

# MASS ESCAPES

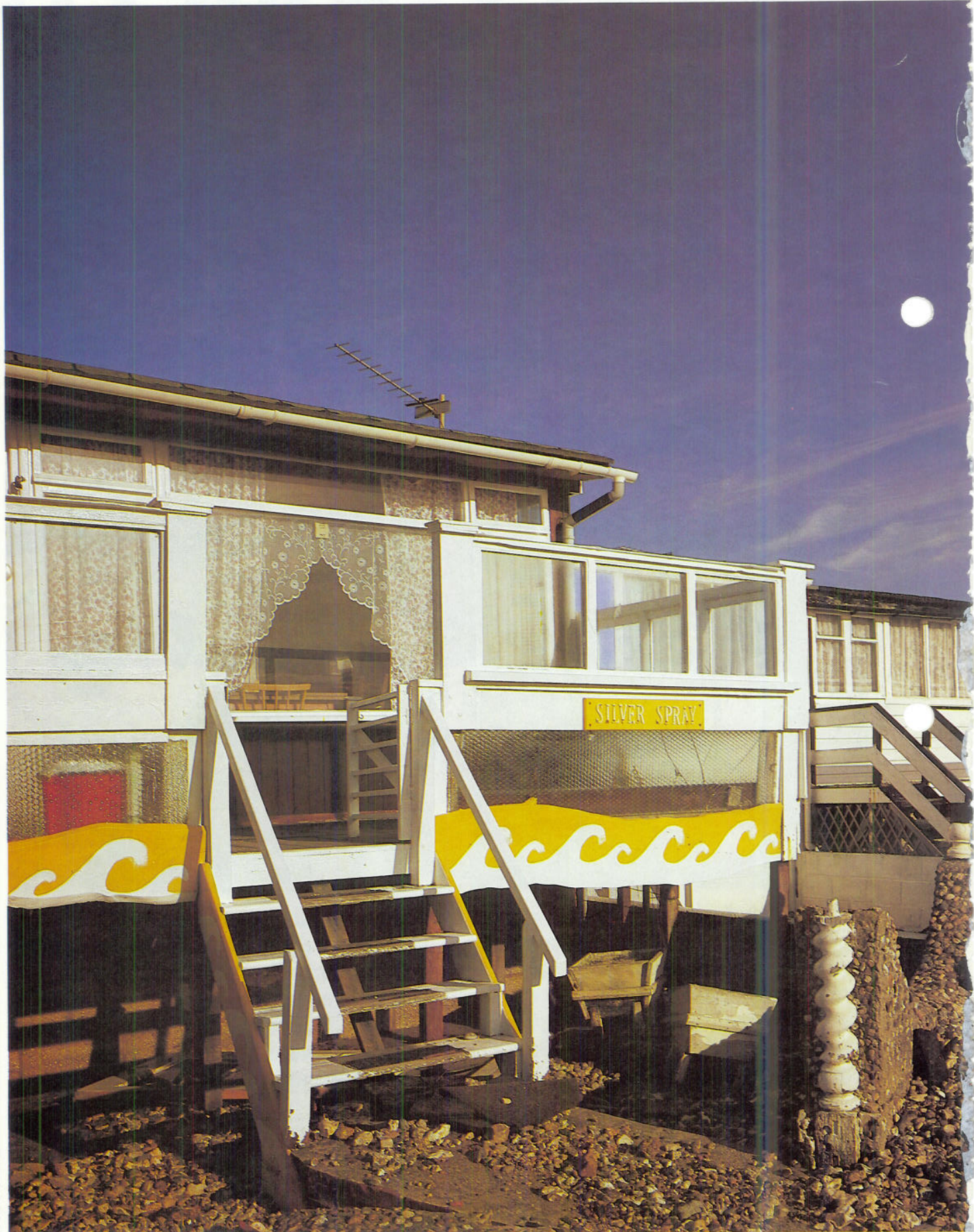


'Putting our feet up' and 'getting away from it all'—it seems we are constantly searching for an escape from current burdens to a land of wild abandon. From the harsh conditions of the '20s, many escaped to build their own version of paradise. Now, in the recession, the wild

abandon of the theme park will be keeping us off the streets. Yet maybe a redefinition of 'work' would save us from the needs to escape—as Irish self-builders have found. Here, we look at the mass escapism of the plotlanders, the theme park and the self-builders.

