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Invincible green suburbs, brave new towns

Social change and urban dispersal in postwar England

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Manchester University Press
Manchester and New York
Distributed exclusively in the USA by St. Martin's Press

This is discussed below, Chapter 5, pp. 132–4.

89 Broady, 'Coronation street parties', p. 240.

90 P. Mann 'The concept of neighbourliness', *American Journal of Sociology*, 60:2 (1954), p. 164.

91 H. Clark, 'Problems of the housing manager today', *Society of Housing Managers' Quarterly Bulletin*, 4:7 (1957), p. 4.

92 Mann, 'Concept of neighbourliness', pp. 166–7.

93 D. Chapman, *The Home and Social Status* (London, 1955), pp. 165–6.

94 Bracey, *Neighbours on New Estates*, pp. 58, 62.

95 Chapman, *Home and Social Status*, pp. 160–5. Also, see below, Chapter 5, pp. 133–4.

96 See also, for example, S. Fielding, P. Thompson and N. Tiratsoo, *'England Arise': The Labour Party and Popular Politics in 1940s Britain* (Manchester, 1995), pp. 104–6. See also Robert Roberts, *The Classic Slum: Salford Life in the First Quarter of the Twentieth Century* (Harmondsworth, 1983), pp. 13–31.

97 J. Bourke, *Working-Class Cultures in Britain, 1890–1960: Gender, Class and Ethncity* (London, 1994), p. 157.

98 Young and Willmott, *Family and Kinship*, p. 156.

99 G. D. Mitchell and T. Lupton, 'The Liverpool estate', in G. D. Mitchell, T. Lupton, M. W. Hodges and C. S. Smith, *Neighbourhood and Community: An Enquiry into Social Relationships on Housing Estates in Liverpool and Sheffield* (Liverpool, 1954), p. 49. This quote is referred to by Young and Willmott, *Family and Kinship*, p. 156.

100 Humphries and Taylor, *Making of Modern London*, p. 88.

101 P. Willmott and M. Young, *Family and Class in a London Suburb* (London, 1960), p. 132.

5

Suburban neurosis and new town blues

> We rolled into the new territory in old vans, our furniture tied on with string, or in ancient pantechnicons which looked altogether too large for our few pathetic bits brought from furnished rooms or cast off by relatives. The new territory was bright, clean, cold, and hostile.[1]

> Loneliness pressed on the women much harder than on the men.[2]

The previous chapters explored the positive experiences of moving out and settling in. This chapter focuses upon the problems encountered during and immediately after the move. For some, these became insurmountable. In their extreme form, these problems were bracketed under the terms 'suburban neurosis' and 'new town blues' by a number of medical experts, sociologists, social psychologists and neurologists. Suburban neurosis was a term originally coined by the general practitioner Dr Stephen Taylor, writing in the *Lancet* during the 1930s. As Jane Lewis and Barbara Brookes demonstrate, in their historical study of Peckham Health Centre, in South London, suburban neurosis referred to the psychological problems of the suburban and lower-middle-class 'Mrs Everywoman'. She had backache, loss of breath, weight loss, and complained of insomnia. These symptoms were blamed upon two major factors. First, isolation and loneliness caused by the absence of community and kin. Second, suburban women were presented as victims of 'false values', of the advertisement of labour-saving devices such as Hoovers, gas stoves and ready-made clothes which left them with too much time on their hands and inculcated a sense of worthlessness which undermined good health and welfare.[3]

This debate was revisited during the 1950s and afterwards. A number of studies of women settlers in new towns and on suburban new estates investigated the incidence and symptoms of neurosis. In 1958 the *Lancet* felt that the earlier interwar problems had to some extent been solved by the war, which, argued the journal, had engendered a new sense of pulling together and of community life among women who had worked on the Home Front.[4] But as the years since 1945 elapsed, and as 'great working-class populations were translated into new homes in country suburbs', the big new out-county estates of London, it argued, were 'partly repeating the story of the prewar speculative estates'. Male wage earners continued to commute back into the centres of employment, as working-class women apparently began to follow 'the obsolescent middle-class pattern of social isolation as a measure of respectability'.[5]

Problems of loneliness, of physical and psychological disorders, of spiritual poverty in conditions of increasing material well-being, underpinned the notion of 'suburban sadness'. This term was devised by David Reisman, and he also felt that women suffered most from it. He emphasised the 'captivity of the housewives tied down in their suburbs' by their young children, by the lack of a car, and by the absence of nearby parents to act as baby-sitters. These factors were consequences of the move away from the extended family and the heightened emphasis upon the materially enriched interior of the new suburban home. Reisman was 'struck by the eagerness of the housewives to talk to somebody', and noted that 'the visiting intellectual [finds] the lives of these women empty ...'.[6] Reisman was writing about American women, but his analysis, as illustrated in Chapter 1, was eagerly received by cultural critics in England. Many articles and novels have been written, television programmes made, and songs sung, about suburban sadness.[7]

This chapter assesses the major problems raised for female working-class migrants by the move to a new home. It is in three sections. First, it assesses the causes of the difficulties and crises which brought about the notions of suburban neurosis and new town blues. It shows that usually there was an interconnected pattern of problems and irritations. Second, it illustrates how such feelings stimulated some migrants to move on because they could not settle. Third, it evaluates the debates about the psychological problems of women in the suburbs and new towns. The general aim of this chapter is to demonstrate that the new estates and neighbourhoods were only

partly responsible for the problems encountered in the move, throwing into relief, as they did, wider processes in English society which made life difficult for women, especially poorer women.

The interconnected pattern of problems

In its 1967 overview of migration to new towns, expanded towns and peripheral suburban housing estates, the MHLG summarised the major problems of 'settling in' which had been faced by migrants since 1946. These were as follows. First, there were the social problems caused when wider family and older community networks were left behind. They could be compounded by problems with making friends or neighbours straight after the move out had been made. A second issue was the lack of services and amenities in the earliest phase of an estate. Many studies highlighted the initial difficulties which the lack of local services caused, although this was of lesser magnitude in new towns.[8] It was clear that new estates could not compete with older areas for variety of entertainment and amenities, a point which Young and Willmott had spared no effort in emphasising.[9] A third cause of difficulties was money, or, more accurately, the lack of it. These problems were connected, for many women migrants, with a fourth factor: the difficulties of mobility. A fifth cause of much anxiety, and one which was ignored by MHLG, was the social tone of the estate, something which was related to judgements about roughness and respectability in working-class life. The rough/respectable distinction was related to residential standards. These difficulties and hardships, it will be shown, were sometimes exacerbated by planning itself. The layout of some estates, and the poor design and construction of some houses, must also be considered as causes of discontent. Each issue will now be explored.

