

YOU may chance upon them on any high street, sidestreet or backstreet of any town in the country. They exist behind huge painted advertising hoardings; they lurk in the shadows of high facades of faceless corrugated iron, or slumber dejectedly, weed-ridden and dank, behind dilapidated wooden fencing. They are the so-called wastelands, the derelict sites of our cities; the pieces of unused land left dormant and desolate while the living world of homes, shops and schools pulsates all around them.

In the country at large, their number must be startling. In London alone there are enough of them to occupy an area of 30 square miles or to fill a space rather larger than the island of Guernsey.

In the London boroughs, there are over 150 of them in Lambeth alone, taking up a vast 65 acres of that local authority's area. The situation in Hackney and Southwark is even worse; each has twice as many derelict sites as Lambeth. But the doubtful distinction of having probably the greatest number of unused sites of any London borough is held by Tower Hamlets with 506 weed-producing patches totalling an amazing 480 acres.

These statistics on London's derelict acres have recently raised the interest of the National Federation of Self Employed and Small Businesses whose London region recently issued a small pamphlet* entitled *30 Square Miles of Waste-Land* setting out the disturbing facts. The Federation, a pressure-group with some 50,000 members in the United Kingdom, regards the existence of the thousands of vacant plots in the capital as a scandal that calls for urgent and radical action.

The Federation explains that vacant land in our cities can be owned by private companies and individuals as well as by local authorities, nationalised industries and by central government. But their pamphlet concentrates on land in public ownership which they see as a greater cause of concern than land in private ownership. When privately-owned land is left unused, they say, "the immediate sufferer is the owner of the land" but, in the case of publicly-owned land "the loss falls on the taxpayer . . . (so) . . . there is a strong case for policies to encourage the bringing into the use of potentially profitable publicly-owned land."

Initiatives to bring this land into productive use, asserts the Federation, have, so far, hardly scratched the surface. Yet, they calculate, the contribution that this land could make to bringing down the burden of the rates is nothing but enormous. They make four "policy proposals" designed to bring the land back into productive life.

First, they want local authorities to be required to compile registers of publicly-owned land in their areas; Second, they want tenants of local authority business premises to be allowed - like the tenants of council houses - to buy their premises on generous terms; Third, they want public bodies to sell, by auction, within three months of legislation, any of their vacant land or buildings which any member of the public wishes to buy; Finally, they want any vacant land still in public hands after two years of these arrangements (the Federation assume that any such plots would be virtually valueless) to be disposed off by ballot. (Ballot tickets to cost £200; and there might have to be safeguards enabling the authorities to re-possess land still not put to use by the ballot winner.)

Full marks must be given to the Federation for their initiative in bringing to public notice some of the facts on a serious national scandal and for suggesting a remedy. But there are a number of weaknesses both in their assessment of the problem and in their proposed solution.

**30 Square Miles of Waste-Land*, London Region of National Federation of Self Employed and Small Business Ltd., 45 Russell Square, London WC1.

Scandal of the vacant sites

In the first place, their lack of concern over privately-owned sites is a gross error. In the boroughs of Lambeth, Hackney and Tower Hamlets, the only ones for which sufficient details are given in their pamphlet, private companies or individuals own 58 per cent, 70 per cent and 23 per cent respectively of the number of vacant sites. In the face of these figures, any remedial measures that ignore the private sector can be only tinkering with the problem.

Secondly, it is not true that, in the holding of private sites vacant, "the immediate sufferer is the owner of the land." On the contrary, the owner is unlikely to be a sufferer at all. He has almost certainly calculated that his financial interests would be better served by keeping the land vacant while it appreciates in capital value ("ripening for development" in real estate jargon) than in being used to earn a current revenue. So the sufferer, both immediate and long-term, will, in fact, be the public. They will receive no rates income from the owner yet, by providing local services out of the rates (roads, street lighting, libraries etc.) as well as by privately-financed developments, they will be continually enhancing the capital value of the vacant site.

Thirdly, the arrangements proposed by the Federation would provide a field day for bureaucracy in local government with huge increases in staff being required to administer the new regulations.



Yet by a comparatively simple measure the aims of the Federation could be achieved. All that need be done would be to modify the present rating system so as to levy rates on site values alone.

This would mean that rates would be payable on all vacant sites, a change that would apply a salutary deterrent to the holding of valuable sites out of use. Any private owner would find it expensive to hold land idle purely for capital gain and would be spurred to put his site to use or to transfer it to someone who would. Public bodies would be placed under similar discipline. The rating assessments of their properties would appear in the register and they would be under pressure from ratepayers and taxpayers to place on the market any land they were keeping idle.

The scheme presented by the Federation is a commendable effort on their part to grapple with a widespread national problem. But a much simpler solution - more comprehensive and infinitely more economical - is staring them, and all of us, fully in the face.

30 SQ MILES BLIGHT LONDON: BERT BROOKES ANALYSES SOME SOLUTIONS