
Working-Class Tenements in London

Author(s): Edward Porritt

Source: *The North American Review*, Jan., 1895, Vol. 160, No. 458 (Jan., 1895), pp. 120-124

Published by: University of Northern Iowa

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25103464>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The North American Review*

JSTOR

public library building, the consideration of which these lines have in mind, should contain another room devoted to the use of children, in which—if the trustees have been fortunate in securing the right woman as an attendant—work may be done which, in its far-reaching and beneficial effects, will be second to none accomplished in any part of the library. In this room will be formed an early taste for reading, and, if tact, patience, and kindly nature have been used, the child will, when graduating therefrom, carry with him to the main library that sense of the proper use of books as to make that use, not only of greater benefit to himself, but to all others with whom he comes in contact. This thought is by no means visionary or Utopian. Those familiar with what is being done by librarians can easily name a number of libraries in which such work is being most successfully carried on. This room may well serve a twofold purpose. Being used by the children during certain hours of the day, it might be devoted at certain other hours to such work as may be suggested through a close and hearty co-operation between the librarian and the superintendent of the town's schools. To this room a teacher in the high-school might very properly be permitted to take his class, that its members should together have the privilege of studying such books of reference as relate to some given subject.

Still another room may well be provided, the necessity for which is perhaps rarely considered, but which is called for by an existing condition too often ignored. The poorer element of a community, as if by instinct, shrinks from availing itself of privileges, if doing so necessitates the use of rooms designed and furnished in a way to which its members are not accustomed. This condition applies forcibly to the man who, never having used the library, or given any thought to the question of reading, is approached by the librarian with the view of making him a user of the books under his charge. This man will be sure to feel that the very atmosphere of the library, its reading-room and its alcoves for study, are unfitted to him, and he will not be willing to make the effort to adjust himself to such conditions.

For this class of the community—which, of course, does not include those of its members who have already acquired the taste for reading—a room may well be reserved, to supply the place of the village reading-room, which has been, in so very many towns, successfully introduced. It would not be long before many of its users would wish to graduate thence to the rooms above, where they might find the books better fitted to their changed conditions. The ideal library—if, indeed, it is to justify its name of free public library—should include all of these means of usefulness. It should avoid everything spectacular. Its every foot of space should be made use of to inculcate a love of reading and to provide pleasant, cheerful rooms adapted to the uses of its many frequenters. Its construction should receive the careful and earnest thought of those to whom the citizens have intrusted it. Such a building will surely prove to be, in the hands of progressive trustees and an earnest librarian, a power in the community for doing good, the extent of which can not be measured.

E. C. HOVEY.

WORKING-CLASS TENEMENTS IN LONDON.

LONDON, it may now be fairly claimed, is in a position to give other large cities a few points concerning the tenement problem. It would be remarkable if it were not so; for in one way or another the problem of adequately and decently housing the industrial classes in the English

metropolis has been grappled with since 1840. During the fifty years which have intervened since the first movement was made, the question has engaged the serious and constant attention of a number of eminently practical social reformers, men and women; and on several occasions, in more recent years, Parliament has taken it in hand, and, by means of legislation conferring new and large powers on the municipal authorities, has contributed its share to the solution of the problem.

Much had been accomplished by associated effort before Parliament took any action. Associated effort, working on social and philanthropic, as distinct from charitable lines, had accomplished the pioneer work and shown what could be done, long before the movement received any help from the legislature. It was, in fact, not until 1875 that this help came. By that time three great organizations, adequately backed with capital, were engaged in providing accommodation for the working classes, and numerous monuments to the success and usefulness of these organizations, in the shape of great blocks of dwellings, were then in existence, especially in central London, where the problem of housing artisans and laborers in good and cheap homes, convenient to their work, was and always had been most pressing. The pioneer organization had at this time been in existence over thirty years. The other two, although working on a larger scale, were much newer to the work; but even these organizations had had twelve or thirteen years' experience of the work before their operations were facilitated and immensely extended by the measures adopted by Parliament in the seventies, with a view to preventing the industrial classes from being crowded out of central London, and compelled to make their homes in the suburbs.

