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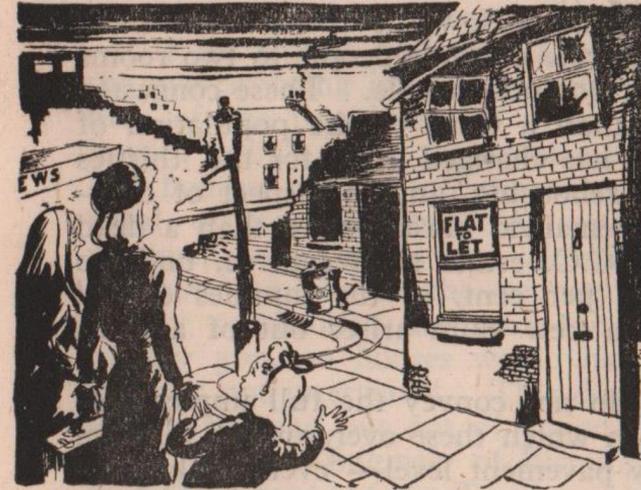
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I

A Nation of Slum Dwellers



*"I don't take the
view myself that
we were a nation
of slum dwellers
before the war."*

—CHURCHILL.

TO-DAY THERE IS great talk of the housing problem, and among the select institutions of the ruling class, the House of Commons and the B.B.C., this talk has become a major smoke screen to obscure the more direct issues of the war. One is tempted to repeat the old jibe about 'Homes fit for Heroes', but perhaps it is better to attempt an examination of facts which will give us some idea of the nature and magnitude of the housing needs.

For the time being we will ignore the special effects of the war, and give some facts which illustrate the housing facilities that existed for the workers just before the outbreak of war.

At that time it was estimated that, in London alone, there was a deficiency of something in the neighbourhood of half a million houses.

"In 1931 nearly two-thirds of all metropolitan families had no family front door; in London, at any rate, the Englishman's home is his neighbour's. Only 37 per cent. of London families enjoy a house or a flat or a maisonette. The remainder share their homes with other people, with no structural divisions between their domestic intimacy and that of their neighbours, and generally with the joint use of such necessities as a bathroom, if any. No fewer than 32 per cent. of families in inner London have been found

to be living in groups of three or more families to an undivided house."

(*Metropolitan Man*. Robert Sinclair.)

There exists, of course, a distinction between mere lack of privacy and overcrowding. The legal limit for overcrowding is two persons to a room. Life at this closeness may seem unbearable to the average suburban villa dweller, but a survey of the London County Council in 1936 revealed that 310,000 people lived at the two-a-room level, while a further 387,000 lived in even more overcrowded conditions. Living below the two-a-room level, but still at or above the rate of three people to two rooms were more than another 800,000 people. These congested families totalled more than a third of the population of London. The position has changed little, for the 'thirties were a period of slow rehousing, and in respect of overcrowding the law has remained hardly more than a dead letter. Even in the L.C.C. estate at Becontree, built to relieve overcrowding, 4 per cent. of the families exceed the official limit, and a new slum arises out of a slum clearance effort.

Yet these figures do not convey the full unpleasantness of the conditions in which these overcrowded families live. Some live below pavement level—"even in the present decade there were 20,000 basement dwellings in London, medically marked as unfit for human habitation!" (Lewis Mumford *The Culture of Cities*, 1938). It is estimated that these basement dwellings housed 60,000 people. Such homes are theoretically illegal, but here again the law has operated only sparingly.

In Bermondsey the last census found four families of nine and ten families of eight living in one room homes. In the City of London itself, the wealthiest square mile in the world, fifty-four families were living at seven or more to a room.

Robert Sinclair in his *Metropolitan Man*, the most formidable indictment ever written of living conditions in London, quotes individual cases, all from authenticated sources, which convey the picture even more mordantly.

"(a) In one room live a tuberculous man, his wife, two adult sons and a schoolboy. (b) Two rooms are occupied by a married couple, three boys (aged fifteen, ten and six years); the house is dilapidated and it is stated that repairs are only executed when ordered by the sanitary authorities. (c) In one front basement room live a man and wife, a boy aged seven years, and six girls whose ages range from three to eleven years; most of the room, which is very dark, is taken up by two large beds, one of which consists of rolled-up bedding which is put down on the floor at night for some of the children . . ."

Describing a large house in a decayed residential area which has declined into a slum, he says:

"In the basement are four rooms, in which live three families, numbering sixteen persons. On the ground floor are four rooms—one a bathroom—holding three families who number eighteen persons. On the first floor five rooms, some of them small, contain sixteen persons in three families. The three small attics overhead are occupied by thirteen persons in two families. We have not finished. In the garage lives a family of nine."

I have dealt first with London, because in that area the overcrowding is of the greatest magnitude, owing to a fifth of the population of Britain being crowded into a limited radius. But the problems of overcrowding, slums, bad houses, exist in all the cities of England and in the rural districts as well. A recent Ministry of Health statement, quoted in the *Evening Standard*, said that 100,000 families in the country are living in premises legally condemned as unfit for habitation, and that a further 300,000 houses would have been condemned had the war not intervened. This does not include the houses that have been put out of action through bombing.

The City Engineer of Birmingham, speaking in 1941 to a Conference of the Town and Country Planning Association, said that in one area alone of the city, out of 6,800 dwellings, 5,400 were classified as slums to be condemned. More recently the Medical Officer of Health for Manchester said that there are some 70,000 unfit houses in his city.

In the provinces the workers enjoy more privacy than they do in London. In the industrial towns tenements are not so common—although Glasgow and Edinburgh have some notable examples—and there are not so many gentlemen's houses gone to seed and crowded out by working families. As against London's 38 per cent. of individual homes there are 95 per cent. in towns like Birmingham, Leeds, Huddersfield.

But the individual houses of the industrial districts are often as overcrowded as the rooms of London. Moreover, the Northern towns have their own form of unhealthy dwelling in the back-to-back house.

"Back to back houses are two houses built in one, each side of the house being somebody's front door, so that if you walk down a row of what is apparently twelve houses you are in reality seeing not twelve houses but twenty-four. The front houses give on the street and the back ones on the yard, and there is only one way out of each house. The effect of this is obvious. The lavatories are in the yard at the back, so that if you live on the side facing the street, to get to the lavatory or the dust-bin you have to go

out of the front door and walk round the end of the block—a distance that may be as much as two hundred yards; if you live at the back, on the other hand, your outlook is on to a row of lavatories.”

George Orwell. *The Road to Wigan Pier.*

Of these back-to-back houses there are still 70,000 in Leeds, 60,000 in Sheffield, 38,000 in Birmingham and 30,000 in Bradford, as well as proportionately high numbers in the other industrial towns of Lancashire and Yorkshire.

In the rural areas there are thousands of cottages which are unfit for habitation, but which are still afflicting the farm labourer and his children with rheumatism and kindred diseases. Moreover, the situation in many country districts has been further aggravated by the fact that the best cottages, even before the war, had been bought up or rented by middle-class people anxious to retire from town life.

Of the old houses in both town and country, which are still legally fit for habitation, the majority have defects which prevent them from being healthy homes. Damp, darkness, lack of ventilation are the principal of these faults.

In the mining towns there are many houses which are threatened by the peculiar circumstances of the district—either in danger of being submerged by a slag-heap pressing against the back door or sunk in a subsidence of the earth owing to mining operations underground.

“Some of these towns are so undermined by ancient workings that the ground is constantly subsiding and the houses above slip sideways. In Wigan you pass whole rows of houses which have slid to startling angles, their windows being ten to twenty degrees out of the horizontal. Sometimes the front wall bellies outward till it looks as though the house were seven months gone in pregnancy. It can be refaced, but the new facing soon begins to bulge again. When a house sinks at all suddenly its windows are jammed for ever and the doors have to be refitted.”

