

WASHINGTON NEW TOWN, ENGLAND

J. R. ATKINSON*

INTRODUCTION

Washington is the twenty-first new town to be designated in the United Kingdom under the New Towns Act, 1946, and the third in County Durham. It is intended that it should be one of the second—or should it be, third?—generation of new towns.

Nearly all the first batch of new towns, known as Mark I towns, were originally designated for about 60,000 people and sited with the aim of securing the decentralization of population and employment from congested cities. It was considered necessary that they should be self-contained for all purposes, including work, shopping, services and social facilities. In other words they should not be dependent on their “parent city” for any of their needs. In retrospect, it is not surprising that things have not quite worked out in this way. Most of the original towns were sited only twenty-five to thirty miles from London and have retained connections with it. Two notable exceptions to this policy were the new towns of Peterlee with 30,000 target population, and Newton Aycliffe, originally 10,000, now 45,000 target population, both in County Durham. The aim of Peterlee was to provide pleasant and modern living conditions for the miners of East Durham who were living in mining towns and villages with poor housing and social facilities overshadowed by pit heaps. It was accepted that most of the inhabitants of the new town would travel out to the surrounding collieries to work. On the other hand, Newton Aycliffe was developed to make use of a large government ordinance factory developed during the Second World War to supply munitions. The factory was in an isolated position some distance from the nearest town, and after the War it became an industrial estate which attracted many workers from the surrounding area. The object of the new town was to provide housing and facilities for the workers adjacent to the industrial estate.

However, the majority of the first generation, or Mark I, new towns were focused on London with the object of achieving the decentralization of its population and employment. The aim was to prevent the further growth of the capital by encircling it with a green belt and only permitting new development in self-contained new towns beyond.

The trouble was that the economic consequences of these new towns were

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not considered and their rapid expansion has further strengthened the growth of the London region as a whole at the expense of the rest of the country.

Other criticisms were made of the Mark I towns. They have been criticized for their overall sameness and lack of "urbanity" which resulted from low density development and generous provision of public open space. This was largely due to the fact that the new towns developed from the garden city movement which was itself a reaction against the congestion and squalor of nineteenth century development in many of our cities. Most of them provided for the segregation of pedestrians and vehicles in their town centres, but not over the whole town. This was largely due to the fact that rapid increase in the number of private cars was not foreseen at that time.

The second generation, or Mark II, new towns are characterized by higher density development largely as a reaction against the defects of the original towns; a greater, although not complete, segregation of pedestrian and vehicular traffic; and the move towards a linear rather than a concentric form of development. Two prominent examples are Cumbernauld, now being built in Scotland and the London County Council's scheme for the new town of Hook which, as a design, was widely publicized, but is not, in fact, to be built.

Washington may well continue the trend towards high density development. It must obviously be designed to have maximum separation of people and vehicles to deal with the growth in the number of private cars forecast for this country, namely doubling in ten years and trebling in twenty years. Perhaps the most important departure, however, is the fact that Washington has been considered in terms of its economic, as well as physical, consequences. North East England has been declining in prosperity relative to the south of the country and the revitalizing effect of the new town on the economy of the region and on County Durham has been an important factor. The town has been designated with the express intention of achieving this and the rehabilitation of the environment of the area in addition to its role in solving the physical planning problems of the north east part of the county. This is perhaps the first time in the history of the new towns that the broad national and regional economic consequences of a physical planning action have been fully taken into account.

Even in the physical planning sense Washington will be breaking new ground. It has been considered as an integral part of a city-region and will be sited fairly close to the Tyneside and Sunderland areas whose overspill population it is intended to accommodate. It will not be a self-contained and separate community, but will utilize, and add to, the employment,

social, recreational and shopping facilities of the Tyneside city-region which contains the regional capital. The relationship between the new town and the conurbation will be symbiotic rather than parasitic; each will depend on, and have something to offer to the other.

For these two reasons one can expect Washington to become a member of a third generation of new towns and in so doing, to continue County Durham's unconventionality.

I. COUNTY DURHAM

The proposed new town of Washington takes its name from the existing village of Washington which contains Washington Old Hall, believed to have been the original seat of the family from which the first President of the United States, George Washington, descended. The village lies in the north eastern corner of County Durham which is itself in North East England, approximately 250 miles north of London.

