

Home Life & Leisure

The Urban Poor

In a bid to stem the escalating cost of relief, the Poor Law Amendment Act came into effect in 1834, consigning the poorest and most destitute to the workhouse. Twenty years later poor relief had fallen to one million, from a million and a quarter, but the stigma was still much for some. In Bath unemployed porter, Joseph West, died of starvation as his family tried to survive on two meals of dry bread and tea each day. In his publication, *London Labour and the London Poor*, Henry Mayhew's depiction of life in the 1840s & 1850s showed desperate poverty in the capital. Nowhere in art was this scene of despair portrayed more graphically than in Luke Fildes' *Applicants for Admission to a Casual Ward* (1874). Vagrants slumped and huddled in the biting cold of mid-winter, hoping for a bed for the night

The transformation of society over the century was immense. The first modern census in 1801 revealed a population of 10.5m of whom about a third were urban dwellers. Fifty years later it was 21.5m and 37m at the time of Queen Victoria's death in 1901 when almost 80% of people lived in towns and cities. By mid-century the largest urban populations, excluding London, were: Liverpool, Manchester, Birmingham, Bristol, Glasgow, Leeds and Sheffield. In the 'Hungry Forties' millions of Irish sought a life elsewhere to escape continued famine. They poured into Liverpool and dispersed from there. East European Jews sought sanctuary from 1881 with Leeds, Manchester, Liverpool, London and Glasgow popular destinations.

The issue was how to house this huge influx. Leeds and Birmingham perfected the 'back to back' and Glasgow was characterised by large tenement blocks. Row upon row and street upon street of densely packed terraced housing sprung up with little access to water and sewage systems, and no lighting. Most houses were rented, devouring a sizeable chunk of meagre earnings. The very poor rented or shared a room. Liverpool typified the problem. A businessman commented in 1832: "In all the houses we visited, with a few exceptions, each single room from eight to eleven feet square is inhabited by one, sometimes two families, in which they eat, drink, cook, wash and sleep." As middle class families moved out, the poor moved in. Even in 1891 overcrowding affected 11.2% of the population. The task was daunting, if not overwhelming, in spite of determined efforts by the Peabody Trust, Octavia Hill and Joseph Chamberlain in Birmingham.

Home for many was a misnomer, living in squalor and filth where disease and infection were prevalent. This applied to the rural poor as well as urban poor, though the able-bodied of limited means living in the countryside sustained a reasonable quality of life, thanks to their land skills and access to a garden or allotment. As the century progressed so did the middle classes and those aspiring. Theirs was a different existence, often characterised by a fairly good education and life skills that could be inculcated in their children; a passport to what we call social mobility today.

Nowhere is the grim reality of late Edwardian Manchester expressed more vividly than in the art of Adolphe Valette at Manchester Art Gallery. His misty, eerie painting of the River Irwell in grey light, fog or pea-souper depicted a society on the move, albeit in grime and squalor. *Under Windsor Bridge* (1912) on show, but not *Albert Square* and *Hansom Cab*, Valette's nocturnes resemble late Victorian artist James Whistler rather more than Atkinson Grimshaw, famed for moonlit quay scenes and paintings of industrial Leeds and Liverpool.

Apart from Valette and Lowry, (later), there is little reference to the industrial landscape but an exception is Eyre Crowe's *The Dinner Party* painted in 1874. It shows The Thomas Taylor Victoria Mill at Wigan Wallgate. With the mill as a backdrop, mill girls are seen streaming out for their lunch break. Whilst an art critic admired his talent he felt this was wasted on such a mundane and insignificant event. The 1840s were tough and many sought a better life in Australia. In the ten years to 1850 over one million people emigrated there. *Answering the Immigrant's Letter* (1850) by James Collison is a stark reminder of famine and artificially high prices through corn protection that imposed a high tariff on foreign imports.

Countryside Living

There were three types of cottage in the North East Oxfordshire hamlet of Juniper, otherwise known as Flora Thompson's Lark Rise. The hamlet, situated between Brackley and Bicester, comprised about 30 cottages. Those for older people, of adequate means, contrasted with homes for married couples raising families, and new homes for those who could afford them. Old people, struggling financially, had no home once employment ceased. They were faced with the choice of squeezing in with family or entering the workhouse.

