

Survival of the Smallest: The Sevenoaks Tenants Estate

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Among the many architectural splendours of Sevenoaks, it would be easy to overlook the Sevenoaks Tenants estate. The houses are small and unpretending, varying in manner from ordinary 'Edwardian urban vernacular' to low-key arts-and-crafts. They are also spread out over a wide area, from the centre of the town to the villages of Shoreham and Kemsing to the north and Sevenoaks Weald to the south, and so do not form what we would immediately recognize as an 'estate'. Yet, in their way, these houses are as remarkable as Knole or Ightham Mote. They are the last 'working' survivors of a housing movement that before the First World War aspired to transform not just the way housing was provided for the working classes, but also the way they lived, and by extension, wider society beyond.¹

The story of that movement — co-partnership housing — its background in the Co-operative and co-partnership labour movements, and its relationship with the garden city movement, is beyond the scope of this essay, but its key features may be summarized briefly: houses for rent would be built by a limited-dividend company (or society), in which the tenants would be members (or shareholders). Tenants would also receive a dividend, usually in the form of shares, on their rent from the society's surplus. This organization was part of the wider social aim of resolving differences between capitalists/landlords and workers/tenants that was further expressed in the attempt to develop a social identity on the estates infused with the nineteenth-century Liberal credo of rights and duties, self-improvement and self-help.

By 1903, when Sevenoaks Tenants Ltd was founded, the movement was still in its infancy. In the 1880s and 1890s a series of small estates, most of just a few houses or flats, had been built around London by the Tenant Co-operators Ltd, and in 1901 a more ambitious scheme, Ealing Tenants Ltd, was started in north Ealing; it was this estate that became, after Raymond Unwin supplied a plan for its extension in 1906, Brentham Garden Suburb. Under the guidance of Henry Vivian, a co-partnership evangelist and future Liberal MP, Brentham developed the community spirit, via communal recreational, educational and sporting activities, that eluded the Tenant Co-operators, whose estates were too spread out for much collective identity to emerge. Vivian, delighted though he was by the success of Brentham, was keen to see the principle extended and wrote about it in any publication that showed the slightest interest.

One publication that could always be counted on to report enthusiastically on such housing initiatives was the *Daily News*, whose proprietor, George Cadbury, had, at

Bournville, done so much to infuse the concept of the industrial village with wider social aspirations. It was a glowing tribute to the Ealing estate in the *Daily News*² that by March 1903³ had brought about 'a series of conferences and meetings which resulted in the launching of the Sevenoaks Tenants Ltd'.⁴

Many of the people involved in those meetings were members of the Sevenoaks Co-operative Society, formed in 1896,⁵ which by 1903 had more than 500 members and extensive premises in Sevenoaks High Street. From early on the Co-op had been taking an interest in the housing questions, urging action on the 'working-class housing question' from the local council and wealthy private benefactors alike.⁶

Sevenoaks Tenants Ltd was organized very much on the same lines as Ealing. Prospective tenants had to buy £5- or £10-worth of shares and commit to building this up to £50. Five per cent interest was paid on shares after other interest (such as on loans) had been paid, and money had been added to a sinking fund; only when all this had been paid would the tenants receive a dividend on their rent. The first secretary of the society was Fred Hooker, a Liberal member of the Sevenoaks Urban District Council since 1895, and secretary of the Co-op since 1897⁷ and it was from the Co-operative Society's offices in the High Street that Sevenoaks Tenants Ltd operated for several years.⁸

Founding a tenants' society was one thing, but it took more than enthusiasm and a practical plan to get the houses built. One of the great difficulties at Sevenoaks was finding land unburdened by restrictive covenants, precluding, for example, industrial and some commercial uses. The Tenants' society was hampered because, although its development was to be purely residential, most Sevenoaks freeholds, in order to ensure the 'good tone' of a newly-built district and so maintain the value of the freehold, were sold with a covenant stipulating a minimum value for any house erected on the land.⁹ This minimum was usually £500, which clearly precluded houses for rent to working-class and lower middle-class tenants.