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# THE NON-PLAN PLOT



From 1900 to 1940 thousands of families escaped from British cities to make their own place in the sun. Dennis Hardy and Colin Ward discuss the lessons we can learn from this phenomenon.



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1 Left, an escape from city pressures: plotlanders' havens at Pagham Beach, Sussex (Patrick Shanahan).  
 2 Advertisement in 'Dalton's Weekly', 1913.  
 3 Jaywick Sands in the 1930s. Many plotlanders' settlements appeared on marginal agricultural land, so were not eating up prime pieces of our beloved countryside (Clacton Public Library).  
 4 Endlessly extended and adapted over time, memories of summer days when the children were small (Patrick Shanahan).



5 **Bob Poplett's** family moved to Peacehaven, one of the most infamous plotlander settlements on the south coast, 50 years ago, when he was 12 years old. At 15, Poplett went into the scrap metal trade. In part payment of a deal one day in 1926, he was given six copies of the 'Peacehaven Post'—the local bulletin which Neville had produced between 1921 and 1923 (Dot Davies).

**6 Fred McCave** has lived on Canvey Island for all of his 57 years. For £350 he bought a piece of land measuring 60ft by 20ft and became the proud owner of one of the new wave of leisure plots, land for which planning permission will never be given for any form of building work (Dot Davies).

**7, 8 Jerry and Marta Karel** came to this country as Czechoslovakian refugees 30 years ago and bought the leisure plot because they both longed to have a garden. The cabin has no water or electricity, but a calor gas stove and old gas lamps provide basic amenities, and water is drawn from a well in the garden (Dot Davies).

The word 'plotlands' was coined by planners for those areas where, until 1939, land was divided into small plots and sold, often in unorthodox ways, to people wanting to build their holiday home, country retreat or would-be smallholding. It evokes a landscape of a gridiron of grassy tracks, sparsely filled with bungalows made from army huts, old railway coaches, sheds, shanties and chalets, slowly evolving into ordinary suburban development.

### The cult of the great outdoors

By 1939 this plotland landscape was to be found in pockets across the North Downs, along the Hampshire plain and in the Thames Valley at riverside sites like Penton Hook, Marlow Bottom and Purley Park. It was interspersed among the established holiday resorts on the coasts of East and West Sussex at places like Shoreham Beach, Pett Level and Camber Sands, and most notoriously of all, at Peacehaven. It crept up the east coast, from Sheppey in Kent to Lincolnshire, by way of Canvey Island and Jaywick Sands, and clustered inland all across south Essex.

The plotlands were the result of several factors. First, the agricultural decline that began in the 1870s and continued until 1939, with a break in the First World War, forced the sale of bankrupt farms at throw-away prices. Also the break-up of landed estates after Lloyd George's doubling of death duties, coupled with the slaughter of sons and heirs in Flanders, added to the pressure among sellers to find many small buyers in the absence of a few large ones.

Added to this was the spread down the social scale of the holiday habit and the 'weekend' idea. The Holidays With Pay Act of 1938 affected 18½ million employed workers, nearly 11 million of whom were to

receive holiday pay for the first time. Those who had previously taken a holiday without being paid for that week or fortnight were likely to seek a cheap one, and a glance at *Dalton's Weekly* in the 1930s showed that the cheapest holiday available was to rent a plotland bungalow. The availability of cheap transport was also important, as was the growth of the cult of the great outdoors.

Finally there was the idea of a property-owning democracy. The owner-occupied house is now the commonest mode of tenure in this country, and even when most families, rich or poor, rented their dwellings, the attraction of possessing a few square yards of England had its appeal. Long before a minor Conservative politician coined the phrase about property-owning, one plotland entrepreneur, Frederick Francis Ramuz, who operated as The Land Company, was advertising in 1906 that 'Land nationalisation is coming', meaning that the dominance of the absentee landlord would be replaced by every family owning its portion of our common birthright.

### Plotland character

The plotlands have several characteristics in common. They are invariably on marginal land. The Essex plotlands are on the heavy clay known to farmers as three-horse land, which was the first to go out of cultivation in the agricultural depression. Others grew up on vulnerable coastal sites like Jaywick Sands and Canvey Island, or on estuary marshland or riverside sites like those in the Thames Valley which are also liable to flooding, or they are on acid heathland or chalky uplands.