The increasing distance between movers and their relatives and the earlier community networks was, as shown in the previous chapters, mostly the concern of Young and Willmott. Other studies felt that the issue of 'missing mum' had been exaggerated.[10] The extent of this phenomenon is impossible to measure, yet some did suffer from it. For example, during H. E. Bracey's interview with a married couple, the husband was praising the new estate as 'lovely' when his wife interrupted 'No it's not!'. After eighteen months, she was still missing the nearness of her mother, and also of older friends and acquaintances. The only thing that was right about her new life was

the house itself, which she could not bring herself to leave.[11] 'Missing mum', however, was symptomatic of a wider problem of adjustment to new estates with no established family or friends close by. Josephine Klein argued that the young housewife on the new estate, 'coming from a close-knit network of the Bethnal Green type', was forced into loneliness once she had moved. Klein provided an example from Young and Willmott – which was similar to that of Bracey – of a husband who was 'congratulating himself' on the new house, garden, bathroom and television set when his wife interrupted: 'It's all right for you. What about the time I have to spend here on my own?'[12] With a similar emphasis to Young and Willmott, the writers Trevor Blackwell and Jeremy Seabrook placed this apparent emiseration at the crux of their analysis of what was wrong with the migration of the working classes to the suburbs. They have written evocatively of 'the inner emptiness of the young woman' in a new house in the deserted streets of the new estate, who 'felt the absence of mam and burst into tears for no reason'.[13]

Children, so often neglected in historical accounts of social change, were of course affected by the move too. They could sense or see that things were going wrong for their mothers after their family had moved in. During the mid-1970s, for example, eight-year-old Julie of Bletchley in Milton Keynes wrote of the tension between her parents caused by moving home: 'the people started to come here then they started to go back where they yust to live most homes are emtey mum wants to move but dad dus not want to move dad likes it here'.[14] This child's eye view of the new life in a new city hints at the marital problems which many migrants no doubt experienced.

As a number of social studies noted, once couples moved to a new town they were pushed more closely together in their new home, without long-standing neighbours or friends to give support to their new life.[15] People living in areas characterised by migration also observed this phenomenon. As Madame Morgana, a white witch in Wolverton, Milton Keynes, put it: 'There is great unrest with the overspills from London. We have a mixed community here, [there are] break-ups of marriages like it's going out of fashion. So people have to learn to find themselves ...'.[16] 'Learning to find themselves' was a consequence of the couple being pushed more closely together in their new home. It was further away from 'mum' and the informal support networks of their original extended family and community. As Elizabeth Bott argued, in her study of families in their social

networks, the kinship and community networks of a family that moved away from their old area to a new housing estate 'will rapidly become less connected and for a time at least husband and wife will develop a more joint relationship with each other'.[17] Josephine Klein made the same point.[18] Such greater reliance upon each other must have caused problems for some migrants. In 1975 a spokeswoman for a tenants' group, speaking on Anglia Television's documentary-and-debate programme on Milton Keynes, blamed many marriage break-ups upon the move to the city.[19] The interconnection between marital problems and the 'new town blues' cannot be ignored. Nor, however, can it be accurately measured. But it does require some historical context. Nationally, the Divorce Act of 1969 had resulted in a considerable rise in the divorce rate.[20] Milton Keynes must have shared in this. Moreover, as a new town Milton Keynes was composed of a higher proportion of younger people than the national average. Divorce statistics published by the Registrar General showed that whilst the divorce rate was increasing among all age groups during the 1970s, it has was higher amongst younger married couples than older couples.[21]

Marital problems were related to another important point. There was no substantive and permanent reconstruction of male identity, nor did working-class men revise their household roles to any significant degree, as a consequence of moving house. Clearly, the blissful domestic role convergence between the suburban 'new man' and 'the modern housewife' predicted by Mark Abrams in 1959, a view strongly endorsed by the sociologist Ferdynand Zweig in 1961, was failing to materialise.[22] Fiona Devine's 1980s study of affluent workers in Luton, therefore, illustrated how task-sharing in the home was also accompanied by the continuity of 'traditional' roles for men and women, and this included segregation in a number of child-rearing, housework and leisure activities.[23]

The move to a new house encapsulated wider changes occurring in the size and composition of the working-class family as the more displaced nuclear family grew to replace the more proximate extended family. These changes, which had begun between the wars,[24] became much more widespread in the 1950s and since, as both planned and voluntary dispersal widened distances between and within generations of family members. The network of the family itself was geographically stretched. Yet this was only one element, a spatial one, of the growing preference for smaller nuclear families.

Easier access to birth-control had ceased to become the almost exclusive monopoly of middle-class women, and it is a compelling point that at roughly the same time that this was occurring, suburban living was ceasing to become a mostly bourgeois monopoly. Increasing numbers of working-class women sought birth-control during the interwar period, a pursuit which was continued after 1945.[25]

In the initial separation from kin and friends, loneliness could undoubtedly result. The early problems of loneliness were also part cause and part effect of the difficulty of connecting with neighbours. Oral testimony lends support to Ruth Durant's view of Watling, that many people were intimidated by their position as strangers on a new estate, and reticent to meet people.[26] Looking back on the move to suburban new estates, those who have talked of the problems they encountered have tended to focus upon a lack of immediate neighbourliness in the early days. One woman who moved within Yorkshire during the 1960s remembered: 'At the time we first moved in everyone seemed to keep themselves to themselves. People come and go.' But she added, 'I don't think Windybank's a bad place to live, people rally round if someone needs help'.[27] Experiences differed, however. Writing of the demise of 'effortless sociability' in terraced streets of the North Lancashire towns of Barrow and Lancaster when compared with new estates there, Elizabeth Roberts showed how making new acquaintances could be a slow experience and, once it had happened, could be intrusive. It was sometimes difficult to avoid over-familiarity:

> Well to be quite honest it was the neighbour across the road. I had befriended her as she was lonely. I said 'If you get lonely just come across for a chat'. It turned out that she was in nearly as much as I was. I didn't want to offend her so I thought if I could get a little job just to get out of the way for a little while. She was coming across as soon as the kiddies went to school at nine and she didn't go until they came home in the afternoon.[28]

Lest the impression be given that entire generations of working-class families were distanced from kin or neighbouring for evermore, it is pertinent here to point out that initial problems were, for the most part, temporary. The majority of new migrants soon established a pattern of regular visiting with relatives.[29] In many cases, chain migration brought about a measure of spatial reconciliation between different generations of families, as was illustrated in Chapters 3 and 4.[30] And new neighbours and new social relationships were usually formed, sooner or later, as was illustrated in Chapter 4, and is more fully developed in Chapter 6.[31]

Beyond the family, more instrumental problems hampered adaptation to new estates and encouraged disenchantment, namely the inadequate provision of shops, recreational facilities, public transport and welfare services. Again, this was not simply a new problem of postwar dispersal. A number of historians have noted similar conditions on the large interwar estates around England's cities. In Catherine Hall's study of Birmingham, both private owner-occupied estates built to house the better-off industrial workers and lower-middle-class clerks, and municipal housing estates built for slum clearance, lacked many basic facilities. These shortcomings were greater on the interwar council estates. The lack of adequate shops, places of worship, libraries, meeting halls and parks caused the bus conductor to call out 'Siberia' when the bus reached its suburban terminus.[32] Furthermore, Wythenshawe, near Manchester, was 'notorious for its lack of the most basic facilities', with ill-situated and infrequent shops, its one pub, and single cinema.[33] Durant was scathing in her criticism of the local authorities for failing to ensure adequate social facilities on the Edgware estates.[34]

