

it is true, but a single gesture of charity—if the Gospels are to be believed—can reach the ends of the earth.

An Englishman's House

MAISIE WARD

After a war, a housing shortage. This is, of course, inevitable. There is no labour to spare for building when men are all fighting or making munitions, yet weddings are even more frequent than at other times and babies continue to be born. An increase in population is not met by any increase in dwellings. On the contrary, destruction is going on all the time. Throughout England in the last war bombers were razing homes to the ground or were making them uninhabitable. Repairs had practically ceased. Anyone looking for a house after the war found dry rot and woodworm rampant; found, too, that in empty houses broken windows had gone unrepaired, no painting had been done. Again and again, a young couple cheered by seeing a cheaply priced house were told by their surveyor that to make it habitable would cost more than the purchase price.

In 1946 we were looking for a flat in London: success was deemed almost impossible, but by great good luck—and a large premium—we got what we wanted in Kensington. All around us were empty houses, mostly damaged in the blitz, surrounded by delightful gardens run wild and with boards proclaiming that they were for sale. But soon we saw at night in houses with no gas, electricity or water, the faint light of candles moving from window to window: squatters had arrived from London's East End, claiming for themselves the right to a home. 'Communist influence', intoned the daily papers in solemn notes; but it did seem possible that these families, like ourselves, had only wanted a place to live in. They had neither the luck nor the cash to get it in any other way. This was my first sight of the 'Housing Problem' which now besets us, and in dealing with which very little can be said in defence of any post-war government.

Still under the rule of Labour, I saw the problem from a second angle, not in London but in the countryside. I had bought a farm, but there was no labourer's cottage. So my manager and his wife had to share the farm house, at first with three young men, later with a cowman and his family. Permits were refused to build a cottage, so I decided to buy and move a wooden hut that had recently housed forty soldiers and was being sold at an auction of all the no-longer-needed camp buildings. The camp was in Surrey; but my transport firm was not allowed to carry it beyond the county border; the farm was in Essex. By the time I had hired a second carrier and the building had been moved from one lorry to the other, this journey of some sixty miles had cost almost as much as the hut. But worse was to come. It took months to get permission for a small family to live where forty soldiers had managed pretty well. We had to make endless alterations and were finally told we must install a cesspool—a thing which neither the farm house nor any other house in the village possessed. Earth closets and Elsans are used, and are valued for the sake of the manure for farm and garden.

When, after many visits to the local Council, some requirements were withdrawn by them and the rest complied with by me, I was given a permit for one year. This was renewed yearly for more than ten years while I still owned the farm. I have now sold it, but in all probability the annual permission is still being granted by a clerk, most of whose time is wasted on similar matters. Before I sold, I was being told by the authorities that I really must build the cottage I had previously wanted—but by this time my available cash was spent. Not long afterwards after this I met in the United States a man who had emigrated there largely because he had built a house himself without all the requisite permits and had been forced by a (Conservative) Council to pull it down. He had to pay for the demolition. He had a magnificent war record. His wife had just had her first baby which died during these agitations. Small wonder he left us.

But already in 1946 I was becoming aware of yet another element in the housing problem. My farm manager was a Pole. We had on the farm at various dates Poles, Ukrainians and one Russian, besides Welsh lads inherited from the previous owner. The Poles came from camps where their existence was fairly miserable. My manager had owned his own farm in Poland; his wife had escaped with great difficulty while he was with our army in Italy. They could not return—and through them I realized what later became a more obvious fact. In proportion

to the size of the country, England has shown an immense generosity to refugees and immigrants. As long as work is abundant, this presses on the home population only in one way—through the shortage of houses. The unhappy Immigration Bill lately introduced failed utterly to face this fact. The government made in reality—whatever they called it—a racial distinction. Yet the Irishman can be as unpopular as the African with an Englishman who thinks he has taken the house that should be his. Other countries in the Commonwealth—Australia, New Zealand, Canada—ask, from British subjects, and foreigners alike, proof that an immigrant will have somewhere to live when he arrives. This Bill should only have insisted on a job for him to go to.

Immigration is a comparatively small item on the list of reasons for a housing shortage, but it looms large in the imagination, and I am convinced that a great part of what were called race riots were, in reality, based on the idea that West Indians and others were buying up and occupying houses that would otherwise have been available. When you are living eight in a room your nerves are not under very good control, and a different coloured skin makes it easier to identify a suspected supplanter. If Hungarians had purple, or Irishmen green, complexions, they, too, would provoke riots in areas where they occupy too many out of too few houses.

I hope that most of us would be strongly opposed to the reversal of England's tradition of hospitality, primarily within the Commonwealth, but also towards the oppressed in any country. But it is a poor idea of hospitality to invite guests to your country, and then have no homes for them to live in.