Another characteristic is that the plotlanders want their holiday homes to stay in the same family and

eventually to become the owners' retirement home. What seems to the outside observer to be inconvenient, substandard and far from the shops, is for them loaded with memories of happy summer days when the children were small.

Finally the plotlands tend, unless deliberate obstacles are put in the residents' way, to be upgraded over time. Extensions, the addition of bathrooms, partial or total rebuilding, the provision of mains services and the making-up of roads are part of the continuous improvement process in any old settlement that has not been economically undermined or subjected to planners' blight.

### Weekend cottage hypocrisy

The nineteenth century saw the mushroom growth of British cities. The twentieth century has seen an irresistible pressure from city dwellers, once they had any freedom of choice, to get out again. Hence the immense growth of leapfrogging suburbs, and the development of 'out-county' estates provided by city authorities taking advantage of the cheap land outside their own boundaries.

The political response to this enormous outward movement was all-party support for restriction of ribbon development, for the greenbelt and new towns and for the development control system of planning which has existed since the war, as well as the growth of amenity and conservation pressure groups seeking to preserve the countryside against further incursion.

The pre-war literature on planning and conservation reveals the intense horror felt by all 'right-thinking' (that is, privileged) people at the desecration of the landscape that was happening everywhere. Dean Inge, a celebrated publicist, coined the phrase 'bungaloid growth' with its implication that some kind of cancer was creeping over the face of the Home Counties. Howard Marshall, in the compendium, *Britain and the beast*, published in 1937, declared that 'a gimcrack civilisation crawls like a giant slug over the country, leaving a foul trail of slime behind it'. One cannot help feeling in retrospect that part of this disgust was ordinary misanthropy—the wrong sort of people were getting a place in the sun.

Of all developments the plotlands were the most vulnerable. They seldom complied with the building by-laws, it was argued that they were a menace to public health, their rateable value was very low, and their owners were not people with an influential voice in public affairs. When raw and new they looked more like boom towns, springing up in a gridiron of dirt roads as in the American West or the Australian bush, than the pattern of urban growth expected in south-east England.

But there is an irony in that the simple life and the rural weekend also attracted the liberal intelligentsia who were the backbone of the preservation lobby. Reginald Bray was a progressive philanthropist who left London in 1919 to administer his father's estates at Shere, near Guildford in Surrey. The estate papers have been studied by Dr Peter Brandon who finds that Bray provided sites for weekend cottages on the estate for many of the good and the great of the period, including most of the members of the first Labour cabinet. Among the weekend residents were several crusaders for the protection of the countryside. They included Clough Williams-Ellis, who later built the delightful make-believe holiday village of Portmeirion, and who wrote *England and the octopus* and edited *Britain and the beast*. He deplored the way in which 'the adventurous bungalow



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9 Most of the bungalows at Shoreham Beach were destroyed by the army during the war. Behind the new facades of the remaining ones are railway coaches, lovingly preserved by one resident (Dot Davies).  
 10, 11 In the 1930s Elizabeth Grainger paid the deposit on her £5 plot with a borrowed pound, and the family slowly built their first house at weekends. Loved and cared for, a characteristic of plotland owners is that they want their original holiday homes to stay in the family (E. Grainger).