George Orwell. *The Road to Wigan Pier.*

The effect of bad housing and overcrowding on the health and expectation of life of slum dwellers is devastating. A comparison shows that in the overcrowded borough of Finsbury the death rate is 44 per cent. higher than it is in the middle-class suburb of Lewisham. Infant mortality for the whole of England is 54 per 1,000, but for the industrial cities it is much higher—Glasgow 104, Liverpool 86, Newcastle 80. Finally, Professor J. R. Mackintosh (Professor of Public Health at Glasgow University), writing in *The Practitioner*, September, 1943, gives the following comparative death rate for homes of varying smallness.

House of	General Death Rate	Pulmonary Tuber- culosis Rate	Child Death rate under 1 child	Child Death rate 1-5 years
1 room	100	100	100	100
2 rooms	64	72	78	74
3 rooms	44	52	61	44
4 rooms	41	34	49	25

(The figure of 100 is taken as comparative number applied to a home of 1 room).

These figures should suffice to show that the objections to over-crowding are not merely those of inconvenience. To have adequate space in which to sleep and breathe properly is literally a matter of life and death to every human being. The man who lives in a spacious house stands a good chance of living to a ripe age. The man who shares one room with his family will only survive so long by an extraordinary feat of tenacity.

Not only is the slum dweller robbed of light and air by the overcrowded atmosphere in which he lives; he is robbed by the rapacity of the landlord of the money with which to buy food. Again, an extract from the facts quoted by Robert Sinclair will suffice.

“One eight-roomed house in a Southwark slum brings in the handsome rental of £6 2s. od. a week. The ratepayers, having helped to pay for the council houses in the suburban estates, also help to provide this Southwark landlord with his £300 a year: in a small triangular room in that house are a man, his wife and child, paying 14s. 6d. a week—and receiving poor relief. Customers are always knocking at the doors of these landlords, who alone in the business community are unaffected by trade depression. A married man with two children paid £1 6s. a week for a half-furnished room; after living in it for nine years he was expelled with his two children because his rent became one week in arrears. A fellow-tenant of his, whose weekly wage was £1 5s. paid £1 in rent. One house in South London, with seventeen rooms, is let to twelve families, numbering 72 people, at rents of 16s. to £1 8s. per family. Cases have been known in Southwark of a house of eight rooms, mostly small, yielding £318 a year, of another eight-roomed house, rented at £71 a year, being sublet at £226 a year; some landlords acquire a number of houses and let them all at excessive rents. The high rents are the most easily demanded in that the rooms are technically furnished in many cases.” (*Metropolitan Man*).

Profiteering in housing is particularly bad in London, because of this breaking up of houses into small one-room units. In the provincial cities the small houses of the slums tend to come under rent restriction. However, with

the wartime shifts in population there is a tendency all over the country, and even in the rural districts, to let cottages and small flats inadequately furnished at disproportionately high rents.

It may sound paradoxical, after reciting all these bad facts concerning housing immediately before the war, to admit that more than 3,900,000 new houses were built in the twenty years between the two wars. Yet a glance at the census figures will illustrate why this total was swallowed up without making any appreciable effect on the slums of the larger towns. Since the last war families have been growing steadily smaller and the figures of population, which increase slowly in the number of individuals, have risen sharply in the number of families. In the ten years from 1921-31 a total of 1,750,000 extra families appeared. We can say, then, that in the twenty-one years of peace some 3,600,000 new families were waiting for homes. The total of new houses barely provided for them—the remaining 300,000 were largely balanced by the large empty houses which remain even in wartime in such residential districts as Bayswater. On the whole, the apparently large housing operations between the wars did little more than keep pace with *new* demands. The slums remained, twenty years more dilapidated and foul by the end of the period.

A further analysis of these housing figures will show that, for the most part, the benefit was limited to people with some capital or at least some security in their work. More than 2,800,000 of the houses were built by speculative builders and bought by their owners with the help of building societies. This kind of house could not be acquired by the casual worker who forms a large element in the slum population or by any of the great peacetime pool of the out-of-work. Only the man who could put down £50 or £100 in ready cash and looked as though he were holding down a safe and respectable job was a suitable candidate for one of these jerry-built villas. Of the remaining 30 per cent. of new houses, many were built by people who were too wealthy to need the assistance of building society, many more were built by manufacturers who wished to have their employees on the spot (the ambiguity is intentional) and the figure also includes the many blocks of relatively expensive flats built in the large cities for business men and women. When we consider all these factors, it is obvious that only a small fragment of the four million new houses of 1918-1939 were available to ease the overcrowding of the poorer workers in London and the industrial towns.

II

The Homes for Heroes

IN THE FIRST chapter we showed that the four million houses erected between the two wars had done little more than meet the new requirements of the extra families which had appeared during those years. The slums existing in 1918 and the houses which had become obsolete and degenerated into slums or near-slums during the intervening period had not been substantially affected by the new housing which sprawled in unplanned abandon from the outskirts of every city and town. A quantitative sufficiency of housing was almost as far from attainment at the end as at the beginning of the period. It remains for us to examine the quality of the accommodation provided by the speculative builders and the municipal authorities during this time.

With few exceptions it was unsatisfactory, from practically every point of view, whether of appearance, convenience, size or comfort. In an age when, despite the limitations imposed by capitalism, there had been a steady improvement in the mechanical factors of man's environment, the houses in which he lived were little better in most respects and worse in others than those his ancestors built. It is true that there were a few excellent show houses built for the wealthy and, very occasionally, some town council or industrial undertaking would build a well designed block of workmen's dwellings. But the exceptions were scanty, and the new houses in general tended to perpetuate the disadvantages of the old. Craftsmanship had declined, and the workmanship was skimped and shoddy, so that the new houses fell into disrepair and decay, both superficially and structurally, much more rapidly than the old houses, whose 'solidity' often made people cling to them in preference to the flimsy villas of the new suburban estates.

The new houses, so far as they affected the workers, were divided into two major groups, those built by municipal authorities for renting to the workers and the cheaper types of house or bungalow erected by speculative builders on the housing estates in the suburbs and sold on a hire-purchase arrangement through the building societies. Nearly three quarters of the houses built in the period fell into the latter group.

The criticism of bad workmanship applies to both

categories. In the municipal houses the contracting builders struggled to make the last penny of profit by skimping on costs, and the speculative builders, in trying to make attractive bargains at the minimum cost to themselves, put in cheap and poor materials, particularly where they could not be seen. The tendency to shoddiness was often increased by the piecework system among the building workers which forced them to work hastily in order to make up a reasonable pay packet at the end of the week. The results became evident in a year or two, when woodwork warped and cracked, draughts and damp appeared, the appearance of both interior and outside became shabby because the 'owner', who was paying as much as he could afford in hire-purchase charges, was unable to pay for redecoration or maintenance, and very often cracks in the walls began to show irremediable structural defects.

The effects of inefficient building were increased in many instances by the use of unsound sites. In one case in Middlesex I saw an estate built over a site where only a few months before there had been a pond and a stretch of low-lying marshy ground. These were hastily filled and the foundations laid down before the filling had a chance to settle properly. On the outskirts of the riverside residential town of Marlow a field was bought by a speculative builder which was almost useless for farming purposes because it was flooded for long periods every two or three years by the bursting forth of underground springs. The fact was well known in the locality, but the builder erected a small estate and sold the houses. In due course, the springs burst out in a wet summer, the gardens were flooded, the residents had to reach their front doors on duck-boards and the houses became soaked with damp rising up the walls. These are two examples among many.

Even when the houses were structurally sound, they were rarely well planned. An imitative adherence to debased traditions tended to perpetuate the bad features of the old houses, while some of the good features of the best new housing designs appeared in only a few cases. Most of the new houses had baths, but very few had anything like adequate provision for storing coal and wood, or for washing clothes, or for safeguarding prams and bicycles without bringing them into the hall or kitchen. Regard for economy in costs cramped the space, restricting the sizes of rooms to little more than the small minima laid down in the overcrowding laws. Almost all the new houses still possess such unpleasant features as the combined bathroom and W.C., and in estates built expressly for workers it is still, according to Mass Observation's survey of *People's Homes*, rare to find wash basins in the bathrooms. This survey also states that most of the complaints of cold come from new houses.