An immense programme of house building and a great deal of slum clearance (as far as possible in that order) was called for immediately after the war, but rising from our ruins were chiefly luxury cinemas, followed by vast blocks of offices, and it was only too painfully evident that any private and personal effort in any field would be heartily discouraged. I asked the leader of a self-build group, which did ultimately succeed in getting twenty-four houses erected for themselves and their families, what was the hardest part of his job. He answered, 'Keeping the group together while we waited endlessly for permits'.

If you are not politically minded, you always have a faint hope that a new government may be better than the old. And when the Conservatives came in in 1951 it looked for a short time as though they were going to tackle the housing problem seriously. I remember hearing in Paris a lecture of Abbé Pierre, who had recently begun his own

vast work for housing. He pointed out that in a given year (I think 1952 or '53) France had built only 75,000 houses, while England had put up 350,000 and Germany 500,000. I felt rather proud of ourselves and it took me quite a while to realize how short-lived this spurt was and also how fundamentally bad was our situation. In fact, it was only in 1957 that I fully woke up to a state of affairs which seems, even more strangely, to have hit the public at large only towards the end of 1960.

Part of the difficulty of seeing things clearly where London is concerned lies in the division of responsibility between the central authorities, the London County Council and the Borough Councils. Many of these Councils have done their uttermost and it is often a government credit squeeze that stops them from further building or lending. But certainly they seem to have lowered their sights in the last few years. The L.C.C. 'half-way house' that I visited in 1957 for families *en route* between slums and new homes was really impressive. Husband and wife were together there leading a family life with their children. Communal living was only practised by the sharing of a reasonable number of bathrooms, lavatories and kitchens, each family having its own stove and its own line for drying the washing. From that to Newington Lodge is a vast step down. Newington Lodge is a temporary place of refuge for homeless mothers and children. Men earning really high wages walk the streets searching vainly for *anything* to rent where they can make a home once more. For, though not quite so bad as the journalists pictured the place when not allowed to enter it, Newington Lodge has still the fundamental horror of wife and children taken from their husband and father who can only visit them for a few hours daily.

Conservatives proclaim that their aim is a property owning democracy, but as Belloc once showed with richly abundant illustrations, this is a theory unsupported by facts. The dice are heavily loaded in every field against the self-employed man, against the small business. A field of allotments brings in a far larger rent than the same field let to an individual farmer, the Post Office pays a lower interest than almost any other investment—and so it goes all along the line. In nothing was this more obvious than in the case of the Rent Act of 1957.

There was a strong case for some degree of decontrol. Rents had been pegged too low and left pegged too long. A good landlord had to pay for repairs from some other source, a floor of his house let at fifteen shillings a week covered a fraction of his expenses. This hit especially hard the smaller landlord, the man who really depended on

the tenant's rent to pay his own rates and mortgage as well as his repairs. But when the Rent Act was introduced it was precisely these smaller landlords who were *not* helped. Rents remained pegged on houses rated at below £40. I have witnessed the near despair of the small man who had just been able to buy his house and whose daily struggle to maintain and pay for it would have been enormously helped by the possibility of a really fair rent for his spare rooms.

Meanwhile, many a man whose house was above the £40 rate line had a glorious time for himself. I have never seen so complete and rounded an example of human greed battenning on human need. Tenants found their rents doubled overnight, evictions multiplied, for there was now *no* protection, nothing but the statutory month's notice for the vast majority of tenants.

If this had been only a part of the other boasted Conservative principle—the liberty of the individual—it might, though bad, have been more endurable. But the growing tyranny of the bureaucracy has remained. Crichel Down was one example that caused a noisy reaction, but the reaction had very little practical result. Such a job as helping people to get houses is beset at every step by bureaucratic roadblocks and pitfalls, making progress so difficult as to tempt one to abandon the struggle altogether.

This feeling was surely at the root of the public reaction to the revelations, lately made by the press, of the housing position today. Letters to the papers began:

‘Why doesn't the Government? . . .’

‘The Government should . . .’

‘The L.C.C. must . . .’

Followed a list of proposed panaceas, some interesting and practical, others largely chimerical. But when I wrote a letter to one of the weeklies, giving a brief sketch of what our own small society had accomplished in the last five years and urging that other such societies be formed, the paper in question had not, they said, space to print it. Like everybody else, editors have become accustomed to the idea that a government which constantly prevents its citizens from getting anything done has, in fact, made itself responsible for the running of their lives. Our sole business is felt to be jerking it into action of the right type—whether we do this by sitting on pavements, marching, striking or working to rule.

