

Living Conditions in Urban Settings

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As we shall see, changes to the way people lived affected all classes; but it is workers' living environments that traditionally attracted historians. This is because the housing conditions of the urban working class is an emotive subject. Contemporary commentators have left us with the impression that one of the most awful effects of industrialism was the degeneration of housing, caused by a huge increase in the size of the urban population. Writers such as James Kay, the Manchester doctor, educationalist and social reformer, in his influential study, *The Moral and Physical Condition of the Labouring Classes in ... Manchester* (1833), enforced the view, still held by many social historians, that living conditions at mid-century were one of the most significant brakes upon the improvements of the standards of living of ordinary working-class people. Kay portrayed the social environment of the Manchester labouring class as a product of poor housing and living conditions; although he suggested these factors were exacerbated by the allegedly immoral and unrestrained attitudes of immigrant groups such as the Irish.

The living conditions and housing of the urban working class varied greatly and it would be impossible to encapsulate the entire experience here. A number of general observations can, however, be made. The speed of urban growth in most towns tended to catch out local builders and speculators. It was very difficult to forecast how successful an industry, or series of industries, was going to be, and thus spurts of in-migration to towns almost always led, first, to a serious shortage of housing and then, secondly, to acute overcrowding. The key issue was whether acute overcrowding should become chronic. On the whole local entrepreneurs were aware of the need for housing-- without it, a town would engender a high turn-over in population which destabilised the workforce and thus affected businesses.

Some of the worst living conditions are associated with the early part of our period when industrial development and urban growth occurred on a scale without precedent. The worst conditions occurred, moreover, in towns with a high proportion of higgledy-piggledy seventeenth- or eighteenth-century housing which was wholly unsuited to nineteenth-century populations. This was certainly the case in Liverpool, where the Victorian problem of overcrowding, poor sanitation and disease were at least predicated upon the fact that so much of the housing had been built for an eighteenth-century population. Here, many urban dwellers were probably crammed into old, airless, damp and sometimes dilapidated accommodation. By 1841 Liverpool and Manchester were the mostly densely populated urban spaces in the world. Population density for England and Wales averaged 275 persons per square mile, whereas the figure for Liverpool was 138,224 and for Manchester 100,000. Dr Duncan of Liverpool-- the country's first Medical Officer of Health-- calculated in the mid-nineteenth century that certain streets and alleys in the city had a density equivalent to 657,963 people per square mile. Perhaps unsurprisingly, mortality rates were also fearfully high. In 1840 Liverpool's death rate was 34.4 per 1,000; the figure for Manchester was 33.3 (compared to 27 in London). The average age of death, moreover, was 17 years in Liverpool and 20 in Manchester (compared to 26.5 in London). The conditions of the labouring classes were hardly much better in Glasgow, Newcastle, Leeds, Birmingham and many other towns and cities; nor was this just a problem in such large centres. Old walled towns, for example, were particular inappropriate for coping with increased

populations; examples included the old parts of Edinburgh, Hull, London and York. This is why Norwich was so badly affected by the smallpox epidemic in 1870-2 which killed 45,000 people in England and Wales.

Throughout this period, the average number of persons per house was 5.45 nationally, although this figure does not account for the desperate overcrowding experienced by many working-class people. The physical shape of these communities was, however, contested ideological ground. For those who lived two or three families to a house, overcrowding was simply a question of poverty and the lack of personal space. For philanthropists and reformers, overcrowding compromised hygiene and morality by encouraging unnecessary familiarity between people of both sexes. Yet few families could afford homes which met with the approval of moral guardians. For example the social investigator Joseph Adshead pointed out in his *Distress in Manchester: Evidence ... of the State of the Labouring Classes* in 1840-2 (1842) that 'there are children of both sexes, mere decency requires four rooms,-- three for sleeping and one for daily use' (emphasis in the original).

The poor conditions of these new urban communities were often merely caused by pressure on money, space and time. Lodging-houses provided many young migrant workers with rudimentary places to rest, and contemporary writers cashed in on the lurid fascination of their audiences whom they regaled with sordid tales of beds occupied day and night by rotating shift-workers, entire families crammed into single rooms, drunkards and criminals lounging in the doorways, and prostitutes lurking on every stairwell. Not all lodging houses were corrupted, and some aspired to be more than glorified brothels. However, Henry Mayhew, in *London Labour and the London Poor* (1861-2), his classic sociological investigation, estimated that 10,000 of London's 70,000 lodging houses were of the lowest sort, by which he meant places in which criminals and prostitutes resided. One Whitehaven surgeon told a team of government investigators under Robert

Rawlinson, who worked for the Chief Medical Officer of Health, John Simon, in 1849 that the town's high incidence of fever was due to overcrowding in local lodging houses: 'nearly all the cases in Ribton Lane were from two lodging houses which are always crowded with Irish', he claimed. Even the more reputable ones were thought to be choked with young single males-- which usually equated with drunkenness, crime and a pool of demand for other vices-- and were overcrowded to a dangerous degree. But some buildings, especially large town houses, could fall into the lodging-house trade almost by accident when they became part of the multiple room-letting syndrome from the landlord's desire to maximize the value of his utility.

Multiple occupancy was not something that workers and their families chose. They avoided it where they could; but it was absolutely a fact of life among the majority of working-class households, even in 1900. It was a necessary condition of existence for the poorer or transient groups, many families chose to ignore the fact that they had lodger. Lodgers, in fact, could be shadowy characters: although usually young men, often fellow migrants from the same town or village, they were, nevertheless, tangential to family life. Lodgers provided income but also generated more washing and required feeding. They often represented the mother's best chance to earn income while small children played at her feet; but they also added to the hard-work and drudgery of the domestic scene. Equally, respectable families also could be found in overcrowded tenement houses, which might be

difficult to distinguish from lodging-houses but offered families a room for as little as 1s 6d a week.