A breakthrough came in 1904 when Laura Gilchrist Thompson, wife of H. Percy Thompson, patron and vicar of the parish of Kippington, to the west of Sevenoaks town centre, made available nearly two acres of land, with an unrestricted freehold, on the north side of St Botolph's Road, near Sevenoaks station.¹⁰ The Thompsons were old friends of co-operation,¹¹ and typical of the middle-class supporters of co-partnership. Percy Thompson was a councillor on the Sevenoaks Urban District Council and '... a Liberal Churchman ... unconventional and with definite and pronounced views frequently in conflict with those held by many of his closest friends ...'¹² One with whom his views were apparently not in conflict was a fellow Liberal councillor, co-operator and JP, Francis Swanzy, a wealthy 'Africa merchant' and resident for many years in Thompson's parish. Swanzy had been a staunch supporter of the Sevenoaks Co-operative Society and fulfilled a similar role for the Tenants Ltd until his death in 1920; it was probably he who furnished the society's £700 founding capital.¹³

This money enabled the society to get building in 1904, and by January 1906 the first twenty-five houses had been built and tenanted.¹⁴ There was little to mark out most of those that the Society built on Mrs Thompson's land — what became St Botolph's Avenue — from speculative houses of the time aimed at working-class



Fig. 1. Sevenoaks: *St Botolph's Avenue, north side (1905–06)*

tenants. The first three were built for the society by a commercial builder in a terrace that appears at first sight to be one house, with a central gabled dormer and the front doors for the two outer houses in the side walls. By the time these were completed, close links with the original co-partnership estate in Ealing meant that the society was able to follow Ealing's example and employ direct labour on the rest of the houses, with Fred Watts from Ealing Tenants Ltd acting as clerk of works.¹⁵ By building themselves, the society saved, it was estimated, around twenty-five per cent.

The rest of the houses in *St Botolph's Avenue* were more conventional than the first three: two facing terraces with red brick walls and window dressings, rendered to the first floor, and a tiled canopy over canted bays and front doors (Fig. 1); the accommodation included three bedrooms, kitchen, parlour and scullery, but no bathroom. Although it apparently had no trouble letting them, the society was not entirely happy with some aspects of the houses: the shape of the land meant that the houses on the north side had very small back gardens, and the rental of 8s. 9d. a week was more than some members could afford. It was partly to address these problems that they gladly took up the offer of more land late in 1905, just as *St Botolph's Avenue* was nearing completion.

The benefactor this time was Francis Swanzy, and the 'eligible freehold' on offer, at two acres and three-quarters, more substantial than the *St Botolph's* estate.¹⁶ The

location of the long one-sided street that became Holyoake Terrace (named after G. J. Holyoake (1817–1906), the Owenite ‘father’ of co-partnership) was a long strip of land falling away from Oak Hill Road towards the railway line. It was ideal for ‘small City men’, that is clerks, since the rentals of the houses were 6s. 6d. to 7s. 6d. a week, and it was even closer to the station than the St Botolph’s estate. The land was heavily wooded with oaks and chestnuts, and it was proposed to retain an acre of this between the houses and Oak Hill Road as a ‘recreation ground’.¹⁷ In fact the wooded land is so steep that it is hard to imagine that the tenants could have enjoyed much leisure there. A more plausible reason for keeping the trees was posited in a report in 1907: ‘There was a certain class prejudice existing for a time, among some of the well-to-do inhabitants of Oak Hill, and resentment was shown to the idea of dumping cottages in close proximity to fashionable villadom . . .’¹⁸ They were won over in the end, it was stated, by ‘the picturesque appearance of the cottages . . . There is a strong contrast between the average monotonous row of workmen’s dwellings and the brightly tiled and diversified exteriors of Holyoake Terrace.’¹⁹

It is certainly true that there is much greater variety in the Holyoake Terrace houses than those in St Botolph’s — which might well be described as ‘monotonous’. This was partly because of the unusual site; as well as falling sharply from front to back, Holyoake Terrace has a gentle slope that falls and rises along its entire length, so that a straight terrace was not an option. The result is a mix of pairs and groups of four, some all brick, some part-brick and part-render, some of these with brick stringcourses, some with oriel windows, some with bays (Figs 2 & 3).