A. *Geography of County Durham*

County Durham is not large in area, covering just over a thousand square miles. It is bounded to the north by the River Tyne, to the south by the River Tees, to the east by the North Sea and to the west by the Pennine Chain, a range of hills in the centre of northern England. Within these boundaries there are large continuously built-up areas along the Rivers Tyne and Tees known respectively as the Tyneside and Tees-side conurbations. Tyneside has a population of about one million people and Tees-side of 500,000.

A smaller urban area—the town of Sunderland—has grown up along the banks of a third river, the Wear, and lies about three miles south of Tyne-side. It has a population of 180,000.

The main north-south highway of the country, Trunk Road A.1., runs through the centre of the county, together with the main railway line. This central communications core is being reinforced by the development of a motorway, which is the English equivalent of an expressway.

The new town of Washington will be built about four miles south of the built-up area of Tyneside and a similar distance west of Sunderland. The broad pattern of development and the position of the proposed new town are shown on map 1.

B. *The Problems of County Durham*

County Durham is very much a working county, producing an eighth of the country's coal and a twelfth of its steel. There are also important ship-building yards and chemical industries. However, it is these very industries

which are at the root of the County's problems. They are old and basic industries which grew up in the nineteenth century industrial revolution and the County is still heavily dependent upon them. Over fifty per cent of all the male jobs are in coal mining, shipbuilding, metal manufacture and heavy chemicals. These basic industries are now in decline and are also the most sensitive to trade cycles, being the first to suffer in times of depression. The newer technological and rapid growth industries are poorly represented and so do not offset these heavy declining industries. The result of this industrial pattern has been heavy unemployment and migration out of the County. Unemployment has recently been twice the average national rate. Towns and villages have a basically nineteenth century industrial character and the countryside has, in parts, been scarred by industrial dereliction in the form of coal mining pit head gear, spoil heaps and derelict buildings.

The result of unemployment and poor living conditions has been the movement of people away from the area to the more prosperous parts of the country. That the migrants have usually been the young and vigorous can only add to the difficulty of regenerating the region. New and expanding industries are required to counteract the overdependence on basic industries and to provide employment as these older industries decline. At the same time the general environment must be upgraded and this involves clearing dereliction, improving towns and villages and ensuring that new development is of a good design standard. This improvement of the environment is essential in connection with the attraction of new industries since industrialists tend to be deterred by the present conditions.

The Durham County Council has consistently followed this improvement policy for many years without a great deal of help from the central government. However, in January 1963, the unemployment rate in the County was 7.6 per cent and well over 10 per cent in some parts. As a result Lord Hailsham, a Cabinet Minister, was given special responsibility for the North East region of England and undertook a detailed study of conditions in the area.

C. Planning Problems in North East Durham

In spite of these economic problems and migration away from the County, the birth rate has been high and the population has continued to rise. Certain parts of the County are relatively prosperous and there is a movement of population from the western coalfield area, where employment is declining rapidly, to the more prosperous eastern part. Tyneside and Tees-side are therefore expanding and subjecting the areas between them to significant pressures for housing and industrial land. The area of north-east Durham containing Washington was subjected to these pressures from the surround-

ing urban areas of Tyneside and Sunderland and we estimated that there would probably be an increase of some 50,000 people in the area by 1981. In addition to the land needed to accommodate this growth, land was also needed for those people without houses of their own who were already in this part of the County and those who must be re-housed after slum clearance. A decision had to be made as to where this future growth was to be accommodated. There were two possibilities: either the peripheral urban expansion of Tyneside and Sunderland, which would result in further urban sprawl and the eventual coalescence of the two main built-up areas and the swamping of smaller settlements in the area; or the definition of a green belt around South Tyneside and Sunderland to prevent their further outward expansion, with a new and compact urban unit beyond this green belt. The Durham County Council decided that the latter course was the most satisfactory, since it would result in the creation of clearly defined settlements with convenient shopping and social centres, relate the housing pattern to likely trends in employment, maintain open areas between settlements, create conditions in which high quality urban development could be expected which would provide better living conditions, give new prestige to North East England and make the area more attractive to industry.

The alternative, peripheral urban expansion, was not attractive. The existing settlements were already straggling and so close together that indiscriminate growth could only lead to their eventual coalescence, causing the build-up of the whole north-east Durham area. This would prevent the maintenance or creation of a clear pattern of settlements, remove open country even further from most of them and blur the boundaries between town and country. Congestion would require people on the fringe suburbs to travel long distances to town centres and to work. Living conditions generally would be greatly inferior to those which could be obtained with new development concentrated at a single centre beyond the green belt.

A site, therefore, had to be found in North East Durham to accommodate this future growth beyond the green belt.

