University of Kent

Kent Academic Repository

Logan, Anne and Auckland, Caroline (2026) *Women's grassroots housing activism: Soroptimist housing associations in Manchester and Tunbridge Wells c.1950–1996.* Women's History Review . pp. 1-19. ISSN 0961-2025.

Downloaded from
https://kar.kent.ac.uk/117094/ The University of Kent's Academic Repository KAR

The version of record is available from
https://doi.org/10.1080/09612025.2026.2745239

This document version
Publisher pdf

DOI for this version

Licence for this version
CC BY (Attribution)

Additional information

Versions of research works

Versions of Record
If this version is the version of record, it is the same as the published version available on the publisher's web site. Cite as the published version.

Author Accepted Manuscripts
If this document is identified as the Author Accepted Manuscript it is the version after peer review but before type setting, copy editing or publisher branding. Cite as Surname, Initial. (Year) 'Title of article'. To be published in ***Title of Journal*** , Volume and issue numbers [peer-reviewed accepted version]. Available at: DOI or URL (Accessed: date).

Enquiries
If you have questions about this document contact ResearchSupport@kent.ac.uk. Please include the URL of the record in KAR. If you believe that your, or a third party's rights have been compromised through this document please see our Take Down policy (available from https://www.kent.ac.uk/guides/kar-the-kent-academic-repository#policies).



Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Women's History Review

ISSN: 0961-2025 (Print) 1747-583X (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/rwhr20

Women's grassroots housing activism: Soroptimist housing associations in Manchester and Tunbridge Wells c.1950–1996

Anne Logan & Caroline Auckland

To cite this article: Anne Logan & Caroline Auckland (15 Oct 2026): Women's grassroots housing activism: Soroptimist housing associations in Manchester and Tunbridge Wells c.1950–1996, Women's History Review, DOI: 10.1080/09612025.2026.2745239

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/09612025.2026.2745239

© 2026 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group

Published online: 15 Oct 2026.

Submit your article to this journal

Article views: 125

View related articles

View Crossmark data

Full Terms & Conditions of access and use can be found at
https://www.tandfonline.com/action/journalInformation?journalCode=rwhr20

WOMEN'S HISTORY REVIEW
https://doi.org/10.1080/09612025.2026.2745239

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

SPECIAL ISSUE: WOMEN'S GRASSROOTS ACTIVISM: NEW HISTORIES OF FEMALE ACTIVISM IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY BRITAIN AND IRELAND

OPEN ACCESS Check for updates

Women's grassroots housing activism: Soroptimist housing associations in Manchester and Tunbridge Wells c.1950–1996

Anne Logan [a] and Caroline Auckland[b]

[a]School of Social Sciences, University of Kent, Canterbury, UK; [b]Independent Researcher

ABSTRACT

A product of participatory research, this article critically examines the work of Soroptimist International (SI) clubs in England in providing homes for poor, elderly women through the establishment of small, local, dedicated housing associations during the second half of the twentieth century. Through two case studies of SI housing schemes in Manchester and Tunbridge Wells, the article examines the reasons for the establishment of Soroptimist housing and accounts for its demise. It also highlights the funding of the projects and considers what clientele they were intended to help. Finally, it considers to what extent these projects can be viewed as 'grassroots activism'.

KEYWORDS

Soroptimist International; twentieth century social housing; voluntary action; English women's organisations; old age; participatory research

Introduction

> There had already been a good deal of talk in the office about Letty's situation [being evicted from her bedsit] and what she ought to do about it …
>
> "Isn't there some friend you could live with?" Edwin suggested … A woman like Letty must have many friends, a whole army of nice women … ?
>
> … "The best thing is to have a relative", said Norman. " … You won't get much pension from here to add to what the state gives you."[1]

In *Quartet in Autumn* (1977) the novelist Barbara Pym dramatised the plight of single, elderly English women requiring a suitable place to live on a small pension. Outside the world of Pym's fiction, however, the accommodation needs of older, 'respectable' women were often overlooked. Except, that is, by women's organisations, who ran campaigns on the issue and in some cases actually provided homes.[2] Foremost among housing providers were British Soroptimist clubs. These were local, voluntary women's organisations affiliated to Soroptimist International (SI), a global movement that emerged after the First World War to improve the lives of women worldwide.[3] In

CONTACT Anne Logan a.f.logan@kent.ac.uk School of Social Sciences, University of Kent, Canterbury CT2 7NZ, UK

© 2026 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

Great Britain, SI clubs established small, local housing associations from (roughly) the 1950s to the 1980s, dedicated to the provision of 'flatlets' for elderly pensioners and run almost entirely by volunteers. According to SI literature, over one hundred housing associations were formed by clubs within the aegis of Soroptimist International of Great Britain and Ireland (SIGBI), spread across cities, suburbs and small towns.[4] Yet, despite their ubiquity half a century ago, little is known about these housing schemes today or what motivated the clubs to run them.

The localised, practical activism of founding and running small housing associations for older women forms the focus of this article, through which the concept of 'grassroots activism' is exemplified. This research was underpinned by a collaboration between an academic historian and a peer researcher, the latter a past president of SI Tunbridge Wells and District (SITWD), based in the south-eastern English town of Tunbridge Wells, Kent. Working in partnership, we designed both the methodology and the research questions together, according to the principles of participatory research.[5] Co-authorship between a grassroots activist and an academic enabled us to unite different perspectives on the subject, and we aimed to minimise the possibility of power imbalances between academic and peer researcher by taking key decisions on researching and planning our project together.

Our research draws on SITWD's rich archive (currently privately held and uncatalogued) to highlight this important example of grassroots activism, which we define as action to tackle social or political issues, undertaken in local areas by members rooted in their communities. We address comparative dimensions of Soroptimist housing through examination of another scheme, based in a northern English city, the Manchester Soroptimist Housing Association (MSHA), which erected a new property for its tenants in contrast to converting buildings, which was the practice of the Tunbridge Wells Soroptimist Housing Association (TWSHA). By studying two examples, we aim to highlight common themes in these different locations.

In addition to archival research, we utilised oral history methodology by jointly preparing and conducting interviews with two longstanding SITWD members, a former TWSHA chairman [*sic*], Mrs Helen Warriner, and another member (who chose anonymity).[6] The agreed research questions were, firstly, to establish the reasons why Soroptimists not only showed a keen interest, but also undertook practical action in the field of housing in the post-war years, how they funded the schemes, and the reasons why they exited the work a few decades later. We also wished to ascertain what type of clients the housing schemes were aimed at, given that reports often referred vaguely to 'elderly people': what were the ages and occupational profiles of prospective tenants? If the clients were mostly female, to what extent were activists motivated by awareness of gender inequality? We also wanted to interrogate the meaning of 'grassroots' within the schemes by seeking to ascertain whether the clubs' housing projects were purely local and what role was played by Soroptimists' national networks, both formal and informal, in promoting the schemes.

To address these questions, this article first reviews literature on British women's organisations' involvement with housing policy in the mid-twentieth century and on the history of voluntary housing provision. It then examines the growth of the Soroptimist movement in Great Britain and of SIGBI interest in the housing needs of older, single women. This is followed by the two case-studies of Manchester and Tunbridge

Wells and a concluding analysis. While the clubs were founded twenty years apart and in very different locations, both housing schemes had a similar chronology, being formed in the 1960s and wound up in the 1980s or '90s.

