

Focus on the Neighbourhood

hazarded that some neighbours would be greatly affronted and would cut the Smiths dead; others might well take the view that so long as they didn't hold the drunken orgies in the Smiths' house then it was really no one's business locally. The point at issue is essentially whether the behaviour of a particular person is relevant to the neighbourhood itself. Obviously there are differences of opinion between individuals and between neighbourhoods themselves as to what constitutes correct neighbourhood behaviour, but the essential factor is a recognition that life is not confined to the neighbourhood in anything like the way it is in the hypothetical village.

There are three points to be considered about the urban neighbourhood. Firstly, since it is a fact that cities divide their residential areas according to social class criteria, one must have some knowledge of the social class of any given area. Secondly, one must try to discover what functions the neighbourhood actually provides for the residents. Thirdly, one must try to discover the active behaviour which constitutes neighbourliness.

In a study¹⁰ carried out in an urban district adjacent to Nottingham I attempted some enquiries into these problems. The place was West Bridgford, an urban district of approximately 25,000 population, which lies on the south side of the River Trent. Whilst socially it is mainly a residential suburb of Nottingham it is a local government area separate from the city and it has strong local loyalties and activities of its own. Six different types of housing areas were selected for sample enquiries; older type terrace houses, medium-sized pre-1914 semi-detached houses, pre-1914 large semi and detached houses, modern council houses, modern medium-sized semi-detached houses and modern large detached houses. The occupants of the houses of the samples interviewed were asked about their use of amenities in the town and Nottingham city, their leisure activities, their associational memberships and their neighbourly behaviour. It was interesting to note that whilst the middle class people were much more active in organisations and clubs than were the working classes, the top people in the middle classes (i.e. the most well-to-do in the best residential districts) were less active *locally* and tended more to do shopping and to join activities in the city or the county area. In neighbourly

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activity the patterns differed between working class and middle class, with the former having more informal neighbouring in the way of 'popping in' to the neighbours, the latter having more formal neighbouring in the way of giving coffee parties or evening entertaining in the home. Thus the neighbourhood means different things to different people and only a detailed typology of behaviour according to certain chosen criteria could do justice to the variety of patterns to be found in various types of neighbourhood.

It is therefore of considerable interest to enquire into the thoughts which lie behind the idea of the neighbourhood as a principle for town planning. Briefly put, the general theme that has been developed is that our modern cities are growing to such a size and such a complexity that some breakdown of them into smaller social units is needed if they are to retain their essentially 'human' characteristics. An official statement made in 1944 put the case as follows,¹¹ 'Something like half the population of England and Wales lives in towns which have a population of over 50,000. In these larger towns especially a sense of neighbourhood has been lost to great numbers of the inhabitants. The town is generally too large to be fully understood as a social unit, and the neighbourhood, the immediate environment of the many inhabitants, has lost or never had a full identity'. The report notes then that large housing estates built between the wars were just as bad as, if not worse than, older parts of the towns in their inadequacy in stimulating neighbourly feeling. The report continues, 'For the proper social well-being of the large town, then, it is necessary to work out some organisation of its physical form which will aid in every way the full development of community life and enable a proper measure of social amenities to be provided and arranged to advantage in each residential neighbourhood. The idea of the 'neighbourhood unit' arises out of an acknowledgment of the necessity of doing this and offers the means of doing it.'

But the neighbourhood unit has a history which pre-dates 1944 by many years and which throws an interesting light on the thoughts behind it.

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transport system, be it road or rail, is geared to the idea. Thus the 'Southport Line' which brings in large numbers of commuters each day into Liverpool, is a recognised rail route. The road into Leeds from Harrogate is thronged with Jaguars and Humbers. These types of commuting represent, in Britain, the nearest equivalent to the London and American systems of working in a large city and 'living' (i.e. having one's home and family) in another distinct town. The essential feature of this type is that the commuter need not feel at all that he is a citizen of the large city other than in those economic functions which concern his work. He has another complete community in which he 'belongs', and to which he can turn for his ordinary amusements, leisure activities and family life. The city may be useful for occasional expeditions for shopping, for theatres and so on, but the commuting residents of Harrogate and, to a lesser extent, Southport, may feel quite content to live most of their domestic lives in these towns.