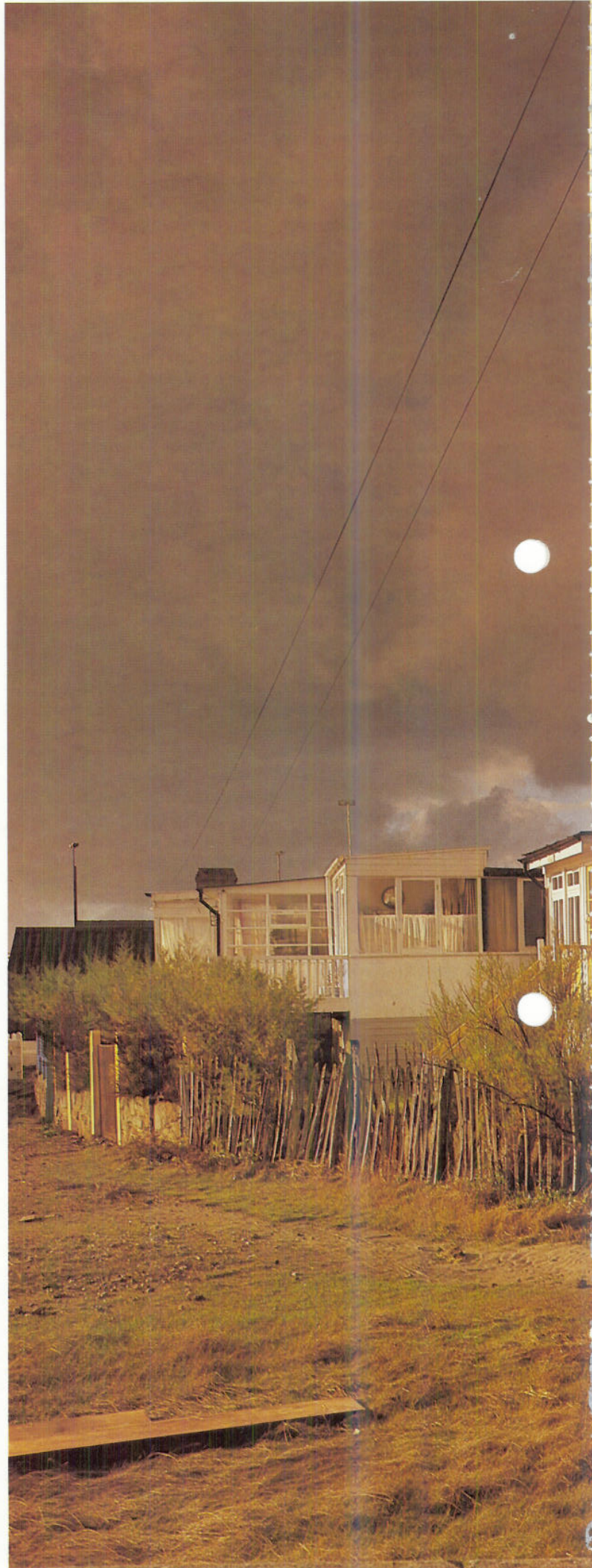
12 (right) When raw and new they looked more like boom towns, springing up in a grid iron of dirt roads, but time and nature has changed the plotlands sites just as they change any raw new settlement. What seems to the outside observer to be a collection of inconvenient substandard dwellings is for the occupants a purveyor of qualities which most spec housing does not even begin to understand. These are the adapted fronts of railway carriages at Pagham Beach (Patrick Shanahan).