Women's organisations and housing issues

Historical research concerning women's organisations' engagement with housing issues tends to focus on the centralised activity of nationwide bodies such as the National Federation of Women's Institutes (NFWI), the Women's Co-operative Guild (WCG), and the Women's Labour League. This work highlights leaders' and members' advocacy and their roles in the process of discussing and influencing housing policy, rather than the very different, practical activity of providing accommodation.[7] Valerie Wright argues that campaigning for better housing in rural areas to arrest depopulation actually empowered members of the Scottish Women's Rural Institutes. Helen Meller, Krista Cowman, and Caitríona Beaumont all link women's activism on the issue to the concept of 'gendered citizenship', whereby after the granting of partial women's suffrage in 1918, enfranchised women used their newly acquired status as citizens to press for better housing, often by employing a gendered image of the home as the housewife's workplace.[8] Notably missing from most published research is the work of Soroptimists, not only in the form of their housing projects, but even in terms of advocacy, in which SIGBI collaborated with other women's organisations. For example, Beaumont examines the involvement of not only the NFWI but also the Mothers' Union, the Catholic Women's League, the National Council of Women of Great Britain (NCWGB), and the Townswomen's Guilds in both the 1936 Women's Housing Conference and subsequent government lobbying, but not of SIGBI.[9]

Much of the focus of this activism (and the historical literature on it) was on the design of the family home and the views of the 'housewife'. Less attention was paid to the housing needs of those whose living arrangements fell outside the definition of a traditional nuclear family, notably unmarried people (of all ages) and elderly couples, with the important exception of some campaign work by women's organisations, for example, by the NCWGB and its partners in the 1936 Women's Housing Conference.[10] This lacuna also applies to the historiography of English housing in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, except for work on institutional living such as settlements and colleges.[11]

Voluntary sector housing

Turning from advocacy to housing provision, there is clear bias in historical literature towards discussion of state action and local-authority accommodation in the post-1918 period, with analysis of voluntary or philanthropic provision often restricted to the Victorian era.[12] As Malpass argues, the 'top-down' story of government policy (and so-called 'council housing') has attracted a lot more academic attention than 'the small-scale activities of independent housing associations'.[13] Although the phrase 'housing association' was not much used before the 1930s, these bodies, often registered friendly societies, provided vital accommodation for specific social groups, particularly the elderly.[14] According to Malpass, membership of the National Federation of

Housing Societies Associations (NFHA) rose from 75 at its formation in 1936 to 638 in 1959.[15] The latter figure included some Soroptimist housing associations.

Historians' interest in the voluntary sector—including housing providers—has increased since the start of this century.[16] In 2000, Mullins pointed to the diversity of the non-profit sector in housing, which, at the time, included 7200 organisations of varying sizes.[17] Bonnie Emmett's recent thesis on housing provided specifically for single women from 1919 to 1939 is particularly relevant to this study. Emmett focuses on the Women's Pioneer Housing Company (WPHC) and two other providers of homes for unmarried women in London. She highlights significant connections between the WPHC and leading feminists such as Lady Rhondda (1883–1958), founder of the Six Point Group, and an NCWGB president, Lady Emmott (1866–1954).[18] By 1939, the WPHC had provided 550 flats for single women, mostly by converting existing properties.[19] These efforts surely provided a model for later Soroptimist schemes in towns and cities across Britain, particularly through their emphasis on the privacy of 'small, dignified homes' for older women, as opposed to boarding houses, residential clubs and hostels, all of which represented alternative, but less private models of single-person living.[20]

The development of soroptimism in Britain

Compared to some other British, twentieth-century grassroots women's organisations, SIGBI has received little attention from academic historians.[21] Soroptimism began in Oakland, California, in 1921, where the founder president, Violet Richardson Ward, prioritised the concept of 'service', together with 'matters of justice and quality of life'.[22] These principles have animated the movement's activities ever since, and are reflected in its housing schemes. Expansion took place in the post-suffrage era. London's club, the first in Great Britain, was chartered in 1924, and the Manchester club (hereafter SI Manchester) was founded two years later. The movement grew rapidly as more 'daughter' clubs of London were formed in Liverpool, Glasgow, and Edinburgh.[23] In 1934, by which time the Belfast club had been founded, the Federation of Soroptimist Clubs of Great Britain and Ireland (later SIGBI) held its inaugural meeting.[24] The movement continued to expand in post-war years: by late 1946, when SITWD was chartered, there were 125 SIGBI-affiliated clubs.[25]

Club membership was skewed towards middle-class, professional women, often unmarried, brought together by opportunities for service and networking. Each member, of at least twenty-five years of age, was the sole representative of their professional field within a club.[26] Some prominent early members had militant suffragette backgrounds, for example the artist, Ernestine Mills (1871–1959), who designed presidential badges for several clubs, including SITWD.[27] Even those activists without such profound, feminist campaigning credentials devoted themselves to advancing women's equality and citizenship, with equal pay a perennial topic at SIGBI conferences. Clubs attracted highly efficient, middle-class, educated, and motivated women to their ranks, whose social and cultural capital made them a force to be reckoned with. The first SI Manchester president was Miss Dorothy Lawrence Pilkington (1893–1971), company director of the eponymous glass manufacturing family, while an early club treasurer (and later, honorary secretary of the housing association), Miss Isabel Ritchie (1901–

81), was the city's first woman solicitor. In Tunbridge Wells, the Soroptimist club's first president was Dr Lilian Croskery (1899–1987), a general practitioner with an interest in homeopathic medicine. However, Soroptimism was also open to members with more ambiguous professional and class status. For example, many women managing retail outlets and other businesses became active members, some engaging in the housing work. TWSHA's founding chairman, Miss Clarinda Cox (1908–1995), homeopathic hospital matron and town mayor, had a relatively humble childhood in a colliery district of South Wales, before training as a nurse.[28]

Shifting gender roles and new demographic trends naturally brought about changes within the Soroptimist movement. The ending of marriage bars in many occupations after the Second World War encouraged more women to work after marriage. Coupled with increasing marriage rates among younger age groups, this meant that, by the 1960s, there were fewer spinster club officials than there had been in the early years.[29] Journalist Mary Stott, reporting on a Soroptimist convention in 1960, observed that 'spinsters are in a two-to-one majority but some married women prefer maiden name for public use and many learned ladies hide their marital status under "doctor" or "professor"'.[30] However, by 1970, when most of the Soroptimist housing associations were active, only eight per cent of women in their late forties had never been married.[31]

Soroptimism and housing

Like many similar women's organisations, Soroptimist clubs held monthly meetings, at which topics of interest were discussed. The Soroptimist ethos of service necessitated action, so club committees discussed which causes to support and in which ways. Soroptimists have been compared to Rotarians and the respective clubs' members frequently socialised and/or worked together locally on service projects. However, the Soroptimist movement was not, as has been claimed, Rotary's 'sister' organisation.[32] Doughan and Morgan maintain that SIGBI 'has from the outset been fiercely independent and has little in common with Rotary … except the service ethic'.[33] Of equal, if not greater importance for Soroptimist networks were neighbouring women's organisations, for example NCWGB branches, who also showed interest in housing for single people and not just families.[34] In Manchester, Soroptimists and NCWGB ladies held regular, joint meetings and in Tunbridge Wells too, Soroptimists had connections to the NCWGB and other women's societies.[35]

