



1971

1972

1973



1971

1974



1980

1986



1995

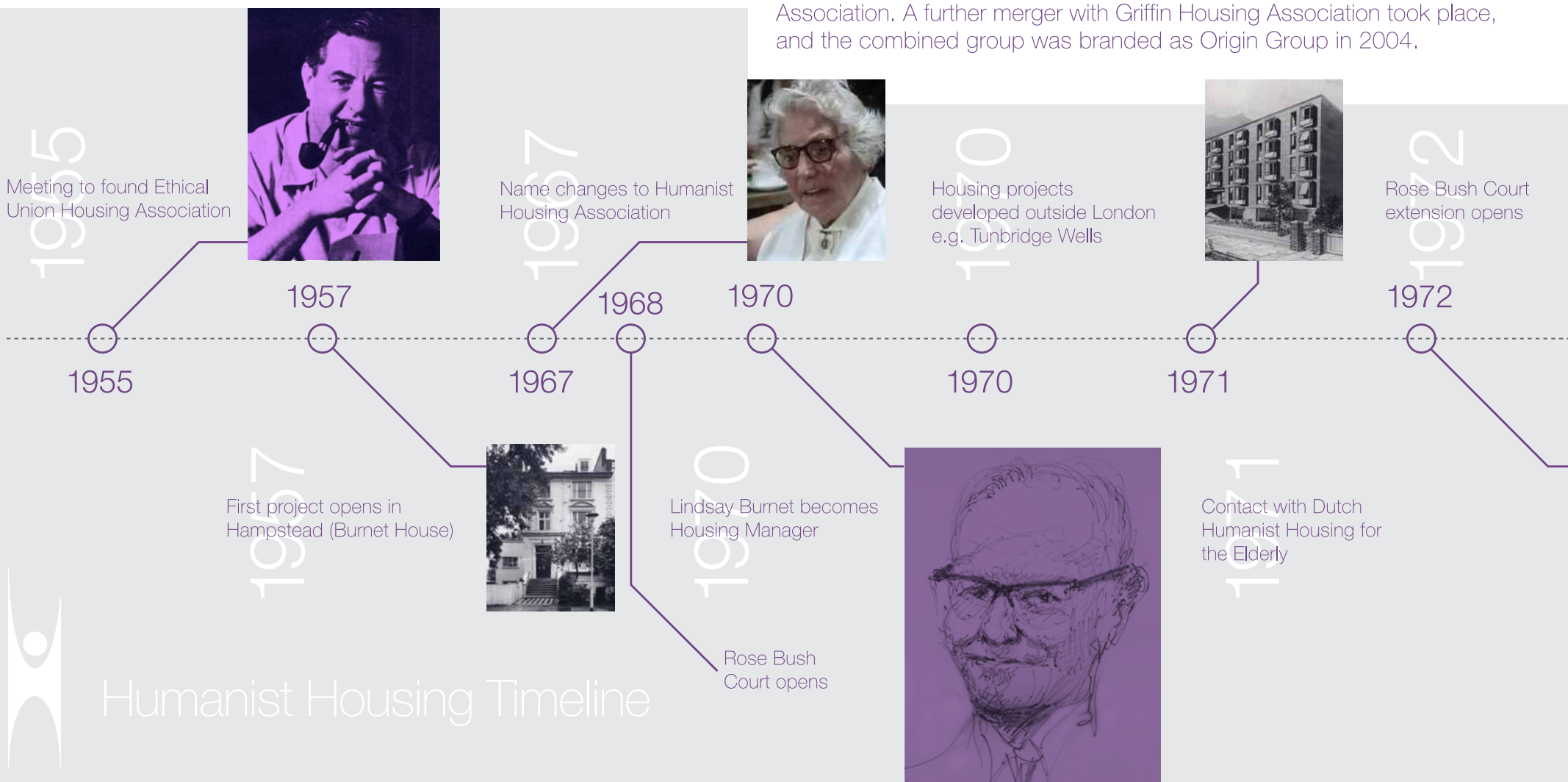
Humanist Housing
Association



Humanist Housing: A History of the Association

Humanist Housing

Humanist Housing effectively started in January 1955. It was first named the Ethical Housing Association, after the Ethical organisation which took the initiative. In the sixties it introduced the word 'humanist' following the foundation of the British Humanist Association and the increasing tendency in public life to use the word 'humanist'. It grew and had a successful existence for 45 years, when it merged with St Pancras Housing Association in 2000, becoming St Pancras & Humanist Housing Association. A further merger with Griffin Housing Association took place, and the combined group was branded as Origin Group in 2004.



