

FROM SLUM DWELLINGS TO COUNCIL HOUSING ESTATES

BRIDGET MARY WATERS

POVERTY and unemployment, slums and dirt were the conditions best known to those who worked amongst the under-privileged in 1925. In London and all the big cities families lived in houses that were dismal and insanitary, houses where a bathroom was an undreamed of luxury, where, as likely as not, hot water was to be obtained only from a kettle on an open fire. Walls were damp and crumbling and many women waged perpetual warfare against the 'steam tugs', as the Londoners called the bugs which tainted the air with their sickly smell. Families who had a four-roomed house to themselves were fortunate, for many were housed in large tenement buildings where lavatory accommodation was shared between several families and every drop of water used by the top floor tenants must be carried from upstairs a tap in the yard. In such buildings it was not unusual for babies to be bitten by rats or mice and for girls who were working in the exclusive shops of the town to be forced to keep their clothes in large paper bags that could not be invaded by the bugs at night. A bed to oneself was unheard of privacy in these overcrowded homes; there were few facilities for personal cleanliness and the family washing was done at the public washhouse. Cooking facilities were little better, and as there was no space for the storage of provisions food had to be bought in small quantities from day to day. Many spoke scornfully of the thriftlessness of the poor who had no knowledge of the conditions which forced them to live in such a hand-to-mouth fashion.

The Dove Rows and Cherry Tree Lanes of the slums held beauty in their names alone. The windows of slum houses looked out on dark walls, gloomy back yards and dirty streets. Many districts were dominated by gasometers or tanneries which poisoned the air with their stench. Smuts from factory chimneys drifted into the houses and women who wanted to keep their homes clean and shining found that the task was almost beyond their powers. The critics who said 'It costs nothing to be clean'

knew nothing of the labour involved in keeping clean in the slums, nor of the difficulty of sparing the cost of the necessary cleaning material from a weekly income that was below the level of decent poverty. In winter slum streets were bearable to those who were adequately clad, but in summer the odour of rotting fruit and stale vegetables from market stalls, combined with the smell of gasometers and the stench of unwashed bodies, made them purgatorial.

Apart from some of the factories the biggest buildings of the slums were the schools and churches. Slum schools were usually gaunt and blackened tenements, though heroic teachers did their utmost to bring colour and beauty to the classrooms and found their reward in the eager response of some of the children. The Church of England was seen at its best in many a city slum where clergy, sisters and settlement workers brought comfort to the old, relief to the needy and recreation to the children and young people of the poor streets. In London an Anglican mission was the first to initiate a House Improvement Association which did much to transform one of the most overcrowded and badly housed areas of the metropolis.

Life in the slums was a school of hardship and few but the tough could survive. Each family was dependent on the health, the industry and the sobriety of the father and the children of working age. Many casual labourers, such as bricklayers and dockers, depended on weather conditions and the movements of ships for their employment and they received neither basic pay nor 'dole' when work was unobtainable. They were forced to rely on the meagre assistance obtained from relieving officers who were not unfailingly kind or courteous. Many women were forced to supplement their husbands' wages by box-making or working at home for the tailors' sweat-shops.

The pawn shop was the bank of the slums and every Monday morning saw a large number of women taking back to it the clothes they had redeemed for Sunday wear. When illness, unemployment or habitual alcoholism made it necessary, wedding-ring, blankets and all the treasured ornaments of a home found their way to the pawn shop. The women who got into debt and pawned their husbands' best suits without their knowledge often suffered acute anxiety through being unable to get together the cost of the 'pawn ticket. Even greater tragedy came when a

family was unable to redeem any of its possessions which were lost forever to the pawnbrokers. Moneylenders abounded in the mean streets and thrived on the misfortunes of their neighbours. The interest they charged was so exorbitant that the borrowers could never extricate themselves from their clutches, and it was not unknown for a man who had borrowed the money to give his wife an impressive funeral to be found hanging in his house in a few weeks' time when the moneylender began to press his claims.