One possible reason for the move away from ‘monotony’ was the way that co-partnership tenant-housing was evolving, and especially the way in which it was becoming ever-more closely enmeshed with the garden-city movement. In February 1905 an advisory body, the Co-partnership Tenants Housing Council, had been set up specifically to promote co-partnership housing, with Raymond Unwin as consulting architect. Unwin had already produced the plan for Letchworth, the first Garden City, in 1903, and in 1905 he produced that for Hampstead Garden Suburb. Here perhaps is the key to why co-partnership housing has become subsumed into the history of the garden-city movement — more than half of the houses at Letchworth and three-quarters of those at Hampstead Garden Suburb built before the First World War were built by co-partnership housing societies modelled after Ealing and Sevenoaks.²⁰ It is complicated by the fact that Unwin was now architectural advisor to the co-partnership housing movement and in September 1906 produced a plan, incorporating many of his typical planning features, for the large-scale extension of the Ealing Tenants estate, thereby transforming it into Brentham Garden Suburb. Even before this, however, it was announced that ‘the Sevenoaks Tenants Society is . . . engaging the services of Mr Raymond Unwin, the well-known architect, who is planning not only Garden City in general . . . but also the whole of the Hampstead scheme.’²¹

So whatever happened to Sevenoaks Garden Suburb? It seems that it was a victim of the piecemeal land acquisition. The nature of the scheme, with discrete streets on small patches of donated land, meant there was little opportunity for planning, community-building or ‘place-making’ in the modern parlance, as at Hampstead



Fig. 2. *Sevenoaks: Holyoake Terrace, looking south (1906–07)*

Garden Suburb, or even Brentham. It seems unlikely that Unwin fulfilled anything beyond an advisory role in planning Sevenoaks, and the appearance of the houses, and the surviving drawings, does not suggest Unwin's hand.

This failure to engage with the cutting-edge planning developments at Letchworth, Hampstead and Brentham did not prevent the Sevenoaks society from expanding. By the end of 1907 the Holyoake Terrace and St Botolph's estates were complete and tenanted, with thirty-four and twenty-five houses respectively, and villagers at Kemsing to the north and Sevenoaks Weald to the south had asked for Swanzy and Hooker to meet them to discuss building cottages there.²² The spur to this enthusiasm in the villages was the 1907 Smallholdings and Allotments Act which empowered county councils to let at favourable rates land for the creation of smallholdings and allotments, and also associated housing, to 'profit-restricted societies' (i.e. co-partnerships or co-operatives).²³

In the event nothing happened at Sevenoaks Weald and Kemsing until 1910, but meantime a social life was evolving on the original estate. Swanzy gave regular summer parties on a field near Holyoake Terrace, and paid for a meeting room, the Holyoake Room, at Holyoake Terrace, which became (and remains) the office of Sevenoaks