1973
Blackham House
opens in Wimbledon



1974

1980
25th anniversary
celebrated



1995
Celebration of 40th anniversary.
'We see housing and care
becoming tailored ever more
closely to tenants' needs



1973

1980

1980s

1986

1995

2000



1974
Housing Act gives
support for Housing
Associations



1980
More provision
for special needs

1986
More active
partnership with
other organisations

2000
After a period of
discussion Humanist
Housing Association
merges with St Pancras
Housing Association

Aims: to provide high quality, value for money, affordable services to meet the housing, care and support needs of older people, people with learning disabilities and other special needs.

Source: Handbook for Tenants

Beginnings

The Ethical movement was established in the USA in the nineteenth century and was concerned with the ideas and the practice and study of right and wrong and the pursuit of values by which individuals in society might live. Humanism is a non-religious belief system that holds that this is the only life we have and we must do the best to create meaningful lives for individuals and societies.

1954



Humanists were sometimes asked by the religious: "What are you doing to help the poor?" There was a strong feeling in the Ethical Union that something should be done by them, and an extraordinary effort was put into the foundation by North London Ethical Humanists.

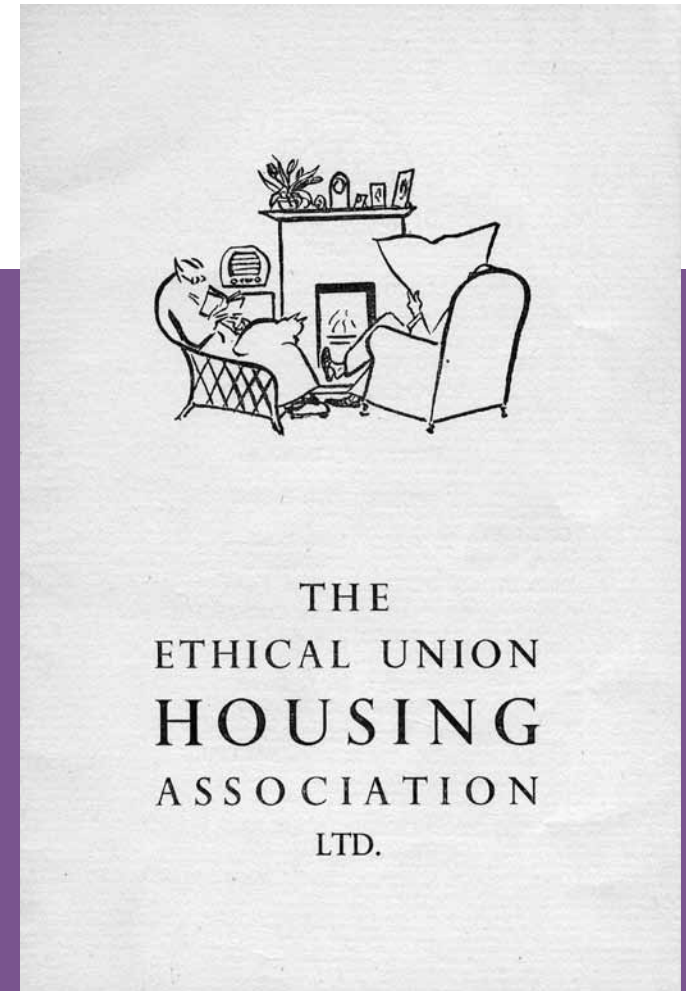
But why set up a new Housing Association when others exist? The period following the end of the Second World War was one of crisis in the provision of housing and many Housing Associations were set up. Many were created by religions or sects and did not offer places to the non-religious. The Humanist Housing Association (HHA), while not excluding people of any belief, gave an opportunity to provide housing for non-believers. Those creating the Humanist Housing Association were, of course, prompted with the altruistic impulse to help people improve their lives. There was a specific intention to concentrate on housing for the elderly.