For the elderly, having a home, the pattern of life was set. The husband, his smock rolled up and trousers complete with buckled straps, could be seen digging, hoeing, watering and planting his garden. His beaming wife was boss and held the purse-strings. One of the two downstairs rooms was a kitchen-storeroom; at one end pots, pans and utensils and at the other, sacks of drying potatoes, peas and beans. Herbs dangled down and apples stored on racks beneath the ceiling. In one corner stood a big brewing copper for malt and hops.

The inner room was a comfortable snugger with a gate-leg table, dresser with pewter and willow-pattern plates, a grand-father clock and scattering of rugs. The garden was large with plenty of vegetables and flowers with space for corn too. Locals were intrigued how they managed with no visible means of support, beyond the garden and beehives. The answer was country-folk, tucking away a few pence each a week and an occasional shilling for retirement. Both parents were steeped in the land and kept a cow, pigs, geese, poultry and a donkey, plus a cart to take produce to market. They made butter, baked their own bread and made candles for lighting. A bit of thatching and hedge-laying helped provide additional income.

The major lived close by, struggling in his small home on a modest pension. Now older and feeble, he was taken to Oxford Infirmary. Back home, he gave a small girl living close by a small wooden box containing dolls dishes and painted wax food; chops, green peas, new potatoes and a jam tart with criss-cross pastry. Her brother received a splendid tin engine. Their parents were not forgotten: a red silk handkerchief for their mother and pipe for their father. One day the doctor called in the relieving officer. Seriously ill, and no relatives, the workhouse infirmary beckoned but the major was not informed of his fate. The doctor's gig arrived to 'take the major for a drive.' Six weeks later he was back but this time in a coffin. There were no mourners for the major was not a church man.

Callers made a pleasant diversion. On Monday morning a cart with fish and fruit made its weekly appearance. A beeline was made for bloaters, soft-roed to spread easily and "oozin with goodness." The baker came three times a week. A former ship carpenter he met a girl, married her and 'cast his anchor' in the hamlet. Travelling tinkers might arrive with their barrows, braziers, grindstone twirling, ready to set the emery wheel in motion. Tramps were

also a common sight. Unshaven, wearing a bowler and sat by the roadside, the tramp lit a fire using a pile of twigs, tea can at the ready. A shabbily dressed woman might accompany him selling shoe-laces, matches and dried lavender bags. Purchases were made out of pity. A piece of bread plastered with lard was proffered. A kindly thank you and slight nod; the tramp was on his way.

By the 1880s the packman or pedlar was seldom seen for there was competition for clothes with fashionable shops in towns where prices were lower. "Anything out of the pack today?" Without hesitation, a pack was spread on the doorstep: dress and shirt lengths, aprons and pinafores, plain and fancy, corduroys for men and coloured scarves and ribbons. Few could afford such distinctive and tempting items. Purchases were usually restricted to pins and cottons but an excellent quality dress-length might prove irresistible if means allowed. For patter, the cheap-jack took some beating. When a highly decorative and ornamental tea-set appeared, the bidding started. "Only two bob." Jokes, banter and song. The cheap-jack knew how to entertain. "Eat off the same ware as lords and dukes."

A birth of a child would herald a knock at the vicarage door. Perambulator ready, the box snuggled inside. It contained half a dozen of everything from tiny shirts, swathes, nighties, napkins plus, as a gift tea, sugar and groats. Any farm labourer's wife, a regular church attender or not, was welcomed to loan of the box and contents for a month, with maybe an extension if not immediately required. A local untrained midwife was on hand. For half a crown she would be at the birth and for ten days would come in daily to bath the baby and help the mother.

With wholesome food, hardworking people living off the land did not expect to be ill. For minor ailments, Beechams and Holloway's Pills were the remedy and the rather mysterious Mother Siegel's syrup. Epsom Salts might come in handy too.