Anthony Bertram's *Design* gives the following instances of bad planning in houses built by public authorities:

"The bathrooms vary a good deal. The worst example I have seen was in rural housing in the West Country. There was no light in the room and a copper with an open fire that was dangerous for children. But then those were extraordinary houses. The larder, for example, locked from the inside only. The blackened wall over the fireplace showed how the chimney smoked. There was a sink draining board eight inches wide . . . I have also seen a very bad bath arrangement in new flats in South London. The water is heated by the copper and has to be pumped over to the bath. It comes in by a pipe at one end, and the cold tap (brass) hangs over the other, so that it is impossible to lay the head back at either end."

Such incompetent lapses in design, and the survival of dust-gathering vestiges like picture rails, wainscoats and beadings on doors and windows, all help to make more difficult the life of the working class woman who has to do all the housework herself and can rarely afford such luxuries as vacuum cleaners or sending her washing to the laundry.

The new houses built between the wars were thus, for the most part, eminently unsatisfactory in comparison with what efficient contemporary design could produce. Furthermore, they contributed to the depreciation of the workers' standard of living because of the comparatively high rents or hire purchase charges which the occupiers had to pay. The high death rate due to overcrowding in a slum may well be maintained when its inhabitants are cleared to a new site because the greater rents allow a slighter margin for food and thus increase malnutrition to compensate for the decrease in other ill-health factors.

So far we have discussed the houses in themselves, but we have still to consider the way in which they were planted in the countryside around the cities. However we may condemn the planning of the houses themselves, it was not so bad as the virtual lack of planning with which they spread like an uncontrolled eczema over the land around every town in the country. The endless and monotonous suburban masses of ugly jerrybuilt villas, stretching for many miles on every side of the core of London, the vulgar satellite towns like Slough, the ragged strings of bungalows and shoddy houses along the big main roads out of every large city, the rash of shacks and old railway coaches along the South Coast and in parts of the Chilterns, have been described often enough, and are familiar to most people either from living in them or passing through the areas afflicted by them. Aesthetic-

ally the new settlements (they were not sufficiently integrated to be called towns) are repulsive, but they can also be condemned on more practical grounds. To quote *Planning for Reconstruction*, a brochure recently published by the Architectural Press:

"... in rebuilding we thought of little other than quantities of houses. We ignored social life, and what people did outside their homes. The new homes, in contrast to the old, were nearly always far from workplaces, shops and centres of amusement.

"The community buildings, schools, hospitals, clinics, clubs, shops, churches and pubs, often provided as an afterthought, were inconveniently placed in relation to the homes. We were losing our traditional social life; the sense of neighbourhood was disappearing.

"... It was tiresome and expensive to get from home to work; shops were few and far between; children still had to play in the streets."

The great bulges of housing caused by the speculative estates were the worst in their lack of consideration for communal facilities, but the municipal ventures were often little better.

"Seven years after the London County Council had begun to lay out a new town at Becontree, the divided control which three local authorities (besides the County Council) maintained over the estate still caused difficulties. Although 12,000 houses had then been built, the centre of the new town and its public buildings could not be planned because the councils could not agree. Two years later, when more than 17,000 houses had been built on the estate, adequate transport facilities were still lacking... When 18,000 people—a good-sized country town—had settled on the St. Helier estate, the London County Council found that they had no public baths, wash-houses or library, no fire brigade within a mile and three quarters, no hospital within two miles."

Metropolitan Man. Sinclair.

Further hardship is caused to the workers by the long journeys they have to take from their suburban homes to their work in the centre. It is estimated that the average London family spends more than £16 a year on travelling to and from work.

"It is not unusual for an outer-Londoner to spend two wasted and unpleasant hours a day and 10% or more of his total income, to say nothing of a great quantity of nervous energy, in travelling between his suburb and workplace. In a famous investigation some years ago into the effect of removing slum-dwellers from the centre of the comparatively small town of Stockton-on-Tees (70,000 inhabitants)

to a new suburb on the outskirts, it was shown that the extra cost, in hard cash alone, of the amount of additional travel required of the workers was such as to lower very definitely the standard of living and to increase quite shockingly the rate of mortality and the incidence of disease."

Town Planning, Thomas Sharp.

In yet another way the new housing schemes have meant a loss to the community, for in the years between the wars an area of farming land greater than the whole of Wiltshire has been lost through indiscriminate house building, not to speak of a further area about the size of Bedfordshire which has been swallowed by factories, aerodromes, sports grounds, etc. These areas include some of the best food-bearing land in the country—in particular a great proportion of the valuable market-gardening sites around London have disappeared in the rush of the suburbanites in their crack-brained escape from the town to something even worse.

In spite, however, of the encroachments of the towns, 80% of the land remained rural, devoted to farming, and the 20% of the population who lived in these areas were even less well served in new housing than the town dwellers. Most of the rural cottages which had not been appropriated by week-enders were in an unhealthy and often dilapidated condition, and very little had been done to improve or supplement them. A scheme for the reconditioning of cottages by the local authorities was set on foot, but Devonshire was the only county in which any appreciable number of the cottages were improved. For the rest, the local councils have built groups of houses here and there about the countryside which are in almost all cases unsatisfactory.

"Most frequently both council and other houses designed for towns are erected in country districts, whereas country dwellings should be specially designed with provision for greater storage space, and for the drying of clothes and the prevention of mud and muck from being brought directly into the cottage."

Scott Report, 1942.

While the new houses in the towns followed traditional methods too slavishly, those in the country failed because they disregarded local architectural traditions which were based on genuine practical needs. Moreover, the lack of taste or aesthetic sense among their designers made them ugly and incongruous in landscapes into which the older designs of tradition fitted felicitously.

To recapitulate, the attempts at new housing between the wars were unsatisfactory because the financial motives, the desire on one side to make money and on the other to economise, led both to bad workmanship and to poverty of design. Workers' dwellings, in particular, were plan-

ned meanly and carelessly with little consideration for the convenience of the housewife. But, in my opinion, the most serious fault of the new housing was its way of spreading from the cities in formless masses that had no local limits or nuclei to provide the germs of communal life. Broken away from the local interests of his old home, the dweller in the new suburb became virtually isolated in his semi-detached house, cut off in a monotonous waste where there was nothing around which local communal feeling could grow. In such conditions the effect of centralised power became greater because it was unchallenged by local influences, and the inhabitants of the nameless brick wildernesses became victims to mass demagogues and totalitarian ideologies much more readily than did people with strongly marked local loyalties, like the miners of the Welsh valleys or the slum dwellers of Stepney. The neo-Fascist politicians who rule to-day undoubtedly find their blindest supporters in the jerry-built miles of outer London which they complacently allowed to destroy the countryside between 1918 and 1939.

III

Houses in the Air

IN THIS SURVEY of housing conditions in Britain, we have so far dealt with those existing before the outbreak of the war, and with the ineffectual measures taken to alleviate them during that period. Now we have to consider the further deterioration in housing caused by circumstances arising from the war, and also the plans so far produced by the Government for reducing the vast shortage which will become even more urgent when the demobilised soldiers and girls from the services return from camps and barracks to live again in what remains of the civilian environment.

The effect of the war on housing has been shown in two ways. Firstly, there are the direct effects of aerial bombardment, which destroyed or damaged several large areas not only of London but also of every other town of any importance in the country. Churchill himself, in a recent speech, stated that altogether a million houses had been either destroyed or damaged too severely to be put into anything like permanent repair. This is an official estimate, and would tend rather to minimise than to exaggerate a point of this kind. However, even this figure is a bad one from the point of view of people who need homes, and it



can serve the purposes of our argument. In addition to these completely lost houses there were, of course, hundreds of thousands which suffered repairable damage—so far only 'patched up'—and which will need considerable reconditioning before they can be made decently habitable.