This attitude is rather specially prevalent among those with whom I have had most to do during the years of my work on housing, for they

are the people who are in almost daily contact with officialdom of one kind or another. One remark made by an inmate of Newington Lodge is worth recording and meditating over: 'Everything is in short supply here except advice'. I have known young mothers, especially in the country, immensely grateful for the health visitor's calls, patients in hospital who deeply appreciate the almoner's interest in what is going to happen to them next. But when it comes to two health visitors in one house of four families, and sundry other officials calling as well, one feels that there are altogether too many people whose office is to help by advice. Most of them are as good and kind as possible, but they are helpless in face of large issues. The hospital almoner can sometimes send the patient to a convalescent home, but cannot cure the basic trouble that she has no home to 'go home' to. The doctor can help a mother with drugs, but cannot prevent her family from being broken up. I had one such case in the other day: under notice to leave their home, the family were living on from day to day at the will of the landlord. They had been to the Citizens' Advice Bureau, they had appealed, but the time granted by the Court was over. Telling me her story, the mother broke off to say: 'I appear calm to you, but I'm under drugs now. My doctor gives them to me to help me through the day'.

An excellent series in *The Sunday Times* about Britain's slums made the point that living in a slum too long created a slum mentality. I would go further, for a slum mentality is just lackadaisical and messy, but not necessarily unbalanced. Reading about the vast numbers of actual Problem Families—indeed, meeting some of them—studying a little about the methods of cure, I suddenly realized that we are today creating Problem Families in vast numbers. Overcrowding, separation between husband and wife, parents and children, acute anxiety as to the future, form a fertile soil for the growth of abnormality.

On the other hand, normal human conditions can bring their own change. Give a family security, room to breathe, some responsibility, and it is almost certain they will shed the slum mentality fairly fast. But let us try to catch them before they become fully problem cases.

The question is sometimes asked—indeed, we ask it ourselves—is the tiny amount The Catholic Housing Aid Society has been able to achieve worth anything in the face of so vast a problem? To have helped something under two hundred families when many thousands are suffering? To have spent so much energy which could have been diverted to a campaign for forcing the government to do ten, twenty, one hundred times what we have done in the same period?

I am more convinced every day that the answer to the question is Yes, a thousand times Yes. For each one of us is his brother's keeper, and to have a brother to care for is an immensely personal job that cannot be forced upon officials who do not recognise the relationship. It is by dealing with men and women rather than merely with 'The Housing Problem' that we have learnt what can be done and what cannot—and also something about how to do it.

Our great exemplar, Abbé Pierre, believed in attacking the government, but he thought, as I do, that the longest way round was the shortest way home. Let us do *all* we can and more: our very doing will in the end prove catching. The paper *Faim et Soif*, run by Abbé Pierre himself and his Friends of Emmaus, the notices in church porches that I have read, show that groups are now working all over France. The idea is spreading into other countries and it is a part of the work of these groups to remind the governments how little they can do compared with all that needs doing, and to wring from the said government every ounce of available help.

But anyhow, as things are today, this housing work has got to be intensely personal. Buying a house was, fifty years ago, still regarded as a major adventure; most people just rented. Now there are literally no houses to rent except council houses for the occasional lucky one. The average young couple start in furnished rooms and then, not very literate, quite unused to doing business for themselves, are expected to handle all the complications involved in getting a mortgage, planning ahead for the rates, grasping such matters as the mysterious Schedule A, doing repairs in time, and many other problems. Also the basic wage of the man must be fairly high for a Building Society to grant a mortgage at all.

The Catholic Housing Aid Society began with the idea simply of helping these families to buy. Soon we discovered that there were many men who, from seasonal work, low basic income, age, number of children, etc., could not be helped in this way. We began to try the experiment of a family able to buy agreeing to take in a second family who would pay rent to them. One magnificent couple arranged their house to hold three families besides their own. Theirs is an inter-racial marriage and their tenants' are the same. Our part in these transactions was only to supplement the savings of the purchasing family, help them if desired with getting a Building Society or the local Council to give a mortgage and furnishing free legal help. More than twenty solicitors draw free for us at least one conveyance a year and have been endlessly

helpful over any snags that arise.

But presently we felt the need of helping more young families not ready yet to buy for themselves and such people as a deserted wife with children, a family whose circumstances might *never* admit of a mortgage or who were themselves unfitted to handle one. Sometimes we can get these on to a Council list, but this usually means years of waiting during which they must go somewhere.

Individually, our Committee experimented, and the four houses owned by members have taught us in the running of them invaluable lessons, some of which are worth noting. No kindness of heart must lead us to put a real Problem Family into such a house; they upset all the others. But the small day-to-day quarrels (usually over the children) heal easily enough and harmony can be on the whole preserved. Rules there must be: the share of each family must be defined in the use of the bathroom, the cleaning of the front steps, the care of the garden, etc. Also, it is very wise, while keeping rents low, to charge a little more than one needs for the running of the house and put it by as compulsory saving. When a family is ready to buy, they are very happy to get back anything from £50 to £100.

