



UNIVERSITY OF
LINCOLN

DISCOVER:

*Publicly engaged
research at Lincoln*



Issue 1

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Unearthing Middlefield's Utopias

Professor Carenza Lewis, Dr Anna Scott (*School of History and Heritage*) **and Dr Ian Waites** (*Lincoln School of Design*) **Date:** 2016-17 **Location:** Gainsborough, Lincolnshire and Somerset House, London



Middlefield Lane, Gainsborough, was a 1960s council housing estate which was one of many created in post-war Britain based on the 1928 'garden city'-inspired plan of Radburn, New Jersey. The aim in the UK was to replace crowded insanitary 19th century slums with better quality housing. Providing access to open space was a key priority, hence houses faced not onto streets but communal pedestrianised greens, intended to create a sense of community where people could move around and children could play in safety. In New Jersey, Radburn is a national monument, but in the UK, time, policy-makers and public opinion have not been kind to such estates, and the approaches of the original planners have been condemned as unrealistic utopianism which neither understood nor met the real needs of residents^[2]. At the University of Lincoln, Dr Ian Waites' research has however challenged this view^[3], and in 2016 he and archaeologist Professor Carenza Lewis secured Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) funding to see what archaeological evidence might reveal about how the Radburn greens were actually used by their 20th century inhabitants.

More than 100 people living on or around the estate took part in developing the project and excavating 20 archaeological 'test pits'. Most of these were on Middlefield Lane's iconic 'Radburn' greens, and revealed four times as many child-related finds (such as marbles and plastic toy fragments) as would normally be found in domestic gardens. This strongly suggests that the 'Radburn' greens at Middlefield Lane were indeed used, as intended, by children for outdoor play. This suggests that the ideals of the 1960s Radburn estate planners were in fact appropriate for contemporary social needs, and challenges those who have suggested such estates declined because of inherent weaknesses in their original design.

Involving estate residents also demonstrated the value of community archaeological excavations to disadvantaged communities, who rarely have the opportunity to take part in such activities on their doorstep. Feedback showed 90% of participants rated the excavations as excellent, and that they particularly appreciated the opportunity to work collaboratively within the local community and to learn something new. Furthermore, more than 80% felt the experience had helped them develop or improve transferable skills including team working, verbal communication, working persistently, working to set standards and interpreting evidence.

More widely, more than 800,000 listeners heard about the project through a Radio 4 broadcast in June 2017 and a hands-on exhibition about the project was featured in the national 'Being Human' festival in November 2018 at the Waterside Shopping Centre in Lincoln. The project thus not only advanced understanding of the history and value of social housing but also, through its publicly engaged approach, generated an inspiring shared community experience which connected residents with the history of their estate and built social and cultural capital by engaging residents in university research and developing transferable skills.

Key references and further reading

[1] Project website: middlefielddig.blogs.lincoln.ac.uk

[2] Book: Ravetz, A. *Council Housing and Culture: The History of a Social Experiment* (London: Routledge, 2001)

[3] Publication: *Middlefield: the development of a provincial post-World War Two council estate in Lincolnshire, 1960–1965* (eprints.lincoln.ac.uk/19753, 2015)



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