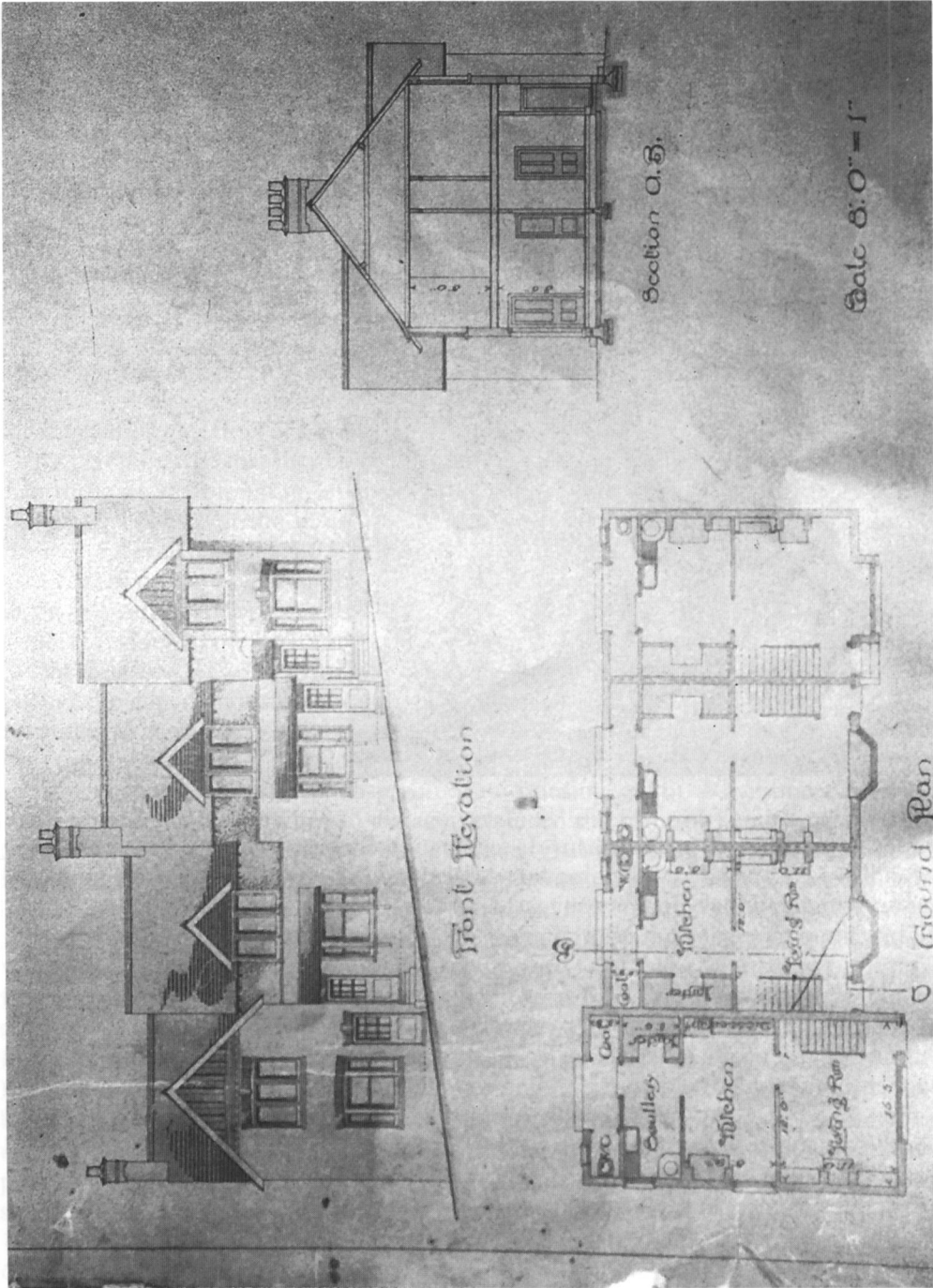


Fig. 3. Sevenoaks: ground plan, section & elevation, f 29-32 Holyoake Terrace (c. 1906) (Photo by Roz Archer)

