

# TOWN AND TOWNSCAPE: THE WORK AND LIFE OF THOMAS SHARP



*MODEL OF A TOWN*

*BOOKLET TO ACCOMPANY AN EXHIBITION BY  
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## Introduction

This exhibition has been designed to accompany a collaborative project between Newcastle University Library's Special Collections and the School of Architecture, Planning and Landscape. The project has made a major resource on the town planner and writer Thomas Sharp accessible for scholarship for the first time. The project is funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council. The exhibition launch is timed to coincide with an international conference held as part of the project activities, *Visual planning and urbanism in the mid-twentieth century*.

Thomas Sharp was born near Bishop Auckland, County Durham in 1901, on the coalfield of south west Durham. Growing up in this environment had a deep impact on his character. He remained throughout his life a self-conscious northerner; bluff, stubborn and uncompromising, often to his own personal and professional cost. It also infused him with a deep anger at the poverty and squalid living conditions experienced by the working class in the pit villages around him.

Sunnybrow



Having drifted into the new activity of town planning somewhat accidentally, Sharp alternated periods of local government employment with periods of unemployment during the late 1920s until the late 1930s. The unemployment arose out of what became through Sharp's career a serial habit of falling out with employers and clients and resigning from jobs and commissions on points of principle or frustration. However, these hard times allowed him to devote time to writing polemical books about planning, such as *Town*

and *Countryside* (1932) and *English Panorama* (1936), which effectively established him as a significant member of the profession.

In 1937 he took a post teaching town planning at the School of Architecture, King's College, Newcastle. Whilst University life did not always suit Sharp, it was the end of his often unhappy days working for local government and the beginning of a period when new opportunities began to open up thick and fast, many as a result of war-time activity on planning. Whilst the ten years before had contained many lows it had also seen Sharp established as an important commentator on planning matters. The next ten years would see him rise to the summit of the profession and established as an important writer of plans.

A notable contribution produced during his time as an academic was another book, *Town Planning*, a Pelican paperback published in 1940, frequently cited as the best-selling text ever on the subject. In 1941 he was seconded for two and half years to the Ministry of Works and Buildings. His work during this time included acting as Secretary to the Scott Report on *Land Utilisation in Rural Areas* and undertaking work for a publication on villages, suppressed by the Ministry, but later to emerge as *Anatomy of the Village* (1946a). Once again finding working in a bureaucracy frustrating, Sharp returned to academia in 1943. On his return he devised a degree in town planning but his proposals became mired in University politics and in 1945 he once again tendered his resignation, this time to strike out as a planning consultant.

His first commission as a consultant had actually come via the City of Durham in 1943. This emerged in 1945 as *Cathedral City* and is the first of a series of 'reconstruction plans' on which much of Sharp's reputation subsequently rested, a number of which emerged as beautifully produced books from the Architectural Press. The triumvirate of his most significant plans is formed by Durham, Oxford and Exeter. But these were

frantically busy years. The years between 1944 and 1950 also saw commissions for plans for Todmorden, Salisbury, Chichester, St. Andrews, King's Lynn, Taunton, Stockport, Minehead, the making of the first masterplan for the new town of Crawley and neighbourhood layouts for parts of Kensington and the new town of Hemel Hempstead and a series of new forestry villages in remote Northumberland for the Forestry Commission. Few of these plans saw much if any practical implementation, as was all too common with plans produced at this time.

Perhaps the principal cause for Sharp's subsequent drought of professional work was ironically the 1947 Town and Country Planning Act. This adoption of a greater role in planning by the state saw a decisive shift in the prosecution of such work away from consultants towards in-house work by local authorities. It is perhaps somehow typical of Sharp that his early career was spent mostly in local government in a profession then dominated by consultants, he exited academia at the time town planning was beginning to blossom as an academic subject (partly at his own promptings) and he became a consultant when the pendulum was swinging towards public sector work.



**Traffic conference: Vienna 1956**

Sharp described his career from 1950 as 'a period of such intermittent and few small engagements as can be accurately described as a period of near-unemployment' (Sharp c.1973 p.254). He was only 49 in 1950. Initially his writings continued and *Oxford Observed* (1951) was widely acknowledged as a classic. Subsequently Sharp's professional writing more or less dried up, with the notable exception of his last major book, *Town and Townscape*, published in 1968. Similarly his work as a consultant was sporadic.