Postwar surveys came to similar conclusions. Hilda Jennings's study of Bristol noted that complaints about the lack of shops, telephones, street lighting and other services 'were frequent, and continued over a long period of time'.[35] Other studies made at different times in different peripheral projects came to similar conclusions.[36] The problem of women's mobility was also noted in the expanded and new towns. J. B. Cullingworth found that the new estates in Swindon could not compete with London for easy access to a wide variety of shops, parks, cinemas, theatres, schools and public transport, and this was a cause of extensive criticism.[37] A later study of Swindon made a similar point about the inadequacy of public transport. It made many women feel 'cut off'.[38] During the 1970s, work by the New Towns Study Unit, based at the Open University in Milton Keynes, showed that the greater level of self-containment of the first two phases of new towns when compared with the suburbs was gained in no small part at the expense of women, who became if anything less able to travel around and commute to work. Men had first ownership of the household car for commuting and leisure purposes, whereas women were less mobile because they were more

dependent on 'the slow growth of public transport' in new towns.[39]

Mobility cannot be viewed in isolation from other problems, which were usually financial. For example, the social psychologist Bernard Ineichen, in his study of the working-class new estate of 'Southover' in Bristol during the early part of the 1970s, found that lack of practical convenient access to shops and services for women in general was connected with money problems. The Bristol estate was comprised largely of affluent manual workers' families and some less-well-off households. The majority of houses in Southover were owner-occupied, but a 'substantial minority' were rented from the local authority and included the poorer families.[40] For the wives of poorer manual workers, especially, there was a 'strong association between neurotic symptoms and the admission of financial problems'.[41]

Interestingly, however, when Ineichen compared his findings for the suburban estate with a local authority central redevelopment area, he revealed relatively good mental and physical health among women in the former, and 'high level of neuroses' among wives in the latter. In central redevelopment areas problems were compounded by the behavioural problems of children in high flats, which were worse than those of children living in council terraced houses of three or four bedrooms in the outlying estate.[42] The presence of young children decreased a woman's ability to get out of the house alone or with friends. In both the central redevelopment area and the suburban estate that problem was exacerbated by the relative lack of female access to a car as the most convenient means of personal mobility, and to the telephone as a mechanism of instant communication over distance. Affluence, however, made a difference:

> The commuter families are much more mobile in their daily life and during their lifetime. All own at least one car, and 63 per cent have a telephone. In the central area, 50 per cent have a car and 6 per cent a telephone. Carless central area families find that contact with their relatives in the outer suburbs is particularly difficult.[43]

But families on outer estates who could afford neither cars nor telephones also had problems. In her participant observer's study of Wellington Road, Margaret Lassell noted the pathetic state of affairs for those who could not afford a car or a telephone: 'Joe had bought a car for twenty pounds, he said. It was outside the door, but broken down. They had had a telephone installed, but it was not working

because they had not paid the bill.'[44] Such findings demonstrated that lack of money sharpened the impact of problems brought about by the move to a working-class estate, as the mechanisms of instant communication across distances probably eased the transition. The inequality of access to telephones and, more recently, to electronic communications, notably computers, has been noted elsewhere.[45]

Other studies, made of different places at differing times, came to similar conclusions about financial hardship, and they chose to emphasise, from the weight of their evidence, how the consequences were felt more heavily by women. A mid-1950s study of a council estate some fifteen miles away from London, made by the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, noted that once families had moved out, the average daily fares to work increased by 8d. a day for most. Male workers tended to stay on in their former jobs, but 75 per cent of working housewives changed their employment in order to work locally.[46] At the South Oxhey estate in South Hertfordshire, Margot Jeffreys also found that the majority of women who had worked in London found employment nearer to the estate once they had moved. She also observed that many women who had not worked before now took jobs near to home, although there were few jobs actually on the estate. Some 40 per cent of married women were in employment a short while after moving, 'just under half of them in full-time work', the rest in part-time.[47] Different figures were supplied by June Norris for Birmingham during the early 1950s. There, 27 per cent of male heads of households had changed their jobs, but only 21 per cent of those wives who had worked throughout the period of transition had done the same. Furthermore, while six wives had given up work, ten had taken it up since the move. In all, 34 per cent of working women had made a major change in employment.[48] It is difficult to explain with total sureness these differences between London's out-county estates and Birmingham's suburban rings. Both groups were for the most part decanted from slums. Yet the Birmingham sample was closer to its older area than the London sample, and thus within easier reach than was the case for the London sample. The restrictions on women's mobility mentioned in this chapter may have discouraged London women from commuting to work as frequently as their husbands. Women earned less than men, of course, so regular longer-distance commuting costs might make such employment only marginally worthwhile, if at all.[49]

Difficulties with access to work could exacerbate economic prob-

lems at home. Norris noted that in some moves the loss of a wife's job due to mobility problems or other factors could hit the family exchequer hard. In general, this was one factor making for a considerable degree of anxiety about costs. The change to suburban living involved increased rents, dearer food at shops or in mobile vans, as these traders often held a near monopoly on new estates, and the expense of new furnishings for a new home.[50] A number of local council housing managers concurred with this and found that some of the unhappiest households suffered from a critical mass of higher rent, travel costs and difficulties.[51] In Milton Keynes, during the early 1970s, strongly similar difficulties continued to cause hardship, and they fell most heavily upon the families of unskilled workers. For example, almost 67 per cent of unskilled manual workers and just over 61 per cent of semi-skilled manual workers felt 'it's a struggle' to make ends meet, compared with 27 per cent of non-manual heads of household.[52]

The costs of making a new start in a new city required the expense of new furnishings for the house. Planners were aware of this and some emphasised the anxieties brought about by the financial commitments of the new house.[53] These were particularly expensive for those moving from furnished, rented accommodation, and this led to a continuation of the cycle of debt and credit, of 'making ends meet', which encouraged the use of hire purchase to underpin many of the material improvements gained by moving to a new house:

> We bought a table, four chairs – that was £48 – a stair carpet, we got that on HP – we paid £40 deposit – that cost £178. As you will understand, the time we had the flat in London we only had the one bedroom and when we were in there we had fitted wardrobes. But before we left London we bought some wardrobes and things second hand which cost us £35. We had to buy a single bed for the little girl. We bought a gas cooker, too.[54]

As Melanie Tebbutt has argued, hire purchase arrangements did in fact indicate a rising standard of living among the growing numbers of affluent working-class families.[55] The poorest were still the unemployed and casually employed unskilled manual workers living in the slums, unable to gain credit, and hence reliant upon informal self-help schemes and clubs which had evolved in the poorest areas during and since the Victorian years.

Yet it cannot be said that finding the money was always easy on

the new estates. On top of major items involving considerable sums, there were the daily and weekly costs, a factor emphasised by Deakin and Ungerson's study in Milton Keynes. Many worried about greater transport costs, higher rents and bills. One man expressed concern about the rent rise to £10.00: 'and I'm paying £8.00 a week for food, who's going to pay the electric bill?'.[56] Moreover, MKDC's stipulation that the provision of a house would only follow the full employment of the head of household often meant that many were forced to commute up to Milton Keynes to work for a while prior to moving in. This placed increased financial burdens on the new movers.[57] Whilst the costs of new furnishings and transportation affected both renters and owner-occupiers, it was those in the rented sector who exhibited higher levels of dissatisfaction, based on higher levels of financial difficulty. Many financial problems were subsumed under the term 'temporary arrangements': 26 per cent of all households who had moved to Milton Keynes since 1967 had required temporary accommodation; 16 per cent had been forced to commute on a temporary basis; 4 per cent had had to do both.[58] Moreover, employees from the professional and managerial categories, and those better-paid workers from the service occupations, were more likely to receive financial assistance from their employers in defraying their expenses. Those workers earning less than £50 per week, who needed such assistance most, were more likely to have to pay the costs of temporary arrangements themselves.[59]

Table 8 Most frequently mentioned practical problems facing arrival households in Milton Keynes in the early 1970s (percentages)

Poor public transport to shops	24
Local shops expensive and inadequate	18
Poor public transport to work	17
Lack of hospital	17
Mud and rubbish left over from construction	16
Poor workmanship of house	12

Source: MKDC, *Four Years On: The Milton Keynes Household Survey, 1973, Summary* (Milton Keynes, 1973), p. 23. Presumably these figures exceed 100 because some households mentioned more than one problem.

