



Town Planning — Dream and Reality

By A. J. CARTER

FAMILY AND KINSHIP IN EAST LONDON

by Michael Young and Peter Willmott (Penguin Books
4s. 6d.)

THE publication of this book as a Pelican will bring to wider notice the results of a careful survey of family relationships made between 1953 and 1955 in the borough of Bethnal Green and in an Essex housing estate with the pseudonym of Greenleigh. The authors have gathered their evidence almost entirely from interviews with samples of people, and it is possible to dissent from the conclusions reached on the grounds that no sample of workable size can properly represent the whole community. The authors' quiet justification of their method (in the appendix), however, will probably convince most reasonable people. The statistical information is supplemented (not contradicted) by personal impressions, and Mr. Young and Mr. Willmott have brought to their work not only the coolness of impartiality but also the warmth of sympathy.

The picture of Bethnal Green that emerges from this study is of a community closely knit by kinship ties, which have been made strong both by the length of residence of the members of the family and by their proximity to one another. The dominant figure is the grandmother, or "Mum." Of the "extended family," composed mainly of her daughters and their husbands and their children, "Mum" is the king-pin, and to most of the wives interviewed, clearly a person whose importance ranked almost equal to the husband's, if not above it. One reason for this may have been the tendency for a wife whose husband was often unemployed, or likely to be, to seek security from her mother; another, the inclination of the husband to spend his leisure away from his damp, overcrowded home, leaving his wife without a companion. Undoubtedly the most cogent reason is the unchanging nature of women's work in caring for home and children — comparatively few sons go into the same jobs as their fathers but nearly all daughters take on the same jobs as their mothers. There is a special bond between a wife and her mother even in communities where the independence and significance of the "family of marriage" (wife, husband and their children) are much greater than in Bethnal Green.

The day when every East End husband was mean, selfish, and brutal is passing. The squalor of the home is not quite as bad as it once was, and he spends more time there. Though the old callousness towards wife and children still survives it is much less pronounced than it

used to be. This is very heartening, and prompts the reflection that decent housing would vastly improve the health of the relationships in the "family of marriage," and so provide a balance to the closeness of the wife and her mother. Matters are not helped by the need of many couples to live with their parents — nearly always the wife's parents. There is a serious housing shortage in Bethnal Green.

The chapter "The Family in the Economy" is of great interest. The free entry of immigrants through the docks has played a large part in establishing the diversity of industry which the authors consider a boon to the family. It has been — even if to some extent it is ceasing to be — an area of "small men." The authors fall into the error of *post hoc, ergo propter hoc* by stating that "the master-craftsman produced the sweat shops," but they add that he also produced "an attitude of outspoken independence and a range of trades, customs, and personality which has added to the variety of local society as much as it has detracted from its prosperity." This raises the question of whether it is only in the absence of prosperity that there can be local colour; in a right condition of society, would not the two co-exist?

In Bethnal Green the "extended family" is a link between the "family of marriage" and the wider community. "Far from the family excluding ties to outsiders, it acts as an important means of promoting them." The contrast found in Greenleigh, built in the late 1940s, is extreme. Here people were suspicious and withdrawn. They enjoyed their much improved housing, but hungered for their native Bethnal Green. The loneliness, suffered particularly by the wives, became less anguishing with the passing of time, but there was no alteration in the lack of community spirit.

In Greenleigh people were concerned with their homes and their immediate families and not so much with the world outside. In 1955, 65 per cent. of households in Greenleigh had a television set; in Bethnal Green it was only 32 per cent. The relationships of people at Greenleigh are "window-to-window, not face-to-face;" unable to satisfy their need for respect in social life, they do so by the acquisition of possessions. There are no homes for the elderly in Greenleigh, and since housing there is

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allocated according to strict need (preference being given to existing slum dwellers), children when they grow up will have to move away. The authors condemn this. "The three generations complement each other. Once prise out two of them, and the wives are left without the help of grandmothers, the old without the comfort of children and grandchildren."