II. SELECTION OF A SITE AT WASHINGTON

Detailed investigations by Durham County Council showed that a substantial area of land around the village of Washington was both available and physically suitable for continuous development up to 1974 and beyond. Development there would permit the creation of a substantial settlement.

A. *Details of the Site*

To the west, the site was bounded by the proposed Tyne Tunnel approach road and also Trunk Road A.1. which only a mile to the south would join

the Durham Motorway, due for completion by 1968. The site was bounded on the south by the very attractive scenery of Lambton Park and the large grounds of Lambton Castle, now used as a residential college for adult education. To the south-west the site boundary was formed by the River Wear and to the north and west by established green belts. The site and the green belts can be seen on map 2.

The site itself was underlain by gently dipping and locally faulted coal measures which were generally covered by variable thicknesses of boulder clay, capped in places with sands and gravels. Alluvial deposits were present in the Wear Valley. The site fell gently from north-west to south-east towards the River Wear. The highest part to the north-west was about 400 feet above sea level, but the greater portion was between 150 and 300 feet above sea level.

In the south-east corner of the site the River Wear flows through a narrow valley which has been considerably affected by industry and other existing development. Immediately adjoining this area, however, there were very attractive areas of river scenery which could be a distinct asset to the new development.

There were four relatively short-life collieries within the area of the site. There were also a number of disused mine shafts and it was clear that there would have to be a careful programming of development, extraction of coal, subsidence and rehabilitation. However, there were some 2,470 acres on which immediate development could take place.

A fairly extensive part of the site was covered by existing development, in the form of mining villages and townships and a considerable amount of new housing and industrial development had taken place within this built-up area. The extent of these built-up areas is shown on map 3, and the character of this development is shown in photograph 1. The total population of the area was 18,000 people at that time.

B. *The New Town Proposal*

In spite of these difficulties and disadvantages, the Durham County Council considered the site suitable for considerable expansion. In addition to the geographical location advantages of the site, two large industrial sites already available in the Washington area were attractive to industrialists because of their excellent road communications. The first was of over 300 acres and had already been largely acquired by a firm which manufactured steel tubing and was expected to employ at least 3,000 people. The second site adjoined Trunk Road A.1. and covered about 290 acres, but had not yet been acquired or developed. These two sites are shown on map 3. De-

velopment of both these sites would provide local employment for a large proportion of the people who would be living in the area.

In September 1961, the County Council therefore asked the Minister of Housing and Local Government to designate the site at Washington for development under the New Towns Act, 1946, to accommodate a population of between 60,000 and 70,000. It was considered that this was the correct procedure for development on this scale and would be simpler than any of the other alternative methods available. This procedure would also be more convenient in achieving the improvement of the general environment of the area. Washington could thus become extremely attractive to industrialists interested in new and rapidly growing towns such as Washington could prove to be. This would have subsequent beneficial effects on the economy of the whole North East region.

C. *Ministerial Reaction to the New Town Proposal*

The Minister said, in August 1962, that the area was unsuitable for development as a new town because it would not be a self-contained community and extensive travel to work would be necessary. He was also of the opinion that the site was too close to Sunderland and South Tyneside and therefore the town could not be an independent and distinct unit. In addition, he pointed out that the procedure necessary to establish a new town could not be completed in time to meet the urgent housing needs of Sunderland where there would not be any land left for housing development by 1965.

D. *Durham County Council's Response*

The County Council found these reasons difficult to understand and was not convinced by them. The Council felt that the development of the 600 acres of industrial land already available in the area would provide a considerable amount of local employment in the new town and that the "travel to work" argument showed a very narrow approach to the idea of a new town. We thought that the idea of self-containment might be necessary for the new towns around London which were intended to prevent growth of a large and dominant capital city, but that Tyneside was suitable for further expansion in this way. In fact, with Washington new town to the south of Tyneside, and the development of two similar but smaller units to the north of Tyneside by the neighbouring County Council, the area could be considered as a cluster development within a city-region, with the towns set in the matrix of the green belts and looking to the regional capital on Tyneside for its regional services. Another new town in County Durham known as Peterlee, was founded on the assumption that most people in the town would travel out to work.

The town could, we felt, be a distinct unit in spite of its nearness to Tyneside and Sunderland. It could have both a completely different character from these areas and sharp and clear physical boundaries due to the distinct green belts between the town and the adjacent urban areas. It could therefore have a measure of physical and social independence and would look to its own town centre whilst making use of the specialized regional facilities in Tyneside. The new town could not be situated any further away from Tyneside and Wearside since it could not then satisfy all the regional requirements of this area and particularly, could not house people who travelled to work at established centres in Tyneside or Sunderland.

