Visible and invisible walls: suburbanisation and the social filtering of working-class communities in interwar Britain

by

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Introduction

Interwar Britain witnessed a major population exodus from inner-areas of towns and cities to new suburban estates. The upper strata of the working-class played a major role in this process, both with regard to new municipal and (contrary to the findings of some early studies) owner-occupied estates - around a quarter of urban working-class families migrating to the suburbs over the interwar period. This article examines the impact of this suburban migration on lifestyles, 'respectable' values, neighbourliness, and community relations.

Values regarding appropriate lifestyles are found to have become markedly different on the new estates compared to the communities from which their inhabitants had migrated, with the emergence of the future-orientated, aspirational, home and family-centred, and individualised behavioural traits, identified in the 'affluent worker' studies of the 1950s and 1960s and generally portrayed as an essentially post-war phenomenon. Meanwhile alongside more privatised, family-centred and materially-orientated lifestyles/ there emerged an intolerance towards neighbours who did not share these values and were perceived to threaten the
suburban domestic environment and its occupants’ aspirations for themselves and their children. Such tensions led to a process of social filtering into successively fine gradations of ‘rough’ and ‘respectable’ communities, together with antipathy towards adjoining estates, or sections of a particular estate, that were perceived to have markedly different social standards. The small number of physical barriers erected between communities, such as Oxford’s famous Cuttleslowe Walls, formed merely the tip of an iceberg of anxiety regarding proximity to people perceived as either ‘rough’ or ‘snobby’. Like the emergence of privatised lifestyles, the growth of this social filtering phenomenon has often been neglected in accounts of interwar socio-economic change. Studies have generally concentrated on tensions between middle and working-class suburbia, or viewed friction between tenants on new council estates as essentially replicating pre-existing rough/respectable divisions within the working-class.iv

This paper draws on contemporary and near-contemporary studies, together with a database of 170 life history accounts of working-class people who moved from inner-urban areas to council estates or into owner-occupation (covering a total of 174 relevant house moves).v Sources included published and unpublished autobiographies, and contemporary interviews, though most accounts were taken from oral history archives and studies. In assembling the database, ‘working-class’ was interpreted narrowly, with occupations such as clerks generally being excluded.vi In other respects the sample composition was largely determined by the availability of sources. For example, municipal tenants account for 116 of the 174 relevant house moves, partly due to the fact that oral history studies of new estates have generally focused on large municipal estates rather than their smaller, owner-occupied, counterparts. In terms of broad regional composition, the sample achieved reasonable representation
of the north (covering 74 moves), midlands (26) and south (74). Yet at the level of Standard Economic Regions the sample is heavily dominated by the South East, North West, and West Midlands, with relatively little coverage of other regions. vii This partly reflects the more limited growth of working-class suburbia in regions dominated by depressed heavy staple industries, or by agriculture.

As Paul Thompson has noted, the history of the family is a field for which oral history can provide particularly valuable source material. viii Yet oral history sources are problematic for number of reasons, including the possibility of bias imparted by the interviewer; the imperfect nature of memory and its filtering through subsequent experiences; and possibilities that interviewees might mythologize, withhold information, or otherwise distort their accounts. ix The vetting of accounts followed Thompson’s procedure of examining each interview for internal consistency, cross-checking with other sources, and evaluation in terms of its wider context. x Problems of interviewer bias and the impact of subsequent experience on earlier memories were minimised by the use of material collected by a large number of interviewers over a period spanning several decades, and its comparison with evidence from autobiographies and a few contemporary interviews. The accounts provided a good deal of quantitative information regarding such things as rents, mortgage instalments, and house purchase costs; when checked against other sources these revealed a surprising degree of accuracy. While recollections concerning values and attitudes were less amenable to such checking, the fact that the same views emerged from large numbers of accounts, assembled at different times by different interviewers, considerably increases the weight that can be placed on them.

The life histories demonstrate that moves from inner-urban to suburban areas were generally perceived to have been accompanied by a transition towards more
restrained and distant neighbourliness, home-centred rather than community-centred activities, increased emphasis on material display and hostility towards neighbours who threatened the standards of the new communities. People are found to have moved to new estates partly on account of pre-existing preferences for more aspirational and privatised lifestyles and often had to make heavy material sacrifices to sustain their new lifestyle - in terms of reducing consumption of food, fuel, and lighting, and/or engaging in family limitation. Given the extent of these sacrifices, people became particularly intolerant towards in-comers who might threaten the ‘suburban dream’ that was being so dearly purchased. Meanwhile, those sections of estates with larger houses and more affluent occupants threatened to set the bar of material display at too high a level for people in cheaper houses to compete, leading to a process of distancing such areas by branded them and their occupants as ‘snobby’ or ‘snooty’. The nature of status competition, antipathy towards neighbours who did not conform to local status norms, and the process of social filtering which ensued, is examined, together with the development of new notions of working-class respectability and codes of neighbourliness that underpinned these trends.

The growth of interwar working-class suburbia

Interwar Britain witnessed intense waves of suburbanisation, dominated by municipal housing development in the 1920s and owner-occupied housing during the 1930s. Council housing expanded from less than one per cent of Britain’s 1914 housing stock to around 10 per cent in 1938, with over 90 per cent of the 1.1 million new inter-war council houses located on suburban estates. Meanwhile owner-occupation increased from around 10 per cent of Britain’s 1914 housing stock to around 32 per cent in 1938, mainly due to new developments (an estimated 1.8
million new houses were built for owner-occupiers during this period, compared to 1.1 million existing houses transferred from the privately-rented to owner-occupied sector). As with council houses, the vast majority of new owner-occupied housing was located on suburban estates. Around 900,000 houses were also developed for private renting, again concentrated in the suburbs.\textsuperscript{xi}

For working-class households, the interwar years constituted the first major wave of suburbanisation. While council housing was initially dominated by the upper strata of the working class (and, in many cases, the lower middle class), by 1938 reductions in rents, slum clearance programmes, and the migration of middle-class council tenants to owner-occupied estates, had transformed it into an overwhelmingly working-class tenure, encompassing a broad range of working-class occupations. During the 1930s the liberalisation of mortgage terms, falling interest rates, and reductions in building costs also produced a boom in working-class owner-occupation. A major national survey of working-class household expenditure, conducted by the Ministry of Labour during October 1937 – July 1938 [hereafter Ministry of Labour survey] indicated that some 17.8 per cent of non-agricultural working-class families were owner-occupiers.\textsuperscript{xii} This represented at least a doubling in the proportion of working-class families in owner-occupation compared to 1931.\textsuperscript{xiii}

The Ministry of Labour survey indicated that working-class owner-occupation already spanned a broad income range, being as high as 12.3 per cent even for families with a weekly expenditure of 50-60 shillings, compared to the working-class household average of 85 shillings.\textsuperscript{xiv} Rates of owner-occupation, and particularly house purchase via mortgage, were, however, very low outside England and Wales. The survey recorded owner-occupation rates for Scotland and Northern Ireland of only 5.9 and 5.3 per cent respectively. Meanwhile only a third of Scottish, and a sixth
of Northern Irish, owner-occupiers were making mortgage payments (compared to
five sixths of London’s owner-occupiers) - suggesting that working-class owner-
occupation in these areas occurred largely via inheritance rather than new purchases.
Suburbanisation, and new housing development, was much lower in Scotland than
south of the border, interwar housebuilding being equivalent to only 28 per cent of
Scotland’s 1911 housing stock, compared to 52 per cent for England and Wales.\textsuperscript{xv}
Depressed industrial areas in northern England and Wales also had markedly lower
levels of suburbanisation than more prosperous areas in the South and Midlands. Most
workers in these areas lacked the stability of employment necessary to purchase
houses on mortgage, depression eroded the local rates-base available to fund
municipal housing, and migration to more prosperous areas eased pressures on the
existing housing stock.