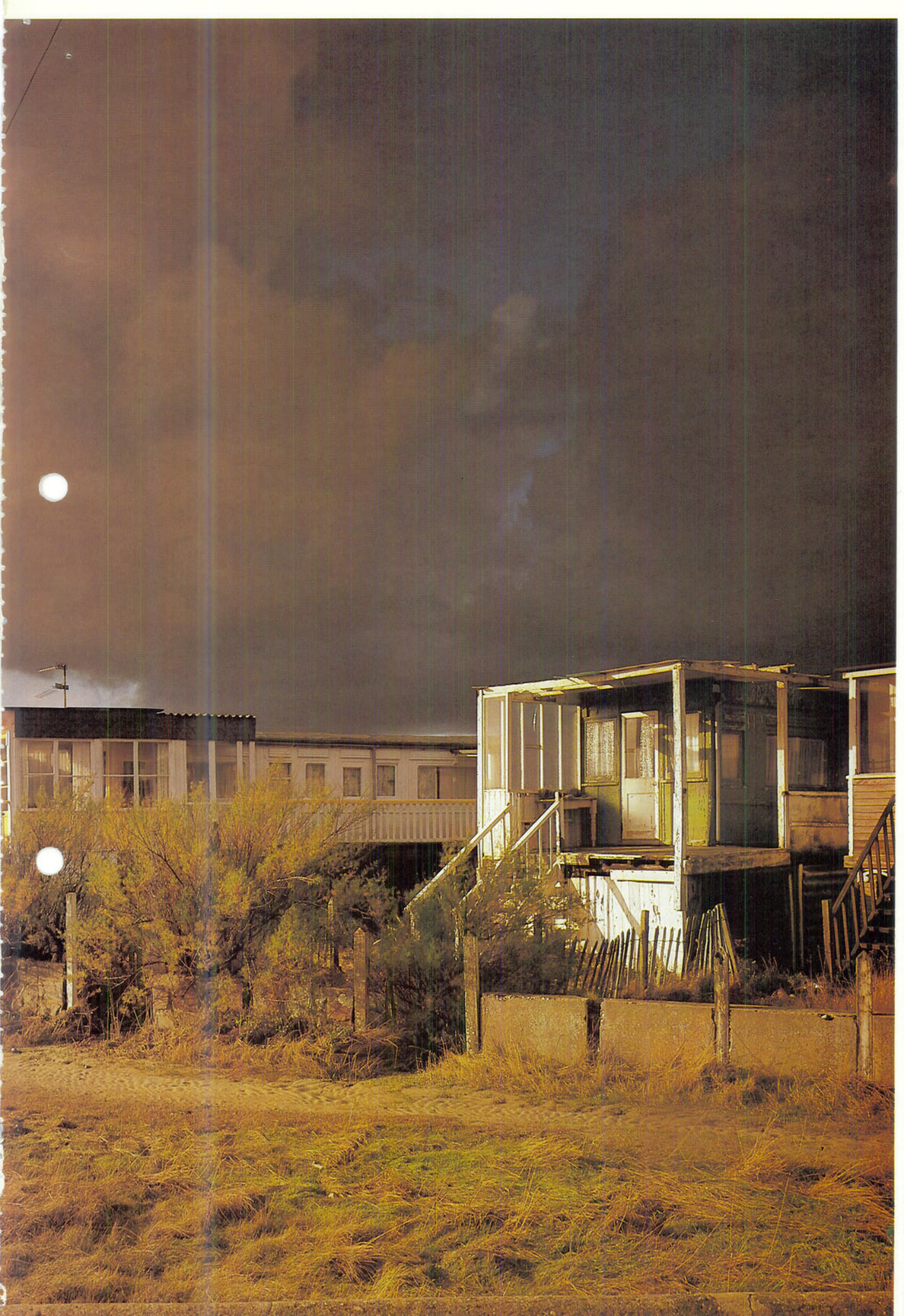


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plants its foundations—a pink asbestos roof screaming its challenge—across a whole parish from some pleasant upland that it light-heartedly defaced'. Another of the weekend residents was Bray's fellow Harrovian, the historian G. M. Trevelyan, who lamented that 'the State is socialist enough to destroy by taxation the classes that used to preserve rural amenity, but is still too conservative to interfere in the purposes to which land is put by speculators to whom the land is sold'.

By the 1980s we surely find something unattractive about the way the shapers of policy took it for granted that *they* were entitled to a country retreat while wanting to deny, on aesthetic grounds, the same opportunity to people further down the hierarchy of income and opportunity. In any case time and nature have changed the plotland sites just as they change any raw new settlement. For example those offending salmon-pink asbestos-cement slates have, beside proving to be as durable as other roofing materials, attracted moss and lichen so that their present appearance is like that of Cotswold stone.

#### Planning for the non-planners

In the post-war years, what have planning authorities done with the plotlands? Their aim has sometimes been to eliminate them totally and return the land, if not to agriculture, to public recreational use. In most places this policy has failed and resulted in empty scrubby wasteland between those plots still occupied by obstinate people who fought planning decisions, with the result that local authorities were overruled by central Government. In some places it has succeeded. At Havering Park, Essex, the GLC demolished all plotland dwellings to make a country park. Nearby, the new town of Basildon was



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designated in 1949 to make some kind of urban entity out of Pitsea and Laindon, where by the end of the war there was a settled population of about 25 000 served by 75 miles of grass-track roads, mostly with no sewers and with standpipes for water supply. More recently Essex County Council eliminated another scattered plotland area to make the new residential town of South Woodham Ferrers.

#### Perseverance and independence

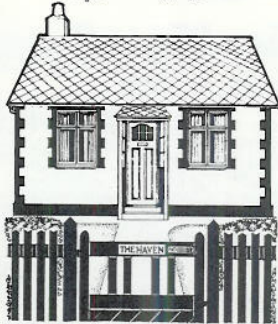
What has struck us most about plotland dwellers has been their enormous attachment to their homes, their defensive independence and their strong community bonds. The residents of Jaywick Sands, for example, have for decades organised a service for emptying Elsan closets, known locally as 'the Bisto kids', although this is no longer necessary because after 50 years a sewer has been built. Our overwhelming impression has been of the number of plotland dwellers who, starting with very little, have over the years turned their own labour into capital, with no help from building societies, local councils or any other financial institutions. For example, take the following two case histories.