The County Council also thought that Sunderland's housing needs could be met at Washington since the experience of other new towns indicated that less than three years had elapsed between the draft order designating a new town and the occupation of the first houses. In any case the County Council were prepared to make land available for Sunderland until houses were available at Washington if this should prove to be necessary.

At this time the County Council believed that one of the reasons for the Minister of Housing and Local Government's decision was that the Government was already committed to substantial expenditure in existing new towns and would not accept the additional national cost which a new town at Washington would involve. However, the Government's attitude to expenditure in North East England had changed by January 1963 because of the high level of unemployment and the general appreciation of the fact that this was linked to the need to improve the general environment of the North East and its quality of life. It was at this time that Lord Hailsham was given special responsibility for the North East and the task of preparing a plan for its problems. When Lord Hailsham visited the region, the County Council re-opened the question with him and pointed out the advantages which a new town at Washington would have in helping to solve the North East's problems.

There was a need to attract new industry and improve the environment and so it was pointed out that the concentration of housing and industrial development in a new town would also make an obvious impact on industrialists who are much more interested in a grouped pool of labour than in assurances about travel to work.

The standard of design would be high if Washington were developed under the New Towns Act because the project would be carried out by a team assembled especially for this purpose and able to concentrate all their time and effort on the scheme. The result would be a further attraction for industrialists and the retention of young people in the area. The existing new towns have been the areas of some of the fastest industrial growth in

the country and the industrial sites in the Washington area would be far more likely to succeed in attracting industry if a new town was developed alongside them.

The pit heaps, dereliction and poor development could be removed, and the environment substantially improved. The new town would assist in the rejuvenation of the North East in both the social and economic fields and provide an answer to the physical planning problems of north-east Durham at the same time.

The Development Corporation for the new town would have a large and ready-made demand for houses and could make use of industrialized building systems which had been widely held as the only method by which Britain's housing shortage could be solved in any reasonable length of time.

There was also at this time considerable discussion in the country about "growth point" policies. This suggests that instead of spreading resources over a wide area it would be better to concentrate on an area with natural economic advantages where growth would occur naturally. In this way success would be ensured and growth would take place faster with concentration of capital, resources and effort and then spill over to benefit the wider area. In this connection it was pointed out to Lord Hailsham that Washington was a natural growing point and its development as a new town would confer considerable benefits over the whole of North East England.

Apart from all these arguments, growth would take place at Washington anyway and any other procedure for supervising this would be cumbersome and difficult, involving five local authorities instead of the one new town agency and resulting in a poorer standard of development.

E. The Government's Acceptance of Washington New Town

As a result of Lord Hailsham's study of the region the Government published a White Paper on North East England in November 1963. This White Paper explained the policy to be followed in the future development of the region and among the proposals made was that for a new town at Washington, to be planned for a population of 70,000 to 80,000.

The battle was won!

III. THE PUBLIC INQUIRY

The draft Designation Order for the new town was published by the Minister of Housing and Local Government in March 1964 and was accompanied by an explanatory memorandum which pointed out that the building of a new town not only is an important way of helping to relieve housing needs and congestion in large old cities, but also can play a large part in

stimulating a region's economic and social development and adding to the quality of its life.

A period of twenty-eight days is allowed after the draft Designation Order is published, during which anybody who disagrees with the proposal is allowed to make objections to the Minister. If objections are made, a public local inquiry has to be held before one of the Minister's Inspectors in the locality concerned. The objectors can develop their case at the inquiry which was held in this instance at Washington in June 1964.

The objectors in this instance were the Sunderland County Borough Council who disliked the idea because they said it would prevent the expansion of the town in its peripheral areas. Also objecting were eleven farmers who farmed land in the area, who did not object to the town in principle, but expressed some doubt about the need for the designation of such a large area of land.

In July 1964 the Minister, having studied the report of the public inquiry, stated his satisfaction that it was expedient in the national interest that an area of land comprising about 5,300 acres at Washington should be developed as a new town and issued the Washington New Town (Designation) Order 1964. A copy of the official letter which preceded this Order is appended. It was pointed out that a large area of land was required because of the difficulties of the site resulting from the instability of much of the land and the large amount of existing development.