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order of magnitude. Given a non-agricultural working-class owner-occupation rate of
17.8 per cent and making the conservative assumption that 50 per cent of these
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residents is even more problematic, but assuming that three quarters of the 900,000 houses developed for this sector were in the suburbs, and that 30 per cent of these were rented by working-class families, gives a figure of 202,500 households, or 3 per cent of non-agricultural working-class households. Thus around 25 per cent of non-agricultural working-class families are estimated to have been living on new suburban estates by the eve of the Second World War.

Interwar suburban working-class estates were distinguished from their urban counterparts both by their location and the character of their housing. Prior to the First World War new working-class neighbourhoods on the edges of towns were typically developed in long terraces, and were of similar design to inner-urban housing. In 1918 the Tudor Walters Committee on the standards of post-war local authority housing set out a new blueprint, drawing on contemporary planning ideas (pioneered in garden city and model workers’ village projects), that sought to improve economic and social conditions by creating healthier and better-designed housing and communities. The Committee proposed housing specifications well in advance of current standards, including a minimum of three ground floor rooms (living-room, parlour and scullery with larder), three bedrooms (at least two of which could take two beds), plus a bathroom. Houses were to be built at a density of no more than 12 per acre, semi-detached or in short terraces, with wide frontages to increase natural daylight and a cottage appearance enhanced by front and rear gardens.

Tudor Walters standards embodied the basic features of both the municipal and owner-occupied inter-war working-class house (private developers following them mainly on account of their popularity with purchasers). Yet within these broad parameters a spectrum of housing designs emerged, providing a physical reflection of gradations in status both between estates and different areas of the same estates.
Developers of owner-occupied estates aimed at providing houses of variegated design, drawing heavily on the English vernacular tradition and producing the 'Tudorbethan' semi that remains, for many people, the ideal house. Meanwhile councils rapidly developed a preference for a 'neo-Georgian' style of plainer houses in near-identical rows, both as a means of economising on costs and emphasising their municipal identity. As Dorothy Barton, who moved with her parents from Charlton to the London County Council’s (LCC’s) St. Helier Estate in 1934 recalled, 'When we arrived at 10 Rewley Road, we found it was one of a short road of square red brick boxes, all exactly alike …'xxix

Meanwhile there was also substantial variation of house design within each tenure. The ambitious standards outlined in the Local Government Board’s 1919 Housing Manual, which exceeded those of the Tudor Walters Committee in some respects, produced a council house that was beyond the means of most working-class families.xx Subsequent reductions in council housing standards reduced costs and thus widened access to lower income groups. The proportion of houses with parlours fell, the bathroom was sometimes sacrificed for a bath in the kitchen (with a removable top so that it could serve as a table when not in use) and the dimensions of rooms became less generous. Developers for owner-occupation also sought to build down to lower income groups, particularly during the mid- and late-1930s. For example, New Ideal Homesteads - one of London’s most prolific housebuilders – offered a range of house designs on each estate, sometimes including a low-cost design based on a three bedroom non-parlour terrace with a bath in the kitchen. This was very similar to the cheaper type of non-parlour council house and, with a price of £395 (that translated into weekly mortgage payments of 9 shillings 6 pence) compared well with many such houses in terms of cost.xxx
Differences in the dimensions, appearance, and tenure of houses became important status markers. As a social survey of a 1930s’ suburban Coventry council estate, conducted in 1949-51 [hereafter the Coventry Survey] noted, `There is an intricate system of assessing status by the physical structure of the house, its gables, bay windows (both single and double) and other appurtenances… The system of tenure is also relevant; distinctions are drawn between private ownership; tenancy of privately owned houses and tenancy of council houses.' Similarly, a social survey of Oxford noted that: `speculative builders pander to the weaknesses of human beings to be exclusive and are erecting a type of house which, by its appearance, will distinguish its inhabitants from those of the council houses.…'

The new environment of interwar working-class suburbia

Two major characteristics of interwar urban life were proximity to people and to different types of people. High housing densities and, often, the use of the same staircases, outdoor water taps, toilets, and back yards, brought neighbours into frequent and unavoidable contact. Meanwhile, though individual courts and streets might be dominated by certain strata of society, travel to work, shops, schools and places of entertainment often involved use of the same thoroughfares as were taken by people from very different backgrounds. Interwar suburban estates, by contrast, were more private and segregated communities, in which lower-density housing aimed at broadly similar socio-economic groups distanced people from their neighbours and, particularly, from those of markedly different social status.

Working-class migration to the suburbs was largely motivated by a desire to get away from cramped conditions, shared utilities and spaces, and other aspects of inner-city life. Analysis by the author of the 170 working-class life-histories included
an attempt to classify the positive environmental features that people associated with their new houses and neighbourhoods. Identifying such features proved problematic for a number of reasons. It was sometimes difficult to distinguish positive mentions of particular features from mere description; descriptions lacking a clear statement that the features were positive attractions were disregarded. Furthermore, as the life histories were assembled from a wide range of sources, the detail with which the house was discussed varied considerably, some accounts making little or no reference to its characteristics. Finally, factors associated with certain pursuits, such as gardens, are more likely to receive positive mention during discussion of these activities than other factors, for example mains electricity.

Nevertheless, the data, shown in Table 1, do provide a broad indication of what were considered to be the major positive environmental attributes of suburban housing. Among council tenants the presence of a bathroom or fitted bath ranked particularly high, mentioned by almost 60 per cent of accounts that noted any positive features. Running, or hot, water was also mentioned in a substantial proportion of accounts, as was electricity and the presence of an indoor toilet. Most urban working-class accommodation lacked bathrooms and indoor (or, often, individual) toilets, while many flats and older houses lacked hot, or even running, water. Many accounts also stress the importance of getting away from negative environmental factors associated with previous housing, such as dampness, vermin infestations, and cramped conditions – space receiving much more frequent mention as a negative feature of previous accommodation than as a positive feature of new housing.