The loneliness and the difficulty of creating a community in Greenleigh are mainly attributable to the sudden break with the old life. People have had to face the dilemma that arises so often in our wrong ordered society — whether to choose better living conditions or stay put among family and friends. It is a decision that should never have to be made; whatever the result, it causes pain. The attraction of a new house and fresh air is great, but even so, up to March 1956, 26 per cent. of Greenleigh tenants had moved away again. The rate of departure is falling, but there are many who stop only because it will benefit their children. The answer is not to leave slum property to deteriorate further and create new housing estates elsewhere. The answer — and it is what the authors themselves advocate — is the improvement and redevelopment of Bethnal Green itself, creating up-to-date housing without disturbing the family and community links. The means will of course be obvious to readers of this journal, especially when they read the following significant passage: "Relatively few houses have been built since the war inside London. It was quicker to put them up on vacant ground than to clear encumbered sites; it was simpler to acquire the land; more space was left for those who stayed behind. This is not new. For three hundred years houses have been striding out over the green fields: Bethnal Green itself was a kind of seventeenth-century Greenleigh."

The twelfth chapter of the book, in which the authors venture opinions, is entitled "Planning and Family Life." I rather expected the usual paternalist platitudes and was delighted to discover I was wrong. The principle is laid down that the majority who wished to stay in the borough should not be moved away from relatives against their will, but that the few who wished to leave should not be hindered from doing so. "People should obviously have as much choice of residence as possible: given choice, they will be able to meet best the individual needs of which they, and they only, should be the judge." This attitude is unfortunately distressingly rare today. We need to be reminded that people matter more than buildings or planners' dreams. A community spirit grows; it cannot be artificially created. By rebuilding Bethnal Green the existing sense of community could be preserved.

Perhaps the one point that the authors do not see is that the variety of Bethnal Green can be maintained only if improvement and redevelopment is undertaken not by councils and officials but by individual firms, working within local authority minimum planning requirements, who have an incentive to modernise and to build anew.

Such an incentive would of course be provided by the removal of taxes and rates on buildings, which penalise improvement, and the substitution of land value taxation and site value rating, which encourage the fullest use of land; and by the abolition of rent control.

Some chapters of this book are less absorbing than others, but the book as a whole is not only sound in its scientific approach but full of humanity, and lucid in its explanations. It is a book that may bore some but will fascinate others.

NEW — BUT STILL OUTDATED

YOUR NEW RATES by H. Howard Karslake, F.R.I.C.S., F.R.V.A., F.I.Hsg. (Rating & Valuation Reporter, 4s. 6d.)

THIS booklet sets out in some detail just what rates are, how they are calculated, who is liable, what reliefs can be obtained, the procedure for challenging one's assessment and how to conduct the case at the valuation court.

The writer explains clearly the new assessments. All are based upon current-day values, and there is no more derating of industrial and commercial properties. The difference between mandatory and discretionary exemption, and how one should apply for the latter, is also explained.

The complicated way in which rateable value is calculated is brought out in the chapter "What is the basis of liability." For dwelling houses and other non-industrial premises the gross value is first calculated (based on the rent the property could reasonably be expected to let for in the open market, with a deduction for the cost of any services provided by the landlord). A further deduction is made from gross value, depending on whether it is under £55, under £430 or over £430. This gives net annual value or rateable value, on which rates are based.

For other kinds of properties, net annual value is calculated directly, but where no rent is paid a completely different method of calculating rateable value has to be employed — profitability, interest on cost or capital value etc.

We tend to forget perhaps that pipelines, railway lines, passenger lifts, ventilating systems and such things as power generators are also rated. Mr. Karslake says of this: "The rating of plant and machinery is a difficult and complicated matter," and this applies as much to deciding whether or not such things are rateable as to estimating their value if it is decided that they are.

The longest chapter is entitled "How Assessments are Made and Challenged" and describes exactly what to do if you wish to challenge your assessment — the proposal for alteration, procedure at the valuation court and appeal to the Lands Tribunal.

The remaining chapters are entitled "How to Launch an Appeal," and "How to Present the Case." This is certainly useful information for anybody who intends to dispute his assessment.