



1904

Mapping Manchester's slums

Thomas Marr's dramatic map charts the legacy of a century of house building in the city. It traces out roughly concentric rings: at the centre, a large commercial core; next, a collar consisting of slums, back-to-backs and 'converted' back-to-backs, interspersed with industry; further out is a ring of earlier and later bye-law housing; and finally, suburban houses with gardens. It largely reflects the age of housing, but this is complicated by an overlay of sectors largely determined by the network of railways cutting their way towards the centre of the city. Clearly, the coloured areas were not homogenous, but the categories depict the predominant types of housing within them. The map was compiled by a local surveyor, J.R. Corbett, and it illustrated Marr's 1904 book on housing conditions in Manchester and Salford. The report drew on the work of members of the Citizens' Association for the Improvement of the Unwholesome Dwellings and Surroundings of the People, a pressure group established by Thomas Horsfall, founder of

the Art Museum in Ancoats and advocate of the ideas of German municipal socialism. Marr was its secretary.

The legacy of much of the city's nineteenth-century housing was clearly appalling. Jerry-built back-to-backs, cellar dwellings and common lodging houses provided accommodation that was cold, dark and dank, and this was reflected in the city's high death rates. Manchester's housing featured prominently in the Victorian parliamentary commissions into urban problems as well as in the investigations of bodies such as the Manchester Statistical Society, which conducted numerous surveys of living conditions in the city and elsewhere. A survey in 1834 of over 4,000 families in the St Michael's and New Cross areas found that three-quarters lived in houses, about one-fifth in cellars and the remainder in rooms. Only one-third of the dwellings were considered 'comfortable'. Follow-up surveys across Manchester found no fewer than 3,600 cellar dwellings with an average of over four persons per cellar and

OPPOSITE. T. Marr, *Map showing housing conditions in Manchester & Salford* (1904) [NLS]

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estimated that 11 per cent of the town's population lived in cellars. Words failed Friedrich Engels when he attempted to describe the living conditions of the poor in the centre of Manchester, and Elizabeth Gaskell deliberately set a poverty-wracked family in a cellar dwelling at the moral centre of her novel *Mary Barton: A tale of Manchester life*.

Pressure groups such as the Manchester and Salford Sanitary Association continued to campaign for social and housing reform. The reformers took pains to spell out the awfulness of the slums, arguing that the town's comfortable citizens must have been unaware of the circumstances in which their poor fellow citizens lived otherwise they would not have tolerated the continuation of such housing. The 'unwholesomeness' of the houses and environments was a compound of factors: the absence of effective building regulations and the lower rates of return on working-class housing, which encouraged the use of inferior materials and the cramming of as many houses as possible into whatever plots of land were available.

Nonetheless, Manchester was a pioneer in tackling such conditions through local legislation. A local Police Act in 1844 led to the banning of new back-to-backs. In 1853, the Police Commissioners sought to prevent living in cellars, and the number of inhabited cellars slowly began to decline. John Leigh, the city's first Medical Officer of Health, appointed in 1868, gave priority to closing the remaining cellars. In 1867, the Manchester Waterworks and Improvement Act gave the Corporation power to declare individual properties unfit and enforce improvement. This gave Leigh power to convert back-to-backs by encouraging landlords to drive through internal walls to convert them into 'through' houses, or to demolish pairs of back-to-backs built in sets of four, or to demolish one of a pair of dwellings in order to give the remaining house a backyard and access to air.

Progress, however, proved slow. Marr's map shows the extent of the 'slum' areas that still remained at the turn of the century. By 1904, few unconverted back-to-backs remained, reflecting the work done by the city. However, the map does show that there were still many in Angel Meadow and a spattering in other areas across the city. Marr looked at seven



Ordnance Survey 25-inch (1892) [UML] The ill-named Angel Meadows with numerous back-to-back houses in the inner parts away from the main roads.

sample areas in some detail, and two examples provide a flavour of what remained to be tackled. One area, in Angel Meadow, included 273 houses with a mix of lodging-house tenements and back-to-backs. Only 20 had water closets and the remainder had pail privies used by numerous families. In one street, 40 houses shared access to a single water tap. The OS map shows the details of the area.

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The contrast between large houses on John Street and the narrow courts and back-to-back houses lying behind.

A second example illustrates cases where builders squeezed back-to-backs into small spaces behind more substantial houses. In the area behind St John Street, in which large handsome Georgian houses were then (as now) largely used as chambers for professional businesses, were five courts, three of which were extraordinarily narrow cul-de-sacs, one a mere 10 feet wide. In total, they contained 25 back-to-backs, a

lodging house and a shop, with one pail closet for every three dwellings. The juxtaposition of grand houses and back-to-backs is shown on the OS plan. It has strong overtones of Engels's view of the ecology of the city that the 'money aristocracy can take the shortest route to their places of business, without ever seeing that they are in the midst of the grimy misery that lurks to the right and left'.

The Council's first major foray into the provision of new accommodation was the large-scale clearance of some 36 acres off Oldham Road in Ancoats where a third of houses were back-to-backs. The Council declared it an 'Unhealthy Area' in 1889, demolished 239 houses and displaced 1,250 people. The first municipal building was erected on the site. This was Victoria Buildings, completed in 1894 and modelled on London's Peabody buildings as a five-storey quadrangle with 285 tenements. The ground-floor frontage had shops, and each tenement had a pantry, coal store and gas meter. A water closet and sink were provided for every two tenements. Refuse chutes were incorporated and communal laundry facilities were provided. The development stands out boldly on Marr's map with its yellow colour, showing it as an oasis of 'property which complies with modern bye-laws'. The Council also developed further tenements on the west of the site. The pertinently named Sanitary Street (later renamed Anita Street) built in 1897, comprised two model terraces of two-storey tenements along a 36-foot-wide road, with pairs of ground-floor and first-floor tenements sharing a common entrance. Each flat had a sink and WC. Even more ambitious was George Leigh Street where five-room cottages were built. Their novelty was that they included a third bedroom in an attic.

Marr was commissioned by the Council to lead the process of converting back-to-backs, and by the outbreak of the First World War most of Manchester's back-to-backs and courts had been cleared or renovated. He left Manchester in 1919 to do similar work in Yorkshire, but his influence was already evident in a new generation of housing reformers, among whom Ernest Simon was to have a significant impact on housing policy, both local and national.

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