

OUR STREET

London, 1943

SIXPENCE

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A Survey in London, 1943

by

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"There is no evil in the world so great that God cannot raise up to meet it a corresponding beauty and glory which will blaze it out of countenance", said JOSEPHINE BUTLER in 1871.

May it not be that a Settlement House will start that blaze in "Exe" Street?

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OUR STREET

As the climax of the war draws nearer, problems of reconstruction press more urgently upon the Government, Local Authorities and all who are sincerely concerned with the homes of the future. An immense new problem has been created by the destruction of homes by bombing, which tends sometimes to overshadow the already enormous problem of slum clearance which existed before the war and which was being tackled all too slowly.

The publication in 1943 of *Our Town: a Close-up*, a book in which a group of expert social workers presented their diagnosis of the town life from which had sprung the evils exposed by the evacuation, brought for the first time to the general public a knowledge of the conditions under which a large mass of the population was still condemned to live.

The survey now printed was originally undertaken for a specific purpose and was circulated privately. It is concerned with people, and at no point does it imply criticism of Local Authorities as the Housing and Public Health Authorities. As a result of the interest aroused, it has been decided to print it, altering the names of streets and deleting any details by which the district might be too easily identified.

This anonymity is adopted to protect the inhabitants of the area, in whose interests the survey was made, and who would naturally resent being used "to point a moral or adorn a tale". It is believed, however, that in this small area nearly all the conditions which *Our Town* exposed are illustrated, and that this concrete example of the inevitable social consequences of bad housing with its accompanying squalor may usefully supplement the larger study. It shows, too, something of the difficulties facing Local Authorities when to the effect of the war upon houses is added the effect of the war upon the minds and habits of people.

This enquiry was undertaken by the London C.E.T.S. in 1943 at the instigation of the Vicar of the Parish supported by an informal group of youth workers and others immediately concerned with the daily life of this neighbourhood. Its purpose was to collect all authentic and relevant information in order that a work-a-day picture might be drawn of the interests and habits of the people living there, the human problems which face any who would help them, and to point the way to remedy.

The area covered by the survey is in the form of a rough rectangle half a mile long and a quarter of a mile wide, and most of it, including the worst streets, is within the parish boundary. It corresponds almost exactly with the shaded patch shown on the appropriate map of *The New Survey of London Life and Labour* as indicating "the mass of unskilled labourers and others of similar incomes", both above and below the poverty line.

This report is based only to a slight extent on observation and almost entirely on information supplied with most encouraging wholeheartedness by 36 men and women, all experts in their various spheres and representing many angles of approach, e.g. the Churches, L.C.C. Children's Care Work, the Employment Exchange, the Medical Service, Play Centres, the Police, Probation Service, and Education. Their collaboration has been magnificent.

General background

The district is bad morally and spiritually, but probably typical in this respect of many bad, but not necessarily poor, patches still existing in London. Its unique feature is that it contains a grim slum leading directly off the main road and unobscured by the usual labyrinth of small streets and alleys. This is undoubtedly the open sore of the district, radiating an influence which diminishes as it gets further from its source.

A comment by a Police Official is illuminating: "I have had 36 years' experience in London, but when I came here I was shocked to find in 'Exe' Street a slum, just off the main road, as bad as anything I had previously experienced."

Families who want to leave it often find it difficult to get rooms elsewhere if their origin is known, and it is sometimes necessary

to graduate via the next street. Yet it must be emphasized and borne in mind consistently that although the area is small it varies considerably, and much of what follows applies far more to the one or two so-called bad streets than to the rest.

The combination of traditional squalor and the proximity of better class people on all sides has the effect of stressing the sense of inferiority in the district, and of producing in consequence a type of warped "fellowship" and utterly immoral loyalty.

The prevailing characteristics are those of extreme unreliability, apathy and irresponsibility, with a moral code based on the attitude "if you want anything, take it".

Another commentary on the habits of some families is provided by the story of the small boy who presented his school teacher with a large bouquet, and promised another in the afternoon. Surprised, but gratified, the mistress pressed for information and discovered that they had come from "gran'pa" who had been dead for over a week. It was also revealed that, in lieu of alternative accommodation and with apparent unconcern, the child had continued to share the bed with the now decaying grandparent.