A group of individuals from the Ethical Union came together during 1954 to discuss practical action and alighted on housing as an appropriate field to become involved with. The Ethical Union provided £75 as a start-up donation as it seemed an appropriate and worthwhile project. A pamphlet was produced with the aims inscribed: these were to house people in need, concentrating on the elderly, to cover couples and individuals, or people with elderly dependents, and with some consideration for people recovering from mental illness. It was called The Ethical Union Housing Association. The opening meeting was to be held on 14 January 1955 – a public meeting to inform and to gather support. The Secretary was to be Mora Burnet, and Lindsay Burnet, Rose Bush and Olga Blackham were among those to become founding members of the Management Committee (whose minutes are an invaluable archival source for this pamphlet).

Following the foundation of the British Humanist Association, the Ethical Union Housing Association changed its name in 1965 to Humanist Housing Association (HHA).



Rose Bush, founding member of The Ethical Union Housing Association



Humanists were sometimes asked by the religious:
“What are you doing to help the poor?”

Raising money and gaining support

At the first meeting in January 1955 a Management Committee was set up and a discussion about raising money took place. The first public meeting was held at Conway Hall in April 1955. The enthusiasm for the project was seen in the large attendance of 90 people.

1955

Mora Burnet was the main speaker – she was to be a tower of strength for the Humanist Housing Association for many years.

The founders sought financial support through cash or Loan Stock. The first donor was the Hampstead Ethical Society. The owners of Conway Hall, the South Place Ethical Society, donated £500. The Rationalist Press Association put forward £2,500 and the Ethical Union contributed £4,500. The National Corporation for the Care of Old People gave a grant of £3,000. This was enough to cover expenses and get up and running.

A successful AGM was held on 25 September 1955. Again there was a good attendance and the meeting was enlivened by a Danish film about housing the elderly. In a pamphlet produced later by Lindsay Burnet, local humanist groups were urged to join in the development of the Housing Association. It was agreed to produce more publicity for a Housing Association; at a later point Lindsay Burnet, in a letter sent to all the Ethical/ Humanist groups in the country, wrote enthusiastically of how it was only necessary to have a compass, a tape measure and a map in order to get going on finding buildings suitable for turning into Humanist housing.

The search was on for the first building. After a wide search it was decided to buy a four-storey late-Victorian house in Burgess Hill. A Mortgage and an Improvement Grant were negotiated with Hampstead Borough Council. Plans were drawn up for 14 bed-sitting room flats with their own cooking facilities and shared bathrooms, with a self-contained flat for a warden.

The aim was to provide self-contained accommodation, but at first some bathrooms were shared, which was not thought ideal. The humanist value given to individual autonomy was brought into the housing movement, whereby the ability (especially for older people) to run their own lives was considered important. The Housing Association projects also had wardens who could provide practical and personal support.