However, the choice of 'service' projects was not entirely a local matter. There is also evidence of interest in housing policy within SIGBI's national organisation. This is unsurprising, as it was one of the key social issues of the twentieth century. Perhaps the most remarkable initiative came from a grassroots activist, Miss Jessie Dickinson (1887–1986), who brought housing to the forefront of SIGBI's thinking. A founder member of Halifax SI who became club president in 1932, Dickinson had professional experience in accountancy and property management. Beginning locally, she turned Soroptimists' attention to the housing needs of single women.[36] In 1933, her club, partnered with local Rotarians and the Halifax Council of Social Welfare, founded a public utility company (a charity), 'with the object of slum clearance'.[37] After converting some local properties, they decided to build flats specifically for single, working women, utilising government slum clearance grants to keep rents low. Forty flats were built in three

blocks of three storeys each, including a larger flat for a caretaker and his wife. Each flat had its own front door 'to the air' and was self-contained with its own lobby, bedsitting room, kitchen, bathroom, coal store and larder.[38] Notably, this attention to the needs of single women coincided with the emergence of the National Spinsters' Pensions Association in 1935.[39]

Although Soroptimists preferred to describe their work as 'service', Dickinson was undoubtedly an 'activist' at local, regional, and national levels, and a driving force in pushing the housing needs of unmarried women to the top of SIGBI's agenda. She represented SIGBI on the Women's Housing Advisory Committee, established by the Ministry of Health in 1936, and set up a Yorkshire arm of the organisation to ensure that the views of northern women were heard.[40] As SIGBI's national housing consultant, she was evangelical on the subject of the housing needs of single women regardless of class, including 'retired domestics', unmarried women and widows. When Dickinson retired from work in 1959, she carried on her role for SIGBI, visiting clubs across the country and encouraging them to undertake housing projects in their own towns.[41] Documents show that she had contact with both clubs in this study.[42]

The spotlight Dickinson shone on the problems of single women (especially those reaching retirement age by the 1950s) resonated with SIGBI members. The difficulties of this cohort were multifaceted in mid-twentieth century Britain. Women born in the late nineteenth century are popularly imagined as the unrequired brides of the so-called 'lost generation' of men killed in the First World War, women who had been 'left on the shelf'.[43] Yet the problem of 'surplus women' had been evident before 1914, giving impetus to greater emphasis on suitable careers for unmarried women. Unfortunately, many of these occupations came with residential accommodation, which had to be surrendered on retirement. Moreover, although some remuneration packages included superannuation arrangements, neither the pay nor pensions were anywhere near equivalent to men's earnings, and single women were also routinely refused mortgages (something SIGBI also campaigned about).[44]

After the Beveridge Report-inspired welfare reforms of 1945–1948, state pensions (which women could claim from the age of sixty) were below subsistence level and recipients were often forced to apply for National Assistance, a means-tested benefit that many still associated with the Poor Law.[45] Older women accounted for a significant proportion of people in poverty during the 1950s and social scientist Peter Townsend calculated that retirement pensions only represented between eighteen and twenty-one per cent of average gross earnings between 1948 and 1975.[46] As they left their 'live-in' jobs such as nursing or housekeeping, many women were obliged to find single-person accommodation—a rarity—at the very time that their (already low) earnings reduced. The material needs of these women received some attention from politicians and social scientists like Townsend, but they were not a priority in the provision of public housing, which, from the mid-1950s onwards, focused on slum clearance.[47] Soroptimists, many of whom were themselves unmarried, albeit usually more secure in their professions than the women they helped, sought not only to campaign but also to tackle this social issue in the most practical way possible, by providing suitable housing for single, elderly women. Comparatively wealthy and secure SIGBI women were alert to the plight of their older, poorer, sisters, a group potentially including not only genteel spinsters but also homeless, working-class widows.[48]

From 1948, 'British Soroptimists began to make concerted efforts to provide housing … and also branched into care for the elderly', with encouragement to clubs coming from the newly formed SIGBI housing panel, led by Dickinson.[49] Of the fifty-odd Soroptimist housing schemes in Great Britain identified for this study, the vast majority were founded between 1950 and 1970. Early promoters included SI clubs in Bedford, Nottingham, Coventry and Wolverhampton.[50] SIGBI produced a handbook setting out the costs involved as well as explaining sources of finance and methods of management, while clubs across the country began fundraising. A journalist in the *Observer* pointed out the main problem: 'Soroptimist clubs have gathered sums varying from £500 to £2000 with which to begin [property] conversion, only to find that over £10,000 is required for a modest scheme'. Yet demand from low-paid, unmarried women for the privacy of their own 'flatlet' was undeniable. Another (unnamed) organisation 'with flatlet houses for professional women … receive[s] at least one hundred applications for every rumoured vacancy'.[51] Soroptimist clubs persisted, although—even when legacies and loans were utilised—finance remained problematic for their housing schemes, as the case studies below indicate. Amid rising marriage rates among younger generations, post-war Soroptimists began to concentrate on housing the elderly, thereby working on both their stated priorities at once. Not only did clubs receive guidance and encouragement from SIGBI, but they also helped each other with advice and sharing of experience, their network being reinforced by the 'mother-daughter' arrangement (whereby existing clubs helped establish new ones in their vicinity) as well as through club officers attending each other's events.

Soroptimist housing in Manchester

SI Manchester showed interest in housing issues from its early days, initially in co-operation with the local Women's Citizens Association (WCA). After conducting a survey of the substandard living conditions suffered by many families in Manchester and Salford, in 1930 the WCA established a 'Better Housing Council' alongside several other organisations and prominent individuals.[52] Founding SI Manchester President, Dorothy Pilkington was one of those involved, travelling to the Netherlands with the WCA to inspect municipal housing.[53] In 1932 the campaign group sponsored a 'housing week' to raise awareness and Salford Housing Limited (SHL) was established as a public utility company, 'controlled chiefly by women of Manchester and Salford'.[54] Pilkington became vice-chairman of the SHL management committee and an NCWGB member; Lily Reiss was employed as housing manager. At first, SHL bought properties and converted them into family accommodation, but committee members soon decided to build new flats. The result was the Salford Brow estate, the first phase of which opened in 1937, which provided low-rental flats for families and was designed by architects who were aided by the 'feminine touch' of 'expert housewives' (i.e. middle-class ladies).[55]

In 1934 Pilkington wrote an article for the *British Soroptimist* giving details of SHL's projects.[56] Later that year, Lily Reiss gave a talk to SI Manchester on 'the Octavia Hill method of housing management'. This was clearly the paradigm of property management in which Reiss herself operated for SHL and which also influenced the running of Soroptimist properties. According to Reiss, Hill's method was the employment of trained, educated women as housing managers 'who combine business ability with

tact, sympathy and firmness'. Not only were the managers to collect the rent, but they also had to ensure that homes were 'kept clean and in order and [that] repairs [were] promptly and efficiently carried out'. Such surveillance often proved objectionable to tenants, but Hill's methods developed into a type of social work which offered decent employment to educated women, and Soroptimists were perennially interested in developing and expanding suitable middle-class female careers.[57] Moreover, despite its exacting, time-consuming standards, this style of management also provided guidance for volunteers managing social housing. As Reiss put it succinctly, 'both landlord and tenant have their duties'. Her lecture was published in the *British Soroptimist* for members across the country to read.[58]

