

Last Days of the Mount ...now Cheswick Green

In wet weather it's the mud you notice first, a black stickiness creeping over your shoes, probing damp tentacles under shed doors and engulfing Gardens. As if resentful that habitation keeps it at bay. Mud on this scale is no longer a novelty for the people living at the Mount, the impromptu shanty town born over 40 years ago when a few Birmingham families felt the urge for a rural life. They have lived with it a long time. And now it has become big business they have mixed feelings at leaving it behind.

Suddenly those proprietary puddles stretching across the lanes that cut through the Mount's heart have become items to be missed during the next few months. The homes, a motley collection of brick-built bungalows, caravans, ex-Army sheds and chalets, evoke a new sentimentality. Soon the 100-acre site will be almost deserted. The builders will soon transform the area into a brand-new self-contained estate of 500 homes.

And in their last days in their proud but shabby little homes the Mount people who call themselves the hillbillies of Birmingham are making plans for a new life. They are the first to admit they live in a shantytown, their dwellings a hodgepodge that reflects their owner's quirks, and they laugh as they point this out. Sometimes neat crazy paving carves a way through dense vegetation to a caravan door with a Westminster bell-chime. Sometimes a bungalow stands rakishly in a sea of tall grass.

A bright green fungus runs amok on asbestos walls and many homes have Grecian urns and nymphs in their gardens. Most of the houses have electricity now and television aerials sprout from the roofs. But residents still use well water and rubber boots are still the most important item in Mount wardrobes.

Just after the First World War a Birmingham solicitor sold the site in plots to families who wanted to live in the country. Brummies began to cultivate allotments. Some bought only a quarter of an acre, others three or four. And soon they began to build weekend retreats. Carts loaded with crates; spare timber and glass were pushed from the city to the Mount. Shaky "summer houses" rose out of the spinney, plants began to grow. Then the houses changed character.

As more timber became available the crates and box's propping up the chalets were thrown aside for a stronger building fabric. Almost overnight they became permanent residences for a sturdily independent community. Market gardens and smallholdings flourished and the area, always an embarrassment to its overlords in Solihull, until boundary changes transferred it to Stratford Rural District Council four years ago. They boasted it was the healthiest place in the Midlands. "We had a saying that we could rear even the weaklings of the community until they were 90 years old," said Mrs. Beatrice Allerton, a sprightly 85 year old who has lived at the Mount for 45 years.



One of the pioneers of the Mount, Mrs. Allerton's late husband built his first home, there from bacon boxes, converting it into a stout chalet, as building materials became available. "The Mount attracted all sorts of people," said Mrs Allerton. "You can't deny we were a very mixed community."



"Class is a dangerous word, I suppose, but we had all classes here." Not very many scandals though Just the odd punch-up on a Saturday night if some of the rougher types had a drop too much, nothing more serious than that. "I can remember several shops on the Mount and a very flourishing sawmill. My husband ran a market garden here for a time, and then he sold his greenhouses and took up woodcarving." And all the time he was improving his house until it is as you see it now-five rooms and most modern conveniences.

Characters

"We've had some real characters living here."

"One lived in a genuine Romany caravan until recently, another in the back of a bus. In some ways we're still a bit of an eyesore but the Mount has kept in step with society." Mrs Allerton's daughter, Mrs. Beatrice Bliss still has a florist supply business at the Mount, and Plans to keep it going until the impending developments reach her area.

"Then I suppose I'll set up somewhere else with mother," she said. "But the money will be quite tight for us because we have only about three quarters of an acre." Not like that old boy who lived here on three acres. He really cleaned up over the Greaves deal".

The Greaves' Organisation has bought each plot from its owners separately. "Many of the people are buying new houses here when they are built," said Mrs. Bliss. "And others will be leaving the area altogether."

"Like that old boy with the three acres. He and his wife are in there eighties. And they'd lived in an ex-Army hut for years. Then they bought themselves a luxury bungalow."

"Most of us though, didn't have that much land so we're not coming into fortunes".

"The Mount's bulldozing will be sad for most of us, but you can't say it will be the passing of a beauty spot."

Taken from the Birmingham Evening Mail. 11th January 1969.

By 1965 there were reported to be 42 sound dwellings and about 65 unfit dwellings, most of the sound dwellings located about the main roads. Residents numbered about 200.