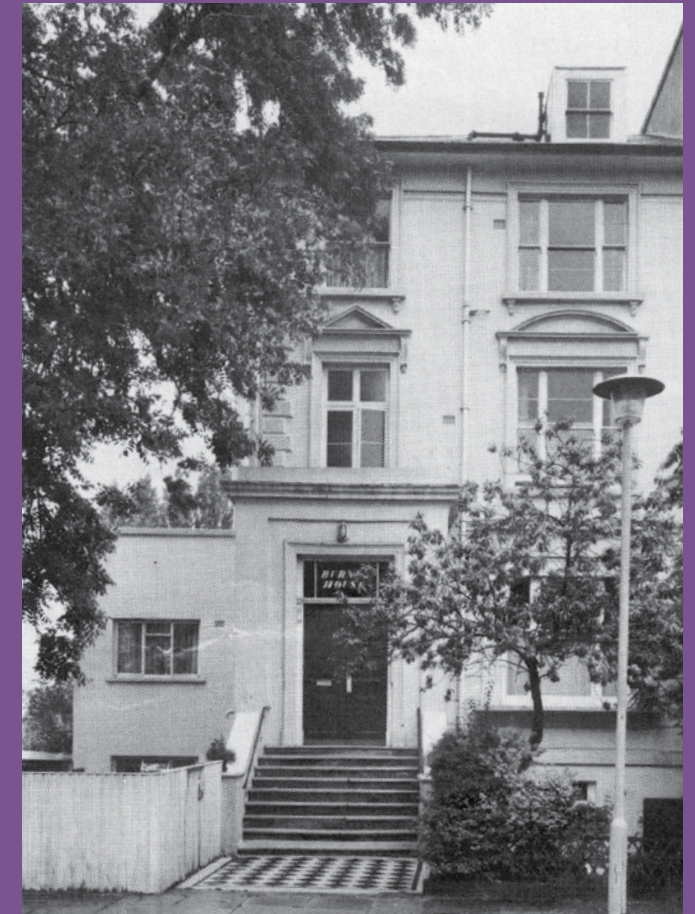


Lindsay Burnet, founding member of The Ethical Union Housing Association

On the opening of the first House there were many inquiries, "Humanists in particular showed great interest in finding a place". The allocation was to be inclusive of the religious and the humanist alike.



Burnet House



Teething Problems

The construction of the first HHA project, Burnet House, was not without its problems. There was an argument with the Ministry of Housing who had to provide the Improvement Grant. A point of contention was whether to provide central heating.

The Management Committee thought this was particularly important for elderly people. Eventually it was agreed and Burnet House was the first place to have a grant for central heating. The builders went bankrupt and neighbours got a Court Injunction to stop the noise of the new heating boiler! Nevertheless Burnet House was thought to be a triumph when it opened in 1957.

Patience was rewarded and the first tenants moved in on 14 March 1957 after two years' work. An asset to the property was a communal garden – something which HHA tried to include wherever possible. The tenants were visited by members of the Management Committee, which became a longstanding practice. Parties were held in the Summer and at Christmas. A mark of HHA's increasing recognition came from the visit of the Mayor and Mayoress who attended the Christmas Party in 1960.

Quickly inquiries came in asking about the availability of flats. Humanists in particular showed great interest in finding a place. (The allocation was to be inclusive of the religious and the humanist alike). There was certainly a demand.

By November 1960 the HHA Management Committee was beginning to talk about advancing with a further property. A promising site was found in Worple Road, Wimbledon. The site lent itself to a two-storey block with 20 self-contained flats, each with its own kitchen and bathroom. The architect, Clive Alexander, was involved in the construction of HHA buildings for 20 years; he had a special interest in building for the elderly and had a very satisfying relationship with HHA. The second project was to be called Blackham House in honour of Olga Blackham who was an invaluable member of the Management Committee, and her brother Harold Blackham who was a thinker and leader in the Ethical Union. At a later stage he became President of the HHA. He was much admired, and when Blackham House opened in 1963, it was seen as a tribute to him, (indeed the naming of many of the projects after activists, was seen as a way of noting the considerable efforts of the volunteers who worked so effectively behind the scenes).

1957

Blackham House



Radio publicity

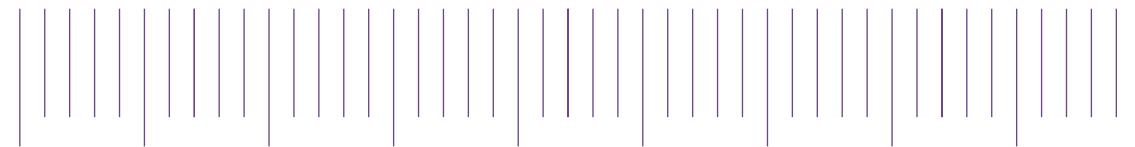
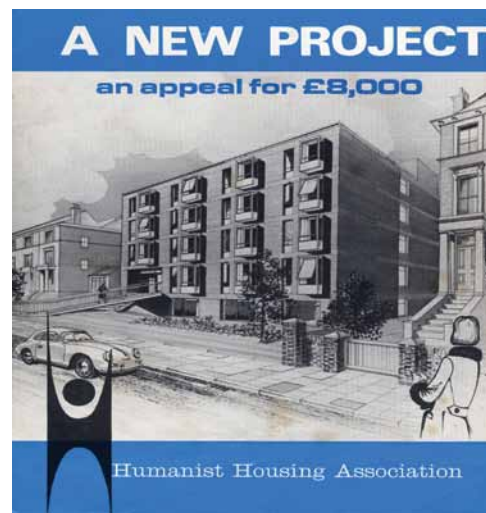
Later Presidents of the HHA included Margaret Knight, a philosopher and humanist, who caused a furore by giving a series of talks on morality without God on BBC radio in 1965.