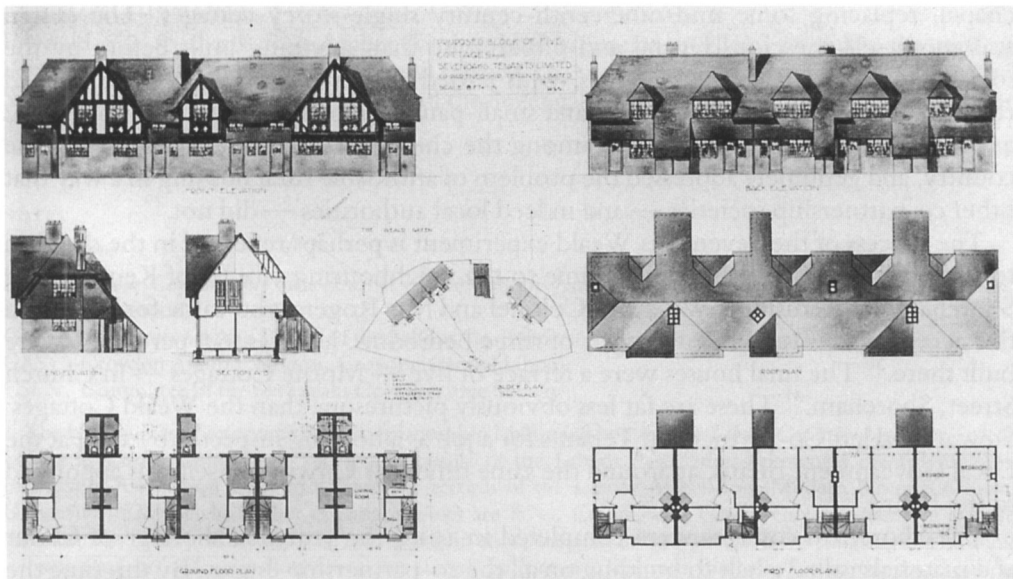


Fig. 4. *Sevenoaks Weald: designs for Patience Cottages (Harry S. Stewart, 1910)* (Courtesy of Hampstead Garden Suburb Archives Trust, London Metropolitan Archives)

Tenants Ltd. An annual competitive flower show began in 1909, and a children's play park was built.²⁴ By 1910, the wider co-partnership housing movement had expanded greatly, one manifestation of this being the creation in 1907 of a central company, Co-partnership Tenants Ltd, which raised funds and offered advice to the federated societies. It also began to centralize services such as building, and from 1909, architectural design, when they employed Harry Sinclair Stewart as an architectural assistant. Stewart was a young man of 28 when he was taken on by Co-partnership Tenants Ltd in 1909.²⁵ He had spent ten years helping A. Cameron Corbett (later Lord Rowallan) develop the Corbett estate at Eltham Park, south-east London, which with its grids of streets and Identikit terraced houses was the model of the bye-law monotony that Unwin hoped to usurp. But Stewart clearly had a taste to do something different, for he had travelled widely in Europe, especially Germany, then seen as in the forefront of developments in town planning, and he went on to write extensively on the subject.²⁶ It is fair to assume that Stewart designed the four houses at 'Sevenoaks Farm' built for the Society in 1910, and he certainly designed the eleven built the same year at Sevenoaks Weald (Fig. 4).²⁷

The houses at the Weald, on land donated 'in the interest of good housing' by Colonel and Mrs J. M. Rogers of Riverhill in Sevenoaks, were a new departure for the Society, and for co-partnership generally, inasmuch as they were an attempt to solve the problem of rural housing, rather than to provide affordable housing for working-class commuters.²⁸ Stewart built a pair and terraces of four and five houses — Prudence and Patience Cottages — on the village green, either side of the Methodist

chapel, replacing some mid-nineteenth-century single-storey cottages. The design was more self-consciously rural and picturesque than anything built before by the society, especially *Patience Cottages*, with jettied timber-framed gables, half-hipped roof and rear dormers, tile-hanging and small-pane casement windows. With rents at 4s. 6d. to 5s. per week, they were among the cheapest co-partnership houses in the country, and genuinely addressed the problem of affordable rural housing in a way that other co-partnership societies — and indeed local authorities — did not.²⁹

The success of the Sevenoaks Weald experiment is perhaps reflected in the decision to extend the rural housing programme to the neighbouring villages of Kemsing and Shoreham. At Kemsing it was again Colonel and Mrs Rogers who came forward with the necessary land, and five cottages, of three bedrooms, let at 5s. 6d. per week, were built there.³⁰ The final houses were a terrace of five — *Morne Cottages* — in Church Street, Shoreham.³¹ These are far less obviously picturesque than the Weald Cottages: Stewart had left Co-partnership Tenants for a job as a housing inspector by 1914 at the Local Government Board, at around the same time that Unwin himself was appointed to the Board.