Hence problems with expenses made practical difficulties worse. MKDC found that once households had moved in, three-quarters of them encountered one or more of a variety of practical problems,

summed up in Table 8. Again, difficulties of access and mobility crystallised these issues. The physical layout and incomplete facilities of the immature city did not help. The inadequate public transport system impeded women's access to shops or the Meeting Places, and was compounded by many women's reluctance to use the redways. These innovative routes, free of cars and designed for pedestrians and cyclists only,[60] were perceived as dangerous and ill-lit by women.[61] Clearly, the poorer and less mobile were at the highest level of disadvantage and perceived risk.

Such problems persisted into the 1980s. A study of the new housing development of Thamesmead noted that it was 'at least two miles and a tedious bus journey away to the nearest shopping centre' and this was one factor among many which led to depression. So too did the increased costs of transport and the expensive rents.[62]

A significant cause of further dissatisfaction lay in the design of the house and its alleged lack of privacy. The Thamesmead study, moreover, reveals the expectations of the new house and the resulting disappointment if that house was out of kilter with the tenant's wishes. The aforementioned study of Bristol by Ineichen also emphasised the general dislike of three-storey houses; 73 per cent of women were critical of them and complained of 'too many stairs'.[63] At Thamesmead, the quasi-Corbusian designs of the houses and flats, which were intended to create a sort of 'St Tropez on Thames', were a failure in the eyes of its residents: 'the futurist design made Thamesmead a formidable and unfamiliar environment to the early residents'.[64]

Complaints about the houses were often related to the social tone of the new estate. The construction and design standards of the housing and the physical layout of the estate could combine with the rough/respectable continuum to produce considerable disquiet among many new arrivals. For example Leo Kuper's study of a 1950s Coventry housing estate explored the effects of housing design and the degree of separation between houses on the pattern of privacy and sociability. He found that most people aimed for a measure of sociability within an overriding concern for unqualified privacy. Tension between neighbours resulted when privacy was compromised, and it could be compromised in many ways. Thus, for example, noise transference between party walls in semi-detached and terraced houses was the cause of many complaints:

> It's noises from other people that distress us.
>
> You can even hear them use the pot, that's how bad it is.
>
> You sometimes hear them say rather private things as, for example, a man telling his wife that her feet are cold. It makes you feel that *you* must say private things in a whisper.[65]

In his report on Swindon, J. B. Cullingworth argued that in contrast to Young and Willmott's emphasis on unfriendliness in the Greenleigh survey, Londoners in Wiltshire 'complained of the difficulties of securing privacy: the neighbours were not aloof; on the contrary they were too "nosy"'.[66] Such concern for privacy extended to the garden, a point noted in the previous chapter.[67] As many as 80 per cent of migrants to Swindon felt their gardens were 'overlooked'.[68] It was not surprising that lack of privacy could cause annoyance, as many had left older, cramped and poorly constructed housing, often with little more than a back-yard. As noted in the previous chapter, the pursuit of privacy was an important stimulus to leave the traditional areas.[69]

Privacy was highly valued in itself, but it was also inextricably linked with an appraisal of the desirability or otherwise of associating with neighbours. That desirability depended to a considerable extent upon notions of respectability. Having one's privacy intruded upon was worse if the intruders were deemed to be unrespectable. It was also noted in the previous chapter that a further stimulus to move was the social ambition to increase the spatial distance from 'roughs', and when the roughs appeared on the new estate, tensions resulted. The BBC journalist James Tucker, for example, found during the mid-1960s that such tensions were rife in council estates. He concluded that 'some of the bitterest class denunciation of council house living comes from those who have one'.[70] Ineichen's study of Bristol found that a major general cause of insecurity and associated physical symptoms identified by Ineichen were status considerations. For the wives of affluent workers especially there was dissatisfaction at the perceived low social status of the estate. Poorer women, however, thought the area was too 'superior' and had felt more comfortable where they had lived previously.[71]

The sociologist Bernice Martin, discussing Muriel Spark's acerbic short story on working-class respectability ('You should have seen the mess'), has argued that perceived roughness and the fear of bad

behaviour was defined as a lack of respect for boundaries and hence privacy: 'cursed is he that removeth his neighbour's landmark'.[72] As Kuper found, the good neighbour was 'someone who keeps his weeds down', whilst a bad one 'lets his kids wander over your garden'.[73] Loud, ostensibly threatening behaviour, bad language, scruffy clothes and scruffy children symbolised a lack of 'control, order and respect for the proper boundaries' upon which demarcations of status and respectability were constructed.[74]

J. H. Nicholson, in his review of the survey literature on new communities in Britain, published in 1961, noted the feeling in some new towns – he gave the example of Basildon – that there was 'a low tone in part of the town', and resentment in overspill estates when so-called 'difficult' or 'problem' families were placed by the development corporation into 'respectable streets'. A study of 'difficult' families on 'difficult housing estates' argued that such families tended to be low-status, low-income and 'poor managers' of the household budget. They were 'almost always families with low occupational status' and displayed behaviour 'which society does not like and cannot ignore'.[75] These tensions were to some extent produced by local authority policies which attempted to disperse 'problem' or 'anti-social' families around the new housing developments. Nicholson further observed how, in such circumstances, there was a tendency for those with 'like standards and interests to group themselves together anyhow, wherever they are housed'.[76] Yet the policy alternative to mixing through spreading thinly was to concentrate difficult families into single estates. It was a strategy which could create estates with large numbers of such families, and thus hasten the onset of economic and social decline, which necessitated higher levels of social service intervention. It also fostered the local reputation of some housing developments as 'problem estates'.[77]

The role of the local newspapers, moreover, often worsened the problem. Press coverage amplified the negative reputation of some estates by repeatedly labelling them as rough and dangerous, fostering juvenile delinquency among dislocated slum children and a host of other unwelcome intrusions into established communities. This point was germane, for example, to Edgware in the 1930s, to South Oxhey and the new estates of Coventry during the 1950s, and to the Greater London overspill estate at Bletchley during the 1970s and since, which is now part of the Borough of Milton Keynes.[78] The Bletchley estate, for example, was attacked by the press almost as soon as it was built, as an unwanted intrusion into both quiet Bletchley and rural North Buckinghamshire. During the 1980s, Milton Keynes newspapers were still targeting the estate. The following is a selection of five alarmist headlines out of many more:

GRAFFITI SPELLS OUT MESSAGE OF DESPAIR (13.1.1982)

TEENAGE SEX IN ALLEYWAY HORROR (7.12.1984)

FEAR THAT ESTATE IS ON THE BRINK OF A RIOT (11.10.1985)

