

Herbert Payne Oxfordshire Blue Plaque unveiling

Payne's Day 17 May 2025

It is with the greatest pleasure, and with a terrific sense of honour, that I am able to unveil this plaque to my local hero, Herbert Payne. Unfortunately his name has almost been lost to history, and not many Banburians now know about him, but Banbury and its people owe him a great debt, for he was the driving force behind replacing Banbury's worst private slum housing with good solid council homes *before* the First World War. So who was he?

Herbert Payne was born in Uppingham in Rutland in 1882. He came to Banbury in about 1904 and worked at Mawles, the ironmongers, and then set himself up in business, selling cutlery. He lived in Queens Road and, later, Bridge Street with his wife, Florence, and their daughter.

In November 1906 Herbert Payne and William Timms were the first members of the Independent Labour Party to be elected to the Town Council; Payne was just 24 when he was elected. He was a respectable radical, a Congregationalist, a pacifist, a teetotaler, and a vegetarian. Above all, though, he was a great speaker, described as someone who could really hold a crowd, with a voice full of resonance and power. His opponents called him 'the Cow Fair Roarer'.

His obituary in the *Banbury Advertiser* describes him as

a forceful character and his earnest advocacy of proposals which he thought were for the public good often led him into direct conflict with others, and, carried away by his fervour, he failed very often to appreciate the opposing views of others and frequently by this attitude lessened his influence on his hearers.

But Herbert Payne was not just a good speaker: he was a Councillor who got things done. Almost immediately, in early 1907, he achieved an improvement in the wages of the borough's workmen and made waves on the Education Committee. He wanted improved sewerage in Grimsbury, better lighting, heating in schools, and many other municipal improvements. Most importantly he instigated the 'Housing Investigation Committee' which ultimately led to the Council deciding to build its first Council houses.

During all of his election campaigns, Payne campaigned for housing reform. In Boxhedge Square in Neithrop, an area notorious for its squalour, stench, and unruly behaviour, Payne addressed a large crowd about

the rotten and bad houses with foul drains, leaky roofs, small windows and dirty walls... only inhabited because the people had nothing better to go to.

At that time Banbury had some infamous slums: Calthorpe Street, Boxhedge Lane, and Cherwell Street. By 1911 many of these were unfit for habitation and severely overcrowded, and some of the houses had no backs to them.

Banbury was one of the very few shire towns to build council housing before the First World War. This was entirely due to Payne's energy, idealism, and heightened sense of moral outrage. Following his vigorous campaigning, the Council took the decision to build in 1911.

The houses they built were, and are, very fine (go and look at them; they are the red roofed houses in the centre of Kings Road, the next street to this one). The 40 houses built in 1913 were designed by garden-city architects Lucas and Lodge – they were built with a scullery, a larder, a copper, a coalhouse, a tabletop bath, a gas stove, and with a yard and WC at the rear. They are now included in the Queens Road Conservation Area. The street is a lasting testament to Payne's achievements.

As for so many, the First World War changed everything for Payne. He was young enough to join up but didn't because he was a pacifist to his core. As a conscientious objector he was eventually arrested and imprisoned. He came home to Banbury in 1919 but there was no return to the Council or to his tub-thumping public speaking. He was a broken man, and the War is said to 'have broken his heart.'

He died, aged 40, on 23rd March, 1922, in the Warneford Hospital – a 'lunatic asylum' – of 'acute confusional insanity and exhaustion'.

My grateful thanks go to all who have helped and funded this endeavour: Banbury Town Council, Banbury Civic Society, North Oxfordshire Socialist Alliance, who first suggested this Blue Plaque – and, not least, to Ruth and Ceri, whose guests we all are, for their terrific enthusiasm for the project.

This man is only too worthy of this honour. I am so proud to now unveil a Blue Plaque to the great Herbert Payne.