Even worse, however, than the effects of the bombing have been those of the almost complete cessation of house building during the five years of the war. Between the wars an average of 200,000 houses a year had been built, but by 1939 the annual figure was rising towards 300,000, and at this rate we can say that there was a loss of nearly 1,500,000 houses which might have been built had not the war intervened.

The cessation of work on houses has also meant that maintenance has largely lapsed. Most houses nowadays look shabby for lack of paint, and this external shabbiness conceals more radical faults which have been neglected during the war—bad roofs, woodwork deteriorating for lack of paint, inefficient grates, and all the obsolete and worn out adjuncts to houses which might have been modernised if the landlords had not such a plausible excuse as the war to leave them as they were.

But, quite apart from the question of poor maintenance and of minor damage through air raids, we find ourselves some 2,500,000 houses to the worse because the war brought something more profitable and therefore more urgent to the capitalist speculators even than building the jerry houses of the peacetime estates.

This radical shortage is evident in every part of the country. In London and the other large cities, where most

of the demolished houses were in the thickly-populated working-class districts near railways, factories and docks, the workers who had to stay near their jobs were crowded into the remaining houses—in spite of the fact that in the residential quarters of all the large cities there were thousands of large mansions standing empty because their owners had fled for safety to their country retreats.

In the rural districts and the small towns the first days of the war brought thousands of evacuated school children and mothers. Although a large proportion of these have returned to London, many still remain or have returned during the flying bomb raids, and they have been joined from time to time by batches of middle-class people who had no need to live near their work. In addition, many small country towns and even villages, built to hold just the local trading and agricultural population, have become the sites of war factories, and large numbers of industrial workers have been squeezed into the quite inadequate accommodation. The result is that the country is, if anything, more taxed for housing room than the cities, and the only compensating factor for this is that those who inhabit the crowded cottages can at least enjoy untainted air when they are out of doors.

The excessive shortage of accommodation has led to an extravagant rise in rents on all property where adjustments can be made without a too blatant infringement of the rent restriction regulations. The introduction of the most meagre furnishings into houses, flats or rooms is the excuse for charging fantastic prices, and the interests of the profiteers have been maintained, particularly in the country districts, by the presence of middle-class people who are willing to pay almost anything for a *pied à terre* in the country to which they could retire from the effects of bombing. As always, the regulations were framed with a studied carelessness to allow a sufficiency of loopholes for those who wish to profit by their evasion. The result was that people with little money, even when other circumstances might have allowed them to get away from the towns, were quite unable to pay the prices demanded for the only accommodation available. The tendency to return to the cities in more recent times led to a similar burst of profiteering in the urban localities. The greater expenditure on rent, with its tendency to encourage malnutrition, has combined with the increased overcrowding to bring about a deterioration in standards of health due directly to wartime housing deficiencies, quite apart from that caused by other unhealthy factors in the wartime environment.

The figure of 2,500,000 houses short which we gave earlier in this article represented the number of dwellings of which we had been deprived through the incidence of the

war. But in reaching the total housing deficiency at the present time we must take into account other considerations, and our total will be made up in something like the following manner.

Firstly the 1,000,000 houses destroyed or irreparably damaged during the air raids.

Secondly, the 750,000 houses scheduled in 1939 under either the category of overcrowded premises or that of slums awaiting clearance.

Thirdly, the houses which have become obsolete during the intervening period. If we estimate these at the rate of 2—2½% of the total houses (11½ million) per annum (thus allowing a house a useful life of nearly 50 years), the rate is 250,000 per annum, amounting in five years to 1,250,000 houses.

Fourthly, we have to take into account the extra families which have appeared during this period. Even if we assume a drop from the annual average increase of 175,000 recorded in the last (1931) census, and assume a figure of 100,000 extra families per annum, the total will reach at least 500,000.

Fifthly, we must consider all those families which, while their dwelling standard was above that condemned in the overcrowding laws, nevertheless lived in conditions of comparative congestion and little privacy. It seems to me a very modest estimate to put this figure at 500,000.

From a total of all these figures, it appears that at the present day we need at least 4,000,000 new houses to relieve overcrowding, and to replace slum and obsolete housing and dwellings destroyed in the air raids. This figure will increase by 350,000 for each year, if we assume the rates of obsolescence of houses and of increase of families to remain constant. It is yet further increased by new air raids. Assuming two years—a hypothetical figure—before the war is cleared up in any final manner, we shall have a deficiency of nearly five million houses by the time new building starts. And this figure, enormous in itself, makes no allowance for rectifying the acts of the jerry-builders of the past quarter of a century. It comprehends merely the barest of necessities in the way of new housing, and does not go so far as to envisage a programme of thoroughly satisfactory dwellings for the whole community—which would make a total of something nearer to ten million new houses!

Taking five million houses as the figure required in two years time, with an increase rate of 350,000 houses every year, we can at least attain a standard by which to judge the government's proposals. On this or any other measure they make a poor justification for themselves.

It will be remembered how, earlier in the war, the mountain laboured and brought forth a mouse, in the shape of the ridiculous plan to solve the housing shortage in the rural districts by building 2,000 kennels, miscalled 'cottages'

for farm labourers. This time the mountain has laboured to better effect—but its new progeny is by no means impressive. The programme issued by the Ministry of Health is for 100,000 new houses in the first year and 200,000 in the second year after the war—a total of 300,000 houses. This quantity will not only do nothing to break into the hard core of 5 million necessary houses—it will, according to our calculations, provide only about half of the houses which will become necessary in those two years *in addition to the original 5 million*. Moreover, it is only proposed that these houses shall be *started* in the first two years. When they will be finished is not prophesied.

This programme was received with such small enthusiasm that Churchill has now been moved to declare that the government will also erect 500,000 pre-fabricated temporary houses. The fact that these houses are classed as temporary shows what kind of accommodation they provide. In their little iron boxes the workers will be toasted in summer and frozen in winter. And the extreme slowness with which the government proposes to tackle the housing shortage makes us imagine that these glorified rabbit hutches will live on to something like permanence and become the new slums of the future.

The promises of the government are scanty enough, but even when they are made there is no certainty that they will be kept. We are all used to the broken pledges of the politician, but in the housing question we have even more concrete evidence than on most other subjects. It was exceptional indeed for a housing project made by a public authority before the war to be carried out both completely and on time. On the record of London, Sinclair says in his *Metropolitan Man*:

“ . . . the London authorities, armed from time to time with eight conflicting Housing Acts, have planned much—and have achieved far less. The first post-war drive of 29,000 houses in five years became 376 houses in five years. The second drive of 6,000 houses became 2,055 houses. The great Wheatley Act drive of 20,000 led to fewer than 12,000 being built by 1927. From the 1928 plans, only 44 houses had emerged three years later. The 1930 plan for 34,670 houses to be achieved by 1935 materialised in 118 houses by the end of 1934. In 1931 379 slum houses were demolished, in 1932, 324 houses.” (These figures, incidentally, were made public by no less a figure than Herbert Morrison, then struggling to become Gauleiter of London).

In some parts of the country the record was not so bad as that of London, but rarely indeed were promises kept or the projected number of houses erected on time.

In view of this past record of the building activities of public authorities we should be foolish to imagine that the

promises of the Government, meagre as they are, will ever be kept. It looks as though the rehousing of the population after the war will be once again in the care of God and the speculative builder.