CALL FOR TIGHTER SECURITY AFTER SUICIDE (19.2.1987)

MUGGERS' HAVEN IS ATTACKED (6.6.1986)[79]

As a study by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation found, the stereotyping of an estate could lead to a sense of being personally slighted, and led many to feel unhappy at their estate's reputation. It also reinforced a sense of isolation or 'social exclusion' from mainstream and more affluent society. Moreover, living on an estate with a bad reputation made it difficult to get jobs, as employers tended to assume the worst of applicants. This exacerbated low self-esteem, added further hardship to the household economy and compounded the collective problems of the estate.[80] Many wished, therefore, to get out, and this has remained a motivation throughout the postwar years. During the 1960s, for example, one worried mother told James Tucker, 'we are all being branded', while another stated, 'It's not our fault we are here. [I] could never get a transfer say to somewhere else now.'[81]

Moving on again

It is feasible to argue, then, that problems of adaptation, whether caused by loneliness, financial constraints, difficulties in mobility, or disappointment at the housing and social tone of the area, could lead people to move on. It is also clear that the propensity to pack the bags once more varied considerably from suburb to suburb, and from new town to new town. Jennings found for the Bristol estates that as many as 31 per cent of the 407 families in her study were 'unsettled' and transferred or applied to transfer to other areas. The reasons she identified were loneliness experienced by women, separation from relatives, financial problems, more difficult access to the

place of employment of the householder and a widespread feeling that the estate was not good enough, hence applications for 'better' estates. A desire to move on was also related to aspirations for owner-occupation. Twenty-one families had moved within less than three years and half of those took privately owned accommodation.[82]

Cullingworth found that twenty-three of 161 families (14 per cent) wished to leave Swindon. The distance of the move from London – over sixty miles – had meant that separation from relatives was a hardship for some, especially the poorer, less mobile families. Financial problems were compounded by 'unreasonable' rents, and weekly hire purchase payments were high.[83] Yet only eleven of the twenty-four were 'adamant' about leaving, and the remainder saw their initial difficulties as 'teething troubles'.[84] Financial problems with rents may have been responsible for lapsed tenancies in Hemel Hempstead, noted in 1961, which amounted to 4–5 per cent of all tenancies there. Some 19 per cent of lapsed tenancies were those of professional people, who accounted for only 9 per cent of all tenancies. But almost 52 per cent of lapses were skilled and semi-skilled manual workers' households, an occupational stratum which held 58 per cent of all tenancies.[85] In Kirkby during the early 1960s, Rankin found that a third of residents wanted to move on, but he stressed design and construction factors, especially in flats, which were in turn linked to the opinion of the neighbours. Over half the households 'expressed some reservation about the "kinds of people" they preferred to mix with in Kirkby'.[86] Other studies were clear that it was harder to achieve the desired levels of quietness and personal private space in flats than in houses.[87]

It can be suggested that poorer people on rental estates had the most difficulty settling in because they had to face at least one of the problems given here. During the 1970s in Milton Keynes, MKDC ascertained a dissatisfaction rate of one in five arrival households. This, moreover, appeared 'greater on rent estates than on sale estates'. A small but significant minority, a little over one in twenty households, wanted to go back, and most, but by no means all, were from the rental estates.[88] Any decision to go back was not made lightly. Testimony is sparse for this area of experience, but we may read from the following quote that the gains made by the poor in a new city were welcomed, but they could be extremely fragile. An unemployed husband, who had recently applied for a job in the forthcoming department store in the as yet unfinished shopping building in Central Milton Keynes, told the magazine *Over 21* in 1978:

> we've been here eighteen months, and *in spite of all the problems here* it's better than what we had before we came. We feel we owe the place a chance. If the shopping centre is successful, Milton Keynes will really get on its feet. If it isn't ... well, then we'll start looking around elsewhere.[89]

This quote suggests that one problem could be compounded by others. It also hints at the disappointment felt at aspirations which might yet be denied. In similar cases, therefore, any decision to move was probably made in misery. It was also, sometimes, made in haste, as problems mounted up and became too much. An examination of some findings for Milton Keynes demonstrates the continuity of the types of problems experienced by migrants, despite the arrivals programme of MKDC. This was a mechanism for arrivals workers to provide vital information for newcomers and to encourage people to come together within their estates. In the early 1970s an arrivals worker for MKDC wrote a piece on the phenomenon of 'doing a moonlight'. This was a secretive, nocturnal flight away from Milton Keynes back to the place of departure, or on to a new destination. The seemingly romantic and exciting image of 'doing a moonlight' obscured the usually tragic or difficult circumstances which caused people to leave secretly and in haste.[90] A number of local causes were identified for the reported problems of adaptation experienced by women, problems which stimulated them to move on. First was the often bleak environment of the new estate. In Milton Keynes in 1975, an assistant housing manager wrote in similar terms to earlier surveys of life on new estates. As well as a lack of leisure and social facilities, 'outside their back door is a long stretch of open space with no view, no neighbours, nothing – they're isolated'. Then, of course, there were oppressive financial difficulties. A combination of such factors clearly dissipated the hopes of the new migrants.[91]

A number of important issues must be raised here, however. Were these problems specific to migrants to the suburbs and new and expanded towns, or were they general to the experience of internal migration – of moving house – in any circumstances, for example from village to village or major city centre to major city centre? In other words, were there wider 'transitional' difficulties?

'Transitional neurosis', suburban neurosis and new town blues

This section will demonstrate that, once all the evidence was in, it was unfair to blame the suburbs and the new towns for a specifically suburban or new town malaise. Hence, for instance, the allegedly higher incidence of 'nerves' on north London out-county estates in comparison with the national average was noted by the *Lancet* in the 1950s. But the *Lancet* qualified that view with two considerations: the problem got better over time; and, significantly, rehousing for many women and men was in itself partly determined by the possession of a medical certificate.[92]

Three studies, which were begun at the turn of the 1950s and 1960s, and published in 1966, attempted to discern whether neurotic behaviour was a problem caused by moving to the suburbs or a symptom that perhaps reflected *a priori* problems which the move had exposed. In Sheffield the problems of an 'uprooted' working-class population rehoused from a slum to a big new estate appeared to demonstrate that moving house was no more a cause of complaints such as loneliness, neglect and boredom than other known causes, such as 'poverty, wealth, idleness, overwork, lack of love, excess of love' and so on. The study did concede, however, that the obliteration of the home and of familiar slum streets, and the move away to a less well known or unknown area, bore strong similarities to the phenomenon reported for relocated slum dwellers in the 1930s, termed 'demolition melancholia'.[93] Demolition melancholia had been defined in 1939 as the sense of dislocation and loss which resulted from the destruction of well known areas and removal from them. It ranged from minor apprehension through to 'a tendency to seize upon a slight incident as symbolical of a dire calamity'.[94]