The Shoreham cottages were completed in 1915, the year that shortage of labour and materials called a halt to building on all the co-partnership estates. By this time the Co-partnership Tenants Ltd consisted of fourteen estates (another forty or so were not federated) and had built property worth £2 million.³² Sevenoaks Tenants, although the second estate founded, was one of the smallest, with eighty-nine houses on six separate sites. It was this feature that meant that Sevenoaks never developed as a garden suburb community as for example had Brentham, Hampstead, Fallings Park (Wolverhampton) and Burnage (Manchester), with extensive leisure and educational facilities. But it is also perhaps what allowed Sevenoaks Tenants Ltd to survive the collapse of co-partnership housing which was more or less total by the time World War Two broke out. The co-partnership system never really recovered from the First World War and the subsequent take-over by the local authorities of some of its remit. The tenants rarely succeeded in buying out the outside investors, and power and money became centralized in Co-partnership Tenants Ltd. Most societies began building houses to sell in the 1920s, and were privatized in the 1930s.

How Sevenoaks Tenants Ltd survived this³³ will not be revealed fully until the current committee sees fit to make the Society's records available to researchers, but it seems likely that the small scale of the operation, and the generosity of benefactors such as Swanzy, the Thompsons and the Rogerses, did in time allow the tenants to gain control of the society by buying out such outside investors as there were. The results are clear today, in that the Sevenoaks houses have retained a sense of community (the committee is determined to keep the society as a 'mutual') and collective design — for example, a uniform treatment of such features as windows and render — that has long gone from Hampstead Garden Suburb and, most notably, from Letchworth. Perhaps such low-key grass roots endeavours have as much to teach us, preoccupied as we are at the beginning of the twenty-first century with problems of housing and rural and urban development, as the grander planning visions that were spawned in the last century by the garden-city movement that so eclipsed co-partnership housing.

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NOTES

Abbreviations

- LCP* *Labour Copartnership* (the journal of the Labour Association/Labour Co-Partnership Association, 1894–1906)
CP *Co-Partnership* (the journal of the Labour Co-Partnership Association, 1907–)
 CAS Croydon Archive Services, Croydon Central Library
 CSCS Committee of the Sevenoaks Co-Operative Society

1 The best sources of information on co-partnership labour and housing are *Labour Copartnership* (1894–1906, known as *Co-Partnership* from 1907), the journal of the Labour Association (known as the Labour Co-partnership Association from 1901), and the records of the Labour Association (Modern Records Centre, University of Warwick). Other essential sources are E. G. Culpin, *The Garden City Movement up to Date* (London, 1913); K. J. Skilleter, 'The role of public utility societies in early British town planning and housing reform, 1901–36', *Planning Perspectives*, VIII (1993), pp. 125–65; Johnston Birchall, 'Co-partnership housing and the garden city movement', *Planning Perspectives*, X (1995), pp. 329–58; and Johnston Birchall, 'Managing the co-partnership way', *Town and Country Planning*, LXIV/12 (December 1995), pp. 333–35. Useful information is also to be found in the four long essays that make up A. Sutcliffe (ed.), *British Town Planning: The Formative Years* (Leicester, 1981); and A. Reid, *Brentham: A History of the Pioneer Garden Suburb 1901–2001* (London, 2000).

2 'Co-operation in housing: interesting experiment — every man his neighbour's landlord', *Daily News*, 27 December 1902.

3 '... that the use of the committee room be offered to the newly formed committee of the Sevenoaks Tenants Ltd for their meetings', Meeting of 6 March 1903, Minute book 3 of the CSCS (CAS 390/42).

4 *LCP*, XII (January 1906), p. 11.

5 Meeting of a provisional committee of Sevenoaks Co-operative Society, 6 December 1895, Minute book 1 of the CSCS (CAS 390/40).

6 In June 1898 the committee had written to Laura Gilchrist Thompson, wife of Revd H. Percy Thompson, Vicar of Kippington, expressing their satisfaction 'that there is a possibility of Mrs Thompson acquiring land for the purpose of providing for the erection of working class dwellings, and begs to assure Mrs Thompson of their deep appreciation of such an act of social duty, and trust that nothing may be allowed to prevent the accomplishment of so worthy an aim and the supply of so pressing a need', Meeting of 11 June 1898, Minute book 1 of the CSCS (CAS 390/40); in October 1898 the committee had written to Councillor Swaffield of the Sevenoaks Urban District Council 'urging him to adhere to his proposal with regard to the Cottage Question', Meeting of 7 October 1898, Minute book 1 of the CSCS (CAS 390/40); in May 1900 the committee had written to the Housing of the Working Classes Committee of the Council urging its members to pursue the idea of erecting cottages, even if the rent were as high as 8s. a week, as 'a want would be met and there would be no difficulty in finding tenants', Meeting of 18 May 1900, Minute book 2 of the CSCS (CAS 390/41).