Houses and atmosphere alike constitute a tremendous obstacle to decent family life, and the fact that some families, even in the worst streets, succeed in overcoming their environment is a refreshing demonstration of domestic grit.

Yet it is generally evident that families, or at least the older people, are attached to the district and resent being organized or moved out as part of a slum clearance scheme, preferring simply to be "let alone" among their familiar surroundings. As an example there is the family of seven once living in two rooms in "Exe" Street who were moved to a self-contained flat of five rooms a mile away. They had no idea what to do with the three additional rooms, so sub-let them. Then the privacy of being self-contained got on their nerves and made them lonely. The family thereupon threw in the sponge and promptly moved back into three rooms near their old home.

Most homes now have a reasonably high income, and although poverty still exists it is by no means a major problem at present.

Bad management and unwise spending probably cause more domestic hardship than actual poverty. Apart from the heavy expenses considered necessary (probably on emotional grounds) at times of marriage or death, the steady weekly drain incurred by clothing clubs, insurance, etc., is typical.

Numerical background

(All the figures given below apply to 1943, with the exception of the estimated population.)

(a)	Estimated population of the area, 1936	..	..	..	..	..	..	10,000
	Estimated number of families, 1943	..	..	..	..	..	..	2,600
		0-5 years		5-14 years		14-18 years		Totals
		Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	
(b)	Total number of young people in area (estimated from official records)	250	250	620	620	224	224	2,188
	Total number reached by existing youth organizations, however slightly	47	51	151	114	120	95	578
	Adverse Balance	203	199	469	506	104	129	1,610

(c) Number of schools in the area—2 (one Infant and Junior, and one Infant and Senior)

(d)				In the area	In neighbouring streets
	Number of public-houses	..	..	11	10
	.. .. off-licences	..	..	7	8
	.. .. fan fairs	..	..	0	2
	.. .. cinemas or theatres	..	..	0	4
	.. .. billiard halls	..	..	1	0
	.. .. social clubs	..	..	1	0

Housing and overcrowding

Parts of the area are reported to have been condemned before the war, but it is now impossible to predict when rebuilding will begin. The sanitation of "Exe" Street has caused the Local Authorities considerable anxiety in the past and efforts were once

made to pin responsibility, but with what success is not known. Many families from this street have been moved to new Municipal flats in other parts of the borough. Their presence in these neighbourhoods has aroused considerable opposition among the local people, who are having demonstrated to them standards of life and habits of conduct of which they would prefer to remain in ignorance.

Most streets have two-storied houses and the remainder have three, but a family to a floor has for long been the rule. In these "converted" houses water is usually available only on the ground floor and on half landings, and it is frequently necessary to pass through someone else's living-space to reach it. In the same way there is only one lavatory in each house, and where it is shared by several families no one feels responsible for cleaning it. Cooking is done privately by coal range or gas ring.

Though overcrowding by Ministry of Health's standards is by no means general, congestion is widespread and inevitable. Much of it is probably voluntary, in that a family's instinctive reaction to bombing is to keep close together. A shaking mother in a vibrating house must needs have her children around her, and the war has taught all classes to accept standards of "overcrowding" and airlessness in bedroom or warden's post which would have been unthinkable in peacetime. These very human factors, plus the scarcity of accommodation, have obviously set the authorities an incredibly difficult problem. Before the war it was considered impossible to say how many people lived in "Exe" Street without an actual census being taken. The less congested "flat" is likely to have a living-room without any beds and possibly two beds in each bedroom. One has only a table, the rest of the available space being occupied by beds, floor mattresses and a few drawers, while two parents, some young children and a newly-born baby apparently sleeping in one room may be quoted as another example. Sharing beds is, of course, common, and it is seldom that one person occupies one bed. The worst known case is that of a bed being shared by three or four people.

Parents and homes

It is to be expected that the main problem with parents in general is the irresponsibility of the father and the inertia of the mother, although some of the better mothers bring their children to the Welfare Centre or attend the Ante-natal Clinic. A fair proportion bring their children to the Clinics or Centres, and appointments (other than dental) are usually kept. Possibly a quarter of the mothers obtain cod-liver oil, fruit juices or free milk. The number of children per family is still large, but there is a tendency to avoid, if possible, having more than one. For the most part children are only wanted when they are over 14 and can earn money, and they are well aware of this. Parental "nerviness", inevitable in such an environment, results in little effort being made to train children, who are alternately spoiled and spanked. An encouraging feature is that the standard of cleanliness has risen considerably during the past ten years, and existing shortcomings are due largely to lack of washing facilities and the attraction of streets as a playground.