Lord Ritchie Calder, a writer and journalist particularly in scientific fields, gave voice to an appeal on the BBC Home Service for funds for the Humanist Housing projects. The consequence was a very useful addition to the funds. Raising money was a persistent effort. Much finance came from the local Councils, particularly in relation to the Housing Corporation.

The minds of the Management Committee focused steadily on possible new projects. A new building in Parkhill Road in Hampstead became named as Rose Bush Court after Rose Bush, who had been an active individual with much drive and a concern for the well-being of tenants. She had been elected Secretary with an honorarium.

Rose Bush Court was opened in 1968 and was part of the very successful growth of the HHA. Rose herself was forceful in moving HHA forward and took a particular interest in meeting and talking to tenants.

1965



Improving standards

Parkhill Road, Hampstead was one of the boldest developments so far. It had an adjoining development which considerably increased the number of potential developments. (There was a nervous moment when nearby residents complained about the noise of the builders!)



Rose Bush Court was built to high specification and I have been told by a few former members of the Council of Management that the Humanist Housing developments were widely considered to be of very high standard. There were laundry facilities, interconnection between different parts of the building, a heated ramp for access which was very appropriate for the elderly, and an extensive garden. HHA had always been keen to see that a view of some greenery was visible.

There was a need to move further from London, where more land was available and costs might be less. An example of this was a house at Pembury, near Tunbridge Wells. This became an area with several houses, helped by good knowledge of the architect and builders in the locality. Local humanists often became involved, especially in the early stages. A site in Morden, London, could not go forward because planning permission was not granted. Perhaps, but this is speculation, a Conservative Council did not wish to support a humanist venture.

In the subsequent decade growth led to a situation where HHA owned and managed 18 houses. The economic climate for development was good. They were gaining a high profile, as the appointment as President of Lord Willis, a well-known playwright and writer, demonstrates. Diana Eldaly-Rookledge became Chair in 1971, a position she held, with some gaps, up to the reforming of HHA in 2000. Her professional knowledge of personnel work and her commitment to the development of humanism in housing were very important. She was good at gaining publicity and gave a talk to the annual conference of the British Humanist Association which made its mark. She was a sterling Chair and commented, when asked what arguments and rifts there may have been in the HHA, that disagreements were always dealt with rationally.

There was a growing need for more professional staff. Lindsay Burnet was appointed into a paid post as Housing Manager, and the admin was assisted by a Secretary. The wardens were already paid professionals. Staff to deal with the finances were also needed. There was the hope that local councils and the National Federation of Housing Associations would support HHA proposals.



Mary Webster House

In the subsequent decade growth led to a situation where HHA owned and managed 18 houses. The economic climate for development was good.



The Chestnuts



Pennington Manor

Tenants

There was much discussion of the type of tenant HHA should cater for. The very elderly should be included, an elderly person with a supporting relative or friend might be appropriate.

The question of including disabled tenants was also discussed. The age limit of over 60 was kept to, but it was queried whether young people might be considered. (In today's very difficult times, perhaps it would consider providing tenancies to young people.)

The Management Committee members were all concerned that the tenants should maintain their own independence, have help if it was needed, and have scope for communal relationships. Social events helped develop the ethos of the HHA projects. On one occasion John White organised a poetry reading for tenants; he was a well-known humanist who emphasised the value of the arts to humanists.

Although HHA had expanded considerably in its first 20 years and was to continue to, there were difficulties – governmental interventions which made the task for all Housing Associations more difficult. The Housing Finance Act of 1972 changed the way housing associations were to be financed. A fair rent scheme was introduced – although not against 'fair rents' the HHA could see the need for reorganisation especially of the finances. There was much discussion within the HHA about whether they could continue to expand in the same way, and certainly there was an expectation that an accountant was needed to oversee the finances.





The age limit of over 60 was kept to, but it was queried whether young people might be considered.

Large growth in the Housing Association movement

A Special General Meeting was held to discuss the future. The Housing Manager spoke on 'reducing subsidies, possible deficits, and rent inflation'. Also there was mention of amalgamation of housing associations.