In contrast to this town-to-city form of commuting, there is the more normal type of daily travel which takes place between villages and towns or cities. This type of travel is, of course, likely to be over much shorter distances and can result in the commuters also using the towns for much of their lives other than merely work. For the person who lives in a small village five to ten miles from the urban workplace the town itself may be the principal focus for evening entertainment, for the purchase of house equipment and even day-to-day provisions. Children may be transported daily to a town preparatory school before being sent away to boarding school. Friendships, with their ensuing home visits, may stem from urban interests and associations. What is left for the village is likely to comprise attendance at the local church (if attendance at all), limited day-to-day shopping for staple foods and household requisites and a limited amount of informal neighbouring with some of the villagers.

It is, of course, almost impossible to generalise about the commuters' villages, since they vary so enormously in size, location and social structure, but in two Nottinghamshire villages, close to each other and about eight miles from the city, great differences arose in the social composition. In one village there were very few middle class people at all, and commuting

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was restricted almost wholly to young women going into offices in the city. In the other village many more houses had been taken over by middle class commuters and there was an appreciable number of male commuters. In the former village, where middle class leadership was absent, the associational social life was negligible. In the latter village, the church, annual gala, cricket club and so on, thrived from the efforts of the commuting classes, who had, in effect 'taken over' much of the village. Yet, this did not mean solely that the commuters were restricted to the village life, since, with their own transport, they could also visit the city, and friends elsewhere, for social occasions. In general, it added up to a wider and more active social life outside (and bringing people into) the home on the part of the middle class commuters than the working classes. With the increase in the number of two-car families in the middle classes the extension of social activities over a wide field must be expected. Even in 1954, when I carried out a survey of West Bridgford which, although a separate Urban District, was virtually a suburb of Nottingham and contiguous to it, in the highest class of housing area one in six of the households sampled had two cars and the proportion today must be considerably higher. These people compared with lower social classes had fewer suggestions for needed recreational facilities in West Bridgford itself. Nearly half of the housewives had their groceries and their meat delivered from Nottingham, and over two-thirds shopped regularly in the town. Only fourteen out of a sample sixty housewives felt the need for any additional shops near at hand but an adjacent council estate gave a figure of 52 out of 60. In enumerating clubs and associations of which they were members, the husbands and wives in this residential area tended to have fewer memberships in West Bridgford than people in lower social class areas, but they led easily when it came to enumerating memberships outside West Bridgford. Thus, although these people were not commuters in the sense of the village dwellers discussed above, they did show a breadth of interests and associations that marked them off from the lower social classes in the suburb. It is also noteworthy that these people lived on the edge of the built-up area, so close to a small village that some houses were actually in the village ecclesiastical parish, and for church attendance the pre-

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dominant Anglican movement was to the village rather than the parish church in the suburb centre.

With the British love of compromise (or perhaps trying to get the best of both worlds) the attraction of the rural residence and urban work is very apparent, and it can only be expected that the tendency towards living on the outskirts or in the 'villages' around a city will continue to attract large numbers of people of various types—both country lovers and status seekers. Within this general trend there is a tendency for people of high income and/or status to move out from the towns themselves and to seek thereby for a dual status. Perhaps it is, as Anthony Sampson suggests, a part of the Englishman's basic desire to become a landed aristocrat. If one cannot own Chatsworth itself, at least one can live near to it and pretend to be a country squire, entertaining one's city-based friends in place of the Prime Minister. But whatever the basic reason may be, with the ownership of *transport* these people are not lost to the town or city. Even if the Member of Parliament for Hallamshire Division of Sheffield lives in Derbyshire he is still a *Sheffield* business executive and a prominent Sheffield figure.

An interesting side-light on commuting is a slight reverse action that is very common in Sheffield and by no means uncommon in Huddersfield and Nottingham. This is the practice of dining out in the evenings in the countryside public houses. In the reasonably accessible Derbyshire area there are a good number of hotels, pubs and what once were called 'road-houses' which cater particularly for evening meals, usually of good quality in comfortable, even luxurious, surroundings, at a good price. For the urban dweller, therefore, it is a regular practice to take guests from the town to the country for evening meals. This practice is so common in West and South Yorkshire that the *Yorkshire Post* carries an occasional advertisement page headed 'Dining in the Ridings' in which hoteliers, predominantly rural, advertise their wares. When one looks at this phenomenon it is slightly strange for people to enjoy driving along unlit moorland roads in the pitch-darkness of a winter's night just for the pleasure of eating out in 'the country'. For drinking out in the country, the road from Baslow to Sheffield has such a reputation on Saturday nights that a few years ago municipal bus drivers on the late services