The organizations then at work were the Metropolitan Association for Improving the Dwellings of the Industrious Classes, the Improved Dwellings Company, now known to Londoners as the Waterlow Company, and the Peabody Trustees. The Metropolitan Association was the pioneer in the work. It was organized in 1844, and was the outcome of a movement started by a late Rector of the East End parish of Spitalfields. Its first venture was a five-story block near St. Pancras station, built in 1846, and affording accommodation for 110 families. This was the first building of its kind in London. The Improved Dwellings Company was organized in 1863. Sir Sidney Waterlow was the pioneer of this concern, and is its president at the present time. He organized the company after achieving success with two or three blocks of dwellings built in Finsbury as a private speculation. The Peabody Trust, charged with the administration of the Peabody fund, came into existence about the same time; and these two organizations have now between them provided dwelling accommodation for more than 50,000 people, involving an aggregate expenditure of two and a quarter millions sterling. By the end of 1893, the pioneer company had provided dwelling accommodation for 6,500 people; the Peabody Trustees had provided 5,070 separate dwellings, accommodating nearly 20,000 people; while the Waterlow Company, in its own buildings and in buildings under its management, had provided 6,120 dwellings, with accommodation for 31,000 people.

Until about 1877 each of these three corporations worked on its own lines without any recognition or help from the municipal authorities, or from Parliament. The Metropolitan Association and the Waterlow Company were dividend earning concerns, differing from other commercial

undertakings only in that their charters limited their dividends to five per cent. Both companies had always disclaimed any charitable intentions. Their promoters and their original shareholders were mostly people interested in social reforms, and also in philanthropic work; but not in any schemes for providing working people with house accommodation at less than cost. The originators of both companies believed that working class Londoners paid too high rents for the poor accommodation which was available for them; that it was possible to provide them with better and more convenient dwellings; and, at the same time, secure from the improved dwellings in rent adequate compensation for the capitalist. It was, from the first, the aim of the directors to earn five per cent. for distribution among the shareholders, and in most years this result has been achieved. The Peabody Trustees, on the other hand, when they commenced their work, were in possession of the late Mr. Peabody's magnificent gifts, and in accordance with the term of the gifts were limited to making three per cent. on the outlays on buildings, and were pledged to use the returns so made in the extension of their work.

All three organizations adopted much the same general plan. The earlier buildings of the Peabody Trustees are remarkable for their fort-like solidity, which gives almost an appearance of grimness. There is little outwardly to distinguish the more recent buildings of the three associations. They are mostly blocks of five and six floors, divided off into self-contained dwellings of two, three, four, and five rooms. In the Peabody Buildings, however, there are some 800 one-roomed dwellings. The Metropolitan Association and the Waterlow Company, after some experience of these one-roomed dwellings, eliminated them from their plan of work. Internally the differences in the dwelling blocks are not very material. The Peabody Trustees provide laundries and drying rooms, and in some buildings baths and reading-rooms, for the tenants in common; while the passages, stairways, and courtyards are the only parts common to the tenants of the two dividend earning companies. The policy of the directors of these companies is to make each dwelling as nearly self-contained as possible. This is especially so with the Waterlow Company, whose experience is that London workpeople will willingly pay a higher rent for privacy, and for rooms and domestic offices of which they have the exclusive possession and use.

Nor is there much difference in the class of tenants. The two dividend earning companies draw theirs from the ranks of artisans and clerks. The Peabody buildings are largely occupied by the same classes, with, however, an admixture of day laborers. Rents, taken room by room, are but fractionally lower in the Peabody than in the dwellings of the other companies. In the Waterlow buildings the average rent per room is two shillings and twopence. In the Peabody buildings it is two shillings and a penny three farthings, and the average rent per family is four shillings and ninepence farthing. The Peabody Trustees, however, make it a rule to give preference to men who are earning not more than thirty shillings a week. The other companies do not question prospective tenants as to their weekly earnings. All that they are careful about is that a tenant's family is not too large for the tenement he desires to occupy, that he is in regular employment, and can produce a certificate as to character from his employer, and finally that he is a man who will pay his rent. A certificate to this effect must be produced from his last landlord. In Central London there is always a great demand for the tenements, and artisans and laboring men to whom near-

ness to work is of first importance will readily comply with these and the other conditions imposed. None of the corporations permit any arrears of rent. They have always held that it is no charity to allow a man to get into arrears. Prompt payment, a week in advance, is insisted upon, and if a tenant cannot comply with this condition, he must make room for one who will.

The legislation under which the work of the improved dwellings associations has been so greatly facilitated and extended, dates from the Artizans and Workmen's Dwellings Act of 1875, and from another Act passed in 1877 which, in the matter of London public improvements, gave great power to the Metropolitan Board of Works, the predecessor of the London County Council, and brought the municipal authorities of London into contact with the dwellings associations. Up to this time the associations had bought their sites in the open market. When, however, the legislation of 1875 and 1877 came into effect, greatly improved opportunities for acquiring sites were offered them. The Act of 1877 empowered the Metropolitan Board of Works to make wholesale clearances, in order to widen thoroughfares, or construct new ones. But along with these powers went the obligation that, in making these clearances, the Board of Works should not permanently displace the working classes who were in occupation of the buildings which were pulled down. The Board was not authorized to erect and maintain dwellings; but only to engage with bodies of trustees, or societies to carry such schemes into effect upon such terms as the Board might think expedient.

