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Pooley, Frederick [Fred] Bernard

(1916–1998)

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Pooley, Frederick [Fred] Bernard (1916–1998), architect and planner, was born on 18 April 1916 at 3 Sandel Street, West Ham, east London, the son of George Pooley (1884–1937), a house painter and builder, and his wife Elizabeth, *née* Parley (1882–1968). Educated at West Ham Grammar School, he studied architecture by night at the Northern Polytechnic while working in the engineer's office of the borough of West Ham. Upon qualification he moved to the architect's department, and continued to study planning, surveying, and structural engineering. During the war Pooley served with the Royal Engineers (1940–5) and on 19 August 1944 he married Hilda Olive Williams (1914–1994), daughter of Paul Williams, waiter, at St Mary the Virgin Church, Ilford, Essex; the couple had three daughters.

In 1951, after two years as West Ham's deputy borough architect and planning officer under Tom North, Pooley left for Coventry, where he served as deputy city architect and planning officer to Donald Gibson. Gibson had recently combined architecture and planning into a single department, which soon became known for its adoption of pre-fabricated materials and fast-track building methods. With its sleek modern buildings, pedestrian centre, and sophisticated traffic management, Coventry enjoyed an international reputation in urban planning, and the city launched the careers of dozens of post-war architects and planners. In both planning and politicking, Pooley proved a capable lieutenant to Gibson. He helped build the country's most influential pedestrian shopping precinct, and introduced concrete high-rise blocks in the neighbourhood of Tile Hill. Then, after three years in Coventry, Pooley moved from the forge of urban modernism to the comparatively placid county of Buckinghamshire. Initially the council's chief architect, he added the title of planning officer in 1961, holding both positions until his departure in 1974. It was here that this tweedy visionary with a knack for politics made his career.

By the early 1960s Buckinghamshire faced population pressures from London, straining its infrastructure, threatening its countryside, and requiring an aggressive building programme. To meet the demand for schools, Donald Gibson urged Pooley to sign up to a national building consortium, but Buckinghamshire—alone among English counties, as Pooley became fond of pointing out—resisted. Rather than bringing new-fangled methods from Coventry,

Pooley 'went native' (*The Guardian*, 24 March 1998), overseeing a building programme distinguished by its brickwork, pitched roofs, and, when possible, local builders. Yet Pooley should not be placed on the 'traditional' side of a dichotomy which pitted ancients against moderns. He resisted the label 'preservationist', preferring the term 'conservationist' instead, and affirmed the planner's obligation to guide, rather than obstruct, inevitable change. He also believed that buildings should be firmly of their time, and his most notorious construction, a twelve-storey concrete tower housing the county council's offices off Aylesbury's market square (1966), stands as a kind of exclamation point punctuating these beliefs. For the architectural critic, Ian Nairn—a friend of Pooley's—this became 'Fred's Fort'; but to wry-minded locals, sceptical of this brutalist signature within their historic market town, it was 'Pooley's Folly' (Ortolano, 484).

Pooley's most significant legacy remains a creation over which he lost control: what became the new town of Milton Keynes, in north Buckinghamshire. In January 1962, with London's population threatening the county's greenbelt to the south, Pooley inaugurated a series of reports exploring the possibility of a daring new town, his 'North Bucks New City', located between Bletchley and Wolverton. In a decade of intense activity in British urban planning, Pooley's vision was remarkable in its ambition. His design was for a city of 250,000 people consisting of fifty 'townships' or 'villages', each to be designed by a different architect to avoid monotony, arranged in four circuits taking the shape of a dragonfly's wings. Mindful of concerns about traffic congestion, but also of the prohibitive cost of underground rail, Pooley seized on the bold idea of a monorail metropolis—a means of public transport that featured in world fairs, from Seattle to Osaka, during the 1960s. Pooley's plan, which was drawn up by his brilliant deputy Bill (Brian) Berrett in just a fortnight, proposed a monorail free at the point of use and paid for by local rates. Each of the new city's townships was to be arranged along the monorail, like 'beads on a string', with no home more than seven minutes from a station around which shops, schools, clinics, and other amenities were planned. What one journalist praised as a plan 'for a city for the 70s', Pooley described as a 'city for the 90s in the 70s' (Ortolano, 479).

In January 1964, after two years of quiet labour, Pooley publicly announced the plan, and during the next year and a half it advanced through statutory review and public consultations. In that year the planning process moved through the county council without resistance while North Bucks New City gained considerable national and international attention, as well as critical praise: for Ian Nairn this was 'the most adventurous and imaginative scheme in Britain' and a 'city of the future' (quoted in Ortolano, 498). In May 1965, however, it met fatal opposition when the Ministry of Housing—jealously guarding the awesome powers of new town development granted by the New Towns Act (1946)—signalled its intention to deny the project funding. To Pooley's dismay the county reluctantly conceded it could not proceed, at which point Richard Crossman, Labour's Minister for Housing and Local Government, announced that his ministry would establish a new town of its own on the same site identified by Pooley. This they did in January 1967, though not

as his North Bucks New City, with its subsidized monorail, but as Milton Keynes, planned for the car. Pooley was invited to serve on the development corporation's board, where he continued to fight his corner, and to champion his preferred transport system, but it soon became clear that Milton Keynes would bear little resemblance to his vision, and by October 1968 his hopes for a monorail scheme were defeated. Nevertheless, Milton Keynes comprises a key part of Pooley's legacy to Buckinghamshire: a well-sited settlement housing nearly a quarter of a million residents, driving prosperity in the county's north while relieving it of population pressures in the south.

In 1974 Pooley left Aylesbury to serve as controller of planning and transportation for the Greater London Council. This late-career move surprised some of his colleagues, but it made good use of Pooley's pragmatic style and political sense. In 1978 he added the title of superintending architect of municipal buildings, and his tenure in London was credited with, among other achievements, establishing the Thameslink rail network and laying the foundation for redevelopment of Docklands to the east of the city. Appointed a CBE in 1968, he also served in this period as treasurer (1972) and president (1973–5) of the Royal Institute of British Architects. In 1980 the Pooleys retired to Whiteleaf, near Aylesbury. Pooley was predeceased by his wife in October 1994, and he died from bronchopneumonia at his home, 11 Meads Lane, Chesham, on 11 March 1998.

Fred Pooley's manner was affable and winning: contemporaries described him as an 'aitch-dropping teddy-bear of a man' (Bendixson and Platt, 21), and his voluminous correspondence reveals a wealth of good humour—even amid the crushing defeat of his 'Pooleyville'—without an ounce of pretension. As a career that took in London during the 1940s and 1970s, with intervening chapters in a modern provincial city and a conservative rural county, Pooley's working life was coterminous with—and a tribute to—the public building programme of welfare-state Britain.

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