A Development Corporation to undertake the planning and development of the town has now been appointed by the Minister. They will, in due course, employ a firm of planning consultants to prepare a Master Plan for the town and appoint a team of technical officers to develop it. It is anticipated that the Master Plan will be ready in approximately two years.

IV. THE PROBLEMS OF DEVELOPING THE NEW TOWN

The development of Washington New Town will in due course present certain problems. It will be very near to existing and well established towns, and the regional centre, for social, cultural and recreational facilities. There will therefore need to be careful consideration of the size and range of facilities to be provided in the new town and their effect on neighbouring towns. A careful study will have to be made of the whole city-region to determine which facilities the new town can provide for its surrounding area and which existing or proposed facilities in the same area it should not duplicate.

The large amount of existing old and drab development within the designated area, together with the colliery waste heaps and pit head gear, will make it more difficult to create a new town than would be the case on

virgin land. This will to some extent be a test case both for North East England and for the country as a whole. It could demonstrate that it is not necessary to use land for new towns which is of good agricultural or amenity value, but more important, it can show how many other such drab and derelict areas can be rejuvenated, particularly within County Durham. The Durham County Council is applying the approach to other existing settlements in the County where it is hoped that a significant improvement can be made in a relatively short space of time. The Washington project is on a considerably larger scale and could be a bold and clear example of what can be done, thus persuading many of the small local authorities in the area to carry out their own improvement schemes.

Other difficulties are concerned with the need to secure a first-class new development with maximum segregation of pedestrian and vehicular traffic throughout the whole town. This has been partially achieved with the Mark II new town of Cumbernauld in Scotland, but the site is virgin land on a hill and adaptable to this process. At Washington it will be more difficult because of the existing built-up areas and roads. Phasing and programming is also extremely important with multi-level development for pedestrian and vehicle segregation and at Washington this will be complicated by the fact that the programming of much of the development will be determined by land stability.

There is also the new problem of applying industrialized building techniques to the development of a new town. This has not yet been done on any large scale in Britain, although more experience might have been gained by the time the development of the town commences. The use of these techniques may make it difficult to create a town with a northern "character." It is generally agreed that the new town of Cumbernauld has a definite Scottish character which has been achieved by the use of appropriate building materials and the careful layout of the housing groups. New development throughout the country is becoming more and more homogeneous in appearance and regional variations in vernacular architecture are fast disappearing. Decisions will have to be taken on the desirability and possibility of Washington having a distinctive regional character.

The task of the Development Corporation will be difficult, but one awaits the results with high expectations that the new town of Washington will reflect the optimism and the spirit of collective endeavour at present to be found in North East England.

S.A.8



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THE SECRETARY
quoting:*

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WHItehall 4300

23rd July 1964

NT/298/1/8

Sir,

*New Towns Act 1946
Washington New Town*

1. I am directed by the Minister of Housing and Local Government to refer to the public local inquiry held at Washington on 23rd June, 1964, to hear objections to the draft order of designation prepared in accordance with paragraph 1 of the First Schedule to the New Towns Act 1946. The Minister has now received the report by Mr. E. R. Davies, who conducted the inquiry. . . .

2. Mr. Davies considered that the evidence which he received raised three main questions:

- (a) Was the creation of a new town for Tyneside and Wearside over-spill population correct in principle?
- (b) Was the proposal for a new town at Washington correct in principle?
- (c) If so, was a new town at Washington on the scale proposed correct, or should the designated area be amended or reduced in size?

3. So far as the first two questions are concerned, no one challenged the existence of a large housing problem at Tyneside and Wearside; nor was the need for the introduction of new industry called into question. There were, however, two objections in principle against the establishment of a new town, and although the Sunderland County Borough Council were prepared to accept the establishment of a new growth point at Washington, they objected to the establishment of a new town of the size proposed in close proximity to the county borough. Having considered the arguments advanced by the objectors, Mr. Davies concluded that for the reasons given in the explanatory memorandum issued with the Minister's draft order of designation, the establishment of a new town would undoubtedly assist in the solution of the Tyneside/Wearside housing problem. He was further of the opinion that Washington was the correct site for such a new town.

4. As to the size of the proposed new town, it was suggested on behalf of a number of objectors that all the area south of the boundary of the Washington Urban District should be excluded. Mr. Davies considered that to accept this would fundamentally alter the scale and nature of the proposal. He recommended, therefore, that the suggestion be rejected.

