

# Taxing truth behind Dockland

• TEN THOUSAND residents in London's Docklands are to sue the Development Corporation and Olympia and York, developers of Canary Wharf, for disrupting their lives. Compensation could total £100m.

• A new book exposes the human suffering of life in the docks. Reviewer PAULINE JUCKES, a New York psychoanalyst, places responsibility for the misery on the land tenure-and-taxation system.

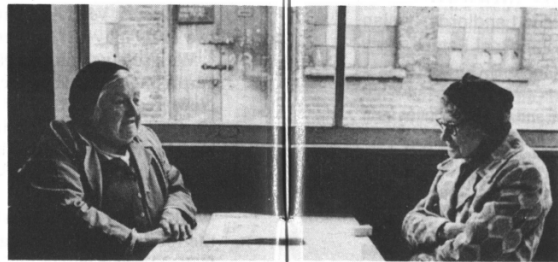
DAVID WIDGERY ends *Some Lives!* with a description of the East End as having a style of living which used to be coherent and lustily alive, adding poignantly in the final sentence of this moving book: "It deserves to get it back".

Having accompanied Widgery through the pages of his book, one shares with him the pain and deprivation of the lives that come under his care, experiencing in his vivid depiction both the spirit that keeps these people going, and the immensity of the forces weighed against them.

This is epitomised by the "vast pointed obelisk of M.I. Pei's central block in the Canary Wharf complex, No.1 Canada Square, with its gleaming steel skin and red marble from Guatemala and Italy". The author adds cryptically: "It stands over East London like an uninvited guest to a party which is over".

If ever one had an uncomfortable feeling during the Reagan/Thatcher years that a segment of the population was being sacrificed on the altar of unbridled greed, one discovers it here, superbly fleshed out in the recordings of a sensitive and immensely caring doctor, as he treats his patients in all conditions and at all times of the day and night. The feeling is one of privilege as the invitation to accompany him behind the scenes brings participation in the most intimate of life's moments: birth and death, as well as travails and inequities between. ("Death, for most working class patients isn't usually kind or 'a release', or all the other slippery phrases which lie about it. It's the final confirmation that many of life's possibilities have been confiscated. To take the pain and injustice out of death is the meanest sentimentality. It is something starker - I have seen too often the gasping and the fading in a room which has accumulated only the most meagre of possessions, the last struggle of a body that has known little luxury and much settling for less".)

Dr. David Widgery was born in London in 1947, inheriting from his designer father and teacher mother, a passion for London. He has lived and worked as a doctor in the East End for 20 years. His writing graphically demonstrates his deep attachment to the area, tracing its tortuous path from a bend in the river where the water was shallow enough to moor galleys (named Londinium by the Romans), through the growth and construction of the London Docks, to the present "reshaping



• Fings ain't what they used to be: Old timers reflect in Bethnal Green

of our Metropolis" by means of a process where "multinational commercial developers, largely financed and controlled from outside Britain, will have been allowed to create a new 'free market' metropolis, much more like an American city built from scratch".

As he presents us with the developing and changing infrastructure, he mentions at each stage the impact of the development on the populace living in its shadow. He states flatly: "the consequences of economic progress are presented in human terms, conveniently out of sight to the politicians, in our surgeries every day. Patients made sick by poverty, living an unhealthy overcrowded existence which is exhausting them and making them ill. Margaret Thatcher's chosen monument may be the commercial majesty of Canary Wharf, but I see the social cost, which has been paid for in the streets of the East End".

WHAT IS it about the construction of Canary Wharf that has wreaked such destruction on the people of the community? Wasn't it supposed to provide jobs and housing, bring a new city to an otherwise "derelict" area?

Margaret Thatcher's initial idea of creating the London Dockland's Development Corporation to spearhead the regeneration of an inner city to "sweep away inertia, slice through red tape and produce tangible results fast" has the ring of decisive action geared to an overall upgrading of conditions.

But the reverse occurred. The L.D.D.C. "proved a highly secretive engine of corruption" a government-financed estate agent "swiftly amassing 150 acres of land "ripe for development" at artificially low prices, and as sole planning authority and main landowner, parcelling off lots to speculators in the 1970s property boom.

Not only was the site price artificially low, but developers were able to offset the costs of building against tax and enjoy a

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on the contrary, it re-affirms them.

AT THE very outset, the introduction makes it plain that no such retreat is contemplated; for *Rerum novarum* is there described as a document that was "to achieve so much good and to radiate so much light in the Church and in the world".

It certainly may be counted to the credit of Leo XIII that, long before socialism was given its first full-scale trial, he foretold

(section 4 of *R.n.*) that 'the working-man himself would be among the first to suffer' from it, and that it would "bring the State into a sphere that is not its own, and cause complete confusion".

What then is the proper sphere of the state? This is a question that *Centesimus annus* does its best, in a somewhat disjointed fashion, to elucidate.

