

# THE WAY WE WERE

## Westdale: Canada's First Planned Community

MALCOLM J. A. HORSNELL

Westdale, in Hamilton, Ontario, is Canada's first planned community. By "planned community" I mean a community planned from the beginning as fully integrated and self-contained on previously undeveloped land, in contrast to one that grows up *ad hoc* or is not self-contained.

Westdale is bounded by Highway 403 to the east, Main Street West to the south, Cootes Drive to the west, and Cootes Paradise of the Royal Botanical Gardens to the north.

Various organizations, literature, and websites incorrectly claim Don Mills, Ontario, as Canada's first planned community. The "Muddy York: Toronto Real Estate Blog" on its website claims this, as does Will Ferguson's book, *Canadian History for Dummies* (Toronto: J. Wiley & Sons Canada, 2005, p. 336). Don Mills, announced only in 1953, is Canada's first *post-World War II* planned community.

A report commissioned by the City of Hamilton says that "The neighbourhood of Westdale Village had its beginnings in 1911" and "prides itself in being one of the first planned communities in Canada" ("Commercial Market Analysis: Westdale Village BIA," 2009, p. 1). Based on new city building ideas, architect Robert Pope "purposefully created Westdale Village as a self-contained neighbourhood" with a "concentric circle configuration of the street layout." On page 2 the report notes that Westdale was to be centred around a local commercial district for approximately 1,700 envisioned households. As of 2009, after so many decades, "the pride of being *the first planned community in Canada* has begun" (p. 55, italics mine). Of course many of Westdale's heritage-minded residents have prided themselves on this fact for years.

In 1911, J. J. McKittrick (McKittrick Properties) bought and promoted 100 acres called Hamilton Gardens, later expanded to 800 acres, the land on which Westdale now lies. Surveys were carried out in 1913, and Hamilton annexed the holdings in 1914. Of Westdale's 16 component parts, 13 surveys were registered between 1920 and 1931; only three were registered later, in 1939, 1941, and 1944. Construction began in the 1920s. Most residents arrived between 1925 and 1930. Westdale was nearly complete by 1931, with the last two areas finished by 1951.

In 1918, F. Kent Hamilton took over management of McKittrick Properties. He produced a multipage pamphlet,

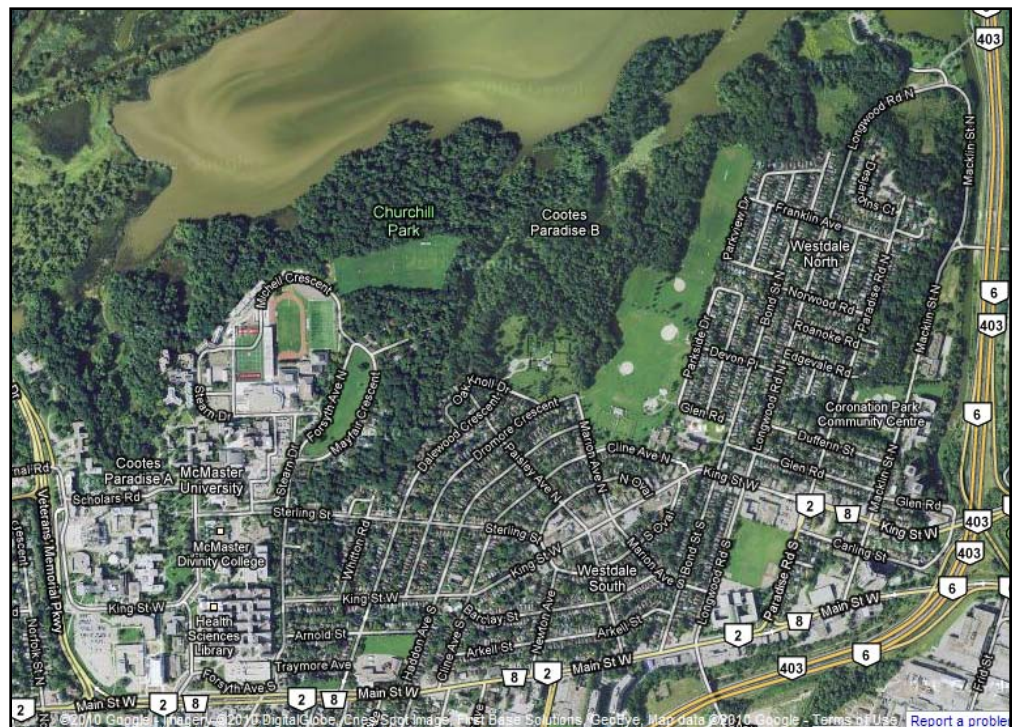
*Beauty Spots in Westdale*, to promote the community to prospective residents. The centre spread shows a map of Westdale with all the proposed streets.

Commonly called Westdale Village, because of its village-like ethos, Westdale has its own shopping area at the centre of the residential community. The planners provided areas for homes, stores, apartments, and what today we call mixed use (residential above stores). Westdale provides the daily services a family needs, such as shopping (groceries, clothes, shoes, pharmacy, computers), gas stations, restaurants, medical services, lawyers, places of worship (Canada's oldest Reform synagogue moved to Westdale in 1952), a large park, schools, public transit, and more, all within walkable distances. An Art Deco movie theatre still exists; today it and other locations in Westdale are sometimes used for movie shoots. Families can raise their children through all levels of schooling, including university. (McMaster University relocated from Toronto to Westdale in 1930.) As a walkable community, Westdale is not dependent on the automobile, in contrast to Don Mills and other so-called planned communities.

In summary, Westdale is Canada's first planned community, entirely planned and funded by the private sector starting in 1911, built in the 1920s and 1930s, and largely settled by 1931.

*Malcolm Horsnell is the consulting editor of Neighbourhood News & Views.*

Sources on page 30



Map ©Google 2010

Mailing Label