In order to provide the minimum of five million new houses in the earliest possible time something much more drastic must be done than the Government's piffling programme, supplemented by the capricious efforts of the jerry builders. In a recent statement criticising the government's programme, Coppock, the secretary of the National Federation of Building Trades Operatives, said that the building industry could produce 500,000 houses a year if required. Even this, however, is not enough to make an adequate and speedy improvement in the housing of the people. To complete the job in a few years it will be necessary to build no less than a million dwellings a year—even then it would take between six and seven years, long enough for the workers to wait for decent housing conditions.

This may seem a fantastic figure—and so it is according to the pre-war standards of the building industry. Nevertheless, I believe that it could be done, given three conditions which are not fulfilled in the building industry under capitalism. The first is the straightforward designing of simple but adequate houses which can be built without unnecessary labour on unessentials. The second is the use of every resource of building technique in order to achieve the speedy building of dwellings without any loss to strength or comfort. The third is the purging of the profit motive from the building industry and its control and operation by free associations of the building workers, who would act in co-operation with local communal bodies for the planning of adequate housing.

These conditions will not be fulfilled while the state and capitalism remain, with their attendant corruption, greed and inefficiency. The workers will get good houses only when they have in their own hands all the means to make them. Until then they will have to put up with the slackness of state authorities and the greed of the speculative builder, while the attentions of the rent collector or the building society often deprives them of the very means of adequate nutrition.

IV

After the Lord Mayor's Show



IN THE PRECEDING chapters I discussed the kind of houses in which the majority of Englishmen live and are likely to live for a long time, unless the capitalist system comes to an end. In this section I shall discuss those other parts of his environment which are regarded as essential public services in modern society, *i.e.* streets and parks, garbage collection and sewerage, water, gas and electricity.

All these services have at some time in the past been provided by private enterprise. The streets were often toll roads, the disposal of refuse and sewage were the concern of the individual, and those services, such as water, gas and electricity, on which profit could be made by monopoly methods, were early seized upon by private companies fortified by Acts of Parliament. During the last century, however, the tendency has been for local authorities, supervised by the state, to take over these services, and it is now only in water, gas and electricity that private capitalists continue to operate, to a diminishing but still formidable extent. However, it does not matter a great deal whether the worker has his 'services' provided by the Town Hall or the Gas Light and Coke Company—he has to pay for them in any

case. If he does not pay rates for streets, his effects may be sold up to provide the money, and a municipal authority is no less likely than a private undertaking to cut off the gas or electricity if the quarter's bill is not paid promptly. Thus all these necessary services are regarded in our present society as commodities for which the user has to pay in one way or another. In order to see what value the citizen gets for his money, we will take the items of communal environment in turn.

Death In The Afternoon

The system of streets in English cities and towns, and the roads connecting them, have long been admitted to be badly planned. The toll authorities were superseded by the local authorities, and these by the Ministry of Transport for the large main roads, but still the road system is inadequate and, on the main roads and in the busier streets of the towns, does not provide sufficient protection against congestion and accidents. In the ten years before the war an average of 7,500 people were killed and 230,000 injured per annum on the roads. Since then the death rate has increased—in 1941 more than 9,000 people were killed. More children have been killed by street accidents during the war than by air raids. In spite of Belisha beacons and traffic lights, the increase in deaths has been steady and continuous. This high rate of accidents is due in great part to the existence of narrow and congested streets in the towns, whose survival is assured by vested interests in land and property. It is estimated that in London alone areas totalling 10,000 acres require to be replanned because of their inadequate streets. Many accidents are caused by inefficient road surfacing, while the tram lines still lay their Victorian death traps in miles of town streets. The most dangerous places are in crowded working class areas, where the streets are most narrow and the children have to play in the gutter for lack of adequate parks and recreation grounds.

It's The Rich What Gets The Pleasure

The lack of open space in working class districts, where every available acre was covered by the profiteering builder of the nineteenth century, is evident in all towns of any appreciable size. The parks are, as in London, mostly situated in those upper or middle class districts which already have adequately wide roads, individual gardens and private squares. In the locality of most city parks, property gains an added value which makes it out of the question for workers to live there. Similarly, in large cities suburban expansion has driven the country so far away that for the inhabitant of, say, the Isle of Dogs to get into any countryside worthy of the name would involve an expenditure which can be met

only rarely, if ever. For many thousands of Londoners the crowded hillocks of Hampstead Heath on a Bank Holiday are the best substitute for a holiday in the country. It was not until the speculative builders had spread their monstrosities so far as to endanger even the haunts of the owners of private cars and weekend cottages that anything was done to save the nearest remaining countryside, already, for the most part, more than twenty miles away from the centre. Then the London County Council proceeded to spend money collected in rates from the slum dwellers of Bermondsey and Stepney, to compensate the landowners of the Home Counties for not being able to get building prices for their estates—and all this so that the country cottages of the people from Mayfair and St. John's Wood might be saved from the incursion of the discordant elements in the landscape. Thus the rentier who feeds well and who lives in the most healthy part of a city (London is only one example among many) has usually all the facilities for enjoying the open air either in his local park or in the more easily available countryside. The slum dwellers, on the other hand, whose poor feeding and overcrowded homes breed consumption and other pathological states, for the relief of which fresh air is necessary, and whose children play danger games with the traffic because the street is the only place in which to play, have to remain in their narrow and filthy streets, because they have neither the energy to travel miles to the nearest crowded park nor the spare cash to visit the countryside at the weekend.

The Plague Of Flies

If any one scene is more typical than another of English municipal inefficiency it is that of the lofty Noah's Ark dust cart lurching through the streets, halting every now and then for the dustman to heave a heavy bin over its high side, while clouds of dust float over the street and troops of flies follow in its stinking wake. In the country towns the most inefficient type of horse-drawn dust cart is still common—even in London it is by no means extinct, and when petrol-driven refuse lorries are employed, they usually necessitate the method of slinging the bin over the high sides, while at least a section of the top remains open to the air. Rarely in England have I seen the efficient types of refuse lorries which one met before the war, on the Continent, where the garbage is drawn by suction from the bin into a completely closed van, or the slightly less efficient type where it is carried on a moving band into the interior of the van. Here and there they exist, mostly in experimental ones and twos to prove the broadmindedness of a few borough councils, but the vast majority are still of those types which require the maximum effort from the dustman and distribute the greatest possible amount of dust into the air.

Perhaps even less efficient is the way in which the garbage is distributed. Almost every small town has its field or disused quarry or sandpit on the outskirts where the refuse is tipped—sometimes houses are built on top of pits filled in with the local rubbish. Here the inconvenience is comparatively slight, as a small quantity has to be tipped, but when the amount approaches the 1,750,000 tons of house refuse and street sweepings which are annually dumped by the London authorities, the problem is formidable—and the town councillors are certainly not men enough to tackle it efficiently. Those who wish to read the whole fantastic story can do so in Robert Sinclair's *Metropolitan Man*. One quotation will suffice:

“The garbage makes a brave parade through the metropolitan streets. Some of London's refuse has passed for years through the northern outskirts of London to dumps in Hertfordshire; the refuse from Hampstead, on the northern outskirts, is sent to Paddington, in West London. Kensington sends its garbage to Hammersmith—and the garbage of Hammersmith is sent to Fulham. The ratepayer pays for this merry-go-round, whose cost is over £1,000,000 a year.”

A small proportion of London's refuse is burnt in incinerators—another minute fraction is used for agricultural purposes or in brickmaking. The greater part, however, is just dumped in vast heaps in the outer suburban areas, where it spoils whatever landscape is left by the builders, and provides homes for myriads of disease-bearing vermin, from rats down to flies. A committee appointed before the war to examine these dumps declared:

“We have inspected most of the refuse disposal works of London, and are agreed that generally they are out of date, insanitary, inefficient, or so situated as to cause nuisance or grave annoyance, and that many of them should be closed.”

What is here said of London can be said equally well of many other parts of the country, the only difference being that elsewhere the nuisance is on a quantitatively smaller scale.