John Paul II could hardly be expected to go along with Henry George in considering that,

when once the state had fulfilled its prime function of collecting economic rent, and then spreading its benefits by spending it on public works, it would have little else to do but to operate undertakings which of their nature are monopolistic, and to step in where absolutely necessary to safeguard public health, safety and morals.

He could not be expected to do this, because he would thereby tacitly admit that the arguments elaborated by his



•Diabetic in Bow: patient has also lost her sight and legs



•Furrier: Frustrated by the way things have turned out

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make the poor vulnerable to disease and stress-related physical and mental illness.

DAVID DONNISON, Professor at the University of Glasgow, reiterated in *The Guardian* of August 21, 1991, the claims of Dr. Widgery, citing conditions in Manchester's Hulme estate, where, he says, the poor have no choice but to under-feed themselves, steal or fiddle the meter.

He describes residents as being desperately short of cash, forced to borrow from illicit money-lenders operating at cruel rates of interest, who then use strong-arm tactics to recover their funds. This then funnels the borrowers into drug dealing and crime.

So conditions spiral downwards, soon creating what those in a more comfortable sphere dismiss as "the underclass", "the inner city", and "problem estates". The companions of poverty are pain, powerlessness and stigma, with poor health being a central feature of the pain. To quote David Donnison: "Liberation, not poor relief, is the name of the game, liberation not only from illness but also from anxiety, helplessness and humiliation".

The impact of prolonged levels of unemployment strikes even deeper than poverty and homelessness, creating in people a sense of despondency, worthlessness and eventual physical ill-health. The effect on communities is a cumulative despair.

TO COUNTERACT these degrading conditions, Professor Donnison advocates better family benefits, public services which are more accountable to those who use them and "new policies to get those appalling estates right". These would seem singularly appropriate, but they fail to identify the problem.

Dr. Widgery, for his part, asks if the future of the Docklands should not have been shaped by those who lived there rather

predecessor about the sacredness of property in general, and then applied in particular to landed property, were an interesting example of the fallacy of the undistributed middle.

*And yet, with all the evidence before him from the so-called western world of increasing unemployment, poverty, homelessness and crime, he could hardly hold this world up as a model to those socialists who are beginning to have second thoughts about socialism.*

He refers indeed to "increasing instances of poverty ..... in many parts of the world, including those where systems predominate which are based on an affirmation of the right to private property". This reference to private property, it is worth noting, follows within the same paragraph as a reminder that Leo XIII, when he used the term, normally meant "land".

It would be going too far to claim that John Paul II is endorsing our "working hypo-

thesis" that the main purpose of the "western" state is to enable private property in land, and the consequent licence to exploit, to continue uninterrupted; but at least he is coming face to face with the idea that this may be one of its purposes.

It is permissible for us here to supply the corollary of a 'licence to exploit'; for he admits elsewhere (section 33) that there are

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than those who owned the Title Deeds. This is perhaps the most relevant question asked in this work. He also suggests that even if there were no alternative to turning inner London over to private developers, those vested with planning authority could impose terms on them.

He mentions the New Town of Letchworth, which operated a scheme in which 50% of the increase in land value is divided between the owners and the New Town Corporation. He reports that a weakened version of such a scheme was kicked out by Canary Wharf who were "not interested in profit sharing".

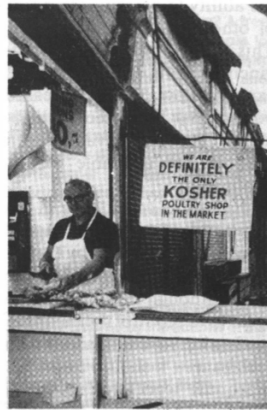
*Neither Professor Donnison nor Dr. Widgery venture an antidote to the miseries of poverty, nor to the excessive power of arrogant developers.*

Dr. Widgery, in an interview with Yvonne Roberts for *The Observer* (7 July 1991), discussed his affiliation to Marxism. "Instead of becoming angry, my Marxism helps me to explain what I've seen to myself and others". He advocates increased spending in health, education and housing.

Few would dispute the efficacy of that expenditure, but rarely are the origins of the necessary financing tackled in the same breath. Where is the money to come from? And a further question: How can land speculators be curbed and prevented from sapping communities of their life and vitality?

The answer to the two leading questions to surface from this work is simple: institute a land value tax, so inhibiting the upward spiral of land values and limiting land speculators' profits, and use these rents to strengthen the community. Had this system been in place, development in the Docklands would have occurred intrinsically and generically, taking place gradually as land became available due to unprofitable usage.

I wonder if Dr. Widgery has explored the philosophy of Henry George as an alternative to Marxism, the latter system presently witnessing such an inglorious finale in the USSR?.



• Still serving: Last vestige of the old Orthodoxy



• On call: Dr Widgery in Limehouse where he was recently mugged