In Crawley New Town, by the late 1950s, hospital psychiatrists were investigating the nature of 'Crawley neurosis', an 'emotional disturbance' allegedly caused by the difficulties of adjusting to life after London. This was one study noticeable for the involvement of a woman psychiatric worker. Some 80 per cent of Crawley's new inhabitants were from the capital. Crawley was a markedly young town comprised mostly of young couples, the majority of whom were raising children.[95] This study divided its subjects into patients and controls, the former being those who were undergoing treatment at the town's out-patients' clinic. Three-quarters of both male patients and controls preferred Crawley to their previous London place of residence, compared to less than two-thirds of women patients and controls. Hence the women patients were more likely to express dissatisfaction with Crawley and manifested higher degrees of loneliness: 40 per cent of women patients complained of boredom and other symptoms of anti-social behaviour such as indifference or a sense of superiority to their neighbours. In qualification, though, the authors could not and therefore would not state whether these were consequences of moving house generally or of the specific move to Crawley.[96] A later study of a psychiatric practice in the same new town of Crawley, published in 1967, came to the uncomfortable conclusion that the problem of 'new town blues' and also of the blues in established towns was felt most miserably by women of childbearing age, 44 per cent of whom were diagnosed as neurotic in Crawley, as opposed to 43 per cent in a compared old town.[97]

A study of Harlow New Town attempted to discover whether there was any evidence to support a view that neighbourhood provision there lessened the incidence of transitional neuroses when compared with the move to the less well planned suburbs. Harlow, like Crawley, was a predominantly young town, a veritable 'pram town', whose average age was twenty-seven years. The study concluded that any neurotic symptoms manifested by the newcomers could not accurately be ascribed to the new town, but to the general experience of moving house and district. It found that the peak prevalence of neurosis was to be found in menopausal women aged between forty-five and fifty-four years. Any apparent high levels of neurosis in women of younger age groups in the new towns could be explained by their prevalence in the local population. The study did not find evidence of a specifically 'suburban' or 'new town' neurosis, and argued that the new towns manifested lower levels of reported 'nerves' than in less well designed and planned suburban developments.[98] In Croydon, a comparative study of the mental health of the populations in an established part of town and in a new estate found that there was no difference at all between the two areas.[99]

The emphasis upon existing factors which predisposed women to suburban neurosis or the new town blues is an important one. A review of the literature on suburban neurosis and new town blues concluded that both these alleged conditions had little to do with moving to suburbs or new towns. There was, it argued, 'no significant difference in the prevalence of neurotic ill-health under widely differing conditions of urban life'.[100] Another study concluded that

rather than a concentration upon the notion of suburban neurosis, a more apposite focus for debate might be 'transitional neurosis'.[101] The difficulty of specifically blaming new town or suburban environments as distinct from the general phenomenon of moving home was noted by five of the psychological studies discussed here.[102] Jeffreys's study came to similar conclusions, observing that women in the South Oxhey council estate 'showed no definite symptoms of a higher incidence of a psycho-neurotic illness than women of the same age elsewhere'.[103] Perhaps the most telling synopsis of all was that of Dr Stephen Taylor and his colleague Sidney Chave, in their study of mental health in 'newtown':

> We found no real evidence of what one of us (Taylor) twenty five years ago described as 'the suburban neurosis', nor of what has more recently been described as 'new town blues'. [Some] people do indeed show loneliness, boredom, discontent with environment and worries, particularly over money. It is easy enough for enterprising enquirers to find such people, and to attribute these symptoms to the new town. But a similar group of similar size can be found in any community, new or old, if it is sought.[104]

The discovery that new towns were not to blame for the blues was, not surprisingly, seized upon by the advocates of new towns, and of dispersal policies in general.[105]

There were certainly problems, then, for women on new estates. But there were deeper causes of symptoms which became manifest in the move. An important historical issue may be raised here. In what ways is it possible, with no archive of detailed retrospective cradle-to-grave life histories of suburban migrants, to explore the predisposing factors – personal factors – and their relationship to transitional neurosis? One possible solution is provided by fiction. To argue that, however, does not mean we have to treat uncritically the view that in fiction we find 'real history'.[106] But the literary imagination and empathy can open up areas of experience at which other sources merely hint. A contemporary historian has argued that fictive *genres* 'can give an insight into the manners, mores and ways of thinking of a particular period' and they may 'stimulate imaginative insight into a period and so be of help to the contemporary historian'.[107] That is true, but it is a limited view of literature. Whilst many historians might balk at the problems of verification with literature, few would deny that fiction provides 'imaginative insights'

not simply into a particular period, but also into areas of personal feelings and experiences where the empirical archive is lacking. And that is pertinent not just to the novel, but also to screenplays.

In 1965, by which time the media debate about new town blues was well known, the BBC launched *The Newcomers*, a television series which became popular and was screened regularly until 1969. The newcomers were the Cooper family from London, decanted to the expanded town of 'Angleton'. It appears that they moved in accordance with the Industrial Selection Scheme. The reactions and experiences of Mrs Cooper must have rung true for many women who encountered misgivings at the thought of the move:

> Ellis Cooper, shop superintendent of a firm making components for computers, tells his wife Vivienne that his factory is moving to a sleepy country town in East Anglia and he has been offered promotion to works manager. Vivienne, city born and bred, a modern woman, marriage counsellor, content with her home and social circle, quails ...[108]

The Coopers had to 'grapple in a dazed way' when preparing to move, and once they had arrived in Angleton they faced transitional difficulties in an alien environment. But they also enjoyed the compensations of the nearby countryside and the nice new home.[109] According to one historian of television: 'All the pains and pleasures of living on a new housing estate were brought into focus, from the loneliness and boredom that such existence brings, to comprehending the local, rural lifestyle'.[110] Or as the *Radio Times* put it in 1965, for the 'strangers on new housing estates there is loneliness, fear and boredom' but also new friends and new social opportunities, 'copious material for the twice weekly serial on Tuesday and Fridays'.[111]

The Newcomers worked within the traditions of documentary realism and soap opera fiction. The series aimed to reflect in dramatic form the everyday experiences of newcomers to new towns, and to be entertaining enough to be accessible to a television audience which would tune in regularly. The written word in novels worked within very different conventions, but the concern for people's feelings within the context of their daily lives was strongly similar to that of television playwrights. There is, as was elaborated upon in the first chapter, a rich seam of anti-suburban literature, much of it risible and superficial in its mockery of its subject.[112] With this in mind, two

(male) writers deserve to be discussed for their treatment of suburban misery and new town claustrophobia, namely Keith Waterhouse and Angus Wilson.

Waterhouse is a journalist, playwright and novelist. His autobiography tells us that after a childhood and an early marriage spent in Yorkshire, he moved to Harlow new town *en route* to his eventual destination, London. His experience in Harlow and his perception of the new town were quite favourable. On visiting Harlow, Waterhouse felt it would be a good place for his children to grow up.[113] A similar route from northern town to southern new town was followed by Waterhouse's most famous fictional creation, Billy Liar, in two novels which deserve to be treated together. In the first, Billy lived a life of unfulfilled dreams in his parent's semi 'Hill Crest' in the suburbs of Stradhoughton during the later 1950s. His way out of a stultifying suburbia was through dreaming. Billy also met girls from 'cold new houses' in a dance hall where the new estate petered out onto the moors. He dreamed of London – and presumably of a properly vital metropolitan life – but never made it. Instead of eloping to the Metropolis with Liz, whom he most fancied, he contrived to miss the train, and walked back home to his other girlfriend, 'the Witch', and to subtopia.[114] In the trans-textual step from the novel to the feature film of 1963, the pathetic farce of the railway station was given extra bathos. Billy, played by Tom Courtney, also missed the train to London which Liz, played by Julie Christie, had already boarded.[115]

The train station as a terminus of Billy's dreams represented, within English fiction feature film, the closing-off of an obvious and potential escape route from suburbia. Those very points of connection which had once made Victorian suburban life possible had been reinterpreted as the first point of escape from the suburbs. The 1945 film *Brief Encounter*, for example, is best described by Leslie Halliwell's unromantic film criticism:

> A suburban housewife on her weekly shopping visits develops a love affair with a local doctor but he gets a job and they agree not to see each other again. [Even] those bored by the theme must be riveted by the treatment, especially the use of a dismal railway station and its trains.[116]

In 1966, within a different film medium, Ken Loach's documentary drama *Cathy Come Home* ended tragically in a station, with the destruction of Cathy's family, and of her motherhood, when the officials from the Social Services forcefully removed her children from her, leaving her homeless and weeping on a station bench.[117] Cathy had travelled from the comfortable parental home, to new council flat, to dilapidated terraced house, to squat, to local authority hostel, and to no home at all, a bitter reversal of the life path from slum to new house which many millions of working-class women had pursued.