Typically, games might be played on the green or between houses. Girls danced to rhymes, chanting in unison with the steps. These games had been passed down through generations but started to wane in the 1880s. Old favourites were more resilient such as Oranges & Lemons, London Bridge and Here we go Round the Mulberry Bush. Marbles, peg-tops and skipping ropes appeared and a game called 'Tip-It' but that meant having a ball available. They were not cheap, and even marbles at 20 a penny were seldom bought. Hopscotch was popular too and 'dibs' played with small pebbles or stones. Boys tended to have their patch for amusements that included football, often using an empty tin can. Climbing trees was a must, ideally with a catapult handy.

Middle class life in London

The detached three-storey dwelling in Canonbury, Islington, was both grand and imposing and gave a good clue to a comfortable middle-class existence. Molly Hughes enjoyed a happy childhood there from 1870 -79. The spacious house allowed for a playroom cum study. The wallpaper was chosen by Molly and four brothers. The room included a table, ottoman for storage and a carpet. A large pile of bricks quickly became a railway station, a docks, a tower or even a fort with imagination, helped by two dozen foot soldiers. The red of the English contrasted with the blue of a dishevelled French army, showing the sign of wear with many wounded troops. Not much doubt about who would win these battles. A packing case became an impromptu shop. Ninepins and marbles completed a toy collection. Books were much in evidence from Scott, Dickens and Thackeray to George Eliot, Tennyson,

Bryon, Coleridge and even politics in the form of Disraeli. The eldest children would discuss them, sometimes with mother too, and often quoted extracts.

Father worked on the Stock Exchange. Molly said he "wavered between great affluence and poverty" though there appeared little evidence of deprivation during periods of supposed austerity. The oft-repeated family slogan was: "Blessed is he that expecteth nothing, for he shall not be disappointed."

An indulgence for Mother was a ride in Hyde Park in a Victoria, ironically a carriage of French origin. Henry, a red-faced coachman, would drive up, flick his whip and at 2 o'clock on the dot she and Molly would set off. Dressed to the nines, trotting along Rotten Row was a parade of fashion and elegance. Father sought sanctuary in cricket and a walk on along the Thames from Kew to Richmond, accompanied by the children. A popular venture for Molly was to travel with Mother on a horse-drawn London omnibus, sometimes to the West End for window-shopping in Regent Street, or to visit the fashionable furniture of Schoolbred's in Tottenham Court Road, or Peter Robinson, the department store, in Oxford Street. Shopping for Molly was exciting though the journey was not. Unable to see out of the tiny windows, the journey was boring and uncomfortable, jerking to frequent stops and jolting over stone-paved roads. The omnibus, lined with blue velvet, sat five each side in the carriage. Fares were handed to a conductor who made a stubby pencil mark on a yellow sheet of paper.

With the time-saving benefit of servants, including a cook, Molly was educated at home until she was 11, taught by Mother who completed her education at a 'finishing school' in Bath. Not only did Mother possess refined cultural habits of a Bath education but she was fluent in French and had a good grasp of Latin and Science and excellent command of English, but maths wasn't her forté. Most mornings, bible reading was followed by English grammar. Whilst Molly carried on with reading, writing and sewing, French poetry and rote learning, Mother sat at one end of the dining table to pursue her passion of water-colour painting.

Much talented, her artistic abilities were handed down. One son became a professional artist, Molly was proficient too and another, academically inclined, son was destined for Cambridge. On sunny, warm days Molly might take a walk with Mother or do sketching on Hampstead Heath. A regular visit was to the National Gallery and occasionally the Dudley and Grosvenor galleries nearby. Sometimes, Father might take the children for long country walks, travelling first to Barnet or Potters Bar by train.

Christmas Eve was special. The morning was a frenzied rush of rehearsals and last posting of cards and presents. Father came home early laden with parcels. The tea-table was decked with bonbons (crackers), sweets and surprise cakes with icing and threepenny bits inside. For once the usual bread and butter rule was set aside. Christmas Day followed the ritual of the service at St Paul's and, on return home, the opening of cards. Turkey and plum pudding for dinner, alias lunch, was followed by a comatose afternoon. The evening festivities always started with Father's punch-making, after which the children performed their well-rehearsed play.