The Board purchased the property to be pulled down at a fair valuation; but when the clear ground was offered for sale, a certain portion of it was sold subject to the condition that workmen's dwellings should be erected upon it. Little more than one-third the normal value was obtained for the land so sold, and nearly all of it passed into the possession of the Waterlow Company, the Peabody Trustees, the Metropolitan Association, and other kindred and well-accredited associations which had been subsequently founded for building workmen's dwellings. All these associations were extremely busy during the next ten years, and during this time the number of separate dwellings, owned by the Peabody Trust, increased from 2,348, accommodating 9,860 people in 1878, to 4,359 dwellings accommodating 18,000 in 1884. During this period the Waterlow Company was equally busy, and both it and the Peabody Trust outran their capital, and received large advances at very low rates of interest from the State through the Public Works Loan Commissioners.

In recent years the obligation to build workmen's dwellings on sites cleared for public improvements in London, has been somewhat modified; but the principle that working people are not to be displaced without room being found for them in new buildings somewhere in the same neighborhood is still in force. It applies not only to improvements undertaken by the municipal authorities, but also to work carried out by the railway companies. If a railway company, in building a new terminus, or in making an extension of its lines, demolishes a number of dwellings occupied by the working classes, it is compelled to find accommodation for people of the same class to an extent which shall be regarded as satisfactory by the Home Office.

By the adoption of this principle by Parliament, and by the public spirited action of the dwellings corporations, house accommodation for at

least seventy thousand people has been provided in Central London. If the improved dwellings in the outskirts are taken into account the number is much larger; but it is safe to say that in the more crowded parts of London seventy thousand are now in homes which have been built as a result of the movement, inaugurated in 1844, by the Metropolitan Association for Improving the Dwellings of the Industrious Classes.

EDWARD PORRITT.

THE LOVE OF SCANDAL.

Who does not remember the greed of the Athenians for news? The love of gossip was one of their most striking characteristics, and "What news?" was as much part of the business of the Agora, when friends met each other at noon, as the "price of fresh fish" or the "condition of the flower girls' violets."

No event was too trivial for them to chronicle, no shifting of life's kaleidoscope too minute for them to follow—nothing, in fact, in public or private, seemed to escape their scrutiny.

Maid, matron, and hetaira, statesman and slave, the favorite poet's latest ode, the fashionable sophist's last oration, what blunder of uncouth simplicity the newest importation from Sparta had committed;—of all things under heaven they discoursed freely, discussing and dissecting without restraint, without stint, as no people have done before or since.

They were the lovers of gossip *par excellence*, and Athens was the paradise of all newsmongers of the time; for neither dramatist nor orator could get a hearing if any should raise the cry, "News! news!" "News from the Hesperides!" "News from the Cassiterides!" "News of Glaucus!" "News of Phyrne!" "Who will hear my news?"

But even the Athenians had their limits, and knew when to forbear; the line of gossip had to be drawn somewhere, if they would not be like their own harpies ravening and befouling all things; and they drew it at the door of the tomb. The dead were as sacred to them as the gods, Hades as impenetrable as Olympus; for much latent delicacy underlay this sunny old-world love of gossip, this chattering, laughing, effervescent delight in personal details.

Yes, although the Athenians were "heathens," in the common acceptance of the term nowadays, they respected the memory of their dead, and we do not. Their qualities of human pity and honor, their sense of fairness, even as man to man, came into play when there was no one present to reply, for they felt that the ghost wandering mournfully in the pale world of shades had still susceptibilities and affections; his wishes were to be carried out as honorably as if he still had power to enforce them; so, too, his weaknesses were to be as lightly touched upon as if he were to be met half an hour hence to discuss with his biographer what had been said of him.

No friend would ever have said, of the dead he had loved and lived with, words which it would have been dishonorable to say to the living, for the same cause as that which makes it impossible for a high-minded gentleman to speak ill of the absent who are unable to defend themselves.

The very helplessness of the dead was their safeguard against indiscretion, as against slander, and "*de mortuis nil nisi bonum*" only expressed the general respect for that helplessness.

But we have changed all that "old-time" honor, all that bygone loyalty of reticence,

We have gone in now for a coarse and cruel chatter which we call eu-