To return to Billy Liar: a worse fate awaited Billy than the disappointed dreams of his existence in Stradhoughton. In the sequel novel, *Billy Liar on the Moon*, first published in 1975, Waterhouse placed his anti-hero in 'the concrete and motor way hell' of Shepford New Town.[118] Just off the M1, Shepford was portrayed as a bleak, soulless, alien place. Billy sometimes reflects miserably that he lives in 'a suburb of the moon'. He is unhappily married to Jeanette, and having an affair with Helen, who is very much a novelist's stereotype of the promiscuous suburban woman. His mother, who like Jeanette has a secondary role to Billy, has moved to Shepford with them and is unhappy there. Billy, Jeanette and his mother live in a council flat, but they want, eventually, to move to a private house which Billy sardonically labels 'Mortgagedene'. Billy is also unhappy, working in the town council offices with selfish, ineffectual and unprepossessing people like himself. He wants to break free with his mistress Helen and leave Shepford. So, after deciding he is missing something in life, he decides unequivocally to leave Jeanette and run away with Helen. The novel draws to its conclusion, however, with Billy realising the futility of his dreaming and the reality of his life in Shepford. The narrative ends with his wife Jeanette phoning him about golf clubs from their new mortgaged bungalow. It is possible to summarise, therefore, that Billy's contempt for Stradhoughton and Shepford reflected his slowly painful journey from immature anomie into maturity. At the end of the novel, Billy reflects how he had 'grown up'.[119] On another level, it simply made for hilarious reading.

The Penguin edition of Angus Wilson's *Late Call*, first published in 1964, was unoriginal and inaccurate in describing the Midlands new town of Carshall as a 'concrete jungle'.[120] New towns were rarely concrete jungles: the dangerous, high-density and untamed urban wilderness which this implies was an inappropriate blurb-writer's shorthand for social novels about life in new towns. The negativity of the imagery, moreover, persisted. In a rather narrow interpretation of Wilson's novel, the literary critic Bernard Bergonzi

argued that Wilson's aim was to explore 'the spiritual desolation of life in a new town in the Midlands, where the gimmickry of affluence has become a way of life rather than an aid to living'.[121] Unlike Waterhouse's novels, the central character of *Late Call* is an elderly woman, Sylvia Calvert. She has just retired as a seaside hotel manageress, and moves with her elderly and ailing husband Arthur to live with her recently bereaved son Harold and his family in the new town.

Harold clearly personifies aspects of new town life and culture which Wilson hated as social engineering. He is living to the progressive ideology of the new town 'experiment' which he also wills others to live to. He is presented as inflexible and doctrinaire, even more rigid than the development corporation's representative at cultural events, Jock Parsons. He and his family is, moreover, a suburban family in a new town context. They had moved from a house near the centre of Carshall to a larger ranch-style house on the outskirts called 'The Sycamores'. The Sycamores contained all mod cons, and Sylvia and her husband found it difficult, embarrassing and often time-wasting to get to grips with these so-called labour-saving devices.

Writers who are in sympathy with the new towns movement have been defensive about *Late Call*, yet they need not be.[122] A reading of the book which emphasised Carshall as a subtopia for the superannuated would obscure some important insights, and thus some alternative interpretations, about new town life and the so-called problems of neurosis. Sylvia Calvert took with her the depredations of her marriage and the personal legacy of her unhappy childhood. She was, moreover, treated by her son in a 'progressive' manner which, whilst fulfilling the writer Wilson's desire to satirise the pretensions of 'sixties' radicals, also ignored the long-established needs and problems of his character of Sylvia. Hence, the aforementioned agreement among many socio-psychologists of the suburbs and new towns, that the causes of neuroses went deeper than the social determinism of the new towns or of suburban life, and stemmed from individual as well as environmental causes, was inadvertently confirmed by Wilson. This was painfully evident in the way he described Sylvia's reaction to the play *Look Back in Anger*.[123] Most importantly of all, 'late call' is a metaphor for the late morning calls Sylvia had enjoyed as a hotel manageress, when she would lay on for a few precious moments in bed before work. She finds a belated new life for herself through her own self-realisation, by making new friends and by becoming active in the social life of the new town. In *The Newcomers*, too, Vivienne Cooper took the initiative in calling for a new community centre, a children's playground, a Citizen's Advice Bureau and better medical facilities.[124] It is worth emphasising, then, that Sylvia Calvert, Vivienne Cooper, Billy Liar and his wife Jeanette, in common with the vast majority of those who moved out to a new town after 1945, did not go back.[125]

Finally, both Waterhouse and Wilson presented women in the background of politics and planning in the new towns. This was not wholly true. A number of women had occupied key positions in the postwar movement for new towns, notably, for example, Evelyn Denington, the chair of Stevenage Development Corporation and a former chair of the LCC's New and Expanding Town's Committee, Mary Tabor, the Housing Manager in Stevenage from 1951, Evelyn Jones at Redditch, and Elizabeth Mitchell, a pioneer of Scottish new towns. One chapter in the *Town and Country Planning* journal's special issue on new towns, published in 1968, was called 'The ladies join in'. It gave space to female planners, notably Evelyn Denington, Elizabeth Mitchell and two women residents, one from Stevenage and one from Crawley.[126] The idea of 'ladies joining in' was unwitting testimony to the fact that what has been termed 'second wave feminism' was in its earliest stages, in social politics generally, and within the context of planning theory in particular, and had not yet begun to influence the language and to question the preconceptions of a predominantly male profession.[127]

To be fair, some male planners, notably L. E. White, who was active in the Community Associations movement, which had a strong presence on new estates, argued in *Town and Country Planning* that 'housewives, whose influence has transformed the kitchen, should now turn their attention to bettering the neighbourhood and the town'.[128] It is doubtful, however, that any women beyond the readership of that professional journal had ever heard of him.