Lindsay Burnet was very concerned that development might become stagnant; he felt that he had been appointed as the Development manager and if development was to be slowed down or paused he could not stay in the post. His resignation was significant, for he had been a key figure since the beginning, but he remained an influential member of the Management Committee.

The 1974 Housing Act favoured the promotion of Housing Associations and wanted far more 'social housing'. This made finances available for further development and by the end of the decade HHA managed approx 1000 flats. However with the leadership of Mrs Thatcher in 1979 there was an 'about turn'. Far from supporting housing associations, the government insisted that they should compete with each other for limited resources. The desire for cheap social housing to be rolled out did not fit the Housing Association pattern. The quadrupling of oil prices also had an impact on money available for housing. Contact with the Dutch Humanist Housing for the Elderly followed and it was obvious how well supported they were by the state (this was true of many humanist projects in Holland.)

1974

The 1974 Housing Act favoured the promotion of Housing Associations and wanted far more 'social housing'.



Burnet House

Inflation led to an increase for the cost of building and of purchasing land. There was nevertheless still the desire to expand geographically in the 1970s. Oxford and Cambridge were suggested and a successful project was erected in Cambridge – still standing and functioning. A large proportion of the buildings remain today after sale by HHA or Origin but still with the same aims. HHA had to face the fact that Burnet House was no longer fit for use and it was subsequently sold to Camden Council.

In 1973 Diana Eldaly-Rookledge retired temporarily as Chair and Rose Bush was elected into her place. In 1975 Angela Willans (a journalist and counsellor) became President – HHA could still rely on well-known people to support them. When the International Humanist and Ethical Union held an international conference in the UK, a visit to Robert Morton House was arranged.

The development of new homes in the 1970's continued apace in Chelmsford, Essex Tunbridge Wells, Farnham, Chingford, Surbiton - although it was to become more difficult to continue with such steady development. The HHA Management Committee could look back on enormously successful achievements. There were several developments in the Tunbridge Wells area, partly because of a connection with an architect who was interested in developing residences for the elderly. It was necessary to appoint a Director for that area. The well-known humanist and philosopher Harry Stopes-Roe became President.

Professionalism

By the mid-seventies more staff were needed, and, almost as a statement of intent, an Acquisition Manager was appointed. A Lettings Officer was also needed.

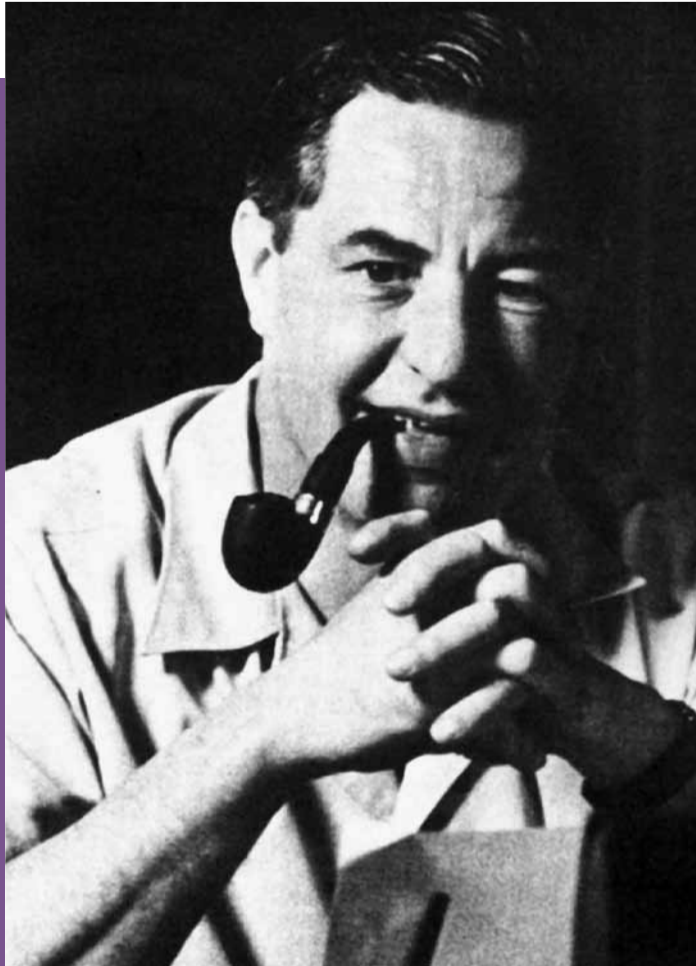
Peter Heales, who was Chair for a period wrote in retrospect:

“Humanist Housing became one of those associations that stagnated. It has barely expanded since the early eighties. It managed to maintain high standards in terms of its management of existing stock, and expanded somewhat by entering into a number of arrangements to manage property owned by other associations.”

