



Pipes, Houses & Searches (of various kinds!)

I read recently in one of the Sunday papers, of a woman who bought a house in England with a view to extending it. Plans were passed and a builder engaged but when the extension was half built they were contacted by the Water Authority and ordered to pull it down as they were apparently building over one of their sewers.

It turned out to be not just a normal gravity sewer but actually a rising main which is, of course, a pressurised pipe leading up from a pumping station.

Needless to say, the lady was not best pleased and wanted to know why no one had warned her and why nothing had shown up on her property Search before she bought the house?

Whilst accepting that the Planning Authority (& Building Regs, for that matter) had been so lax as to not know (or at least tell her if they did know) about that particular bit of infrastructure, I can well understand how such a thing came about.

From my own experience I know that Searches are, to a Local Authority, something of a pestilential nuisance and are routinely given to the most junior member of staff for attention. He or she then sends out some form of questionnaire to each relevant Department, including the Planning Department (if there is one - nowadays it might well be a separate body) and each department in turn then pushes it down to their lowest tier of Office Junior. Thus the general standard of reply is poor. Each chooses from a list of stock answers, applies little, if any, local knowledge (and even less imagination!). It is quite amazing that there aren't more mistakes.

Many mistakes are undoubtedly made but as the Law firm handling the Sale, tends in turn to consider Conveyancing to be a low priority and essentially dull job, in the Solicitors office it again tends to be passed down to the most junior Clerk. To compound this, not many Solicitors seem interested enough to pass on the results of Searches to their Clients unless something glaringly important appears on it.

The doubt also arises as to whether nowadays the Local



Surveying for sewers - Nantwich RDC. c.1960

Authority could be expected to know about the presence of this pipe?

Years ago when, at the age of 15 I started as an Articled Pupil with the local Engineer & Surveyor, one of our first jobs was being sent out to survey the sewers of the District. Apart from some main intercepting sewers built by Consultants in the 1930's, the rest of the system was looked upon as a great mystery which only a few local 'Ancients' knew anything about - and we subsequently found out that they were often wrong!

We did, after much delving under tarmac searching for manhole covers in roads or under bushes elsewhere, eventually end up with a more or less reliable map which no doubt remained as an important document UNTIL 1974. But then, of course, it all went pear shaped on the Reorganisation of Local Government. How many of the new Districts, Boroughs or whatever, appreciated (or even found) the detail records of the old U.D.C's, R.D.C.s or whatever? And were there any 'locals' on their staff who held that magic ingredient "Local Knowledge"? Many had taken the opportunity of 'Early Retirement'.

As far as sewerage and drainage concerns, all this lack of knowledge was further compounded when later, these powers were stripped from Local Councils and given to the Water Authorities! No wonder that they cannot give any guarantee when they attempt to indicate where they think their services run!

Now the Government are hatching plans for yet further re-organisations. How mad it all is. They claim there will be economies-of-scale. Did anyone notice any savings after 1974? Did rates go down? Did staff numbers drop? Were Authorities noticeably more efficient? Did we all get and appreciate better local services? Not on your Nellie! Nothing is more sure than that it will all get even worse.

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 Writing about the immediate post W.W.II period when I started in what was really an Apprenticeship - learning 'on-the-job' plus attendance at Day Release and Night School which involved travelling to Colleges at Manchester, Stoke-on-Trent and later Liverpool at what were then termed Technical schools and which have all now be exalted to University status. This was a hard working but necessarily a less effectual route to Professional Qualifications.

Apart from sewer hunting - and I well remember an occasion looking for manholes in a village near Crewe when we were overtaken by the local coal-cart. We had managed to acquire an ex-army mine detector and were busy sweeping the main road searching for buried manhole covers. The coal man said "Eh, what-yer doing Mester?" and we said, without a moments hesitation "Looking for un-exploded bombs". He spurred on his horse and disappeared in a cloud of coal-dust.

It was earlier than this though, whist still with my first Authority, Knutsford U.D.C. that priority had to be given to building Council Houses to meet the housing shortage. (Not dissimilar to the present drive for First Time Buyer's Homes). The target was to build a house for £1,000 (excluding sub-structures) and although we never quite managed it, we did get close. Tendering was keen as local Builders couldn't build private houses because of the rationing of Building Licences and even repairs and extensions were difficult because of Timber Rationing.

My parents wanted to build a new house for themselves, bought a plot, I drew up plans and got Consent (the design, I remember, was constrained such that the room sizes related conveniently with the size of the carpets Mother had already bought!). We arranged a Contract with a Builder but then we couldn't get a Building Licence. The



Houses Fit For Heroes - Knutsford UDC. c.1950

Council was allowed to issue one private Licence for every 15 (I think it was) Council Houses they built. Licences went by Councillor's vote and I don't think we were friendly with enough Councillors!

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Sorry about all that deviation - I'll get back to the underground pipes.

Busy as we were, as I said, building Houses-for-Heroes, we managed to build one over the top of a buried pipe. This turned out to be one of the Wartime Government's oil (petrol?) pipelines which criss-crossed the country linking the oil ports to aerodromes etc. We actually knew there was one in the vicinity and using the Government Map we had set out our houses to adequately miss it but it turned out to be not quite where it ought to have been!

Right under the back corner of the kitchen, it was. So, after consultation with The Ministry (we seemed in those days to spend an inordinate amount of time fending off Ministry Officials who had control over almost everything!) we lopped-off a corner of the kitchen, corbelling-out the brickwork higher up so that the 1st floor layout remained as planned.

I often wonder what happened to that house, did it let at a reduced rent because of the smaller kitchen with a splayed-off corner? Does the modern tenant/owner (probably been sold off by now) wonder why his house is different? If it was sold, did it show up on the Search? Did it effect the mortgage?

Mention of selling-off Council houses, bring me on to other thoughts. It seems remarkable that, in the 1960's it was a Socialist controlled Council for whom I was working then (Winsford UDC) who seemed to pioneer the idea of selling-off their houses to the sitting tenants.

Everyone seems to blame Mrs. Thatcher for this but it wasn't her that started it. I tend to believe it was a mistake and that we wouldn't be in the current position vis-à-vis 1st time buyers, had a sufficient pool of Council Houses remained available. Sadly, most Local Authorities have now lost not only their houses but also their housing powers. What have they got left? Were do all the Rates go? It makes one think!

As I moved around various local Councils in the early stages of my career as an Engineer & Surveyor and before I settled down (?) as a "Planner", it was sad to sense the loss felt by the then Department Chiefs at the recent transfer of Water powers to Boards and later, Water Authorities. Many small Districts had run their own Water Supply set-ups with not only watermains in the towns but Boreholes, Reservoirs and Pumping Stations out in the countryside. To many of the Engineers it was like losing one of their babies and they tended to become disinterested in what was left and were simply hanging-on until retirement. Very sad to have lost a lifetime's work by Government Decree.