Hence Clara Greed has argued that, in general, planning has relegated women to second-class citizens both in its view of women and in terms of their problems of mobility as consumers of services. It was, after all, women who spent most of their time on the estate, especially married women with children, the majority of whom stayed at home for most of the day, took the children to school and did the shopping. Many were inconvenienced by the spatial design of

estates, by the relative lack of mobility due to male ownership of motor cars, and most were economically dependent upon their husbands.[129] However, planners prescribed a largely marginal and consultative role to women's organisations, and only then within institutional contexts laid down from above. Some annual reports of development corporations, for example, praise the role of the Women's Advisory Committees in new towns, for their recommendations on improved heating or kitchen design, for example.[130] Yet, as any investigation into the annual reports for most new towns will show, little or no mention of women's groups tended to be the norm. This was one-sided. Women's participation, both organised and informal, on the new estates and in new and expanded towns was tangible and growing in the postwar years, and is discussed in the following chapter.[131]

Conclusion

By the mid-1960s, the debate about suburban neurosis and the new town blues had moved between professional annals, popular fiction, the television and the daily newspapers. In so doing that debate widened, and there is little doubt that planners were forced to take notice of it. Thus the MHLG felt that the popular impact of these depictions of suburban and new town life had encouraged a rather critical and unfair perception of the new towns which was articulated in a new and popular lexicon of urban pathology:

> 'new town blues', 'suburban neurosis', 'social ghettos', 'prairie planning', 'cultural deserts', and the like. These melodramatic terms are frequently exaggerations; certainly problems do exist, but where the necessary thought and social provision has been made, they can be dealt with before they become serious.[132]

The idea that suburban neurosis or new town blues were 'melodramatic' probably reflected the popular influence of *The Newcomers*. Proponents of new towns and the MHLG felt that the phrase 'new town blues' was a convenient catch-phrase for social critics of new development.[133] Yet it would be inaccurate to argue that the MHLG, or the planning profession generally, were guilty of any sustained complacency about the problems of urban dispersal policies. Development corporations did maintain a surveillance to highlight the problems of those in need. It must be noted, however, that the institutional commitment to monitoring for dysfunctional symptoms probably varied with the different commitment to social development from town to town.[134]

Within central government, moreover, there was little point in pretending everything was running smoothly when it was not, as this would have stored up problems for the future, and destroyed the intentions and reputation of the Ministry and its policies for population dispersal. The MHLG's survey of facilities in expanded towns, *The First Hundred Families*, published in 1965, argued that adequate services and facilities in the earliest days of migration and settlement were crucial to adaptation. It further argued that arrivals workers and the social development programmes had tended to solve the 'inevitable problems which arise in the first few months after moving ...'.[135] This was not an inaccurate assessment. Looking back on the postwar slum clearance programmes, one sociologist agreed that 'the break-up of working-class communities [has] no more than a minor and short term effect on people'.[136] Even Peter Willmott came to such conclusions. As a singular social investigator – in contrast with his partnership with Michael Young – Willmott's study of Dagenham found that the nature of working-class life had evolved with the maturation of the estate, and that many, but not all, of the social and cultural characteristics of pre-suburban working-class life were to be found in Dagenham. He further pointed out that many of the more pessimistic positions taken on working-class dispersal stemmed from studies which had been undertaken very early on in the life of an estate which was rapidly filling with very recent movers. The temporary nature of many of the early problems had not been sufficiently emphasised.[137]

A historical perspective on the dispersal phenomenon, moreover, manifests the truth in Norman Dennis's observation that 'housing estates represent that exaggerated result of processes that are common to our society'.[138] Such processes included the changes within family life, the demise of the spatially proximate extended family and the rise of the nuclear family. The smaller size of families as a consequence of increased demand for contraception was certainly concomitant with dispersal, but not totally restricted to it.[139] Dennis's observation may be applied to the planning process: poor provision and the 'lack of integration of other supporting land uses and amenities' do appear to have affected women more than men.[140]

That final point reminds us that the social experience of urban

dispersal should be interpreted as a learning process. In the official and popular pursuit of improved housing and residential environments, mistakes were made from above, and that led to hardships below. Advocates of new and expanded towns liked to point to what they saw as the superior provision of services in new and expanded towns when compared to council estates as proof that the new towns were better at helping people to settle in.[141] Yet as this chapter has shown, there were often difficulties for migrants to the new and expanded towns, and some planners felt that many aspects of planned provision might have been handled more effectively.[142] A final conclusion must be, therefore, that although the case for suburban neurosis and new town blues is largely not proven, it would be impossible to deny, from the vantage point of the later 1990s, that some neighbourhood units and new estates could have been better built, and that supporting facilities were lacking. This made life unnecessarily difficult for many migrants, given the personal and financial problems which many carried with them. At a time of continuing dispersal from the city and town centres to suburbs and new towns,[143] the lessons from their earlier experiences should not be forgotten.

Notes

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3 J. Lewis and B. Brookes, 'A reassessment of the work of the Peckham Health Centre, 1926–1951', *Milbank Memorial Quarterly; Health and Society*, 61:2 (1983), pp. 330–2; see also A. A. Jackson, *Semi Detached London: Suburban Development, Life and Transport, 1900–1939* (London, 1991), pp. 137–8.
4 *Lancet*, 'Suburban neurosis up to date', I, 18 January 1958, p. 146.
5 Ibid., p. 146.
6 D. Reisman, 'The suburban sadness', in W. M. Dobriner (ed.), *The Suburban Community* (New York, 1958), p. 388.
7 See above, Chapter 1, pp. 11–13.
8 Ministry of Housing and Local Government (MHLG), *The Needs of New Communities: A Report on Social Provision in New and Expanding Communities* (London, 1967), p. 21–3.
9 M. Young and P. Willmott, *Family and Kinship in East London* (London, 1979), pp. 142–4, 167, for example.

10 See above, Chapter 3, p. 79.
11 H. E. Bracey, *Neighbours on New Estates and Subdivisions in England and the USA* (London, 1964), p. 63.
12 J. Klein, *Samples From English Cultures* (London, 1965), I, p. 226.
13 T. Blackwell and J. Seabrook, *A World Still to Win: The Reconstruction of the Postwar Working Class* (London, 1985), p. 110.
14 The People's Press, *This Place Has Its Ups and Downs, or Kids Could Have Done It Better* (Milton Keynes, 1977). This book has no page numbers.
15 E. Bott, *Family and Social Network: Roles, Norms and External Relationships in Ordinary Urban Families* (London, 1968), pp. 109–10; H. Gavron, *The Captive Wife: Conflicts of Housebound Mothers* (London, 1983), pp. xix–xxiv; M. Young and P. Willmott, *The Symmetrical Family: A Study of Work and Leisure in the London Region* (London, 1973), pp. 278–9.
16 J. Turner and B. Jardine, *Pioneer Tales: A New Life in Milton Keynes* (Milton Keynes, 1985), p. 76.
17 Bott, *Family and Social Network*, p. 109.
18 Klein, *Samples From English Cultures*, p. 227.
19 Anglia Television programme, originally transmitted December 1975. This is now available on video at the Living Archive Project, Wolverton, Milton Keynes.
20 J. Lewis, *Women in Britain Since 1945* (Oxford, 1993), pp. 51–6.
21 In 1976, the *Milton Keynes Household Survey* found that 56 per cent of employed workers in Milton Keynes were aged between twenty and thirty-nine years of age, compared with 41 per cent nationally: MKDC, *Seven Years On: Household Survey, 1976; Technical Report 3: Employment* (Milton Keynes, 1976), p. 6. On postwar divorce rates into the 1970s generally, and their age breakdown, see R. Fletcher, *The Family and Marriage in Modern Britain* (Harmondsworth, 1974), pp. 146–50.
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