Illness and accidents alike were dreaded by the inhabitants of slumdom. Hard-working parents paid little attention to aches and pains so long as they could stand upon their feet. Few slum mothers of the period enjoyed good health, for they were the first to go short of food when times were hard, and men who were out of work for any length of time might find, when they got employment, that they no longer had the strength for heavy manual labour. When forced to the doctor's surgery the poor sat patiently in dreary waiting-rooms and were content with any bottle of medicine that was brightly coloured, tasted sufficiently nasty and was given with a friendly word. The doctors of the slums charged little to their patients and often they were very kind. Slum dwellings were not places where the sick could be given suitable treatment; infection spread rapidly in overcrowded and airless rooms and quiet and comfort were impossible to secure. Hospitals were the refuge of the seriously ill who received free treatment from the most eminent physicians and surgeons and skilful care from women trained in the highest traditions of nursing. If the poor were treated as unintelligent and inferior beings, unentitled to any explanation of their diseases or treatments, probably they differed but little in that respect from the better-off patient of the period. The doctors might often perform miracles of healing, but the anxieties of the poor decreased the chances of cure and the conditions to which the patients returned precluded the possibility of continued health.

Those who knew the constant anxieties of the slum dwellers, the dreariness of the little streets and the tawdry gloom of the larger thoroughfares could not wonder that many of the inhabitants increased their poverty through alcoholism. The overcrowded and evil-smelling kitchen of the slum house, filled with the steam of drying clothes, was not a room in which the ex-

hausted navvy could relax at the end of the day. He found comfort and companionship in the pub and temporary release from anxiety in intoxication. The housewife who was always ailing, who seldom ventured beyond the immediate neighbourhood, found in alcohol the key to a brighter world. The wonder was not that some lives were ruined by drink but that all the inhabitants of slumdom did not become chronic drunkards.

The material conditions of the workers of fifty years ago were a disgrace to a civilised community, but for all that there was great happiness and even gaiety to be found in the poorest parts of any town. Family life flourished in the most appalling conditions and a mother could still look at her tenth baby as if he were God's greatest masterpiece and the most delightful infant that was ever created. Wives who were almost illiterate could show great wisdom in the handling of their men, and fathers and mothers alike were usually devoted to their children. Responsibilities came to the children at a far too early age, but they tended to develop great affection for the infants whom they tended and often were proud to show off 'our baby'. The children of the slums had a wealth of affection to give and the social worker who was known in a street would be greeted and escorted by a crowd of children all inviting her to come and see their mums. Old people were cared for by their sons and daughters who would have been horrified at the idea of sending them to the workhouse.

'It's the poor who always help the poor' is a saying that was proved to be true any day in slumdom. Neighbours might quarrel, but when a family fell on bad days the whole street rallied to its aid. The sick mother was cared for, the children washed, fed and sent to school, and if the woman died friend or relatives thought little of fitting another child into their overcrowded homes. Cockneys, at least, showed innate courtesy and intuitive kindness to those who came amongst them and there was a genius for friendship in the mean streets of any city. There was laughter and lightheartedness in the slums, though jokes would be toned down to suit the ears of young social workers. Lacking modern sources of entertainment, the workers of the cities enjoyed the spectacle of a good funeral as much as they enjoyed a wedding. They found their drama in the life around them and they brought a tremendous power of enjoyment to the annual outing by the sea and the Christmas party provided by the local church or

mission. The slums held much that was evil, but heroic virtue and amazing charity was to be found in almost every street.

Looking at the changed material conditions of today the social worker of thirty years ago might think that she had found Utopia. The congested slums of yesterday have given place to the new council housing estates of every town and city. Instead of dreary rows of houses with front doors opening straight into the street there are attractive-looking homes standing in gardens that are gay with flowers. Each house has its own bathroom, indoor sanitation and plentiful supply of hot water. The housewife delights in built-in cupboards, airing cupboards and sometimes central heating. These houses are set in roads that are wide and often bordered with grass verges. In the new estates everything is clean and light. The children attending the spacious schools of the new estates are clean, well dressed and usually look healthy. The women look prosperous as they set out to do their shopping and return with well-laden baskets. Ante- and post-natal care given to mothers at the public health clinics has done much to improve the health of both mothers and babies and the dental and minor ailment, orthopaedic, rheumatism and child guidance clinics help to ensure the physical and mental health of the rising generation. Most of the men bring home well-filled pay-packets, though often they have had to do overtime to achieve this result. Basic wages and insurance give a measure of security.