Another aspect of refuse dumping is the great waste of many valuable substances which might be used in industry and thus save work in extracting raw materials. In wartime this has been realised to a certain extent by the authorities, who have tried, with miserable results, to *compel* people to collect metal, waste food, etc. During peacetime, however, the interests of capitalism are to encourage rapid consumption by the use of advertisement and the production of shoddy goods, so that the waste rate is high and large quantities of valuable raw materials are thrown on the refuse heap.

Feeding The Fishes

The criticism of waste on which the last section ended can be continued here. The only alternatives available for the Englishman who wishes to get rid of his sewage are, on the one hand, the primitive and unhealthy methods of bucket and earth privy, which conserve the natural manures but at the same time provide breeding places for flies and sometimes infect underground water supplies, and, on the other hand, the sewerage method employed in the towns, which is comparatively healthy but attempts no conservation of the valuable salts and humus in the sewage—instead precipitating them into the rivers and seas and killing off the fish in the process. Some 5,000 parishes, mostly villages and very small towns, rely on the primitive earth privy, the cess pool or even the bucket—thereby incurring a heavy risk of disease. The rest dispose of the sewage by modern methods so efficient that they rid the land annually of an enormous quantity of valuable food-growing substances which would help a great deal towards making our agriculture again self-sufficient.

“In England we waste every year 219,000 tons of nitrogen, 55,000 tons of phosphate, and 55,000 tons of potash as sewage sludge and household refuse that pollute the rivers and are lost in the sea.”

M. J. Massingham, *The Tree of Life*.

It should not be difficult to plan a way of preserving all these valuable substances for the land, and at the same time enable our rivers and estuaries to become again prolific breeding grounds for fish and shellfish.

Water, Water Everywhere!

A regular and clean piped water supply is essential for good sanitation and efficient agriculture, and also saves much labour in household work. Still, however, in June 1939 more than 3,400 country parishes were without piped water supplies. This means that the cottagers often have to carry water half a mile or more from the village pump to the house—no great incentive to cleanliness—and the farmer in these considerable areas is at the mercy of the weather for his supply of water. Modern methods of farming cannot be put into practice at all efficiently in such localities, and the supply of milk, and consequently of butter and cheese, will vary according to the dryness of the season. Nor, where piped water supplies exist, are they by any means sufficient. The Metropolitan Water Board pleads with us every summer to cut down our baths and not to water the allotment, and of the smaller undertakings the recent Ministry of Health report stated—

“Many of the smaller water supplies are inadequate at any time and seriously inadequate in dry spells; gathering grounds are in some cases located too near to places of public resort, or on agricultural land, and so are open

to pollution; proper headworks are sometimes lacking or, if provided, are too small; treatment works, where provided, are in several cases maintained inexpertly.”

This inadequacy of water occurs at a time when large numbers of people have no baths in their houses, when streets are washed inefficiently—if at all, and when agriculture suffers from a lack of regular facilities. If all these circumstances were changed, as they must be in a society that aims at the welfare of the people, there would be a demand for water which the present means of supply could not meet, even at the wettest season. Yet England is not a dry country and there are large and widespread reserves of water. As the Ministry of Health report says, “There is in this country ample water for all needs. The problem is not one of total resources, but of organisation and distribution.” That, however, is a problem which will not be solved by sleepy middle-class town councillors or by municipal engineers who hold down their jobs by making their work appear more difficult than it is. It will only be solved in the end by the co-operation and initiative of the people who are most vitally concerned in the provision of an adequate water supply.

Tweedledum And Tweedledee

Lastly we reach the two public services which have been fighting through the cities and towns of England for the last twenty years with all the fury and persistence of Tweedledum and Tweedledee. Coal gas as a means of heating and lighting went out of date with the development of electricity for these purposes. The disadvantages of gas are many—its fumes are unhealthy for anything less hardy than an aspidistra, it is more liable than electricity to result in fires and explosions, it takes much more labour to instal and requires much larger transmission pipes than does electric current—making its transmission outside the towns impracticable.

In spite of all these disadvantages, the powerful gas companies, supported by the coal interests, carried on a great campaign between the wars to persuade the people to use an obsolete and inefficient method of lighting and heating. The most advanced methods of advertising, the highest pressured salesmanship, and all the devices of Parliamentary influence were used in this great battle of conflicting capitalist interests, with the result that the gas works, which should have disappeared two decades ago, are still stinking and smoking in the working class areas of every town in the country, and many houses are afflicted with the fumes of gaslight, which kill flowers but are represented as having no bad effect on human beings.

This does not mean that the way in which electricity is supplied to-day is in any way satisfactory. To begin, almost all the power stations in the country are operated

by coal-burning plant. Where mountain water power exists it is frequently ignored, and nothing has been done to establish barrages in the tidal estuaries, as was done successfully on the Shannon in Ireland. Moreover, it is only occasionally that the wind is utilised, and solar power, which would make possible an extensive decentralisation of power production in local units, has not been developed because it is against the prevailing interests in the industry. The present tendency is towards an increased centralisation of production, through the grid system. This has two great faults, firstly, that a breakdown may cause a widespread blackout and immobilisation of industry, and, secondly, that further centralisation of administration occurs, which tends to favour the control of the industry by central power groups, who operate in their own interests and against those of the ordinary consumer. At the same time, there exists an appalling diversity in technical matters where some form of agreed uniformity is desirable. Some towns have alternating current, others direct current, and there are several different rates of voltage. The only people who gain from this confusion are the vendors of electrical appliances and wireless sets, who reap a good harvest from people who move to an area with a different current or voltage and have to buy new appliances or have their old ones adjusted.

Most towns now have electricity supplies, and about 80% of factories use electric power, but in the country districts there are still many areas where it is not available. Although some years ago there was much talk about taking electricity to every farm, it was estimated that in 1938 "only about twenty-five to thirty thousand agricultural holdings, out of a total of 365,972, were served with electricity" (Scott Report). Electricity can play a great part in the modernisation of agriculture, and if the villages were all served, preferably by small local power units, it would greatly facilitate the achievement of self-sufficiency in food production.

Summary

I have shown briefly the faults of the major communal services under our present social system. The ground to be covered in a short space has made the survey necessarily scanty, but I hope I have at least managed to convey some idea of the present appalling inadequacy of these services.



V

The Struggle against the Landlords

IN THE PRECEDING chapters we have discussed the present state of housing and other communal services in England to-day. The conclusion to be reached is that a vast number of the people of this country are living in extremely unsatisfactory conditions. There is a great initial shortage of accommodation for the workers and what exists is suitable neither for health nor for comfort. War conditions, bombing and the lack of new building, have caused an accelerated deterioration of the situation, and the immediate post-war period will see a housing shortage far greater than any that has previously occurred in this country. What is likely to happen in this situation can only be regarded in proper perspective if the question is posed on the basis of what the workers are likely to do, still more of what the workers *can* do in order to ensure that they are provided with sound and adequate living accommodation.

The future of housing can be divided into two phases. There will be the period of struggle within the existing social order, leading up to the eventual social revolution. And there will be the period of growth and reconstruction following the revolution, when the workers will be able to rebuild their environment according to their desires and needs. We can discuss these phases in turn.

In the history of social struggle housing has always played an important part. The landlord is an even older enemy of the worker than the capitalist, and in the houses and tenements of working class districts there goes on a continual struggle between the people and their enemies which is as bitter as that which exists in the factories and mines. The rent collector and his sinister shadow, the bum bailiff, are among the most unpopular figures in the poor streets.

During periods of 'economic crisis' or capitalist retrenchment, when there is much unemployment and wages are low, the bad feeling between tenant and landlord bursts into a kind of guerilla contest. The tenant is faced with the alternative of half-starving or going into arrears with his rent. He chooses the latter, and the landlord replies with threats of eviction, which are usually put into practice if the landlord can get any advantage by losing his tenant. The unfortunate worker has then to try and find some other accommodation for his family, and here again the process may be repeated. Recent legislation has made a show of reducing the opportunity for eviction, but in reality there is rarely any difficulty, so far as the law is concerned, in turning out a tenant for non-payment of rent.