Obtaining sufficient funding was a problem for Soroptimist housing schemes and raising money for these ventures took time. On its twenty-first birthday (1947) SI Manchester agreed to set up a new fund called the 'special effort fund'.[59] Ten years later, this was renamed the 'House' fund and money-raising for the project began in earnest. A series of social events the following year raised over £237 and a further £344 was added to the fund in 1959. However, what made the project a real possibility was a legacy from a deceased member. In June 1961 the club voted to establish a housing scheme for 'elderly people' and the following year MSHA became a legal entity.[60] To add more capital, club members were asked to either buy shares in the association and/or make a loan with or without interest. There were fifty-seven shareholders in 1980, although not all SI Manchester members held shares.[61]

Unlike many Soroptimist housing associations, MSHA decided—after abortive attempts to buy suitable property—to build flats rather than convert an old house. The total cost of the building in the suburb of Prestwich, named Manshal House, was around £8000, for which eight flatlets with shared bathing facilities were provided.[62] A few years later, to fund an extension, MSHA took out loans from the local council and the Gentlewomen's Work and Help Society, the latter being interest-free. Unfortunately, the extension work took place in the early 1970s, against the background of high inflation rates, shortages of materials and strikes by building workers, so the financial situation became increasingly challenging.[63] Rents were fixed in accordance with fair rent regulations but rose substantially as the rate of inflation increased in the 1970s. Rising interest rates meant that in some years little capital was paid off the council loan.

Soroptimist housing projects depended heavily on voluntary labour. The MSHA secretary, solicitor Isabel Ritchie, undertook all the legal work for the housing association. She stepped down in 1977, but agreed to help her successor 'where legal matters [were] concerned'.[64] Her dedication and donation of both time and expertise, freely given, was priceless. Ritchie's fellow committee members were also generous with their time, for example the committee chairman, Mrs Dora Albrechtsen, was voluntary housing manager for eight years.[65] Other SI Manchester members were not as munificent: in 1966 the MSHA annual report remarked that twenty-four had not subscribed to the housing association at all, while the previous year attendance at the building's open day was said to be 'disappointing'.[66] Yet there is evidence of voluntary action by local Soroptimists in support of the MSHA. On occasions 'working parties' tidied the garden and the club also raised money to pay for garden furniture.[67]

Nevertheless, getting a good supply of volunteers was an increasing problem as new club members proved to be less committed than their predecessors. Rather than the

committee having to deal with tenants' issues at all times of the day or night, MSHA employed one of the tenants as a quasi-caretaker, key-holder and go-between. Yet Ritchie and her colleagues still had a lot of work to do to solve not only the legal and financial issues, but also tenants' problems. In 1976 they discovered that the pre-cast concrete units used in the building's extension were defective and needed remedial work.[68] They sought compensation, but the manufacturers blamed the builders for not fitting the units properly and the builders went into receivership. Fortunately, Soroptimists—including Ritchie herself—were still leaving legacies for the housing work.[69]

One of our research questions was to establish the kinds of people for whom Soroptimist housing associations were providing accommodation. The MSHA archive only contains details for the first eight tenants and some proposed ones. All the suggested tenants were women, even though the MSHA's objects referred to 'elderly *people*'. In practice, Soroptimist housing projects were mostly not only provided *by* women, but also *for* women. Partly this was a consequence of gender-based inequality (discussed earlier in this article), together with perceptions of female solidarity. However, there was also an element of practicality. Originally, Manshal House had eight bedsitting rooms each with kitchenettes, but only two baths, six washbasins, and six toilets, thus it was convenient—and probably reassuring for the tenants—to keep the property single-sex. Moreover, the flatlets were aimed at a certain type of woman: semi-professional with some claim to respectability, if rather poverty-stricken. To obtain the right tenants, the committee wanted women who were personally recommended. Women who were still young enough to be independent and physically mobile were preferred, although of course, since some of them stayed put for many years, they could not be expected to remain that way. The prospective tenants discussed by the committee before the building opened were all aged between sixty and sixty-five. Of those who took up residence, four were retired nurses, two were widows, one was a retired housekeeper and one had worked in local government.[70]

The Manchester example also suggests some practical reasons for the demise of independent Soroptimist housing associations, one of which was increasing government regulation and frequent changes in legal frameworks, such as the Housing Acts of 1964, 1974 and 1980. The 1974 Act required the compilation of a register of housing associations and thereafter the MSHA had to submit a 'return' every year to the Housing Corporation (HC).[71] The 1980 Act required providers of social housing to have a written policy for the selection of tenants available for members of the public to see, but the impact of this on MHSA was not discernible in the archive material.

Financial issues and the availability of volunteers also played a part. As already mentioned, the 1970s extension of four extra flatlets in Manshal House proved problematic, both financially and structurally. As the decade wore on, many committee stalwarts stepped down or died and there were continuing problems getting other club members to volunteer. MSHA lost the convenience of their on-site quasi-caretaker when she moved away. In 1983 two flats became vacant and the management committee were unable to find new tenants, resulting in a loss of over £28 per week in rental income, a difficult situation for a housing association which was struggling financially. A memorandum explained that since the flats were built, 'people's expectations have grown, and there are demands for larger flats … with a warden on call'. It argued that competing accommodation—some now provided by local authorities—was higher standard and

welfare benefits had improved, allowing even those on low incomes to afford more space. Prospective tenants were not willing to share bathroom facilities and given that many remaining tenants were now very old and likely to vacate their flats in the near future, it was expected that 'the problem' would only 'escalate'.[72]

After seeking advice regarding structural alterations to make the flats self-contained, the working party agreed 'after careful consideration, and with regret' to recommend 'disposal of Manshal House to another housing association'. A key consideration was uncertainty whether MSHA possessed 'sufficient supportive resources … in the way of interest and expertise' to carry the project forward. A working party argued that not only was 'a certain amount of knowledge required [but] that a good deal of time and energy has to be devoted to the running of the organisation' and doubted that 'these essential requirements are still available'.[73] These remarks reflect the fact that the provision of social housing was becoming ever more complex and professionalised. As a consequence, the property was transferred in 1984 to Manchester Methodist Housing Association (MMHA) and MSHA was wound up.[74]

Soroptimist housing in Tunbridge Wells

In its early years, SITWD recruited many women with a wealth of professional skills, which would be utilised in the housing project. These women were not only 'leaders in their professions' but also very active in public life, representing the club on local committees, dealing with (for example) adult education, housing, and old people's welfare.[75] The new club quickly adopted SIGBI's key service priorities. In 1949 minutes reported that some members had visited and befriended 'old folk in County Council homes' around the district, while others 'befriended individual old ladies who lived lonely lives'.[76] The annual meeting of 1950 agreed that the club's aim was 'service to the community' with a focus on the housing of 'elderly people'.[77] The following year, SITWD's housing fund was launched.