A great many mothers go out to work, relying on the older children being provided with school dinners, and leaving the babies in the care of Day Nurseries or "Granny". In fact the responsibility for looking after the children falls increasingly on the granny and the older children. The nearest nursery centre has a waiting list of 100 children, and the need for more centres is great but in the process of being met.

Most homes have a gramophone and radio, and in spite of material squalor about half the parents take a pride in their homes. Where they are badly kept the cause is usually the hopelessness of keeping a home clean in face of the prevailing loose floor boards, broken bannisters and falling plaster, or possibly in some cases a low mental standard. Considering such a state of disrepair the average home, though untidy, is surprisingly clean.

The Newly-weds

Most girls marry at about 18 or 20 and as a rule their husbands are from the same district; a first baby seldom arrives after 30.

There is very little evidence that young couples move out of the neighbourhood into better surroundings, and if they do move there is a strong tendency for them to return to live with their parents. All the young wives recently interviewed by an after-care worker had returned because their parents lived there. Only the more enlightened type move out and stay out; it has been noticed, for instance, that many of those connected with religious organizations, by contact with a different atmosphere, have realized for the first time the degradation of their surroundings.

In recent years young married people have improved materially on their parents, encouraged by cheap clothes and the influence of the cinema. But this newly-found self-respect is only superficial for, although girls may dress attractively, they continue to lack an inner self-respect or to change spiritually and morally.

The tragedy of the young wife is so often the break with freedom and outside interests, such as they are, which occurs with the arrival of the first child. The husband never realizes the psychological problems of pregnancy, and when she becomes nervy and irritable he goes out alone to the public-house or the "dags", and this quickly becomes a habit. He no longer tries to be the amusing companion of their single days; she retires resentfully into the routine of domestic life, quickly losing even the outward pride of appearance. The scene is now set for the creation of yet another "home" of the "Exe" Street type, and in that environment another family of children will grow up true to the traditions of the district. And so it continues.

Youth

Young children are as undisciplined as one would expect them to be in such a daily environment, doing what they want to do with or without parental consent. The Play Centre caters for boys and girls from 5 to 14 and provides trained staff, a variety of activities and games, tea for 2d., bright airy buildings, and no rules except that children shall stay there until closing time at 7 p.m.; yet they prefer to play in the open streets without restraint or supervision, which they resent. The appearance of "Exe" Street suggests that it has suffered badly from blast: actually the

damage to empty houses is caused by the bursting capacity of boys, not bombs. First the windows are systematically smashed; then the frames are levered out and sold as firewood. The door panels follow in company with anything else that may be portable, or that ingenuity can render portable. They are of the type that scream the first line of a carol through letter-boxes at Christmastide before demanding alms for "the carol singers", or that tour better-class districts with bogus collecting boxes.

After a recent registration approximately thirty boys from the area were requested to appear for an interview, but less than 25 per cent. presented themselves, and of those who asked to be put in touch with youth organizations only about one or two can be expected to follow up the introductions. A member of the Interviewing Committee commented, "If I see 'Coombe' Road, 'Avell' Street, or 'Eax' Street on their forms I know beforehand that nothing much will come of it."

At the School, however, most of the children are quite intelligent but unable to concentrate for more than a very short time: 20 per cent. of the 11-year-olds graduate to secondary or central schools each year. A large proportion of the children are of low moral standards, but a number of those who have been evacuated show a marked improvement. The lack of concentration among the younger children is reflected in the elder, e.g. a number of club girls may be playing games with abandon when, on the instant and for no discernible purpose, they will simply drop whatever they hold in their hands and flee the room in a mass.

Nevertheless, the friendliness and cheerfulness characteristic of all young living things can be found up and down our streets, no less than elsewhere, and in large quantity. This "likeableness" is probably the will-o'-the-wisp which encourages so many youth workers in their efforts to discover or create the stability which alone can break the vicious circle.