Every day families move out of the city slums to well-built and fully-equipped houses in the healthy atmosphere of a new estate. It is true that the transformation of the cities is by no means completed. There are still far too many families condemned to live in a couple of rooms in the decaying houses of the mean streets. Some prefer such accommodation in a neighbourhood which is home to them, but others cannot afford the higher rent of a new house. There are still many families who will bring their dirt and their slipshod ways with them wherever they may go. Such families are a source of distress to their neighbours if they be moved into a new estate. In one city such problem families are rehoused in one or two streets of older houses on the new estates, but this arrangement has obvious disadvantages. Problem families are a constant source of anxiety to the local authorities and bewilder all who think that the provision of good material conditions should cure all social ills. Investigation proves that

mental deficiency, psycho-neurosis and the moral degradation induced by a century or more of sub-human living conditions are usually responsible for the creation of the problems which cannot be cured by good housing conditions or the constant visits of social workers alone. Heroic Quaker units have befriended such families, visiting them daily, cleaning and redecorating their homes, teaching them how to budget on their incomes and acting as guides, counsellors and friends until they are able to manage their lives for themselves.

Many people think that the welfare state and full employment have banished poverty, but this is not the case. Sick benefits and unemployment insurance give a measure of security to the workers although few families would find it easy to meet the cost of living on these sources of income alone. There must always be a number of widows with young children dependent on them, men who are chronic invalids or permanently disabled by industrial injury who must live on incomes derived from pensions or the National Assistance Board. The families of such men will have a hard struggle to live. Many speak of the fabulous wages earned by manual workers today, but there are still many whose weekly wages are far too small to meet the cost of modern living. There seems little room to doubt, however, that the material conditions and living standards of British workers have improved to an extraordinary degree in the last few years and the prosperity of many artisans' families is far greater than that of many professional workers.

Reasonable security, full employment and good living conditions were considered by many to be sufficient to bring happiness and contentment to the workers. This expectation has not been fully realized; happiness seems to be less in evidence than it was thirty years ago and there is little sign of content. It would be a grave mistake to blame improved material conditions for this failure. Improvements were long overdue and the provision of good houses, medical benefits and employment insurance are the outcome of the social justice which should be expected in any community that is nominally Christian. The failure seems to arise from the mistaken belief that man finds his satisfaction in material things alone which has been held by many of the more prosperous members of society and has been passed on by them to the working classes. Those who should have been leaders have led the less

educated astray. In so far as the workers have become imbued with a materialistic philosophy they have lost their capacity for happiness. In the past the struggle to survive and the need to force higher wages and better working conditions from reluctant employers have made it necessary for the utmost effort to be concentrated on the fight for material improvements. Today the need exists for a minority only, but non-material needs are still unrecognised. The growing materialism and paganism of the middle classes and their utilitarian attitude towards education have been assimilated by many workers. Standardized recreation, serving as a soporific or a stimulant and leaving the addict in his usual condition of boredom when the effects of the drug have worn off, serves to add to the feeling of futility.

The break-up of the family unit is without doubt the greatest loss experienced by the workers of this generation. Thirty years ago it seemed that comparatively few slum dwellers found consolation in religion but the natural joys remained to them. While it would be grossly untrue to say that all inhabitants of the council estates have lost the capacity to find joy in family relationships, it appears that a growing number look upon family ties as a burden. Young working-class mothers have learned from various sources that the birth of children should be planned and controlled, but it is not unknown for a young married couple to seek adoption for their legitimate child before its birth. During the war many women forced to work outside the home learned not only the pleasure of having money of their own to spend but the pleasure of companionship found in work, in factory or office. The rising cost of living forces some married women to work, but many more do so on flimsy pretexts which suggest that pleasure in outside work is the real motive for undertaking it.

The modern search for equality which seems to be a by-product of materialism adds to the general discontent. At home parents will go to any length and incur severe financial burdens to ensure that all the children of the family shall have exactly the same possessions: if there be three children there will be nine birthday presents to buy each year, and if the eldest be given a bicycle the presents of the other two must be of equal value. Parents are bewildered to find that 'equality' and lavish gifts do not bring happiness and cannot think why their children should be difficult when 'they get everything they want'. The well-paid worker,

often spending considerable time and energy in getting from his new home to his work, affected to some extent by a growing belief in his equality with the bosses and a growing bitterness at inequalities of incomes, is certainly no happier than the slum dweller of the immediate past. The working woman, uprooted from a hideous but familiar environment, finding greater leisure than she has known before, living her days alone among strangers, is too often the most unhappy product of modern conditions. She cannot find friends at church or chapel for she has no connection with any religious denomination. It is only the exceptional doctor who makes time to consider the personality problems of his patients, and the parish worker who visited from house to house and made friends with those who needed her is almost extinct. It is not surprising that these lonely women turn in on themselves and nurse their depressions until they are forced to seek treatment at the overcrowded psychiatric out-patients department of their local hospital.