However, the club was not yet ready to 'undertake a Housing Scheme of its own' and instead wanted 'to contribute funds to an established housing association.'[78] Exploration into collaboration with a local housing association, the Hatton Housing Trust (HHT), took place while SITWD raised money. Funds were obtained by holding a variety of social events, with some club members contributing their business resources to events. For example, Mrs Kay Piper, who owned a ladies' boutique, held a fashion show and Madame Nicolaeva-Legat hosted 'ballet on the lawns', featuring her students at the Russian Ballet School.[79] In 1953, HHT erected some new flats in Tunbridge Wells and SITWD, which aimed to raise £800 towards the cost, nominated four prospective tenants for them.[80] The same year, the town's first woman mayor, Soroptimist Muriel Wells, died and a memorial fund was launched in collaboration with other women's organisations, resulting in the provision of four more flats for 'for old people with small incomes' again in conjunction with HHT.[81] It was only in the mid-1960s that SITWD turned to the provision of its own premises and in 1968, following a significant donation for housing work, TWSHA was registered with its own committee.[82]

As in Manchester, multiple sources of income were accessed. In addition to fundraising events, donations and legacies, TWSHA borrowed money from individual club members and issued shares. Over the years it obtained improvement grants from the

local council and also applied for HC finance. The council set the rent, which was collected by committee members on a rota basis and paid in cash. When interviewed, former TWSHA chairman, Mrs Helen Warriner, recalled that 'in fact it was quite nice because then you met the tenants and [had] a nice chat with them, and they would tell you if there was anything wrong.'[83] This remark suggests that Soroptimists remained influenced by the personalised, supervisory 'Octavia Hill method' of housing management.

In common with many other Soroptimist housing projects, TWSHA chose to convert an old property rather than build a new one. After three properties were assessed by committee members, a house in Madeira Park, near the town centre, was purchased in March 1968 and planning permission obtained for conversion into nine flatlets, with a communal laundry in the basement. Once the work was completed, the house was officially opened by the Mayor (and Soroptimist), Miss Patience Thesiger, in 1969.[84] Some of the apartments were self-contained, but the four ground floor flatlets shared bathrooms and there were only two small washing machines, one spin-dryer and one coin-operated telephone for all the residents. In 1976, a second property was purchased, aided by another generous, anonymous donation. This building, a former dancing school only metres away from the town's famous 'Pantiles', was converted into six self-contained flats and named 'Soroptimist House'. Opened officially in November 1978, the property included a tenants' communal room which was used for SITWD meetings in return for a small fee.[85]

TWSHA's criteria for tenants were understood rather than explicitly stated and selection processes were initially opaque. A later document, looking back on the Association's beginnings, claimed that the original aim was to address the 'lack of suitable accommodation for retired business and professional women of limited income, particularly those who had been in residential accommodation all their lives', a group that might include former live-in servants as well as nurses.[86] Control over choice of tenants—as in Manchester—belonged mainly to committee members, but the anonymous donor whose gift enabled the first house purchase was reported to want power to nominate half the tenants in return for their generosity.[87] Later, like MSHA, the TWSHA was obliged to make reasons for selection public by the 1980 Housing Act. According to their written policy, tenants should be unattached, retired, active women, aged sixty to seventy, with only limited incomes.[88] Preference was given to someone who had been in residential accommodation because of their work and to those living in the borough of Tunbridge Wells, or with close family connections in the area. Despite frequent use in publicity of the gender-neutral term 'elderly people', the flatlets were definitely intended for women. An anonymous club member recalled in her interview that tenants were:

> … elderly women who'd retired from overseas and jobs, lots of single women, widows … and others who simply just not had the means when they came back, say, from teaching abroad or missionary work … and were lonely.'

She added that 'these older women … were genteel'.[89] TWSHA officials obviously had some latitude to select those they perceived to be suitable tenants, although the word 'respectable' was understandably not in the official policy. However, the archives contain very few details of personal circumstances apart from one mention of a retired nurse. There are no surviving applications from prospective tenants or details of their

interviews, but it is quite likely that, as in Manchester, women retiring from health service jobs were offered accommodation. Retired overseas missionaries may have been a significant group in Tunbridge Wells, given its longstanding reputation as a popular retirement location.[90]

Like MSHA, Tunbridge Wells' Soroptimist housing provision relied significantly on the volunteer labour and expertise of a small group of club members. The original TWSHA chairman, hospital matron Clarinda Cox, was a very experienced local councillor and served as chairman of Tunbridge Wells' old people's welfare committee for twenty-four years.[91] Warriner joined the committee because as a solicitor she was able to advise on legal matters. Yet although club members as a whole were encouraged to give their time to the housing project (and some did help with gardening, painting and curtain-making and/or the work of befriending tenants) the bulk of the work fell on the shoulders of TWSHA committee members. After the then-chairman complained in 1981 that 'she was unable to deal with all the work involved with calls from tenants [as well as] supervising the work of contractors',[92] each property had separate 'repair committees' made up of volunteers who dealt with tenant disputes and welfare as well as organising repairs. There were many difficulties, including noise issues, problems with the bathroom facilities, cracked windowpanes and dry rot. In October 1987 the 'great storm' damaged Soroptimist House, with every flat sustaining broken windows from a fallen tree, while two flats suffered even greater damage.[93] In addition to structural issues and tenants' disputes, there were difficulties caring for frail tenants, not to mention the continual need to raise money for major works, such as reroofing. Unsurprisingly, the minute book recorded that 'concern was expressed over the work involved in running the association.'[94]

As already mentioned, increasingly elaborate government regulation of social housing in the 1970s and 1980s impacted Soroptimist housing schemes. The creation of the HC under the 1964 Act and the requirement introduced ten years later for an official register of housing associations, were particularly significant changes. Following a monitoring visit from the HC in 1983, several recommendations were made to TWSHA in accordance with the so-called 'tenants' charter'. Tenancy agreements had to be revised and TWSHA produced an eleven-page document—along with a folder containing information leaflets and a copy of the signed tenancy agreement—to be issued to all current and future residents. As Warriner recalls:

> regulations were getting very restrictive and very complicated. There must have been a new housing act [of parliament] or a new housing association act because I remember thinking it was not fair to volunteers to do all this. We hadn't got the people to do it.[95]

By the 1980s it was quite common for Soroptimists to be married and have young families on top of careers, making time-consuming voluntary work even more problematic. Nevertheless, the HC representative saw much to admire in TWSHA, commenting:

> I would like to focus for a moment on the considerable achievements of [TWSHA]. Remarkable contributions, in time and money, have created an organisation which can offer secure and supportive homes to fifteen elderly ladies. The association has faced and overcome several real obstacles. Some, such as the roof repairs at Madeira Park, would have been much easier to deal with if you had known of the current procedures. This only serves to

> underline the value of keeping in touch with the Corporation and particularly with the [NFHA], for help and advice.[96]