Fred Nichols of Bowers Gifford, Essex, is in his late 70s. He had a poverty-stricken childhood in east London, and a hard and uncertain life as a casual dock worker. His plot, 12 m wide and 30 m deep, cost him £10 in 1934. To begin with he put up a tent, which his family and friends used at weekends, and he gradually accumulated tools, timber and glass which he brought to the site strapped to his back as he cycled the 25 miles from London. For water, he sank a well in his garden. His house is called Perseverance.

Mrs Sayers has lived at Peacehaven since 1923. Her husband, severely wounded in the First World War,



# DUNTON PLOTLAND TRAIL



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**13, 14 Architect-designed chalets versus self-build—an improvement?**

**15 Portmeirion, superior plotland for the upper middle classes.**

**16 A memory to 25 000 plotlanders eradicated by Basildon New Town.**

**17 Birling Gap. The naturalist R. M. Lockley wrote in 1938, 'Nothing but a dictatorship will save the English coast in our time'. Such was the privileged class's response.**



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was urged to live in a more bracing, upland climate than that of London. They applied to estate agents in the Surrey hills but found houses there far beyond their reach. After reading about Peacehaven in the publicity placed on the backs of London tram tickets by the flamboyant speculator who started the settlement, they bought three adjacent plots at £50 each. They got the land in 1921, built on it in 1923, opened a branch post office and grocery store and lived happily there for many decades.

The same sort of aspirations still exist, as can be seen from the 'leisure plot' rackets of recent years, where speculators sell plots without planning permission to gullible purchasers who discover that there is nothing that they can legally do with the land. The amenity lobby is horrified at the suggestion that such sites should be selectively licensed. Most of us would readily agree that some of the inter-war plotland sites should never have been built on. But most of them are so obscure and hidden that the ordinary explorer gets lost looking for them, and has to make a special journey in order to be affronted. Not all land is so precious that it must be devoted to raising the European grain mountain at the public expense. Not all principles of planning are so precious that they cannot be waived a little, here and there.

## **An end to self-help house-building**

The Second World War and the overwhelming powers to control development given to planning authorities by the 1947 Town and Country Planning Act and its successors put an end to this kind of self-help house-building in Britain. Even self-build housing has to provide a fully finished, fully serviced house right from the start. Otherwise there is no planning permission, no approval under the Building