In 1980 HHA was able to celebrate its 25th anniversary. Considering the modest beginnings in 1955, everyone was impressed by the way the association had developed. At the time of the anniversary the Humanist Housing Association held over six hundred flats on nineteen sites.

An account of the HHA was printed in 1980. The tenants came from all walks of life, of which half were bound to be selected from local authority lists. There could be waiting lists. There seemed to be no reports of difficulties between the tenants, probably because of the selection process and the mellow age of the tenants. Some lived to a great age and stayed until their end. Many of the tenants remained quite active, some involved in voluntary activities or helping with work in the gardens. Tenants were offered something to read: an account of humanism was provided for tenants, many of whom were not aware of the meaning and development of the philosophy of humanism.





Ted Willis

There were naturally many wardens, they were unsung participants and their work and humanity played an enormous part in the success of the Humanist Housing Association. The conversations held with members of the Management Committee and tenants enabled a good knowledge of the houses and gave the chance to sort out any requirements. In the anniversary report mention was made of the work on the Management Committee of Mora Burnet, she was good at dealing with tenants and as a committee member was quietly forceful and very persistent.

By 1980 the properties were valued at nearly £11,000,000. Mortgages came from some Local Authorities. Money was tightly controlled by the Department of the Environment and essential comforts and style were not always provided for. Members of the Humanist movement could be very generous, and benefactors enabled support for new housing and provisions for houses which allowed the very high standards to be maintained. The South Place Ethical Society, which made a £500 loan in the initial stages of HHA, were able to be paid back.

People found the management “sober, serious, careful, steadily organised – also of warmth and friendship and humour among the tenants and staff.”

25th anniversary

According to the 25-year account: 'So that our charitable funds could continue to be used up in balancing our books because of rent restriction, we set up a charitable trust in 1976. Since then we have asked for all gifts to be made payable to the Friends of Humanist Housing Association.' This was money which could be used for purchase of extras and luxuries for the various houses.

1980



There was an attempt to get the tenants more involved in the management. Two tenants became members of the Management Board, one of whom stayed on for many years. Tenants were involved in arranging social events. This was in line with the humanist belief in democracy. A Tenants' Handbook was prepared. A leaflet was produced on the subject of non-religious funerals. A few tenants stayed until their last moment, their passing sometimes being accompanied by a devoted warden. Naturally longstanding volunteers doing much for HHA themselves aged, and Rose Bush, Mora and Lindsay Burnet, and Constance Dowman all of whom gave notable work passed away.

There was a move in the Housing Association movement to deal with more specialist tenants; this was particularly because the Government and local government felt it was not their duty to support tenants who had no particular hardship. There was some discussion of including special needs people, such as those with Alzheimer's Disease and those with special learning needs, but on the whole it was felt that HHA houses were not suited for such special needs. Although in its later years the HHA had many links with houses which were supported for their special needs – such as tenants with ex-mental health issues or people with learning disabilities. This led to a great increase in the necessary numbers of staff, which the HHA was not really well structured for. HHA premises were increasingly subject to rules and regulations. What had started as a well-meaning and successful project had become a professional organisation subject to the necessary checks.

The need to follow Health & Safety regulations and other strictures affected both staff and tenants and was part of the move towards professionalisation. The number of office staff increased, notably in the need to prepare funds for the audit by accountants. The installation of a computer, which was not found easy at first, led to a need for more training and specialist advice. The HHA during the late 70s and 80s was a growing organisation – a measure of its long-term success. The association was being better run, and the Houses were being built to better standards.

The brochure published to mark HHA's 40th anniversary noted: '...we are now an established, professional business, with 129 staff and an annual turnover of £3.4 million'. A truly remarkable development from the single project which began 40 years earlier. An important development by this time was the management and support for sheltered flats. Such support became truly important by the final decade of HHA's existence. It brought HHA's expertise in management to other associations and valuable financial resources to the HHA.