The real problem of these half-way houses—for such they actually are—is the growth of the families, which is much faster than their power to earn or to save. Two large rooms, with a cooker in one of them, does splendidly for a couple with two children. But by the time there are four, the family is cramped. And from the point of, say, eleven children in the house, everybody feels there are too many, and that the other parents have the too many!

However, these houses have certainly justified themselves and we are beginning to pass families on a little faster—this being the fourth year of this particular development. What is more important and interesting is that it is quite possible, while charging a low rent, to run the house without any loss. This is shown by the most wonderful thing in some ways that ever happened to us. A builder's labourer appeared one day and to the usual question of what could we do for him, he answered that he, on the contrary, wanted to do something for us. He had always been a wanderer, seeking in one Catholic Society after another some sort of fulfilment that he had not yet found. He had saved £800 and thought he would buy a house. He could get a large one and do a lot of decorating himself. He would house two families and the men would help him with the garden and the repairs. He had this all thought out—and he has made a success of it. Last time I saw him he told me

he was working sixteen hours a day and had never felt fitter. With purpose in his life now, he was a changed man and at some date, I fancy in his late fifties (I was too discreet to ask his exact age) life had begun again.

Since then I have often dangled before my well-to-do friends the idea that if each of them bought a house and let it out in floors, we should go a great way towards solving our problem.

For one outstanding question as to whether our small efforts are worthwhile was answered unconsciously in a letter to *The Times* the other day. The question, of course, is: When you house a family in the present shortage, you are only displacing another; what is needed is more houses. The letter to *The Times* pointed out how miserably the country is failing to use its existing resources: many houses stand empty either altogether or for most of the year, restrictions exist in most leases against sub-letting, most Councils and Building Societies forbid it in their mortgage terms. We may still wish to avoid Poland's method of dealing with a housing shortage where the owners of a house are allowed, like every other family, only so many square feet of space. But certainly we could use our existing square feet to far greater advantage than we do.

Houses of the size our Society is now buying—for we have begun to buy corporately as well as individually—are oldish, need adapting, need repairing. They were in use by one or, at most, by two small families. We can put into them as many as six. We certainly hope to do some building eventually if the government makes land available. Hitherto, it has seemed impossible, not so much to form a self-build group, as to find any land near enough to their work for men to establish their families there. A self-build group would indeed be our ideal, for a chief aim of our Society is to restore a sense of responsibility and initiative where this has been lost.

But what one comes to realize in quite a new way when constantly dealing with this problem is its actuality, its urgency. When a man is sitting in front of you whose wife lives thirty miles away from him, the children six miles away from *her*, who is himself lodging in a small room where he cannot even make a cup of tea, when his wages will not allow him, after paying all their separate living expenses, to take a bus to his work or to visit his family even weekly, you become burningly aware that *immediate* action is needed. He is, perhaps, followed by a woman who is living with husband and children in one room, allowed the use of the landlord's cooker only to make a hot breakfast

and must otherwise eat out, thus making saving impossible. And then, in turn, comes another under notice to leave even the miserable two rooms they are in, and who speaks shudderingly of parting from her husband and taking the children to Newington Lodge. When you have talked to a few of these people, the question ceases to be an academic one. You must rush to the rescue, even if it be by less than perfect means. Believe it or not, when you establish any of these families in a couple of large rooms with a low rent *and security*, they act as though you had installed them in Buckingham Palace.

Although I have had no takers on the proposition to my friends that they should buy houses themselves, there has been an immense generosity in response to the Society's appeals, especially the one launched in our last Annual Report and followed up nobly by the Catholic press. The Cardinal himself sent a generous cheque with a warm blessing on our work. Many priests have allowed us collections in their churches. Poor people have pressed their life savings on us and families who possess homes sent us cheques as a thanksgiving offering. Enough money has come in for us to buy two houses besides helping almost as many individual families in four months as we had hitherto helped in a year. And then came the near-miracle of a man, unknown to any of our Committee, who is buying a house in which we can put five families, which he wants us to organize and run!

Those interested in the work of the Catholic Housing Aid Society may write to the Secretary, c/o 33 Maiden Lane, London, W.C.2.

In the Mid-day Sun

DUNCAN CAMPBELL, O.P.

I have been asked to write some account of the Church's life in the West Indies, and how it is affected by changes taking place thick and fast in these islands. I say that I have been asked, because I would certainly not have tried to do so on my own initiative. I mean by this that I feel a priest is the one least able to see and judge the situation at such