Since time immemorial there had been a family code. One went to bed the moment asked, without argument or plea; every scrap on your plate was eaten and woe betides if you were rude to servants. Father had strict ideas on other aspects of upbringing as did many of his peers. Boys should go everywhere, and know everything, whilst girls should stay at home.

Literature for the Masses

A critic writing in the Quarterly Review complained, not about the proliferation of books for children, but the standard, accusing many writers of lacking ability. The child's view became accepted. Victorian classics echoed this from R. M. Ballantyne's *Coral Island* (1858), a story of three boys shipwrecked on a South Pacific Island and Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventure in Wonderland* (1865) to Edward Lear's *The Owl and The Pussycat* (1867). Later books such as Robert Louis Stevenson's *New Arabian Nights* (1882), highly popular *Treasure Island* (1883) and Mrs (Juliana) Ewing's *Daddy Darwin's Dovecot* (1884) continued the theme.

A special treat for children was illustrated books, especially in colour. These included the spooky, capricious and sometimes cruel Jacob and Wilhelm's *Grimm's Fairy Tales*, published in 1812 and reprinted and extended many times over the decades. Toy shops flourished with Hamley's Noah's Ark Toy Warehouse in High Holborn, an assortment of German toys in W. H. Cremer of Regent Street and John Lawson's Rocking Horse Shop, opened in Lancaster in 1837. Toys were often practical, ranging from dolls' houses for training little mothers to board games imparting historical facts, geography of the world and knowledge of the Bible. Steam engines and magic lanterns were extremely popular and so were model locomotives for those who could afford them.

Matthew Arnold coined the expression 'new journalism', distinguishing the popular press from the serious. The *Pall Mall Gazette*, associated with causes and sensational stories, led the way, calling for Britain to 'send Gordon to the Sudan' and 'strengthen the navy now.' A proprietor George Newnes took note of William Thomas Stead's own brand of investigative journalism, humble and less pretentious and designed to give "wholesome and harmless entertainment to crowds of hard-working people, craving for a little fun and excitement."

According to folklore, Newnes idly flicked through a newspaper when his gaze focused on a titillating article. Remarking to his wife, "Now that's what I call a tit-bit," Newnes was amazed there were not more like it. This was soon remedied for in the very next year, 1881, '*Tit-Bits*' hit the streets and took off almost instantly. Circulation rose even further with the attraction of special offers, competitions and hidden clues each day, leading regular readers to a well concealed treasure pot containing 500 sovereigns. This was a fortune for the lucky winner. Within a year circulation had soared to 700,000 and profits jumped again as nearly two and a half million readers bought the game Pigs in Clover for a two pence supplement.

Newnes was ready to expand into popular periodicals after teaming up with W. T. Stead to produce *Review of Reviews*, a digest of newspapers. He also pioneered a range of titles including *The Strand Magazine*, complete with Sherlock Holmes mysteries, *The Westminster Gazette*, *Navy and Army Illustrated*, *Country Life*, *Ladies Field* and *Wide-World Magazine*.

The most prominent of the dozens of journalists trained by Newnes was C. Arthur Pearson, later to become a powerful journalism tycoon after dominating Alfred Harmsworth had taken his cue from Newnes. The recipe was simple. The public in general was not interested in heavy news and society gossip, preferring instead inspiring, gritty and appealing stories to touch the heart and provoke mirth, as well as anger and irritation at ineptitude where it existed. Style was all important by keeping it sharp, enlivening content and avoiding heavy and verbose prose. Headlines said it all from the revelatory to sensational. Read it here and read it first.

Poverty, squalor and wretched living were vividly illustrated in the literary works of Elizabeth Gaskell, Charles Dickens, Friedrich Engels and a host of others. It was starkly portrayed in the art of Gustave Doré with graphic images of London low life as depicted in *Bluegate Fields* (1874) in the East End of London, in rural poverty with Frederick Walker's *The Vagrants* (1868) and in Sir Hubert von Herkomer's *On Strike* (1891). Literature, complemented by art, made a major contribution to social and cultural awareness. It also provoked debate on the constituents of a good quality of life, how to aspire to this and how to address dire poverty and extreme inequality, for those otherwise destined to remain poor.