Sharp used some of his under-employment in an attempt to further another of his ambitions, as a creative writer. He had written some poetry since his youth but turned more seriously to this about the age of 60. Some of the poetry made its way into print, and some was broadcast by the BBC, but most did not. He wrote two novels and some novellas, all of which remain unpublished.

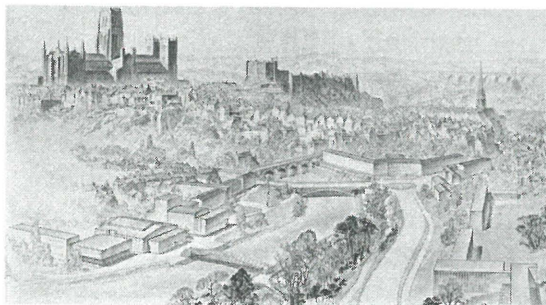
This exhibition concentrates on two facets of Sharp's work, both with a strong local dimension; his work producing plans for historic cities and his interest in the planning of villages.

Much more information on Sharp and the project can be found on the project web-site: <http://www.ncl.ac.uk/library/sharp/>

## Sharp and the Historic City

Having set himself up as a planning consultant in the 1940s Sharp became particularly well known for his plans for historic cities, which were generally well reviewed. As has already been mentioned, perhaps the three most significant were, in chronological order, Durham, Exeter and Oxford. Part of their fame derived from their wide dissemination – all were published in stylish formats by the Architectural Press. Each settlement produced very different challenges.

The plan we have principally featured in the exhibition is Sharp's first significant private commission, his plan for Durham, published as *Cathedral City*. Sharp's client was Durham City, against the wishes of the County Council who had objected to the principle of the work and Sharp's appointment in particular. The County Surveyor's antagonism towards Sharp in person may be explained by Sharp's pronouncements over issues in Durham in the preceding years. He wrote about Durham in his contribution to the polemic *Britain and the Beast* (Sharp, 1937). His key target was the County Council's relief road proposals, sections of which would have been elevated on a high embankment. Sharp used this opportunity to publicize his ground-level alternative (first prepared in 1934, Sharp c.1973 and Stansfield, 1974) to the officially-approved elevated road. Here and elsewhere in the chapter he attacked the responsible authorities, including local authorities and the Cathedral and University, for their apparent lack of engagement in the city beyond their own interests.



**Cathedral City**

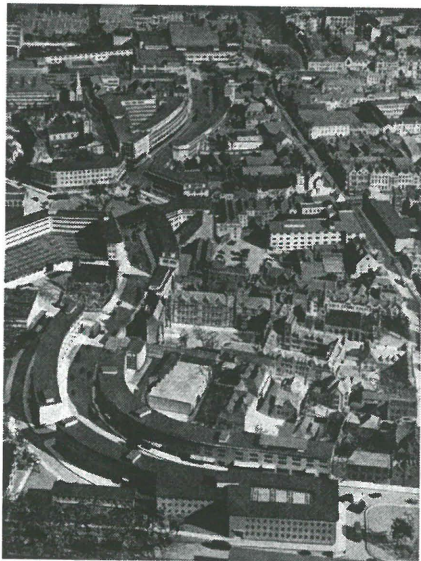
*Cathedral City* was published in January 1945. Sharp's appreciation of Durham was largely based upon its visual qualities. Not

surprisingly the Cathedral, and to some degree the Castle, were central to this, although there was an appreciation of the roofscape and of the foil that domestic scaled building gave to the major monuments. Sharp also emphasised the historic and visual importance of the cathedral as part of emphasising the significance of Durham. His proposals for preservation were focused on the peninsula containing the Cathedral, Castle and heart of the University and commercial centre, although a map of buildings of historic interest included buildings across the City such as a concentration on the north side of Old Elvet, an historic street to the north-east of the peninsula. The settings of the Cathedral and Castle were given extensive discussion. Beyond the peninsula he saw the need for extensive rebuilding, whilst acknowledging that some of the buildings to be cleared had architectural merit.