Much has been written about the decay of religion in Great Britain, but often this has been deplored solely for its adverse effect on popular morality. It seems probable that the religious and social sanctions of the nineteenth century were responsible for much of the honesty of which the British boasted and for a rigid code of sexual morality. Today few but Catholics believe in the existence of hell and Catholics in general are no longer motivated by fear of eternal punishment. No instructed Catholic, however, would believe that religion exists for the sole purpose of enforcing a moral code and the Church's concern is with modern man's failure to fulfil the purpose of his existence, that of knowing, loving and serving God. Losing God, man loses the Centre on which he revolves, his world becomes meaningless and life consists of a ceaseless search for material benefits which can never bring him happiness.

It was Pope Pius XI who said that the working classes had been lost to the Church, and those who have read Maisie Ward's *France Pagan?* or Fr Loew's *Mission to the Poorest* know that in France this is indeed true. They will know, too, of the heroic methods that are being used to reunite the workers with Christ the Worker. In Great Britain the loss is not complete, though it seems that few but Catholic workers have any knowledge of God. In *Called Up*, a collection of accounts of their national service

given by sixteen young men, many of whom are from the working classes, it is notable that the only man to whom religion had meaning was a Catholic. He found that provided a man lived up to the religion he professed he was not subjected to persecution from his comrades. The statement of a working-class mother that the workers were not against God but just knew nothing about him is true of many individuals who give the impression that they would be glad to accept Catholicism if it were put to them as a faith affecting the present as well as the hereafter in which, at present, they have no real belief. Within the Church, in spite of much falling away, the working class remains as the backbone of English Catholicism. Anyone seeing a large church crowded to capacity when members of the Legion of Mary renew their promises will recognize the influence exercised by this one organization alone on the lives of the Catholic working classes. The Church stands as a bulwark against the paganism that threatens this country, and the Catholic worker and indeed every individual Catholic has a vital part to play in the struggle against evil.

During the last war civilians found that warfare was no longer the affair of professional soldiers alone; it had become a matter in which all were concerned and even the children were not exempt from its rigours. In the same way the fight against godlessness is no longer a matter for priests and religious and for the saints alone. We, the laity, can no longer play the part of civilians, making a little ammunition or rolling a few bandages in our spare time. We must live our faith and allow Christ to live in us so that he may be known wherever men and women meet together for work or recreation. Seeking no longer to serve two masters, taught by the Holy Spirit of Wisdom, we shall value what Christ values and cease to concern ourselves mainly with earthly riches and honours. When every practising Catholic lives his Christian life fully, all with whom he associates will see the joy of Christianity and the workers will find the happiness that eludes them. When the Incarnate Christ is the centre of every Catholic home and every Catholic family is united in his love the families around will be drawn through them to the love of Jesus and Mary. Treated as sub-human in the past and denied their material rights, the British workers have displayed courage, charity, humour and lack of hatred that is amazing. Today they are bewildered

because they find that the material advantages they have acquired at last do not bring inevitable happiness. The future of the workers is the future of the country itself and it depends to a terrifying extent upon the Catholic laity who are almost alone in knowing where true joys can be found. It is our task to give back to the workers their ancient heritage of faith that, transformed by his Spirit, they may find joy and peace in the love of God on earth until they are called to adore him in the bliss and glory of eternity.

ARCHITECTURE AND NATURAL HARMONY

KENELM FOSTER, O.P.

IN any period men's thoughts about the past tend to harden and simplify into conventional praise or disparagement. This in turn, as fashion and then prejudice, affects the present and the future; until a new generation finds it an intolerable cliché. It is then criticized and perhaps discarded. Modern scholars cannot stomach the old clichés about the Renaissance. To go further back, Voltaire's generation sneered at Dante, whom it did not read, and thought Gothic a style for barbarians; and both these views, with their implications, had become conventional, not to say stale, by the mid-eighteenth century. When, with the new century, the tide turned, the motive was largely religious; a revival of Christian piety, a new interest in theology. But the new outlook could be equally one-sided. Pugin thought Gothic the only Christian style in building and Ruskin thundered against the neo-classical style of the Renaissance—'pagan in its origin, proud and unholy in its revival, paralysed in its old age . . . an architecture invented, as it seems, to make plagiarists of its architects, slaves of its workmen, and sybarites of its inhabitants'.¹ And from this attitude, become in turn a convention as stale as

¹ *The Stones of Venice*, vol. III, ch. 4: quoted by R. Wittkower in *Architectural Principles in the Age of Humanism* (1952), p. 1.