By 1984 difficulties in letting the flatlets with shared bathrooms in Madeira Park were evident and the TWSHA committee 'recognised that over the last 25 years the expectations of the older generation had changed [and] that few women were now in totally residential accommodation when working.'[97] As in Manchester, the committee considered the options of upgrading the accommodation or selling the properties and it even approached the nearby Dartford Soroptimist housing committee for advice.[98] A special meeting of SITWD decided to carry on with the housing project but difficulties continued to mount up. The rising rate of inflation meant that the cost of renovations to Madeira Park increased to £77,000, covering not only the conversion of the 'bedsitters' into three self-contained flats but also the cost of meeting new fire safety requirements.[99] Once again TWSHA had to piece together the finance, with sources including fundraising at the Tunbridge Wells half-marathon, another council grant, and charitable help, but it was a legacy of £36,500 from a club member, Miss Grace Philpott (1894–1990) which finally enabled the work to go ahead. In 1992, the renovated Madeira Park property was reopened and renamed 'Grace Philpott House'.[100]

Yet only a few years later, TWSHA was terminated and the properties handed over to Rockdale Housing Association (RHA), formerly the Sevenoaks and District Old Persons Housing Association. Unfortunately, the available minute books only cover the period until March 1988 so the precise reasons for the disposal in 1996 are not clear, although the possibility of offering the properties to a larger association was suggested as early as 1985. It seems likely that a combination of an ever-increasing administrative burden, continually rising maintenance costs, and the reluctance of more than a handful of club members to commit enough time and energy to the project, led to the decision to close TWSHA. As the anonymous author of a 'brief [one page] history' of TWSHA put it in 1989, 'the future depends of [*sic*] the FULL support of all members in both practical and financial terms. It is the Club's major project'.[101] Ultimately, sufficient support was not forthcoming from members and SITWD turned to other forms of activism.[102] However, the situation was by no means unique to TWSHA since the management of voluntary-owned social housing was becoming ever-more professionalised in the 1990s and the impetus for mergers among housing associations grew even stronger. Of the UK Soroptimist housing charities on which we have data, most closed in the 1990s or early 2000s.[103]

Conclusion

This article has attempted to answer a series of questions about Soroptimist housing projects, the first being, why were they established in the first place? In the mid-twentieth century SIGBI clubs set about providing homes for a relatively small, but significant and neglected group of women, i.e. 'genteel' (or at least, respectable), poor, aging, single women, many of whom had worked all their lives in caring or domestic jobs with accommodation attached. As discussed above, demographic factors in the early twentieth century—combined with gender discrimination in job opportunities, pay and pensions—gave rise to this group, while Soroptimists' awareness of it was probably

heightened by the prominence of hospital matrons within SIGBI. Collectively, Soroptimists aimed to provide their tenants with small, but safe and dignified premises of moderate comfort and adequate privacy. To achieve this, they accessed a variety of financial resources from within the clubs (fundraising, personal loans and donations) and from external sources, including local government and HC loans.

Soroptimist housing associations were not only philanthropic, 'service' projects but also an expression of gender solidarity, with club members trying to help other women less fortunate than themselves. Although in 1984 SIGBI claimed that 'in some of the schemes, men have been included as tenants', this was by no means the norm and does not seem to have happened in either of the case studies presented here.[104] As Jessie Dickinson recalled, when the Soroptimist housing projects began 'the greatest need which was not being met either by the government or the local authority was that of women living alone'.[105] Her words show how influential awareness of gender inequality was in the gestation of Soroptimist housing.

While clearly there were some class distinctions between club members and their housing association tenants, the lack of detailed information about the latter in surviving records makes it difficult to reach firm conclusions about their backgrounds and why they were deemed suitable for such niche housing provision. Soroptimist housing schemes helped elderly women, a term defined at the time as over sixties. However, as is often the case with bureaucratic, institutional archive material, the voices of 'clients' are noticeably absent. Soroptimists sought 'respectable' tenants for the accommodation, but how these women qualified (or even self-identified) as such remains unknown, as do their views regarding the style of hands-on, voluntary property management that their landladies employed. Essentially, the tenants were recipients of charitable help, a fact which, however 'genteel' they were, was surely significant in shaping their relationships with the housing association volunteers.

The case studies presented here do suggest that the schemes were fundamentally grassroots efforts, albeit prompted by wider social and economic issues. Newspapers mention housing as a frequent topic of discussion at national conferences, where conversations were led by Dickinson and the SIGBI housing committee, but the schemes remained locally run. As early as 1975, the idea of a centrally run housing association was proposed and in 1987 there was a similar suggestion at the SIGBI conference that there could be 'an umbrella organisation' to give advice and manage Soroptimist housing projects, while local groups concentrated on providing pastoral care.[106] Neither suggestion was taken up: significantly, Manchester delegates opposed such collaboration on the grounds that they would 'lose [their] autonomy'.[107] This reluctance suggests that they preferred independence, self-identifying as local initiatives, albeit with policy advice from SIGBI. However, there was sharing of information between clubs, with members visiting each other's properties, indicating another source of mutual support. Soroptimist housing associations also had access to membership of the NFHA, its networking, and advice. For example, the NFHA director advised MSHA to 'link up with a neighbouring housing association with its own staff … We have found that a partnership between small associations and those with development and financial expertise is the best way forward'.[108] In addition, Soroptimist clubs could look to other local women's groups for moral support, for example the NCWGB. However, by the 1990s the latter was a declining force and both Manchester's and Tunbridge Wells' branches had closed.[109]

Our sources have been rich in suggesting reasons for the demise of independent Soroptimist housing associations. Both demographic and social changes played a part. Commentary within the records tends to emphasise the changing expectations of older women, especially regarding space and private bathrooms. In 1987 not one of eight people interviewed for vacant flats in Tunbridge Wells was interested in the Madeira Park accommodation 'because of the shared bathroom facilities.'[110] However, shifting expectations regarding bathroom arrangements were only one social change among many. Women who reached adulthood after 1945 were far more likely to be married and those who remained single were less likely to have lived in institutional accommodation. Living standards and even pensions had improved and the gender pay gap was gradually becoming eroded, with the 1970 Equal Pay Act a particularly important milestone. Professional women were beginning to advance in a broader range of careers rather than being confined to nursing or teaching, while the uptake of institutional accommodation had declined. The niche market that Soroptimist housing associations sought to fill was disappearing.

Crucial factors were the twin trends towards increasing regulation of social housing and in favour of professionalisation of voluntary organisations, making purely voluntary work even more onerous and unrealistic for women with full-time jobs, let alone families. As the anonymous SITWD interviewee explained:

> Typically, as the years go by it was like – it was left to two or three club members who would be appointed … but then the burden fell all on their shoulders. It wasn't just a question of being kind or friends to the people there, it was actually running it, maintaining the fabric, meeting all the rules and regulations, building regulations, fire regulations and everything else … a little local landlord, hands on, doing all the repairs. And of course, the elderly people expecting [Soroptimists] to come and do things, so this became very burdensome and that really was the reason in the end why they transferred it on.[111]

Furthermore, even single women had more housing options than hitherto. By the 1970s, building societies were granting mortgages to unmarried women (partly in response to pressure from SIGBI) and local authorities were doing more to provide homes for elderly people.[112] In the voluntary housing sector, letting, rent collection, repairs, administration, legal work and accounting were all functions more frequently carried out by paid staff. Tenants—especially older, frailer ones—perhaps also preferred to live somewhere with a paid caretaker or warden on call.