With regard to moves into owner-occupation, a smaller proportion of accounts mention positive environmental factors and those that do typically identify fewer factors. In addition
to a few accounts which involve the purchase of older housing, the number mentioning such features is further reduced by the presence of people who moved into owner-occupation from municipal, or other better-quality, accommodation – which already had at least some of these attributes (and a larger proportion of accounts, compared to the municipal housing sample, that do not discuss the house in

Table 1: Positive features of suburban housing identified in 170 life-history accounts of working-class people who moved to suburban estates during the inter-war period

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentage of house move descriptions mentioning any positive feature, which included positive mention of:</th>
<th>Municipal tenants</th>
<th>Owner-occupiers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bathroom/fitted bath in kitchen</td>
<td>59.4</td>
<td>38.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Toilet</td>
<td>22.9</td>
<td>5.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Running/hot water</td>
<td>31.3</td>
<td>11.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Electricity</td>
<td>32.3</td>
<td>16.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gas</td>
<td>9.4</td>
<td>11.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kitchen</td>
<td>12.5</td>
<td>5.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Space</td>
<td>19.8</td>
<td>5.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lightness</td>
<td>7.3</td>
<td>11.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Garden</td>
<td>60.4</td>
<td>55.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural surroundings</td>
<td>35.4</td>
<td>38.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Number identifying any positive features** | 96 | 18

**Total number of relevant house moves** | 116 | 58

Source: Database assembled by the author of life history accounts of 170 working-class people who moved to suburban estates during the inter-war period.

any detail). Nevertheless, the presence of a bathroom still constituted a major attraction, being highlighted by almost 39 per cent of accounts that noted any positive factor.

Meanwhile the external environment of the house receives more frequent mention than its interior, for both tenures. Gardens receive positive mention in a larger proportion of accounts than any other environmental factor. This was corroborated by a 1935 survey of Manchester’s giant municipal Wythenshawe estate,
where 90 per cent of respondents to a question on the value of the garden stated that it
was appreciated. xxiv The local area’s rural environment is also highlighted in a
substantial proportion of accounts – some people placing considerable emphasis on
this. For example, a London postal worker who purchased a house in Sidcup recalled
that:

After living in the Old Kent Road and… all the smells and the smudge
and everything else… [to] cycle home through the night out from work …
and get out here in the cool… the air was a lot cleaner and fresher and you
got damp and dew. It was well worth the cycle ride every day…. as you
got nearer home you could feel the difference in the air and it made it
really worthwhile… right in the country. Behind us was a big market
garden which grew all kinds of vegetables and flowers. One big mass of
flowers most of the spring… And all around her it was just bluebells,
wood, streams, kids, frogs, and… there was always hedgehogs in the
garden and we had an owl who used to sit on the lamppost… xxv

Again, external environmental factors sometimes featured as the absence of a
previous negative. Several accounts mention the previous area’s unhealthy
environment, especially with regard to the needs of children - dangers including
pollution, and traffic on busy urban streets. Indeed a significant number of migrants to
council housing moved following medical advice regarding a child’s chronic health
problems. Meanwhile, some people’s wish to escape from inner-urban
neighbourhoods was motivated by intangible negative environmental factors, such as
a desire to get away from intrusive neighbours or local hostility to their aspirational
behaviour. Joanna Bourke’s analysis of applications for Bolton council housing showed that dislike of the applicant’s existing neighbourhood was the most common reason given for wanting to move. A migrant to Wythenshawe recalled that concern for his wife prompted their move: ‘we had a beautiful house in Fallowfield, but every time she bought anything for the house the neighbours criticised it - she was very unhappy. I used to be working in town and [when] I came home the wife said the neighbours had been ridiculing her again. I realised that I would have to get her away.’

Occasionally hostility to ‘snooty’ behaviour took a more extreme form. An artisan’s wife, who had moved to a Coventry municipal estate from a low rental inner-urban area, told the Coventry survey that: ‘The children were hooligans, running around with bare feet, dirty noses and hardly any clothes on. If they saw anybody well-dressed they used to spit and the grown-ups used to call after you and I used to walk a long way round to save going down that street.’

These priorities are indicative of the ‘suburban aspiration’ defined by Clapson as comprising three main elements: a wish to escape from inner-city living; a desire for a suburban-style house and garden; and ‘social tone’ - the appeal of a high-quality residential environment, both in terms of its material qualities and type of people. These aspirations were tapped into, and in the process reinforced, by building industry advertising. For example, a poster for the Planet Building Society showed a long bridge spanning the chasm between a dark, dense, group of terraced streets, with small rear courts and narrow windows, and a brilliantly-lit suburban neighbourhood of bungalows with large windows and generous gardens (in which a small girl rides a bicycle, out of danger of the traffic), alongside the slogan ‘Bridging the gap between tenancy and ownership’.
Healthy rural surroundings, well-tended gardens, and clean, spacious, light houses, with bathrooms and other modern utilities, tied in to a new concept of working-class respectability. Writers on the pre-1914 urban working-class have identified notions of respectability emphasising independence from state or charitable assistance, via membership of formal or informal mutual aid networks, and an emphasis on thrift, living within one’s means, and stoically tightening ones belt during hard times. As Szreter noted, compared with:

competitive and aspirational bourgeois aims and motives, this bred an economically conservative and culturally static set of values, so that working-class communities were much less ’open’ and were each a law unto themselves... Ambitions for social status and consumer aspirations were contained within the very modest limits which were appropriate to the circumstances of the great majority of the community.

Conversely, Hughes and Hunt have identified the emergence during the interwar period of a different notion of working-class respectability, based around independence from even the local community and focused on the family as ’an intense domestic unit enclosed from the wider world.’ Domesticity proved key to this new privatised respectability – encompassing a high standard of personal and domestic hygiene, family and home-centred lifestyles even for adult males, and an increased commitment of material and psychological resources to the welfare and material advancement of the next generation. As Joan Rolfe, who moved to Southampton’s Merry Oak estate as a child recalled, ’Merry Oak … was built for "the respectable poor" … most of us were poor, but every family wanted to be
"respectable". Children were sent to school clean and decently dressed. Gardens were well tended, paths and yards swept, steps washed, and we all knew the difference between right and wrong. XXXIII

Aspirational behaviour, and social mobility – mainly with regard to the next, rather than the current, generation – thus became both legitimate and laudable goals for a ‘new respectable working class’ that coalesced around the new estates. A substantial number of the 170 life histories discuss moves to suburbia in terms of a wish to create a better life, especially for the children, yet only one account makes any mention of a desire to rise from the working- to the middle-class. Families sought ‘respectability’ within the broad parameters of this new, suburban, aspirational working class, rather than ‘embourgeoisement’. XXXIV

For those who remained in traditional inner-city neighbourhoods, older notions of respectability - and the conservatism and communitarianism that accompanied them – still remained powerful social forces. Thus, announcements of departure for the suburbs were often met with hostility. For example, one migrant recalled that:

I got into trouble with a lot of the neighbours because I applied... to the Corporation for a move on to the Wythenshawe estate... I put it in on health reasons and of course my father put me right on the points for the health reasons and... some of these people had been in years and... bred and born in them and they thought they was alright… I had the health inspectors to come and see the house and when they knew health inspectors was in the street they wanted to lynch me. XXXV
Similarly, Jane Walsh, who moved from a one-up, one-down house in an Oldham slum court to a new three-bedroom suburban owner-occupied house in around 1925, found herself ostracised by her old neighbours despite attempts to maintain contacts: "a lot of people from our old district thought Charlie and me very "snobby" for moving away into our new house. One or two of the women I invited out were sure I was only having them there to gloat. And yet if I hadn't asked them out they would have been equally wrathful with me for deserting old friends."\textsuperscript{xxxvi}

Appropriate material display was a central feature of the new respectability. While owning and displaying prestige goods was a recognised feature of status competition in traditional working-class communities, it was generally focused around one, or few, particularly prized possessions.\textsuperscript{xxxvii} For example, a man who grew up in a mice-infested Coventry court house recalled how his mother bought a 57 guinea piano which took up almost half of their single ground-floor room, on hire purchase - paying almost half as much on the instalments as her family paid in rent.\textsuperscript{xxxviii} In contrast the new suburban working-class respectability generally involved adopting, or at least projecting to the outside world, a broader, coordinated material `lifestyle’ that encompassed all aspects of observed consumption. This foreshadowed Young and Willmott’s observations of suburban migrants from London’s East End in the 1950s, whose new council house proved: `only the beginning. A nice house and shabby clothes, a neat garden and an old box of a pram, do not go together… Smartness calls for smartness.'\textsuperscript{xxxix} Suburbanisation was found to be accompanied by a switch from status based on a `life portrait'\textsuperscript{xli} - including one’s family background, occupation, and community and leisure activities - to a much narrower material yardstick.
This trend was already strongly evident on new interwar estates, the bicycle, motorbike, motor bus, and tram offering working-class families unprecedented geographical mobility and thus creating what were often initially communities of strangers. Lacking the long-acquaintance necessary for a life-portrait assessment of status, and often already having modern notions of respectability, people rapidly moved to a status system based on a mixture of material markers and ‘restrained’ forms of social behaviour - creating ‘consumption communities’, tied together not by background, workplace, or religion, but by shared material values.\textsuperscript{xli}

People were anxious to ‘fit in’ to their new suburban environment and looked to earlier arrivals to show them the rules of the status game. As Durant’s survey of the LCC’s Watling estate noted, ‘The new house needs new linoleum, new curtains and even new furniture, and all is bought on hire purchase. In the old “mean street,” people were not tempted by the example of their neighbours to acquire fresh impedimentia. At Watling… the wireless next door becomes an obligation to bring home a wireless.’\textsuperscript{xlii} Similarly, a 1939 survey of a Birmingham municipal estate found high levels of hire purchase [HP] debts, many directly linked to the house move. Migrants’ old furniture was said to look:

very shabby and dirty when it is set out in a new light room. One of the first outlays of the rehoused family is often on curtains with which to hide their dilapidated possessions from the inquiring eyes of the neighbours. A greater number of rooms may call for more furniture, and many people feel that new beds are a necessity. The fear of being accused of bringing vermin into new houses seems to be sufficiently strong to make some housewives undertake instalments on new beds for the whole family.’\textsuperscript{xliii}
As Johnson has noted, status competition was primarily based on comparisons with one’s immediate neighbours. Given that many suburban streets were composed of broadly similar houses, the status game focused on other expressions of material display. Aspects of material life that received greatest attention were those most visible to neighbours. As discussed below, gardens constituted an intense arena of neighbourly competition, formalised by the annual prizes awarded by local councils and, in some cases, by private developers. Within the house, those areas visible from the front door step or accessible to visitors received most attention. One couple interviewed by Whitworth felt obliged to furnish the hall before any of the rooms so that it appeared respectable when the front door was opened. The parlour or front room constituted the other key area, as the Coventry survey noted:

it is entirely misleading to judge the cleanliness and standard of furnishing of the rest of the house from the appearance of this living room which contains the status giving possessions. Even their arrangement is often influenced by the impression which will be made on visitors entering the room, so that the best article, usually a sideboard… is placed opposite the door.

The costs of moving to suburbia and meeting the social requirements of the new estates proved onerous for many families. Suburban houses were generally substantially more expensive than the rooms or small houses from which their occupants had migrated. The life-history database contains 36 accounts of people moving to municipal estates that include both the rent of their council house and of
their previous accommodation. Average rents paid by these households for council houses were 21.2 per cent in excess of their previous rent. Analysis by McKenna of several thousand Liverpool council tenants’ house cards, which show the rent paid in the new and previous accommodation, indicated that tenants moving to houses built under the 1919 Housing Act experienced average rises of 26.2 per cent. This fell to 19.7 per cent for houses built under the 1923 and 1924 Acts and only 7.5 per cent for the relatively small number of houses built under the 1925 Act. Yet, it increased to 44.1 per cent for houses built under the 1930 and 1935 Acts – which were primarily aimed at slum clearance tenants. xlvii

The life-history database contains insufficient data to estimate weekly accommodation costs before and after moves to owner-occupation (a substantial number of owner-occupiers purchased their house on marriage and had no previous accommodation other than with their parents). However, 16 accounts provide information on the ratio of mortgage repayments to household income, the median proportion of income allocated to repayments being 19.4 per cent. This compares with a median ratio, for 30 council tenants in the database for whom this information was available, of 20.8 per cent. However, when comparing these figures account must be taken of the fact that unlike mortgage payments, council rents were often quoted inclusive of rates. Furthermore, the proportion of income spent on housing generally falls as income rises, and the sample of council tenants had a substantially lower mean income than the sample of owner-occupiers (54.2 and 83.3 shillings respectively). Both groups had a substantially higher proportion of income devoted to housing than the average for all working-class families making returns to the Ministry of Labour survey (12.3 per cent, including rates, for households with an average income of 85s). xlviii
In addition to increased rent/mortgage costs, suburban living also entailed extra expenses in travelling to work, and for other purposes, together with higher local food costs. A 1939 survey of Birmingham’s Kingstanding estate found that people generally paid 2s 6d – 3s per week on commuting to work; analysis by Olechnowicz indicated that the median figure for LCC cottage estates was in the region of 3-6s in 1937, while McKenna estimated that residents of Liverpool council estates during the 1920s had to pay about 2s per week extra on transport to work and a total of about 6s for all additional transport and food costs.

Meanwhile social pressures to engage in material display required families to maintain or increase expenditure on furnishings, clothing, etc., often funding these items via expensive HP or ‘clothing club’ credit commitments. Young’s survey of the LCC’s Becontree estate estimated that families spent between 3s and 5s on furniture, usually on HP, while Jevons and Madge’s Bristol municipal estates’ survey put the figure at 2s 6d.