A key element of the plan was his alternative to the County Council inner relief road. This debate over road alternatives rumbled on through a convoluted series of proposals and inquiries. The City and County Councils were in opposition, with the City accepting Sharp's proposals and the County sticking to their original preferred scheme. This issue dragged on until the relief road was eventually constructed in the 1960s, broadly on Sharp's line although to a detailed design about which he was highly critical (Gazzard, 1969). Sharp's relationship as a planning advisor with Durham continued from 1948 until the end of 1962.

Exeter was the only one of the historic cities that Sharp worked on to have received major war-time damage, Sharp estimated that the city had lost something like half of its buildings of architectural merit through bombing (Sharp, 1946b). The report discussed at length those buildings destroyed, especially the Georgian buildings, such as Bedford Circus, to the east of the Cathedral. However, the purpose of this discussion was not to propose reinstatement of similar buildings or even the retention of the street plan. On the contrary it was used to mobilise

support for Sharp's proposals for clearly contemporary interventions, built to a new street plan. His favoured approach was modern renewal, sympathetic to but not imitative of existing forms. He argued for new development of similar scale to the buildings that had been lost, and intimate rather than monumental in form. Elements of the Exeter plan were implemented, although some have recently been redeveloped once more.



Oxford Replanned model

Though 'Oxford Replanned' was described as 'largely a work of preservation' (Sharp, 1948: 16) it was, like Durham, largely based upon an appreciation of its visual qualities. The emphasis was firmly on the appearance of Oxford and the character that derived from the way space was used and the visual relationships of Oxford and progression through space studied in great depth. The plan was an important stage in the development of the study of 'townscape'. A key

priority for Sharp was the removal of traffic from High Street, the principal route to the east that bisects the main college area. However, to facilitate this, drastic interventions were seen as necessary elsewhere. Most controversial was Sharp's plan to run a road around the south of the centre through the Meadows along the line of Broad Walk, a route he termed 'Merton Mall'. Again, deliberations over a series of competing schemes to relieve inner-Oxford of traffic were made in a series of highly controversial public inquiries between the 1950s and 1970s, through which time Sharp stayed personally involved. Ultimately most of the suggested road schemes were abandoned in favour of traffic-management (Stansfield, 1981).



## Sharp and the English Village

Sharp's first polemical text, *Town and Countryside* (1932), suggested that his interests were not only concerned with towns and urban areas. He was highly critical of the prevailing garden city ethos and he believed in high density towns. Development needed in the countryside should not occur through ribbon development and sprawl but through the creation of new villages. Subsequently in 1946 he published the classic *The Anatomy of the Village*, born out of work Sharp undertook for the Ministry of Town and Country Planning. It was lucidly written and generously illustrated by photographs (now conveying a rather elegiac quality) and beautiful line-drawings of village plans.

This was no guidebook or academic treatise and anticipated considerable post-war development in the countryside. The aim of *The Anatomy of the Village* was to set out the main principles of village planning, especially in relation to physical design. Sharp argued that the key factor in village character is simplicity and simplicity of plan form in particular. He identified two dominant principal forms of village plan in the English tradition of village building, the 'road-side' village and the 'squared' village. Critical to village character is that the road is rarely dead straight - thus the road becomes visually contained and forms a place; and that closing views in this way is both visually and psychologically satisfying. With the squared village the shape of the enclosure may in practice take many different patterns. This, Sharp considered, often had a more immediate visual appeal as the plan form is more readily appreciated. However, the principle of visual containment is shared with the road-side village, with roads generally staggered and not allowing any direct vista through.

Sharp considered the village in both functional and design terms. He suggested a minimum village size of about 400-450 village inhabitants. Some of his descriptions of village facilities

seem somewhat fantastical today (as many villages lack *any* such facilities). On the one hand, it was apparently then common for a village of 300 or so to have eight or nine shops and three or four inns. He considered two general stores, a bakers, a butchers, a cobblers and perhaps a saddlers as minimum provision. On the other hand, he considered future facilities might include communal refrigeration for local produce or a communal heating station and laundry. His prescriptions for the form of future development followed the principle of informal simplicity. Thus his general preference was for terraces of houses arranged informally. Houses should have good sized back gardens, for privacy, but at the front gardens were unnecessary - he considered a traditional narrow unfenced garden strip, or 'flower strip' better in functional and aesthetic terms. Though new buildings should not imitate those existing, Sharp argued for good neighbourliness, through such factors as height, street line, character and colour of materials.

