered for a council home.¹⁸²

In summary, whether the resident wardens at Chobham and Bagshot were appointed by the district council, or if like elsewhere in the country, residents self-organised and chose their own caretaker isn’t clear from the available evidence. According to Sally Clark, the Chobham Camp community formed its’ own residents association and the warden was selected from among the residents of the camp.¹⁸³ From personal memories of living at the camp as children, it seems that residents recall a more informal approach to maintenance. Residents also worked together and helped each-other, without direction from the local council. Contrarily, the Medical Officer’s Reports suggest a more structured model of organisation, with the district council working to ensure that residents were provided with decent amenities. Fred Gillam’s account suggested that local businesses and tradesmen may also have assisted the camp residents with making individual huts comfortable and functional.

182 *Surrey Advertiser*, 6 October 1945, p.5.

183 Clark, ‘Looking back to 1946, Former Military Camps used for Housing’, p.21.

There appears to have been some combination of all three; with the local council supplying electricity, water and sewerage facilities for the site and private local enterprise assisting with improvements to individual huts, as well as the practical contributions from camp residents. Ultimately, whilst the council took responsibility for ensuring a minimum standard of amenity, with limited resources and financial constraints they may have approved of the resourcefulness of residents in terms of the camps' management and upkeep. The end of the camps came gradually and long after the term of their expected use. A large portion of the Chobham and Bagshot camp inhabitants were rehoused, forming new communities in the newly-built council estates in the villages surrounding the Common. Oral histories from camp residents express both gratitude for the amenity of their new homes and sentimentality for the space and freedom which living at the camps had afforded them.

Conclusion

The question raised by this study is what was the purpose behind the Chobham Common camps in Surrey from 1946 to 1958 and to what extent were they a manifestation of the post-war national squatters' movement?

An analysis of housing policy between 1945 and 1958 has demonstrated how residents of the Chobham and Bagshot camps were impacted by changes to local and national housing regulations, as well as the extent to which these changes correlated with the key events of the wider Squatters Movement. Financial and practical limitations prevented the government from immediately embarking on a house-building programme after the war had ended. During the time in which it took for the government to gather labour and resources and implement a completely overhauled planning system, many local district councils had already begun enquiring as to the use of the empty military hutments

in their boroughs for temporary housing. Government departments had wavered in their approach and various ministries debated the release and acquisition of resources, as pressure mounted from a dissatisfied and widely inadequately-housed public. There was a rift between the ambitious and reformative ideology of the newly-elected government and the practicalities of maintaining a minimum standard of public safety, hygiene and amenity at the local level for district councils.

As national policy began to be implemented after 1946, the Bagshot District Medical Officer for Health oversaw the building of hundreds of council homes, the gradual rehousing of the Chobham and Bagshot camp occupants and the alleviation of overcrowding across the district by 1958. Whilst the benefits of the new national and local housing policies clearly improved housing for the squatters and other local residents, there isn't enough evidence to ascertain the extent to which actions of the Chobham and Bagshot squatters made an impact on how local housing policy was enacted. The district council did work closely with the camp sub-committees and resident wardens to maintain and manage the camps. The ubiquity of military-camp squatting in August and September of 1946 across the country certainly motivated the government and many local authorities to act swiftly in utilising the camps for temporary housing.

Examining the circumstances of the people who settled at the Chobham and Bagshot camps has demonstrated that most of the residents were driven primarily by a lack of housing. Patrick Rolinson's online memoir, as well as the recollections of other camp inhabitants, depict a group of people prompted to squatting due to homelessness, inadequate living conditions or the need for private space as a family unit. Analysing the

extent to which the occupation of the camps were a demonstration of collective action, or self-help and individual initiative has raised the question of whether the encampment of disused military premises could really be considered a social and political movement at all. There is no evidence of any political affiliation or assistance from any local political party or group and all of the available oral history suggests that the squatters' in Bagshot and Common were simply seeking decent housing for themselves and their families.

Exploring how the camp organised and managed and the services it provided for itself has revealed how communities were formed within the camp and the ways in which those communities interacted, eventually assimilating with the wider local community in the villages surrounding Chobham Common. Both camps, like many others across the country, were managed by resident wardens. For Chobham Camp there was also a camp sub-committee, which liaised with Bagshot Rural District Council. The Chobham camp committee monitored the condition and usability of the huts and the waiting list of applicants to live in them. Camp residents, including Prisoners-of-War interned on the Common, connected with the communities of nearby villages through friendship, marriage and the taking of occupations with local businesses and tradesmen. A number of local businesses also assisted the camp with services, repairs and maintenance and the delivery of goods. The camps at Chobham became small and transient communities, which are now remembered predominantly in online memoirs, personal recollections and discussions in the social media and community websites for the villages surrounding Chobham Common. Most of the camps' inhabitants were rehoused in the newly built council estates in villages

surrounding the Common and many current residents of these villages have kinship ties to camp residents or personal memories of living at the camps.

The camps at Chobham Common ultimately served multiple purposes. For the local authority, they were a necessary temporary resource to ease overcrowding amidst the practical constraints of a local housing stock in poor repair and short supply. For the people who occupied the camps, they were a means to housing and a better standard of living. For local ex-military personnel, their spouses and their children, it was an opportunity to reunite and live as a family unit, with a good level of freedom and personal space. The squatters who inhabited the ex-military huts on Chobham Common were evidently not assisted or inhibited by any local branches of the political parties, the police, the military or members of the local district council. None of the recollections of camp residents insinuate any political affiliations at all and many did not consider themselves as, or did not want to be seen as 'squatters'.

The Chobham and Bagshot camps share many of these purposes with other ex-military camps across Britain. People began to arrive at the huts on Chobham Common in August of 1946, during the period in which over forty-five thousand people nationally also began moving into disused military huts. This dissertation has reiterated the findings of the few other studies regarding the post-war military-camp squatters, in demonstrating that the residents of the camps on Chobham Common were part of a physical movement of people and not a social or political protest.

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