Employment. Rather more than half the number of boys and girls leaving school are anxious to secure jobs which offer a career, and the rest are concerned only with the immediate prospect of high wages at unskilled or semi-skilled work. Well-paid repetition work calling for little mental effort is preferred to anything

demanding craftsmanship. In this they are supported by their parents, for the same reasons.

Approximately half the girls are unskilled factory workers and the rest are engaged in dressmaking and tailoring, or work in laundries, shops and offices.

The boys seem to divide in much the same proportion, a half becoming unskilled factory workers, office workers, van boys, messenger boys, builders' labourers, etc., and the rest adopting engineering as a career.

Working Hours. An enquiry late in 1942 among boys belonging to the local Y.M.C.A. revealed that boys of 14 were working on an average 60 to 70 hours a week. The average working hours throughout the area surveyed are considerably less, as the following figures show:

	Factory workers	Other workers
Boys and girls aged 14 and 15	48 per week	44 per week
" " " " 16 and 17	54 per week	50 per week

There is a strange difference between these two averages. One is tempted to wonder whether private arrangements may not sometimes be made for overtime that is not officially recorded.

Girls are not permitted to work on night-shifts; 48 hours per week are the maximum for those aged 14 and 15, and 60 hours for ages 16 and 17.

Wages. Occasionally wages are found to be extremely high, but again the average weekly wages below provide a corrective:

	Girls			Boys		
	Factory	Others	Engineering	Factory	Building	Others
14 years	20s.	20s.	19s.	21s.	22s.	21s.
15 ..	25s.	25s.	25s.	27s. 6d.	30s.	27s. 6d.
16 ..	35s.	31s.	40s.	42s. 6d.	45s.	37s. 6d.
17 ..	45s.	40s.	50s.	55s.	62s. 6d.	45s.

Eating and Sleeping. Children are unwisely nourished rather than undernourished, the ubiquitous fish and chips and bread and jam being the popular diet. Some children take advantage of school meals but frequently need considerable coaxing before they will eat unfamiliar food, and, what is more, eat it sitting down at a

table. Nevertheless, the meals provided at home are usually fairly regular and often cooked.

Lack of sleep seems to be general among the quite young children, who in summer continue to play in the street until 9 or 10 p.m. For that matter, when beds or mattresses are shared, and congestion is such that they cannot be moved into position until the door is finally shut, there seems to be no point in small children retiring before the return of older brothers and sisters from their overtime or nightly perambulations. The normal habit seems to be to sleep without clothes until adolescence arouses self-consciousness, or alternatively to sleep in shirt or vest. This is thought to be a very real cause of the extremely low standards of sexual morality accepted as normal.

Drinking and gambling

It is acknowledged that the habit of drinking is widespread among all ages from adolescence upwards, but that drunkenness is by no means pronounced. Drinking at home is becoming more popular, and is borne out by the existence in the area of seven off-licences as compared with eleven public-houses, most of which also have an off-licence department attached. This private drinking has an ugly feel about it, for it permits of an outward appearance of respectability by virtue of a claim to quite moderate drinking, which in fact is often immoderate and menacing.

Gambling is by far the greater curse and embraces all ages from young children to adults. People gamble openly on the pavement, usually at week-ends, and before the war it was customary to see a group of forty or fifty men and boys so occupied. Women are among the worst offenders, and among adults the most general betting interest is dog racing. During the blitz gambling on the pavements seemed particularly popular, probably because it brought relief from the nightly strain. There is a strong urge to "get something for nothing" observed from the age of 10 upwards.

Morals

There is complete agreement that "Exe" Street in particular produces an attitude of mind so devoid of general moral standards

as to make it unique in the experience of all the welfare workers interviewed, though, for the area as a whole, sexual immorality is probably no worse than is to be found in other similar neighbourhoods. A large number of girls are already pregnant when they marry.

Prostitution within the area is not greatly in evidence, and the twenty known prostitutes living in one street, for instance, are hardened cases who operate from rooms in the Piccadilly or Marble Arch area. The immediate vicinity had a bad reputation before the war, though the women came more from neighbouring roads than from the survey area.

Although evidence is very difficult to obtain, there is no doubt in the minds of those workers specially concerned with prostitution that it is assuming grave proportions, and that the "problem" age for girls has dropped in this war to 12-14 years. As one Juvenile Court magistrate said, "By the time this type of girl reaches 14 she is often too hardened to be touched permanently." This is confirmed in a general way by the Women Police. Some of those quite young girls have been known to charge their clients as little as 4d.