These new costs were met, primarily, by squeezing the budget for items of daily expenditure – food, heating, lighting, beer, and so forth. Analysis of surviving individual returns for the Ministry of Labour survey, examined at various levels of household income, indicates that owner-occupiers spent a substantially higher proportion of income on accommodation than other households with similar levels of total expenditure, substantially less on food, fuel, and light, and roughly the same proportion on other items (furniture, clothing, etc.). A significant number of accounts in the life history database mention reducing food budgets to make ends meet, or other behaviour aimed at reducing daily costs such as going to bed early to cut down on fuel and lighting expenses. Poor diets became the hallmark of some council estates; for example a woman who moved to a Hull estate recalled that many ex-slum dwellers found themselves, ‘having to pay excessive rents, for which they
had not budgeted, many not knowing the meaning of the word or having ever 
practiced such a thing. The new Preston Road Housing Estate was duly christened 
'Corned Beef Island', that being in many cases, the menu throughout the week, the 
said commodity costing only 2.5d per quarter pound.\textsuperscript{iii}

One long-term method of controlling expenditure, which appears to have been 
widely practiced on new estates, was the use of family limitation to keep the number 
of children within the constraints of available income.\textsuperscript{iv} As one council tenant 
recalled: 'Only having the two children helped of course. After the second one, I said, 
no more, that's it, I wasn't going to have a brood of children like my mother'.\textsuperscript{v} Many 
people remarked on living on estates of 0, 1, or 2, children, small families becoming 
both a means of maintaining a respectable suburban lifestyle and a badge of suburban 
respectability. Given that effective mechanical methods of contraception were not 
widely available during this period, family limitation was largely achieved via 
abstinence or \textit{coitus-interruptus}. Like economising on food, fuel and light, this 
involved sacrificing immediate gratification for the goal of projecting a respectable 
appearance to the neighbours and, in the longer-term, achieving a better life for their 
children.\textsuperscript{vi} Yet, to achieve this better life, it was necessary to insulate themselves and, 
particularly, children, from people who did not share their new values and might 
undermine them.

\textbf{Patterns of neighbourliness on the new estates}

Another respect in which the environments of interwar suburban working-class 
estates foreshadowed the findings of the 'affluent worker' studies was in the 
development of a new, more distant, pattern of neighbourliness.\textsuperscript{vii} Zweig noted the
emergence by the late 1950s of a general trend, especially strong on new council estates and aspirational neighbourhoods, towards a form of neighbourly relations characterised as `Friendly but not too close’ or `Keep apart from neighbours, but be friendly,’ with activities such as house visiting generally being discouraged. He attributed this, in part, to post-war trends such as the entry of married women into the formal labour market and the impact of the car and television. Yet a similar pattern of restrained neighbourliness had already become strongly evident on interwar estates.

There is some debate regarding the real extent of close neighbourliness even in traditional working-class communities. Yet the great majority of life-history accounts identify a marked change in neighbourly relations on moving to suburbia. This was partly the result of a preference for greater privacy and private space on the part of suburban migrants – whose moves had often been at least partially motivated by a wish to get away from intrusive neighbours. As Kaye’s study of Wythenshawe concluded, people typically moved, `not to found a community but for three bedrooms, a bath, and a smoke-free environment. Neighbours were less important than private space.’ The dominant response of accounts in the database regarding questions of neighbourliness is one broadly along the lines of `we kept ourselves to ourselves’. For example, one migrant to a Liverpool council estate, on being asked whether the estate was lonely, explained:

I was never one for neighbours, I liked to keep myself to myself and so I was quite happy with Arthur. When I had my little girl I got to know people a little better, but I was never what you would call a mixer. People did keep to themselves around here, it was never the sort of place where people were in and out of each other's houses. No I was never lonely. We
never really went out much, Arthur just liked his garden and I had my knitting and sewing.\textsuperscript{lxii}

This preference for privacy was part of a wider trend among Western societies towards the emergence of a new `social self’ based around individuality rather than community.\textsuperscript{lxii} It brought with it fear, that neighbourliness might threaten privacy and lead to conflict. In traditional high-density inner-urban neighbourhoods frequent contact with ones neighbours had been inevitable, but it could be avoided in the insulated suburbs. Perceived invasions of privacy included excessive and one-sided borrowing, or picking up information that would then be broadcast as gossip. The Coventry survey found that very few women accepted borrowing or lending as a normal social practice and that it was generally disapproved of, as an invasion of privacy. Some respondents mentioned the possibility of conflict, `people can keep borrowing and not pay back till in the end you have to refuse them and this is not pleasant’. Borrowing was also inherently objectionable, as it represented a departure from the ideal of the independent and self-reliant family.\textsuperscript{lxiii}

This collective preference for privacy became manifest in general codes of behaviour, that mitigated against close contact and made a virtue of `keeping yourself to yourself’.\textsuperscript{lxiv} Social codes on the new estates still valued, and expected, neighbourliness in times of crisis such as illness, bereavement or childbirth. For example, a woman who had set up home on an owner-occupied Coventry estate recalled that: `if Mrs Sweet was ill I would go and see if there was anything I could do. And when Arthur was ill she'd come and see if I wanted anything, you know. But we never… butted in on private lives.’\textsuperscript{lxv} Similarly, a man who had migrated to the LCC’s Castleneau Estate as a child recalled, `it wasn't a kind of East End spirit with

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you living in each other's place. [But] if you wanted any help you knew that you could always get it. When my brother died I went down to a friend's down the road and she gave me meals and looked after me… while they were going to hospital. lxvi Yet the Coventry survey found that some families asserted their independence and privacy even during crises lxvii

Neighbourliness on the new estates became regarded as an activity which occurred outside the home - in gardens, whilst cleaning front paths and sills, at local shops, and while taking the children to school. lxviii Durant’s survey emphasised the rarity of mutual house visiting: ‘A Watling woman who had lived four years in the same cottage and is on very good terms with her neighbour has, nevertheless, not been in her house. Their boys play together, but each in his own garden, the fence separating them.’ lxix Similarly, Alice Pond, who moved from Hackney to an owner-occupied estate in Chingford in 1935 recalled, ‘You talked to [neighbours]… over the fence, at the shops, and if you had children. But no, it wasn't like Hackney with people dropping in. lxx

In addition to privacy considerations, the taboo against mutual visiting was partly motivated by fears that the entry of neighbours into the home would reveal the family’s true standard of living. Durant noted that some Watling residents were even deterred from socialising outside the home by the embarrassing consciousness that their outfits were shabby, though many turned to ‘Provident Checks’, by which clothes could be bought on credit. lxxi

Inter- and intra-estate tensions
Occupants of new municipal estates often encountered hostility from established local residents. Local opposition to council estates has generally been portrayed as an essentially middle-class phenomenon. Yet, while opposition was most vocal among the middle-classes, there was also a significant strand of hostility from ‘respectable’ working class residents at the prospect of being joined by ‘slum clearance tenants’. A 1927 letter to the *Hendon and Finchley Times*, attacking the Watling Estate, encapsulates both these elements. The letter first highlighted the threat to middle-class residential property values, but then broadened the spectrum of established residents to encompass the ‘respectable’ middle and working classes who were jointly menaced by the slum dweller:

Thus the respectable mechanic has to live side by side with people from the slums… noone wants a house in the district now with hordes of ex-slum dwellers on the doorstep, and the threat of a greyhound track to add liveliness. Already there is a need for police protection. People in Mill Hill have found their gardens ruined by children pulling up rose standards and stripping fruit trees. The language of some of them is such that even a workman on the estate told me last week that he blushed, `To think that such a female could use such a mouthful’. lxxi

Instances of poor standards of material display, hygiene, and behaviour were quickly seized on by the local press. For example, a letter to the *Birmingham Post* in 1931 produced a spate of similar complaints, one writer claiming that ‘one has only to look at some of the gardens (at the back) and the windows (at the front) to imagine what the inside must be like… [why should] decent-class persons… have to live in
close proximity to that class of person who can only be described as course and uncouth." In many cases, local people appear to have regarded all municipal tenants as akin to slum dwellers. One juvenile migrant to the LCC’s Mottingham Estate recalled her surprise at this attitude, in contrast to her previous neighbourhood where her family had been accepted as respectable despite their poverty:

to be sneered at, merely because we lived in a bright new house, on a bright new estate, came as a shock to me. At the impressionable age of fifteen, I began to wonder if perhaps there was something to be ashamed of, living on a council estate. So for a time I told everyone who asked, that I lived just off Elmstead Lane, which was perfectly true but it also gave the impression that I lived in Chislehurst.

Migrants reported hostility from local shopkeepers, youth organisations (which estate juveniles were often not encouraged to join) and in dealing with local services, such as education. For example, one woman who had moved to the LCC’s Castelnau estate as a child recalled that children from the estate were treated as inferiors by staff at her new school. When it came to leaving, my mother had to go and see the Headmistress about different jobs for me. She said to my mother, “Oh, that’s alright, she’s only an estate girl, put her in service.”

The most visible and celebrated instances of local antipathy involved the notorious walls built to segregate north Oxford’s municipal Cutteslowe estate and the LCC’s Downham Estate from their private-sector neighbours. The Cutteslowe walls became an iconic symbol of middle/working-class divisions, campaigns to demolish them featuring prominently in newspapers and newsreels. Yet evidence
suggests that there was substantial overlap between the socio-economic status of many residents on the Cutteslowe estate, and the privately-rented Urban Estate on the other side of the divide. A survey conducted by Collison in the early 1960s indicated that skilled workers - who constituted 60 per cent of household heads at Cutteslowe, also comprised 38 per cent of household heads on the Urban Estate. Despite the broadness of the ’skilled’ socio-economic group, his analysis suggested that the overlap was genuine.\textsuperscript{lxxviii} The view that there was no substantial class difference between a significant proportion of residents on the two sides of the walls is also reflected in oral history accounts by early Cutteslowe residents.\textsuperscript{lxxix}

Collison found that the decision to build the walls was not precipitated primarily by hostility to council tenants per se, but to plans to house slum clearance tenants, allegedly in contravention of assurances the Urban Housing Co. had received when buying the land from the Council.\textsuperscript{lxxx} Their symbolic impact appears to have been almost as important in deterring private-sector tenants as their actual numbers. When the Corporation pointed out at a public enquiry that only 28 of the 298 houses on the estate were used for slum clearance, the company’s representative responded that, ‘your name “slum clearance” frightens our people’.\textsuperscript{lxxi}

In addition to tensions between areas of private and municipal housing, distinctions and tensions were also evident between areas of the same tenure, and, often, different areas of the same estate. Again, these were most acute within the municipal sector, which experienced substantial changes in housing specifications, rents, and the character of new tenants over the interwar period. During the early 1920s high building costs and ambitious housing specifications produced houses that could only be let at high rents. Meanwhile, councils carefully selected tenants who would be likely to regularly pay rent and conform to their rules. Successful applicants
often had small families, were in secure jobs, and had rent books showing a good payment record. Such tenants viewed themselves as a select group, composed of the elite of the working class, together with a significant proportion of middle-class families. Yet a progressive policy of ‘building down’ to lower income groups, together with a change in emphasis from housing provision per se to slum clearance, led to tensions between early tenants and more recent arrivals. As the 1939 Birmingham study noted:

During the nine years that they have been there, the original families have put a good deal of time and money into their houses and gardens and, not unnaturally, have come to feel a sense of ownership of and right to their houses. More recently the policy of the Estates Department has changed and the estate has been used for receiving people compulsorily moved under the slum clearance and overcrowding schemes. The people now moving in have for the most part large families, and there are no requirements about their income. Families have been transferred to the estate while on public assistance.\textsuperscript{lxxxii}

These changes produced major cleavages between ‘rough’ and ‘respectable’ estates, or areas of the same estate. For example, the University of Birmingham conducted a survey of a 1930s Wolverhampton estate, mainly consisting of council housing, in around 1947-48. One of the strongest responses to questions regarding neighbourhood was along the lines of: ‘Decent people should not mix with slum people.’ Some 75 people gave this as their only criticism of the estate (of 476 that gave a single, clear, response to the neighbourhood question), but it also featured in
many more general responses. A further 27 gave a response along the lines of: 'Very rough, children noisy.' Similarly Jevons and Madge’s study of Bristol municipal estates found that the imposition of slum-clearance tenants, ‘proved disturbing to the older tenants. By the outbreak of war the prevailing tone of some estates was set, through force of numbers, by the least skilled and poorest tenants. Where this had occurred… it had become very difficult to secure co-operation between the different classes of tenants.'

Private estates were generally smaller than their municipal counterparts and were developed over shorter periods. Yet many had sections of cheaper and more expensive housing, which led to similar divisions to those evident on municipal estates (though these were sometimes between working-class and lower-middle class areas as well as different strata of the working-class). For example, a postal worker who purchased a house for £335 on a new estate in Sidcup recalled that friendliness and neighbourly cooperation did not extend to the inhabitants of: ‘dearer houses, the £550 pounds / £650 pound houses, where they had to put fifty pound deposit instead of the twenty pound we had to pay, they were like clerks or the hoity toity type of people, they weren't as friendly or didn't mix with the other people in the three-hundred odd pound houses’.