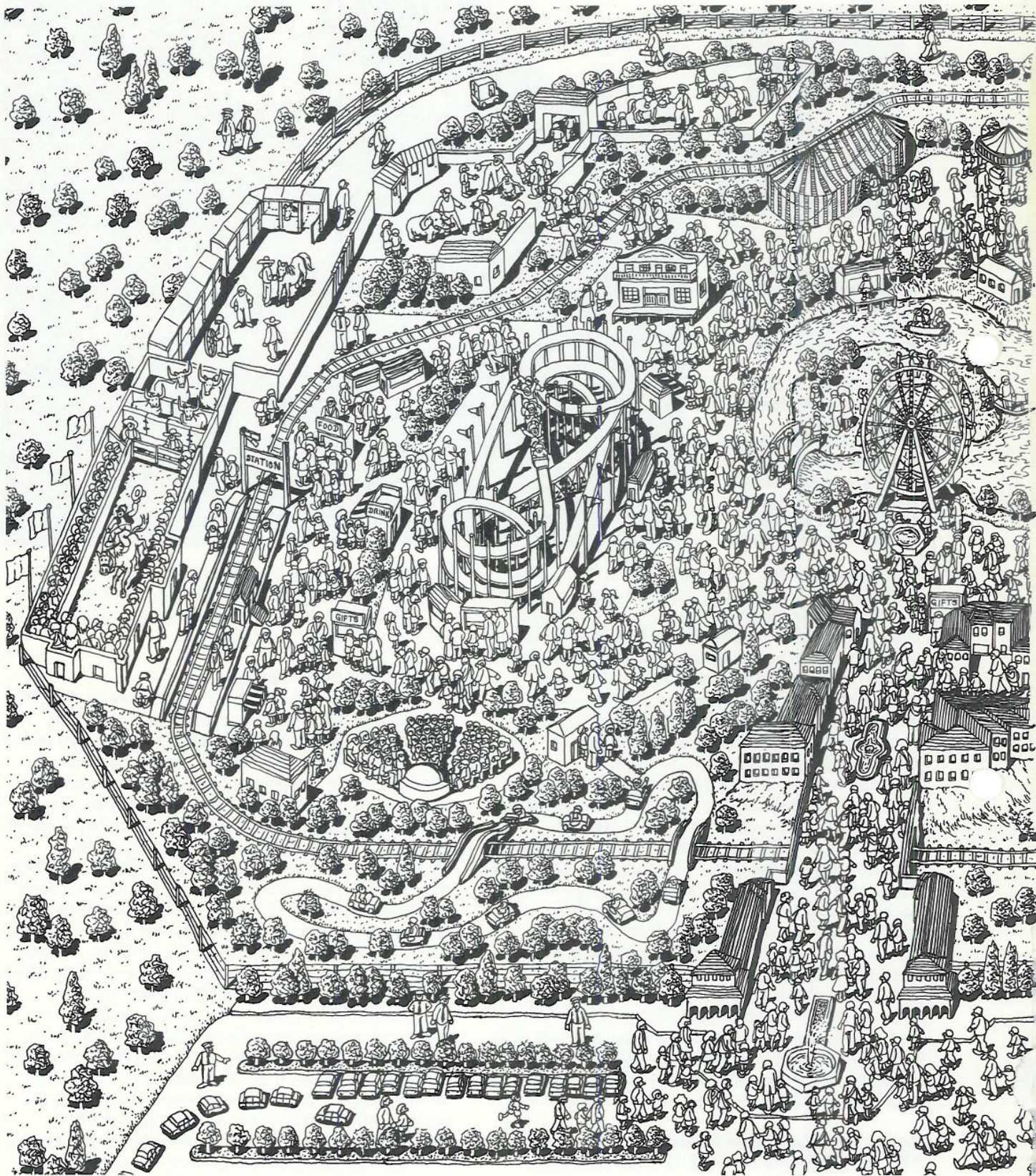
Regulations and no mortgage loan. Other countries, in both East and West, provide opportunities for the home-builder who starts with nothing and turns labour into capital over time.

## **Housing from the bottom up**

At first sight it seems absurd to compare the English plotlands of the first half of this century with the explosion of self-built shanty towns in the cities of the Third World in the second half. In the English example it was a marginal phenomenon, whereas in the cities of Latin America, Africa and Asia, the unofficial self-housed inhabitants outnumber those of the official cities. But our investigation of the plotlanders and the homes they made for themselves has reminded us continually of the findings of those investigators of Third World self-build settlements who see them as a triumph of popular initiative and ingenuity. John Turner and Bryan Roberts, in their paper on 'The self-help society' in *The exploding cities* (edited by Peter Wilsher and Rosemary Righter, London, 1975), conclude that 'ordinary people use resources and opportunities available to them with imagination and initiative—when they have access to the necessary resources, and when they are free to act for themselves. Anyone who can see beyond the surface differences between the many forms of dwelling place people build for themselves is bound to be struck by the often astonishing economy of housing built and managed locally, or from the bottom up, in comparison with top-down, mass housing, supplied by large organisations and central agencies.' Everything we have learned from the plotlanders confirms this interpretation.

Dennis Hardy and Colin Ward are the authors of *Arcadia for all: the legacy of a makeshift landscape*. Mansell. £22.50 hardback, £15 paper.

# THEME PARK THRILLS



This drawing shows some of the ways the designer controls the happy throng while creating an environment that has maximum appeal and will produce the best financial return (from plans by LARC).

- People do not disembark from the trains and the skyride at the front entrance but elsewhere at points where there are plenty of opportunities for the visitors to spend money.

- Landscaping creates a favourable atmosphere and screens noise. Primary landscaping is used for visual impact with cheaper planting for screening. The outside world is shut out.

- The major food outlets are at strategic points with indoor and outdoor dining and views of other attractions to hurry people on. Novelty and impulse foods are sold at key junctions.