The disturbing feature, however, is not prostitution as such, but the attitude of mind which simply does not regard promiscuity as immoral—is affronted, in fact, at the very suggestion. It is quite natural for a woman to live with a man who is not her husband, and for the husband, himself living in the same street with another woman, to drop in once a week to pay for the children, or spend the week-end with his wife and her temporary partner. The desire to hide such domestic conditions often makes women reluctant to visit the hospital for treatment.

The Parish Church

The church, bleak and forbidding, was built 70 years ago for a congregation of 1,000, now represented by an average adult congregation of 30. The hall is of similar type. Neither can begin to compete in atmosphere with the warmth and brightness and general attractiveness of the cinema foyer at the bottom of

the road, nor with the airiness and cleanliness of the L.C.C. School.

The regular congregation is an extremely hard working and loyal nucleus of men and women who, with the clergy, battle steadily against discouraging conditions. Nevertheless, the clergy themselves are regarded in the popular eye not so much as the ministers of a Living God as the machinery for getting married—the signers of pension and milk forms, and lost coupon forms. The people extend to them a ready friendliness beyond which it seems impossible to penetrate.

The Sunday Schools and some of the other parochial youth activities function well, particularly among the younger children, but in general the going is heavy. The Scouts, formed a year ago, have six enrolled members of whom only one is in any way reliable; a religious tableau, rehearsed for two months, was finally produced with scarcely any of the original cast; when the Bishop of London came to preach, most of the choirboys, carefully coached in the hymns, went to the pictures.

Conclusion

The problem posed in this survey is easily seen to be a double one. There is the problem of a hopeless environment—but there is also the problem of the people who are to some extent the product of that environment. To clear a slum is not difficult: to undo the effects of generations of slum-dwelling is another matter. The clearance or rebuilding of "Exe" Street and its neighbourhood is a task for the statutory authorities, but the group which initiated the survey has also attempted to find a solution for the second part of the problem.

Some of those who live in "Exe" Street once moved out of it and have been driven back either by their own failure to adapt themselves to new surroundings or by the hostility which they met with in their attempt. Others, the great majority, are those whose inertia has prevented them from any move. No scheme to rehouse them will ever succeed unless they themselves co-operate in it, just as all attempts to improve the children by better education and health services will be defeated unless the parents play their part.

Slums result from the acceptance of standards below those of decent living conditions. They can only be finally abolished when that acceptance is no longer forthcoming, when people actively demand on their own behalf proper standards of sanitation, living-space and amenities, and when they are ready to make full use of every opportunity provided. As a first step towards this they must be helped to realize their own potentialities. This is being tackled in "Exe" Street by the well-tried method of the Residential Settlement.

A house has been bought near the centre of the area in which will live a Warden and a small team of social workers, whose principal aim will be to establish friendly contact with their neighbours and to provide for them a centre to which they can turn for help and guidance of all kinds.

Not far away premises have also been secured in which clubs for both children and adults can be opened. The Settlement workers will at first be responsible for the running of these clubs and their cost will be borne by the Settlement, but eventually it is hoped that a fully self-governing Community Association will develop, able to shoulder its own responsibilities, financial and otherwise. To carry out this two-fold scheme a Council is being set up whose membership will include representatives of local churches and voluntary organizations, elected representatives of the Clubs, and a number of co-opted members. The Settlement will be entirely non-denominational and its membership will always be open to those of any faith or of none.

It is hoped that this double approach may achieve the end of helping the people of "Exe" Street to fit themselves to seize their opportunity when reconstruction reaches them, so that in this instance at least the tragedy of the "slum-clearance" estate which itself becomes a new slum may be avoided. The Settlement is providing them with leadership and initiative from outside, but providing them also with the means to take that initiative into their own hands as soon as they are ready for it. These efforts, however, cannot succeed unless they are supported by an improvement in physical conditions.

This Survey is printed in the hope that it may quicken the

imagination of some of those who are beginning to forget the shock they received from *Our Towns*, and who, by reading this account of the way in which some thousands of people in one London district have been condemned to live, may be moved to find out under what conditions some of their own neighbours may be living.