Projecting the new suburban respectability involved both appropriate material display and restrained, aspirational, behavioural codes. Unacceptable traits included plainness in speech, strong accents, the free use of taboos, children who appeared poorly cared-for, over-readiness with a cuff for the children, a forthright approach in personal relations, poor standards of housework (observed, for example, via the wash line) and a lack of neighbourly reticence – especially the habit of popping in and out of other people’s houses. As a Liverpool council resident recalled:
'My next door neighbour came from the rough part of town where they kept their doors open all the time. She didn't like me keeping my door closed, but you had to. You didn't want people getting to know all your business, you know, too familiar like.\textsuperscript{\textit{lxxxvi}} Even having a large family was often taken as a sign of roughness, as it contravened the suburban code of respectability based around, ‘spotless homes, shining ones or twos of children and a reserved bearing to neighbours.’\textsuperscript{\textit{lxxxvii}}

Children could bring neighbours closer together, yet also constituted a potentially explosive point of conflict. Respondents to the Coventry survey reported that it was especially difficult to prevent children acquiring the undesirable traits of neighbours’ children – such as rough manners and speech and particularly the acquisition of tabood words and knowledge - thus discrediting their home environment and damaging their ability to fulfil their parents’ aspirations for them.\textsuperscript{\textit{lxxxviii}} Children from rough families were also considered a greater nuisance than their parents, as - less restrained by social convention than adults – they were more likely to reflect rough traits in anti-social behaviour. Investigations carried out by Mass Observation in 1941 revealed complaints of children ‘running wild’ on the Watling and Becontree estates.\textsuperscript{\textit{lxxxix}}

Like children, gardens constituted both an indicator of status and an important arena of neighbourly cooperation and potential conflict. Both contemporary social surveys and the life history database emphasise the prevalence of neighbourly cooperation and sharing in gardening, of a character and extent that appears at odds with the general pattern of neighbourly restraint. This included gifts of plants and, in some cases, shared gardening tools – either informally or through local gardening clubs.\textsuperscript{\textit{xc}} Such clubs proved among the most popular estate social organisations - partly, as Olenchnowicz noted, due to their role in facilitating, rather than replacing,
privatised leisure.\textsuperscript{xci} Garden competitions run by local authorities and, occasionally, private developers, proved very popular, some residents making great efforts to secure a prize and the neighbourhood prestige which went with it.\textsuperscript{xcii} Yet, as a Mass Observation study of a Bolton municipal estate noted, people who cared for their gardens resented those who allowed their plot to run to weeds.\textsuperscript{xciii} Fear of infestation of one’s garden by the weeds of one’s neighbour mirrored fears of broader and less tangible infestation. The state of gardens constituted the most easily discernable marker of respectability for the houses behind them and ill-maintained gardens, like badly behaved children, reflected both on the house in question and its neighbours - implying not only `rough’ households, but rough streets. Thus giving plants and lending gardening tools, even if not fully reciprocated, was far from a purely altruistic activity.

**Estates as social filters**

Estates acquired distinct reputations, which strongly influenced people’s housing decisions - for example, the life history database includes a significant number of instances of people who rejected council houses on `rough’ estates. Council allocation procedures also acted as social filters, prospective tenants often being interviewed and, if considered rough, being directed to one of the less desirable estates. This social test could influence people’s perceptions of their own status; for example, a resident of the LCC’s Castleneau estate recalled that people had to be interviewed and "passed" to come to this particular estate… my friend downstairs, she had to go on to the Burnt Oak estate... which wasn't very nice.\textsuperscript{xciv}

Meanwhile many families responded to tensions arising from differences between their social norms and those prevailing on their new estate by relocating to
areas perceived to be dominated by people more akin to themselves - producing a process of successive filtering into communities of similar aspirations and behaviour. Conversely, accounts that mention having friendly neighbours stress commonalities in status: ‘cos... we were all of the same sort of class, you know.’ Positive accounts of moves to owner-occupied estates often mention both the working-class background and respectability of neighbours; the purchaser of a new £499 house in Welling, South London, described his neighbours as: ‘all a nice generally working class, decent working class types, and most of them worked... there were no, what we call rough types.’

For families whose aspirations exceeded the social-norms of municipal estates, owner-occupation offered a route to a more ‘select’ environment. The Watling survey noted that for many families, moving to the estate represented merely one stage of a ‘pilgrimage towards suburbia’, spurred on by building firms whose advertising copy stressed the advantages of home-ownership and which offered ‘cheap, privately built houses… which try to compensate for the inferiority of their plan, looks and solidity by the sense of superior social status which they inculcate in their inhabitants’.

Modern privately-rented suburban estates were also considered more exclusive than council housing.

One powerful motivation was to protect children from ‘infection’ with the traits of rough neighbours. As the Coventry survey reported, even preventing children from playing outside the garden could not obviate the danger of contacts at school. ‘For families who feel their way of life to be superior to that of their neighbours, the only effective solution is to move from the area to a neighbourhood more in keeping with their aspirations.’ Conversely, tenants who felt uncomfortable with the ‘snobby’ environments of certain municipal estates often moved on to estates where
prevailing standards were more in keeping with their own. As a woman who had moved during childhood first to Liverpool’s municipal Clubmoor Estate, then to Norris Green, recalled:

Clubmoor was quiet, really quiet, they didn't even let the kids play out in the street, it was so posh. Our next door neighbour used to have tea on the grass, the lawn they used to call it. Some of them even had cars... and...a number used to have cleaning ladies to do for them. We never fitted in, but Norris Green, well, I loved that right off. Everybody was just ordinary working class... It was busier, noisier, lots of kids running round getting hammered by their mams; that sort of thing.xcix

Conversely, the influx of such families increased pressure on more aspirational Norris Green residents to move on. As one woman who left a non-parlour Norris Green house (with a weekly rent of 9s) after 12 months, for a parlour house on the council’s Springwood estate (at a rent of 16s), recalled: ’Norris Green had been alright but you had got some rather low types there, barrow women in shawls, that sort of thing. It suited us... at the time, but I would not have liked to bring my daughter up amongst them. No, we felt more at home here. This estate... was very select in those days... Everybody kept their houses and gardens beautifully.’c

One alternative to moving was to adapt to the estate’s prevailing social norms. Sometimes a neighbour might assist this process, taking on the role of informal social worker to help new ‘rough’ neighbours adjust – and thus mitigating the social costs of their proximity. For example, Elizabeth Knight, a tenant on the Watling estate, recalled the arrival of poorly clothed, ‘scruffy’ neighbours, whom their father branded
`totters… rag and bone people’. On talking with them over the back garden fence she discerned that, `they hadn’t got an idea of anything. They used to hang the washing over the line and it was as black as your hat… she would say to me, “How do you get your sheets white?” “Well I used bleach,” I said, which I didn’t, but after that her washing improved. ’

She supplied her new neighbours with some curtains, as much for her sake as for theirs - `it looked better as you came through the gate.’

Other gifts, advice, and encouragement gradually brought them into line with prevailing local norms.

While the transition towards `consumption communities’ of shared material values increased divisions based around incomes, spending priorities, and restrained behaviour, it weakened traditional cleavages within working-class communities, such as sectarian hatreds. For example, McKenna identified a long-term reduction in sectarian bigotry among migrants to Liverpool’s suburban council estates, assisted by long delays in developing local denominational schools.