Political developments

A difficulty came with the introduction of the Community Charge (popularly known as the Poll Tax) in 1992, which led to separating the tax payment from the rent – leading to substantial changes in the accounting. There was increasing difficulty of gaining government money for housing development. In the frequent discussions of strategy by the Management Committee it was felt that creating new properties was still necessary, but that it would have to be done with private finance.

There was a concentration on the high maintenance of existing Houses. An increasing use of leasehold arrangements and much debate on whether to continue to grow were discussed. At a strategy day 'no growth' was not seen as an option, but there was now the big question of whether HHA could go it alone. There was the unanswerable conundrum – money was needed to grow, but money would not come in without growth.

A difficulty was that suitable new members of the Management Committee were not coming forward. Perhaps this was due to an emphasis on administration, finance and regulations rather than the early idealistic thrust of creating housing for non-believers. It was necessary to turn to the Housing Corporation for finance for repairs. There had been a large growth in secular housing associations which left no special place for Humanist Housing. A new brochure was produced as a means of attracting new tenants. Nevertheless staff and committee members were still looking for new sites.

The Management Committee continued to manage and people found them sober, serious, careful, and steadily organised – also of warmth and friendship and humour among the tenants and staff.

1992

1992 chairman and director



Merger

By the mid 1990s, HHA was an organisation with commitments too large to deal with. Zoe Littleton, the HHA Chief Executive said that there was much to be done to bring the housing stock up to high standard – which was expensive at a time when little housing association finance was forthcoming. Private finance and continuing potential tenants enabled HHA's work to expand.

The first contact with St Pancras Housing Association was about the repossession of a sheltered scheme in 1998. But at this stage it was still the aim of HHA for growth and contact with the Housing Corporation for financial support. In 1999 St Pancras Housing Association approached the Humanist Housing Association as being interested in a discussion of ways in which they could work together. A working party was established and HHA agreed to progress the discussion with St Pancras Housing Association. Committee members were concerned with how the two organisations would work together, but increasingly the possibility of a merger seemed likely.

Zoe Littleton and Adrian Norridge (who was the Chief Executive of St Pancras Association) could see the advantages of a merger. They were impressed with the way the Humanist Board settled down to examine the possibility – a humanist way of reaching decisions. There was wide agreement that if Humanist HA joined St Pancras HA the sense of identity and the service ethic should not be lost.

The Humanist Housing Association had to face:

- Rising maintenance costs;
- The widespread secular Housing Associations;
- The need for the housing of people with special needs.

For over a year there was discussion of whether the HHA aims could be continued, the high standards maintained, and the staff and managers of the two organisations could work together. Strategy meetings and working parties were held in 1999. By January 2000 the weight of the Management Committee was behind the merger and early in the new millennium a Special Meeting was held for HHA members in which it was agreed to merge. The new name was to be St Pancras and Humanist Housing Association



Rose Bush Court Garden in 2012

Rose Bush Court was built to high specification and considered to be of very high standard. A heated ramp for access was very appropriate for the elderly and there was an extensive garden.

There was negotiating to make sure that staff positions would be sustained and representation of management would be properly maintained. In general there was satisfaction that the aims of the HHA continued to be pursued. There was some disappointment among some humanists when the name was subsequently changed to Origin, thus losing the association with humanism, but those involved in the work of HHA could look back on 45 years of good work.

Peter Heales, a former Chair of the Humanist Housing Association, wrote in an article in the Ethical Record: (July/August 2000):

“What then of the forty-five year record of Humanist Housing? The association came into being at a specific time when humanists felt a specific need. One group of people who needed and deserved better housing were being excluded because they did not have a suitable religious affiliation. The ideals and dedication of its founders helped it pioneer modern standards, and the Association has always been a credit to its founding movement in the way it served its tenants.”

Were the founders of Humanist housing viewing the current situation, it is doubtful whether they would see any need to set up an expressly Humanist association. They would, no doubt, be concerned about progress and standards in social housing at large. The success of HHA over four decades came from the dedication of those who saw the need for homes of the highest standard for the elderly.

Origin Housing continues to provide essential affordable housing and support services. Our aim is to help people and neighbourhoods to thrive.



Normanhurst, Cambridge



1955

1957

1967

1970