Propelled partly by government policies for mass transfer of council housing to the voluntary sector, the last thirty years have witnessed ever-growing conglomerates of housing associations, with larger ones taking over smaller societies. For example, MMHA, which took over Manshal House, is now part of the Great Places Group (GPG).[113] By contrast, RHA, which took over the Tunbridge Wells properties, has so far remained a relatively small operation with professional staff providing sheltered apartments and residential care in the Kent town of Sevenoaks. Interestingly, it was founded in 1948 by physiotherapist and local Soroptimist, Beatrice Wilson (1896–1980).[114] Today, GPG and RHA represent diversity within the social housing landscape, amid ever-changing standards of housing and care provision for the elderly.

In conclusion, we argue that Soroptimist housing projects were strongly aligned with SI's core aim of improving women's lives. While many twentieth-century Soroptimists would not have self-described as feminists, SIGBI members did recognise the existence

of gender and age inequality in housing provision and worked to alleviate it. Although their projects have changed, current Soroptimists, including this article's peer researcher, remain committed to grassroots activism which is designed to better the lives of women, locally, nationally and internationally. Our aspiration in combining the perspectives of both an academic and an activist is that this article will not only contribute to the under-researched field of the history of Soroptimism, but also empower today's Soroptimists with greater understanding of their clubs' histories of grassroots activism and inspire them in their future endeavours.

Notes

1. Barbara Pym, *Quartet in Autumn* (London: Picador, 2015), 58–9.
2. For campaigns, see Caitríona Beaumont, '"Where to Park the Pram?" Voluntary Women's Organisations, Citizenship and the Campaign for Better Housing in England, 1928-1945', *Women's History Review* 22, no.1 (2013): 75–96.
3. https://sigbi.org/who-we-are/ (accessed February 5, 2026).
4. SIGBI, *50 Years of Federation* (London: SIGBI, c. 1984), 151, available at https://sigbi.org/cheshire/files/2019/02/50-Years-of-Federation-Sigbi.pdf (accessed August 31, 2025). Research in online databases identified about forty housing associations in England with the keyword 'Soroptimist' in their title and several more established by clubs without using that term or as joint ventures with other organisations, including Rotary clubs. There were also housing associations formed by SIGBI clubs in Wales, Scotland, Jersey and the Isle of Man.
5. See Introduction to this Special Issue.
6. Research for this article was carried out with the co-operation, but not active involvement, of SI Manchester. We could not identify any living person with first-hand experience of MSHA to interview.
7. Beaumont, '"Where to Park the Pram?"'; Valerie Wright 'The Prevention of Rural Depopulation: Housing and the Scottish Women's Rural Institutes, 1917-39', *Twentieth Century British History* 23, no.2 (2012): 336–58; Caitríona Beaumont, *Housewives and Citizens: Domesticity and the Women's Movement in England, 1928-64* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013), Chapter 6. See also Karen Hunt, 'Gendering the Politics of the Working Woman's Home' and Gillian Scott, 'Workshops Fit for Homeworkers: The Women's Co-operative Guild and Housing Reform in Mid-twentieth Century Britain', in *Women and the Making of Built Space in England, 1870-1950*, eds. Elizabeth Darling and Lesley Whitworth (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007). For an important, local study, see Esther Brietenbach and Valerie Wright, 'Women as Active Citizens: Glasgow and Edinburgh c.1918-39', *Women's History Review* 23, no.3 (2014): 401–20.
8. Beaumont, '"Where to Park the Pram?"'; Krista Cowman, '"From the Housewife's Point of View": Female Citizenship and the Gendered Domestic Interior in post-First World War Britain, 1918-28', *English Historical Review* 130 (2015): 352–83; Helen Meller, 'Gender, Citizenship and the Making of the Modern Environment', in *Women and the Making of Built Space*, Elizabeth Darling and Lesley Whitworth, 13–30.
9. Beaumont, *Housewives and Citizens*, 165–9.
10. Beaumont, *Housewives and Citizens*, 169; Daphne Glick, *The National Council of Women of Great Britain: the first one hundred years* (London: NCW, 1995), 138; Beaumont, '"Where to park the pram"', 82.
11. Martha Vicinus, *Independent Women: Work and Community for Single Women, 1850-1920* (London: Virago, 1985). The Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) also provided hostel accommodation for young women. See Caitríona Beaumont, 'Fighting for the "Privileges of Citizenship": the YWCA, Feminism and the Women's Movement, 1928-45', *Women's History Review* 23, no. 3 (2014): 463–79.

12. John Burnett, *The Social History of Housing, 1815-1985* (London: Routledge, 1986).
13. P. Malpass, 'The Discontinuous History of Housing Associations in England', *Housing Studies* 12 (2000): 195–212.
14. Ibid., 203.
15. Ibid., 207.
16. https://www.vahs.org.uk/about/background/ (accessed August 26, 2025). The voluntary sector is sometimes referred to as the 'third' or 'non-profit' sector.
17. David Mullins, 'Social origins and Transformations: the Changing Role of English Housing Associations', *Voluntas* 11, no. 3, (2000): 255–7.
18. Bonnie Emmett, 'Housing for Single Working Women in Interwar London' (PhD diss., Open University, 2023), 77–81.
19. Ibid., 103.
20. Ibid., 183.
21. An exception being Helen McCarthy, 'Service Clubs, Citizenship and Equality: Gender Relations and Middle-class Associations in Britain Between the Wars', *Historical Research* 81, no. 213 (2008): 532–52.
22. Janet Haywood, *The History of Soroptimist International* (Cambridge: SIGBI, 1995), 2.
23. *The British Soroptimist*, 1 (1930-1): 60.
24. The Federation became SIGBI in 1973 and will be referred to by the newer acronym throughout this article.
25. Haywood, *History*, 20.
26. David Doughan and Peter Morgan, *Women's Clubs and Associations in Britain* (London: Routledge, 2007), 133.
27. Elizabeth Crawford, *The Women's Suffrage Movement: A Reference Guide* (London: Routledge, 2013), 415.
28. 1921 England and Wales Census.
29. For statistics on rates of singleness 1911-1951, see Katherine Holden, *The Shadow of Marriage: Singleness in England, 1914-60* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), 27.
30. Mary Stott, 'Sisters Under the Skin', *Guardian*, July 27, 1960, 6.
31. Emily Priscott, *Singleness in Britain, 1960-1990* (Delaware: Vernon Press, 2020), 9.
32. Jane Robinson, *Ladies Can't Climb Ladders: The Pioneering Adventures of the First Professional Women* (London: Transworld, 2020), 259.
33. Doughan and Morgan, *Women's Clubs*, 136.
34. Glick, *National Council of Women,* 138.
35. 'SI Manchester: The first fifty years, 1926-76' Manchester City Library (MCL), M82/6/1; *Kent and Sussex Courier*, April 1, 1966, 4.
36. 'Spinsters who want homes of their own', *Halifax Courie*r, August 19, 1948, 2. There are similarities with the 'spinster flats' built by Glasgow's council in the 1950s. See the 'Time Travel' podcast, https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/m000k79y (accessed July 29, 2026).
37. *The British Soroptimist*, 4 (1934-5): 202. Called Housing (Improvement) Halifax Ltd, the charity was deregistered in 2003.
38. *Leicester Mercury,* March 16, 1938, 13.
39. Pat Thane, '"An Untiring Zest for Life": Images and Self-images of Old Women in England', *Journal of Family History* 25, no. 2 (2000): 235–47.
40. Kathleen Brisfield, 'A Challenge to Women', *Bradford Observer*, September 17, 1941, 2.
41. 'Miss Jessie Dickinson to Retire', *Halifax Evening Examiner*, August 6, 1959, 8.
42. SITWD visitor's book, 1956; MSHA Annual Report, 1975. MCL, M638/3/1.
43. Katherine Holden, 'Imaginary Widows': Spinsters, Marriage and the "Lost Generations" in Britain after the Great War, *Journal of Family History* 30, no. 4 (2005): 388–409.
44. SIGBI, *50 Years of Federation*, 134.
45. Pat Thane, *Foundations of the Welfare State* (London: Longman, 1996), 238.
46. Peter Townsend, *Poverty in the United Kingdom* (London: Penguin, 1979), 788–9.
47. John Boughton, *Municipal Dreams: The Rise and Fall of Council Housing* (London: Verso, 2019), Chapter Four.