As one of her interviewees recalled:

Where we came from down Scotland Road way, Catholics and Protestants only came together to fight. The Catholics lived in certain streets and Protestants in others and no one mixed. Out here though the Corporation forced us all to mix because all the children at first had to go to Council Schools. Well, when people started to mix a lot of the old hatreds start to go and out here the Orangemen and Catholics never fought like back down town.
There is evidence of a similar trend away from denominational schools and activities on owner-occupied estates. For example, at the Coney Hall estate in West Wickham, Kent, there was a political struggle over whether the only schools on the estate should be run by the Church of England or the local authority. A plebiscite organised by the Residents’ Association produced a 91 per cent vote against a Church school and a state infants school was opened despite determined opposition from the local rector. More generally, the influence of religious organisations in pressing for denominational schools and organising denominationally-based youth and other social activities was weakened by delays in developing churches on new estates, the dispersion of their potential congregations among scattered existing churches, and the less community-orientated outlook of many residents.

Conclusion

Interwar working-class suburbanisation had fostered a new ethos of respectability, based around the primacy of the family as a private, independent entity, with only limited and restrained contacts with neighbours. In the new suburban communities the ‘good neighbour’ was defined not by active participation in mutual support networks but by activities such as keeping the garden tidy, the children neat and under control, projecting an acceptable standard of material affluence, and not bothering neighbours with unwelcome visits or borrowing. He/she might be expected to offer assistance in times of crisis, but otherwise neighbourly interaction was expected to be unintrusive and to take place outside the home.

Meanwhile social status became increasingly based around material display and codes of behaviour that projected affluence and restraint. Diversity in social
behaviour and mixing with – and especially allowing one’s children to mix with – different social types, became less acceptable and people placed increasing importance on neighbourhoods which reflected their own values. Suburban working-class estates thus became far more socially homogeneous communities than their inner-urban counterparts. Studies which identified similar trends in new, aspirational, communities during the 1950s and 1960s generally ascribed them to the post-war environment of affluence and material security - buttressed by full employment and the welfare state. The fact that these relationships were already strongly evident among new suburban working-class communities during the interwar period casts doubt on the pivotal importance of these factors and suggests that the character of the residential environment was of more central importance than they acknowledge.

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ii In contrast to the findings of M. Swenarton, and S. Taylor, ’The Scale and Nature of the Growth of Owner-Occupation in Britain between the Wars’, Economic History Review, 38 (1985), 373-92, that the 1930s’ owner-occupation boom was essentially a middle-class phenomenon, more recent studies – G. Speight, ’Building Society Behaviour and the Mortgage Lending Market in the Interwar Period: Risk-taking by Mutual Institutions and the Interwar Housing Boom’ (Univ. of Oxford D. Phil thesis,


iv See, for example, A. Olechnowicz, Working class Housing in England Between the Wars. The Becontree Estate (Oxford, 1997), pp. 121-5.

v The number of house moves is greater than the number of life histories due to the inclusion of one interview involving two people who moved to different houses as children; two interviews involving people who had moved into both local authority and owner-occupied housing, at different times, and one interviewee who described house moves both with her parents and following her marriage.

vi Two low-paid ‘white collar’ workers were included, a clerk and the manager of a small shop. The shop manager earned less than £3 a week at around the time of his house purchase, while the clerk earned only £3 5s from his clerical work (his income being supplemented by his wife continuing to work after marriage, as a dressmaker, and from money he earned at weekends in a jazz band). These workers thus earned less than many factory workers and lived on estates where such workers were also resident.

vii Three regions - Scotland, Wales, and the Northern Region - were not represented in the sample. These had relatively low levels of working-class suburbanisation.


x Thompson, Voice of the Past, pp. 209-21.

N[ational] A[rchives], LAB17/7, ‘Weekly expenditure of working-class households in the United Kingdom in 1937-38,’ unpublished report, Ministry of Labour, July 1949. This is probably an overestimate, as it excludes families experiencing long-term unemployment. It also includes some families with heads of household in middle-class occupations but earning less than £250 a year. However, given that annual earnings below £250 were generally restricted to young white collar workers, men in this group generally married relatively late, and owner-occupation almost always occurred on or after marriage, their inclusion is unlikely to substantially distort the results.


NA, LAB 17/7, ‘Weekly expenditure of working-class households in the United Kingdom in 1937-38,’ unpublished report, Ministry of Labour, July 1949. The average number of wage/salary earners per family was 1.75.


This Committee was established by the Local Government Board, which was also responsible for implementing its recommendations.


Age Concern Reminiscence Centre, autobiographical excerpt provided for Age Concern, ‘Just Like the Country’ project, by D. Barton, c. 1987.

Burnett, Social History of Housing, p. 225.

Bexley Local Studies [and Archive Centre], New Ideal Homesteads brochure, Super 1933 Homes, Barnehurst Estate, Barnehurst, Kent (1933).

Coventry Local Studies Library, unpublished Coventry Sociological Survey report on the Brandon Road Residential Unit, 1952.


Coventry Local Studies Library, unpublished Coventry Sociological Survey report on the Brandon Road Residential Unit, 1952.


Transcript of interview with Mr Pennington, conducted by Mike Harrison, c. 1975-76. Copy available at Tameside Local Studies Library.


xxxxii Coventry Record Office, Acc. 1662/3/130, Coventry Oral History Project interview with Mr Batchelor.


xli Ibid, p. 162.


xliii Durant, Watling, pp. 7-8.

xliii M. S. Soutar, E. H. Wilkins, and P. Sargant Florence, Nutrition and Size of Family. Report on a New Housing Estate – 1939 (London, 1942), p. 42. Similarly Olechnowicz, Working class Housing, p. 52, found that migrants to the Becontree Estate had high standards of material display - unwanted second-hand furniture, collected by charities, being rarely accepted by any but the poorest tenants.


xlv Whitworth, 'Men, Women, Shops, and “Little, Shiny Homes”’, p. 156.

xlvi Coventry Local Studies Library, unpublished Coventry Sociological Survey report on the Brandon Road Residential Unit, 1952.

xlvii Madeline McKenna, 'The Development of Suburban Council Housing Estates in Liverpool between the Wars' (Univ. of Liverpool Ph.D thesis, 1986), Table 5.

xlviii NA, LAB17/7, 'Weekly expenditure of working-class households in the United Kingdom in 1937-38,' unpublished report, Ministry of Labour, July 1949. This comparison is not straightforward, as the data from the life history database covers dates throughout the interwar period and measures income at the time of the house move, while the Ministry of Labour survey covers a single year and measures expenditure, rather than income, generally some years after the move to the current accommodation. Furthermore, the Ministry of Labour data are net of any income from sub-letting rooms.

xlix Soutar, Wilkins, and Sargant Florence, Nutrition and size of Family, p. 51; McKenna, 'Development of suburban council housing estates', p. 244.


iii P. Scott, 'Selling Owner-occupation to the Working-classes in 1930s’ Britain,’ University of Reading Dept. of Management Discussion Paper (forthcoming, 2004).


McKenna, ‘Development of Suburban Council Housing Estates, Appendix 13, interview No. 3.

For a fuller discussion of this topic, see Scott, ‘Did owner-occupation lead to smaller families’.


McKenna, ‘Development of Suburban Council Housing Estates, Appendix 13, interview No. 1.


Coventry Local Studies Library, unpublished Coventry Sociological Survey report on the Brandon Road Residential Unit, 1952.


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