5. Another objector, who owns land in the south-west corner of the area proposed for designation, asked that his land should either be excluded or, alternatively, should remain within the designated area on the basis that it will be designated for private residential development. This land is the subject of an appeal under the Town and Country Planning Act of 1962, which is at present before the Minister. The appeal is being dealt with as a separate matter, and the Minister does not wish at this stage to express a view on the proposed housing development. He will consider the appeal on its merits and having regard to all the relevant factors, including the new town proposal. Meanwhile, he accepts Mr. Davies's view that the land concerned should not be excluded from the area to be designated.

6. The Minister has carefully considered the report. He accepts Mr. Davies's recommendation that an order of designation should be made, and that the area to be designated should be the area proposed in the draft order.

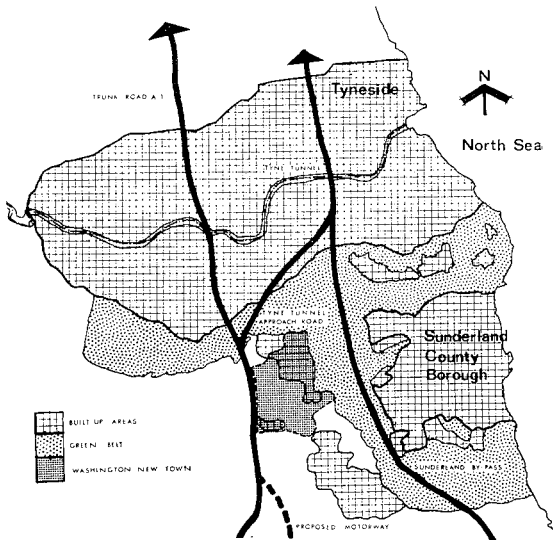
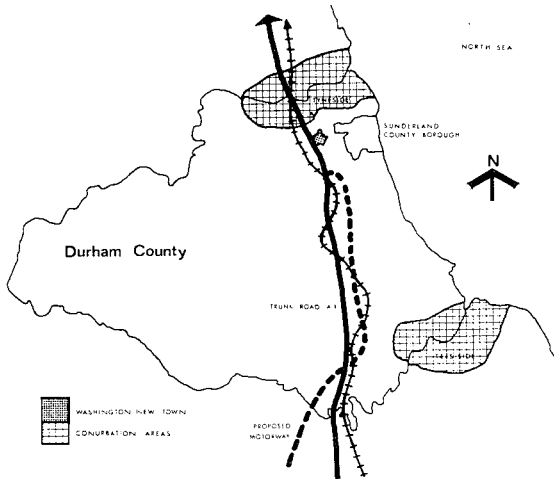
7. The Minister has accordingly decided to make an order designating all the land shown in his draft order. Notices will be served, under paragraph 5 of the First Schedule to the New Towns Act 1946, as soon as the order has been made.

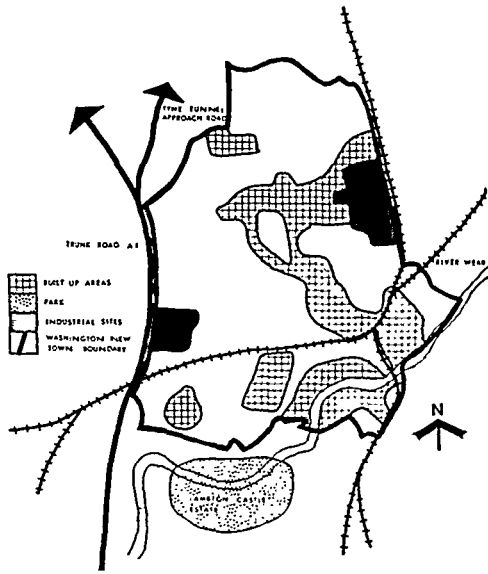
8. In his report, Mr. Davies has drawn attention to the reliance which the agricultural objectors place on the statement made on behalf of the Minister at the inquiry that in no case would a development corporation refuse to consider using its powers, under section 22 of the Agriculture (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 1963, to pay sums to farmers and market gardeners who are dispossessed following acquisition of land for new town purposes. The Minister has recently reminded all corporations of these powers, and when he appoints a development corporation for the Washington New Town, he will draw their attention to this matter.

9. In making his recommendations, Mr. Davies suggested that the Durham County Council should be asked to consider amending the local government boundaries so that the designated area of the new town is wholly within the boundaries of one county district. This is a matter for the County Council to consider in the first instance.

I am sir,

Your obedient Servant,
(F. SCHAFFER)





Map 3. Detail of Washington New Town Site



Example of housing development in the Washington area before site designation order.