Even in 'normal' peacetime conditions housing presents one of the most important sides of the class struggle. In the much more severe conditions which will follow the present war it is likely to assume far greater importance.

At the end of the war we are likely to find ourselves, as has been shown earlier, some five million houses short of a sufficiency of sound accommodation for the whole population of Britain. More than a million houses will have been demolished by air raids, and of those that survive millions will have reached the stage of normal deterioration when they are no longer fit for habitation. At the same time several millions of men and women will be demobilised from the services and will wish to restart their old homes or set up new ones. The chance of many of them getting more than a corner of someone else's home will be small indeed.

At the same time, the Government's plans do nothing to relieve the immediate situation. Those who want homes will have to shift for themselves while the government slowly gets under way its pitiful programme of two hundred thousand houses a year. The lucky few will be allowed to knock their heads on the ceilings of the prefabricated rabbit hutches, but even this addition to post-war amenities will do little to ease the situation. And this is on the assumption that the Government keeps its promises, which the post-war Governments from 1919 onwards certainly failed to do.

In order to gain some idea of the kind of situation which is likely to develop, we must glance at the events which took place after 1918. Then, when there had been almost no bombing and the accommodation was so much less reduced

than it will be at the end of the present war, housing became a major social issue. Around the lack of houses, as much as around the lack of work, class antagonisms became accentuated. Even in the minds of the ruling class it became evident that housing could be a factor in producing revolutionary discontent. They decided to make at least a show of interest, and the more unscrupulous group of politicians actually turned the matter to their advantage by using the demagogic election slogan of "Homes for Heroes!"

The "Homes for Heroes" did not appear, and the demand for housing, being so much greater than the available supply, led to overcrowding in the working class districts and a rapid growth of excesses in exploitation, such as rack renting. Fantastically high rents were charged for single rooms in slum buildings (Chapter 1 gives examples of these), and the Rent Restriction Act by which the government pretended to prevent high rents was either evaded or just ignored.

The excessive rents fell most heavily on the hundreds of thousands of workers who failed to find employment in the post-war years. Among these workers resistance began and developed into relatively widespread direct action against the landlords. The resistance began first among individuals who found it impossible to pay their rent and had to let it fall into arrears. As more people found themselves in this position the non-payment of rent became something of a mass action which could be turned into a direct attack on the landlord. Rent strikes began. At first they were organised spontaneously among tenants in certain streets and groups of tenements, and although certain political groups, and particularly the Communists, cashed in on the rent strikes in order to gain the credit for them, the most effective strikes were always those arranged on the spot by the workers in the streets where they lived.

Individual action and group action alike were attacked by the landlords with the weapon of eviction. This was countered by the workers with various forms of action. Eviction pickets were formed who warned the people of the neighbourhood when the bailiffs arrived. Efforts were made to prevent the bailiffs from entering the houses, and sometimes this resulted in houses or whole blocks of tenements being barricaded to keep out the landlord's employees. It also became a practice, when furniture was taken out by the bums, for the neighbours to pick it up and take it back into the house. In these struggles the police often intervened and sometimes minor pitched battles took place before the tenants were evicted. In many cases, however, the rent strikes were maintained so steadfastly that the landlords gave in and granted the demands of the tenants.

Another method used on some occasions by homeless workers was the actual occupation of empty premises. One example was that of a camp of huts which had been built

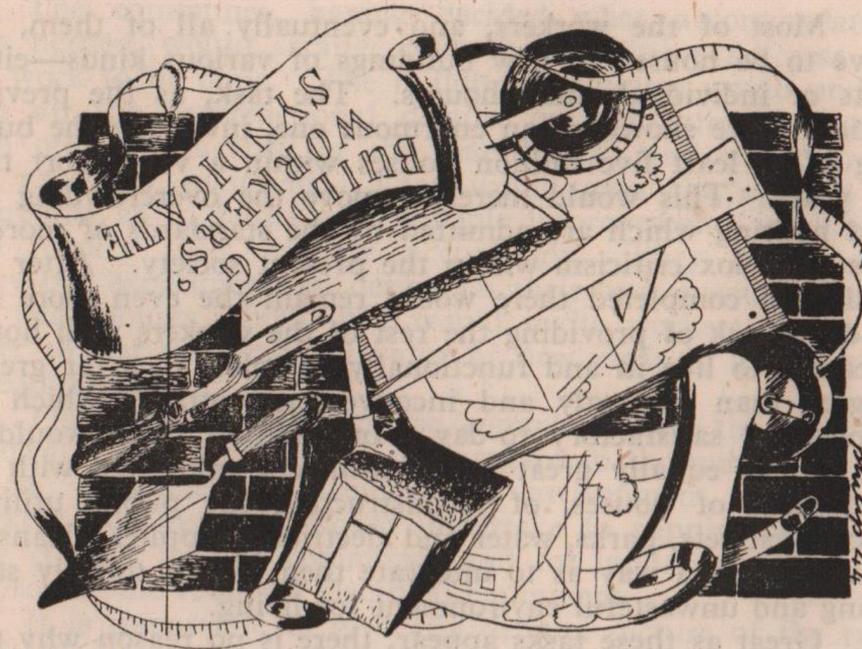
in Durham during the 1914-18 war to accommodate Belgian refugees. There were about 650 concrete huts, with drainage, water, electricity, roads, a school and a hospital. The whole place was surrounded by heavy park railings with locked gates. At the end of the war the refugees returned home, the camp was deserted and locked up. Meanwhile, the housing shortage on Tyneside had become acute, and one night the gates of the camp were broken down and a number of working class families established themselves in the huts. The number soon increased, and before the authorities awoke sufficiently to take action a large settlement was already in being. The government, realising that some considerable measure of force would be necessary to eject the new dwellers, gave in and accepted the situation. This is one example of a type of direct action which happened more frequently in the post war years than is commonly known by those who gain all their information from newspapers.

After this war a housing shortage of far greater dimensions than any before is unavoidable. The government's plans for providing accommodation and preventing exploitation are obviously designed as no more than a gesture towards a solution. Any effective action must come from the workers themselves. We have seen how they acted in a comparatively minor housing shortage after 1918. Events during the present war, such as the taking over of the underground stations by the people as air-raid shelters, show that the workers will be no less ready to act after this war. Meanwhile, we should remember that the struggle against landlords is part of the general struggle against privilege and property which will lead up to and merge into the social revolution in which the people will take over all the material necessities of life, including housing.

VI

Homes in a Free Society

THE SURROUNDINGS IN which men live, as well as the ways in which they live, can become integrated and harmonious only when the discordant influences of exploitation and restrictions are removed. The frustration arising from an ugly, monotonous and unhealthy environment is only part of the general frustration which is inevitable in an acquisitive and authoritarian society. In every respect we can begin to live the well-balanced and fruitful life only when we live in a society free alike from convention and coercion. Only as they become free can men build the environment in which freedom will be developed and enjoyed.



We will therefore, give some idea of the changes which would be effected in man's communal environment by the advent of an anarchist society.

The subject can be approached from two major directions. Firstly, we can describe the way in which the provision of housing and communal services will be organised. Secondly, we can suggest some of the features which the social environment is likely to assume as a result of this organisational work.

After a social revolution, the problem of providing some immediate improvement in the living conditions of the workers would have to be faced. As private property would have been abolished, all dwellings would become vested in the community. In each district communes would be formed to administer local affairs not directly concerned with industries, and these communes, or workers' councils, would take over the administration of all houses in the neighbourhood. It would be their business to make a survey of all accommodation, so that the large residential houses of the rich could be shared among those who lived in overcrowded slums. Areas like Mayfair, with a surplus of large mansions, could offer some of their accommodation to the people of working class districts.