7 Minutes of meeting of 29 March 1901, congratulating Hooker on 'his work as a representative of the working classes of this town', Minute book 2 of the CSCS (CAS 390/41); see also *Sennocke Almanack 1904* (Sevenoaks, 1904).

8 *LCP*, X (October 1904), p. 154.

9 Sybella Gurney, 'Co-operative housing', *LCP*, XI (July 1905), p. 106.

10 *LCP*, XII (Jan 1906), p. 11; see also n. 6.

11 Percy Thompson had, with Frank Swanzy, underwritten the Sevenoaks Co-operative Society in its early days — Minute book 1 of the CSCS (CAS 390/40), *passim*.

- 12 Obituary of Canon H. Percy Thompson in *Sevenoaks Chronicle and Courier*, 23 August 1935; see also *Who's Who* (London, 1932), p. 3190.
- 13 Obituary of Francis Swanzy in *Sevenoaks Chronicle and Courier*, 7 and 14 May 1920; 'Library acquires portrait of town benefactor', *Sevenoaks News*, 26 February 1970.
- 14 *LCP*, XII (January 1906), p. 11.
- 15 Reid, *Brentham*, p. 75; Richard White, secretary of Ealing Tenants Ltd, also supplied specimen designs for houses.
- 16 'Co-partnership tenant societies', *LCP*, XI (November 1905), p. 179.
- 17 *LCP*, XII (January 1906), p. 11.
- 18 'The Sevenoaks Tenants Ltd', *CP*, XIII (May 1907), p. 75.
- 19 *Ibid.*
- 20 Reid, *Brentham*, p. 56.
- 21 'Co-partnership in housing', *LCP*, XII (April 1906), p. 59.
- 22 *CP*, XIII (October 1907), p. 160; (November 1907), p. 174; (December 1907), p. 192.
- 23 'Conference at 6 Bloomsbury Square', *CP*, XIV (March 1908), p. 44.
- 24 'News from estates: Sevenoaks', *CP*, XV (January 1909), p. 31.
- 25 RIBA nomination papers for election of Harry Sinclair Stewart as Licentiate (v15 no. 1026; elected 20 March 1911) and Associate (v20 no. 2291; elected 4 March 1912); see also *Who's Who in Architecture* (London, 1914).
- 26 Stewart cited the *Westminster Gazette*, *Manchester Guardian*, *Glasgow Herald* and *Garden Cities and Town Planning* in his LRIBA nomination papers, loc. cit.; between 1909 and 1912 he also wrote a number of articles in *Co-partnership*, including a review of Unwin's *Town Planning in Practice* (*CP*, XV [October 1909], pp. 152–53).
- 27 *CP*, XVI (November 1910), pp. 176, 179; 'From Bloomsbury to Sevenoaks', *CP*, XVIII (September 1912), p. 139; glass lantern slide of a lost sheet of plans, sections and elevations of five cottages for Sevenoaks Tenants Ltd, signed H.S.S., dated April 1910, Hampstead Garden Suburb Archives Trust, London Metropolitan Archives (Acc/3816/02/03/009).
- 28 *CP*, XVI (June 1910), p. 95.
- 29 *CP*, XVI (October 1910), pp. 152, 160.
- 30 *CP*, XVIII (November 1912), p. 173; *CP*, XVIII (December 1912), pp. 191–92; *CP*, XIX (March 1913), p. 44.
- 31 *CP*, XIX (April 1914), p. 60.
- 32 See Culpin, op. cit., and *CP*, XXI (1915), passim.
- 33 The survival has not been total as the society had to sell off five houses — Morne Cottages in Shoreham — in 1981 (information from current resident of Morne Cottages).