Sharp's opportunity to put these principles into practice appeared to arrive with a commission from the Forestry Commission in 1946 to masterplan eight villages in remote Northumberland for its forestry workers, each of which would house between 350 and 500 people. The forests of Kielder, Wark and Redesdale were undergoing massive expansion and it was anticipated a large workforce would be needed close by. This was to be a phased work; the Commission decided they immediately needed 150 houses which Sharp recommended be divided between three sites; Kielder (60 houses, adding to some earlier inter-war semis), Byrness (50 houses) and Stonehaugh (45 houses); though these settlements would be incomplete he considered that they would be of sufficient size to give some community and village character.



*At Play in Kielder Village*

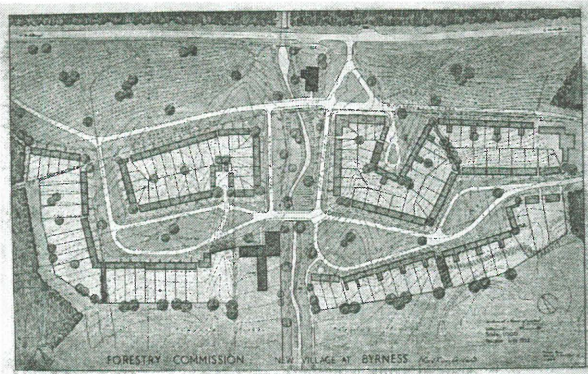


*Washing Day*

### Kielder 1962

Kielder was an obvious place to develop a village but at the outset it was seen to be challenging because of the scattered and disparate existing buildings. There was a debate over whether village extension should take place around Kielder station but Sharp was firmly of the view that it should be on the new site of BATTERYHAUGH (though there is in practice also some post-war development around the station). The completed plan would have established a more satisfactory visual relationship with Kielder Castle than exists today – Sharp orientated one of

his informal spaces at the entrance to BATTERYHAUGH to capture the view up the hill. BYRNNESS and STONEHAUGH were virgin sites. COMB was to have been the fourth village, again a virgin site, with a linear plan running along an isolated ridge in the Tarsset Valley.



Byrness new village

Like so many of Sharp's commissions things were not to work out as he wished; he went as far as to say that the Forestry Commission was the worst client he had! This had been an

important project to him, 'I felt that what would most satisfy me in life, what would most justify me ever having lived, what would crown a whole life's work, would be to build a good new village and write a good, even if very short, lyrical poem' (Sharp, c.1973 p.247). The fundamental problem was that the works were not continued, as the mechanisation of forestry work and improving communications meant that the scale of workforce estimated to be needed on site dropped rapidly. Kielder and Stonehaugh were only 1/4 to 1/3 completed – Byrness rather more so. Furthermore, the Forestry Commission refused to provide the necessary community buildings including basic needs such as a shop or pub. Only after much pressure did they provide £5 or so per village for amenity tree planting!

Visiting the three villages today, the overall planning of the parts that were built, in terms of the combinations of buildings and the spaces that link them, stands up reasonably well. At the same time, understanding something of the history explains what is so unsatisfying in each case – they are fragments, in the cases of Byrness and Stonehaugh little more than a series of terraced houses, not the complete and coherent villages Sharp wanted. The experience is perhaps most dispiriting at Kielder, however. For at Kielder further development has taken place and rather than using the Sharp plan as a key for growing the village the building has been haphazard and unrelated to what went before, architecturally, but more importantly in terms of siting.

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### **Forestry village intentions May 1947**

Area	Village	No of dwellings	Notes
Kielder	Kielder	200	
	Plashetts	100	Low priority, site now under reservoir
	Mounces	100	Low priority, site now under reservoir
	Comb	300	
	Chirdon-Bowen	100	
Wark	Stonehaugh	300	
Redesdale	Rochester	80?	Long-term village expansion
	Byrness	120	

(Earlier proposals included expansion of Falstone but site susceptible to flooding and Coldcotes in Wark area amalgamated with Stonehaugh proposal.)

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