This, however, would be a solution both incomplete and temporary. The rich men's houses of London and the provincial cities, the mansions of the country gentry, large as they may be in the aggregate, are certainly not sufficient to house all the workers who now live in unsatisfactory homes. Nor are houses of such a kind convertible into really satisfactory units for families who wish to live comfortably instead of ostentatiously. Such a measure, therefore, would be a partial and a very temporary solution of the problem of rehousing the workers.

Most of the workers, and eventually all of them, will have to be housed in new buildings of various kinds—either flats or individual small houses. The task, as the previous articles have shown, is an enormous one, involving the building of at least five million houses within a very short term of years. This would merely remove the overcrowding and bad housing which are admitted by the standards of more or less orthodox criticism within the present society. After this had been completed there would remain the even more formidable task of providing the rest of the workers with houses pleasant to live in and functionally complete to a far greater degree than the ugly and inconvenient cottages which are considered satisfactory to-day. In addition there would be the almost equally great task, intimately associated with the rebuilding of houses, of reconstructing the public utilities, such as streets, parks, water and electricity supplies, cleansing, etc., in such a way as to integrate them into a socially satisfying and un wasteful environment for living.

Great as these tasks appear, there is no reason why they should not be completed within a relatively short number of years in a society that used all the potentialities of a scientifically mechanised industry in order to achieve a much greater rapidity of production than exists to-day. In making these statements I am not envisaging any sudden turning to Stakhanovite methods. On the contrary, if modern methods of unit construction were developed in a moderately imaginative manner, there is no doubt that the desirable increase in the rapidity of production could be achieved at the same time as a marked lessening of the labour necessary from the building workers.

The construction of new houses would be done by the syndicates of building workers, working in collaboration with the syndicates of factories producing construction units of various kinds. Included among the syndicates of building workers would be the architects and designers, who would no longer be hampered by the artificial barrier which in the past has divided the man who designs houses from the man who builds them. Design and practice would become once again closely integrated, as they were in the mediaeval periods of good architecture.

The syndicates of building workers would co-operate closely with the local communes, formed by the workers on a residential basis to administer the affairs of districts, villages and towns. Each commune would decide how much land could be devoted to building and how many houses it required. It would also consult with workers from other communes who needed accommodation outside their own districts, or, if its own population were too great, arrange for those who wished to leave to be given homes in other districts. Similarly, country communes would maintain a proportion of houses for workers who wished to leave the towns for a short while.

The communes, having decided what accommodation they needed, would arrange with the building syndicates for the work to be done. The building syndicates would undertake all the constructional details, in their turn arranging with other syndicates for the manufacture and transport of the necessary materials. They would gain the opinion of occupants as to faults and possible improvements in design, and modify their practice accordingly. They would also carry out experiments in design on their own account, building trial houses which they would invite workers to use in order to test the practical value of new ideas in architecture or equipment.

The relations between the communes and the workers' syndicates would be similar with regard to the public utilities which complete the communal environment. Electrical workers, for instance, would undertake to supply the necessary current for the communes and for industrial plant and to provide the requisite electrical equipment.

It is impossible to give any definite picture of the type of housing which would be built in a free society. Many of the people who wish to help humanity to live decently are too fond of creating Utopias correct to the last details of life. But anarchists more than anyone else should realise that men are endlessly diverse in their tastes, and that a free society must increase this diversity. Therefore, in housing as in other things of life, the result of freedom is likely to be a great variety of forms, bound as little to the architectural clichés of, say, Le Corbusier, as to those of the Gothic revival. It would be a very bad thing to try, like so many Utopian reformers, to swamp this beneficial diversity in an attempted uniformity of taste.

Nevertheless, certain general tendencies seem probable. The first is a changed attitude towards the town. When their work no longer ties them to one spot, many people will desire something different from the life of the great cities which have sprung from the administrative and industrial centralism of the last century. In a society based on decentralisation and federalism in communal and industrial affairs, the practical justification for large cities will vanish, and many of the inhabitants will begin to desert these overgrown agglomerations. The result will be an increase in the population of the country districts and the smaller towns. It will also, no doubt, be desirable to build new cities, of limited dimensions, in order to avoid the growth of further bands of suburbs round existing cities. These new cities would be surrounded by country—nowhere should the fields be more than reasonable walking distance from the centre, and within their boundaries, as in the old mediaeval cities, there would be gardens and public lawns. In general, the new society will probably see a strong tendency for the country to become more thickly populated, and for the towns to become more ruralised. Even in the old cities, this is

likely to take place as their populations shrink and old, useless buildings are pulled down and replaced by parks and gardens.

Dwellings will be built for health and pleasure. They will be so oriented and spaced as to receive the maximum sunlight. They will be constructed so as to admit plenty of fresh air and to make cleaning as simple as possible. They will make great provision for privacy—a need at present rarely catered for in working class families—and the elimination of external sound will be carefully achieved. They will be built away from through traffic roads, to avoid both the noise of such thoroughfares and their danger to children.

For the first time the social value of aesthetics in housing is likely to be fully realised. An ugly and monotonous environment can have harmful psychological effects and contribute to the most unhealthy frustrations. The endless by-law streets of Victorian England with their barracks-like terraces of identical houses, the grim tenements of Glasgow and London, the ribbon roads of the suburbs with their miserably designed lines of detached villas, represent patterns of housing which cannot reappear in a society that builds for health. Instead there should be houses pleasant and various in appearance, comfortable and healthy for living. Variety, of course, does not preclude harmony, and houses in towns should be designed so as to make a satisfying whole, while those in a rural environment should be built to contribute to rather than detract from the environment. A brief study of any good textbook of house design, such as F. R. S. Yorke's *The Modern House*, will show what can be done—for those who can afford it—in the way of aesthetically satisfying dwellings built by methods and materials now available. When craftsmanship and design are freed from economic necessity and direction, the possibility of building pleasant homes for everybody should be even greater.

One detail which has much importance in modern discussions of housing is the great controversy of flats *versus* houses. Many workers object to living in flats and wish to have individual houses. This attitude has two principal causes. The first is that working class flats are for the most part unsatisfactory. They give too little provision for privacy and are often crowded among other buildings which rob them of air and light, they usually have no lifts for the higher floors, and in general they give the feeling of a regimented rather than a communal life. The second is that under the property system of to-day there is a general tendency to desire a home of one's own, and this attitude is encouraged by the economic insecurity which gives an individual home the illusory air of a sanctuary against disaster. When, however, the worker can have a flat planned for comfort and privacy, in a block built to get air and light, and widely separated by gardens from other buildings, as well as

containing within itself many of the communal facilities—restaurants, meeting halls, etc.—he would otherwise have to seek outside, his attitude might well be different. In any case, towns could be designed in such a way as to give scope for both flats and single houses to be combined in a satisfying pattern.

Communal amenities will be planned to provide a completely integrated environment for the workers. Instead of the present suburbs spreading in shapeless masses from the centre, and integrated to no real local pattern of life, manageable and locally centred communities would arise, in which all the amenities of a full life would be provided. The aim of these comparatively small communities would be to ensure that everybody had within easy reach a reasonable service of schools, cinemas, meeting halls, libraries, theatres, restaurants, and the distribution depots which would replace shops. In this way each reasonably defined district would be able to develop a really vital life of its own, like the older *quartiers* of Paris or the mediaeval towns. Any tendency to centralisation would be countered by the local influences set up by such a plan of living, and from this great number of nuclei of activity there would arise a contrapuntal spirit of emulation which would result in a richness of life and culture similar to that of the other great periods of social decentralisation.

We have approached subjects of discussion far removed from the question of slum clearance at which we started, yet the whole complex of communal life is so closely inter-linked that it is impossible to discuss the kind of houses a man should inhabit without at least touching on the general communal structure of the society for which we strive.

For true freedom becomes possible only among integrated communities and individuals—and, reciprocally, an integration of society is possible only by an approach to freedom.