

Thatcher's Progress

During the quarter of a century after the Second World War, the United Kingdom designated thirty-two new towns across England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland. Why, even before selling council houses or denationalising public industries, did Margaret Thatcher's government begin to privatise these new towns? By examining the most ambitious of these projects, Milton Keynes, Guy Ortolano recasts our understanding of British social democracy, arguing that the new towns comprised the spatial dimension of the welfare state. Following the Prime Minister's progress on a tour through Milton Keynes on 25 September 1979, Ortolano alights at successive stops to examine the broader histories of urban planning, modernist architecture, community development, international consulting, and municipal housing. Thatcher's journey reveals a dynamic social democracy during its decade of crisis, while also showing how public sector actors begrudgingly accommodated the alternative priorities of market liberalism.

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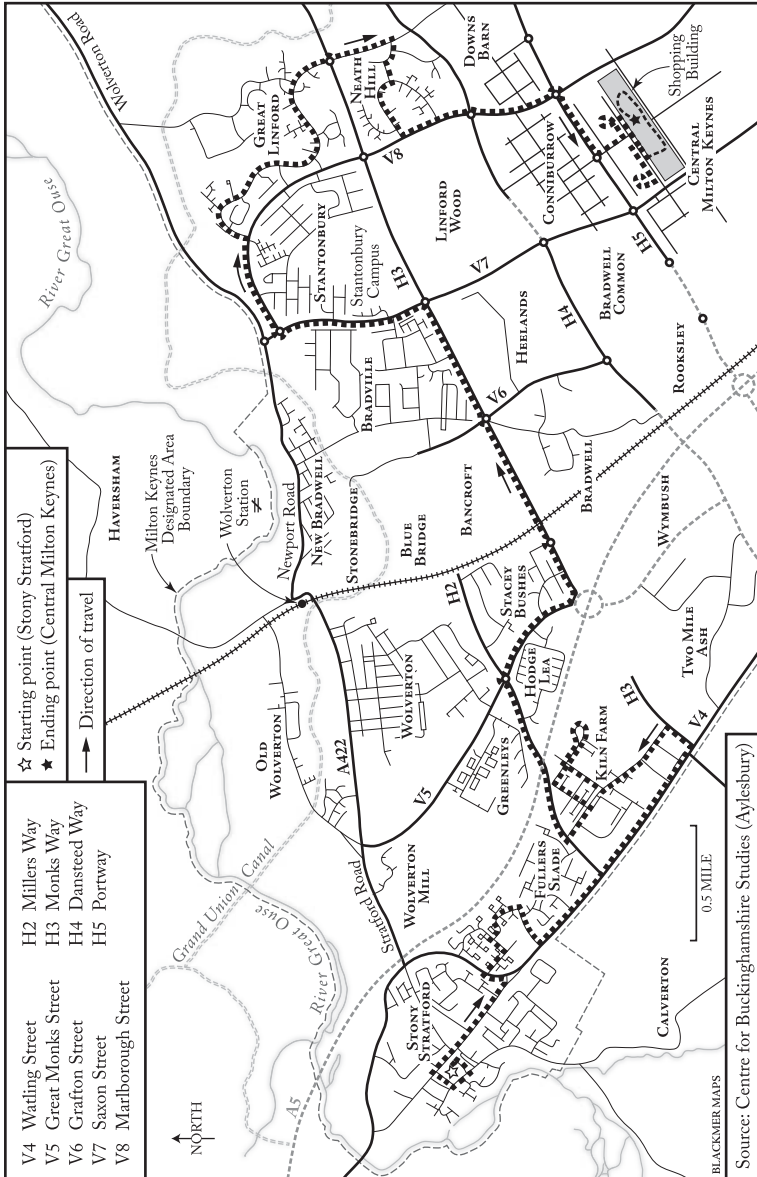
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Thatcher's progress: The Prime Minister's journey through Milton Keynes, 25 September 1979.

Thatcher's Progress

*From Social Democracy to Market Liberalism
through an English New Town*

Guy Ortolano

New York University



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For Jenny

Truly, if I had been mindful of that country from whence I came out,
I might have had opportunity to have returned; but now I desire a
better country

John Bunyan, *The Pilgrim's Progress*

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Frontispiece: Margaret Thatcher's progress through Milton
Keynes, 25 September 1979

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Acknowledgments

This book about planning began accidentally. In January 2010, at the suggestion of Mark Clapson, I visited the Centre for Buckinghamshire Studies in Aylesbury. I was researching the county's plan to build a monorail city and, while awaiting some files, asked the archivists whether they had anything on new towns. They shared a wry look, before offering a jovial, if cryptic, reference to "Strong Room 5." Strong Room 5, it turned out, holds the records of Milton Keynes Development Corporation, the agency responsible for building Milton Keynes from 1967 to 1992. It represents, in my estimation, the best new town archive – and one of the best planning archives – anywhere in Britain. To the archivists' knowledge, no historian had ever worked through the collection – and, consequently, its hundreds of boxes and thousands of documents lacked any index. This did not prevent me from badgering the staff to dig around for more on, say, that visit from Thailand's housing minister, but for the most part I learned to accept whatever Strong Room 5 offered each day. The collection has since been indexed, twice. My footnotes refer to the first of these indices, since superseded, but the citations remain legible. In the years since my first visit, the Centre has endured painful cuts, a blow to the residents who arrive daily to learn more about their families, their properties, and their communities. Nevertheless, today this remarkable archive supports the work of evermore urban historians, a tribute not only to its contents, but also to its keepers. I am indebted to the staff who aided me these past eight years, including Roger Bettridge, Laura Cotton, Lisa Edwards, Sally Mason, June Wailling, and, especially, the heroic Chris Low.

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