48. Widows' pension reform was also a campaign issue for NFWI and NCWGB.
49. Beatrice F. Hyslop, *Soroptimist International Association, Golden Jubilee 1921-1971*, (USA: Soroptimist International Association, 1971), 55.
50. *Halifax Courier*, August 19, 1948, 2.
51. Alison Settle, 'Women's Viewpoint', *Observer,* January 8, 1950, 2.
52. *The Vote*, October 31, 1930, 350; *The British Soroptimist*, 4 (1933-4), 242.
53. *The British Soroptimist*, 1 (1930-1): 43, 86.
54. *Irish Times*, July 3, 1937, 5.
55. *Manchester City News*, June 4, 1937, 5.
56. *The British Soroptimist*, 4 (1933-4), 242.
57. For the professionalisation of housing management in this period, see Marion Claire Brion, 'The Society of Housing Managers and Women's Employment in Housing' (PhD diss., City University, London, 1989).
58. *The British Soroptimist,* 5 (1934-5) 104. For Hill's housing management, see Anne Anderson and Elizabeth Darling, 'The Hill Sisters: Cultural Philanthropy and the Embellishment of Lives in Late-nineteenth Century England, in Darling and Whitworth, *Women and the Making of Built Space in England*, 33–48.
59. 'SI Manchester: looking back over 21 years, 1926-1947'. MCL, M82/6/2.
60. 'SI Manchester: The first fifty years'. MCL, M82/6/1.
61. MSHA Annual Report, 1980. MCL, M528/3/1/1.
62. 'SI Manchester: the first fifty years'. MCL, M82/6/1.
63. MSHA Annual Reports 1963-78. MCL, M638/3/1.
64. Ibid.
65. Ibid.
66. Ibid.
67. MSHA Annual Report, 1979. MCL, M528/2/1/1.
68. MSHA Annual Report, 1976. MCL, M638/3/1.
69. MSHA Annual Report, 1981. MCL, M528/2/1/1.
70. Management committee meeting, 4 July 1963. MCL, M528/1/1.
71. UK Parliament, Housing Act 1974, Ch 44, Part II.
72. 'Memorandum regarding the future of Manshal House', September 1983. MCL, MS528/4/1.
73. Ibid., working party minutes, 26 June 1984.
74. https://www.greatplaces.org.uk/about-us/our-history-and-story/ (accessed 31 Aug. 2025).
75. SITWD member (anonymous) interview, Tunbridge Wells, 14 March 2025.
76. SITWD Executive Committee (EC) minute book, 1946-1957.
77. Ibid.
78. Ibid.
79. *Kent and Sussex Courier*, October 3, 1952, 5; 'Ballet on the Lawn', *Tunbridge Wells Advertiser* n.d. [1950?].
80. SITWD EC minutes, 1946-57.
81. *Kent & Sussex Courier*, January 8, 1954, 8.
82. 'Tunbridge Wells Soroptimist Housing Ltd. A Brief History', March 1989.
83. Warriner interview, Tunbridge Wells, 20 March 2025.
84. *Kent and Sussex Courier*, October 3, 1969, 12.
85. 'A Brief History'.
86. TWSHA tenancy information, 1 Dec. 1983.
87. *Kent and Sussex Courier*, March 29, 1968.
88. TWSHA minutes, 18 April 1983.
89. SITWD member interview, 14 March 2025.
90. John Cunningham, ed., *The Shock of War, Tunbridge Wells: Life on the Home Front 1914-1919* (Tonbridge: Royal Tunbridge Wells Civic Society, 2014), 15.
91. *Kent and Sussex Courier*, 24 Feb 1995, 2.
92. TWSHA minutes, 28 Sept 1981.
93. Ibid., 21 October 1987.

94. Ibid., 9 Jun. 1981.
95. Warriner interview, 20 March 2025.
96. Letter from Monitoring Officer, Housing Corporation, 15th April 1983.
97. TWSHA minutes, 17 Sept 1984.
98. Ibid., 22 Jan 1985.
99. 'A Brief History'.
100. *Kent and Sussex Courier*, May 29, 1992, 5.
101. 'A Brief History'. Emphasis in the original.
102. Described in SITWD's film, *Eighty Years of Making a Difference*, (accessed July 29, 2026).
103. For details of sample, see n.4, above.
104. SIGBI, *50 Years of Federation*, 151.
105. Ibid.
106. TWSHA minutes, 10 Nov. 1987.
107. MSHA Annual Report, 1975. MCL, M638/1/1.
108. Letter from Richard Best, NFHA, 9 April 1984. MCL, M528/4/1.
109. Glick, *National Council of Women*, 261.
110. TWSHA minutes, 19 March 1987.
111. SITWD member interview, 14 March 2025.
112. Priscott, *Singleness in Britain*, 75; Boughton, *Municipal Dreams*, 88, 102, gives examples of council bungalows for the elderly built from the 1950s.
113. https://www.greatplaces.org.uk/about-us/our-history-and-story/ (accessed August 31, 2025).
114. https://www.rockdale.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/Our-Founder-Beatrice-Wilson.pdf (accessed September 11, 2025).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributors

Dr Anne Logan is an Emeritus Reader in the School of Social Sciences at the University of Kent. She is the author of many publications on women's history and/or criminal justice history, including the book *The Politics of Penal Reform: Margery Fry and the Howard League* (Routledge, 2017). In 2023-25, she was the Co-investigator for the AHRC-funded Women's Grassroots Activism (WGA) network. She has also led two community-facing, AHRC-funded projects concerning the histories of women and of refugees in the town of Tunbridge Wells, Kent, working in collaboration with both the local museum and volunteer researchers.

Caroline Auckland holds an MA in Victorian Studies from Birkbeck, University of London, and has a particular interest in historical research, women's history, local history and archival sources. She is passionate about recognising women's contributions to society, for example, through the installation of heritage plaques commemorating women whose achievements might otherwise be overlooked. A Past President of Soroptimist International (SI) Tunbridge Wells & District and President-Elect of SI South East England Region, she is currently her club's Communications Officer. In 2023-25, she was a member of the WGA network steering committee, representing SI Tunbridge Wells.

ORCID

Anne Logan http://orcid.org/0000-0002-9556-4647