“Squalid Liverpool” revisited

A. H. SYKES*

In 1883 the Liverpool Daily Post set up a special commission to investigate the housing conditions of the poor. Its members were a well-known City Councillor, a prominent local physician, and a member of the Daily Post literary staff; none were named. Its report was published in a series of articles in the newspaper over six consecutive days from 5-10 November 1883, and reprinted as a pamphlet of 93 pages with the uncompromising title Squalid Liverpool.¹ It was a small sized publication, about 6 x 4.5 inches, with advertisements on the inside covers. It is not in the British Museum Library, in any of the major national libraries, or in the United States Library of Congress. The only source appears to be the Special Collections of the John Rylands Library, Manchester. An enlarged photocopy is held by the Liverpool Record Office. However, a low cost reprint of the original pamphlet has now become available from Lulu.com, an American online publishing firm. Its appearance provides the opportunity to review this hitherto rare publication on an important aspect of Liverpool’s social history.

There had been earlier investigations into the state of housing for labourers, dock workers and Irish immigrants, notably by W. H. Duncan²,³ (1805-1863), Liverpool’s, and the nation’s, first Medical Officer of Health, appointed in 1847 under the terms of the Liverpool Sanitary Act 1846. He wrote a number of reports on the health and housing of the poor, and the Borough Council, through James Newlands⁴ (1813-1871), the first borough engineer, was active in improving the sewers, pavements, water supply and rubbish removal. Cellars were no longer to be used as dwellings, a rule often ignored, unsanitary buildings were demolished and new houses had to conform to higher standards of light and sanitation.

* Email for correspondence: alansykes@etherway.net

¹ Squalid Liverpool by a Special Commission, Liverpool Daily Post, 1883, reprinted in 2009 by Lulu.com price £3.75.
In 1871 the Borough Council commissioned a report by E. A. Parkes FRS (1819-1876), Professor of Hygiene at the Army Medical School at Netley, and J. Burdon Sanderson FRS (1828-1905), who had been Medical Officer of Health for the Paddington district of London from 1856 to 1867 and therefore had wide experience of hygiene and housing. In Part 1 of their report they referred to the unsanitary practice of depositing contaminated cinders and chemical refuse on ground to be used for building. In Part 2 they looked at the health of the city and of individual streets. Liverpool had a mortality rate of 38.8 per thousand compared with 24.3 for London, 28 for Leeds and 30 for Manchester. Mortality varied considerably from street to street. For example, the mortality of men aged up to 45, expressed in the same terms, was 29 in Henry Edward Street and 62 in Addison Street compared with only 12 in healthy districts of England.

Houses were built in courts, of twelve to twenty feet wide, often with only a narrow entrance at one end. The six or more houses on either side of a court had a cellar, a parlour entered by a short flight of steps, a bedroom and an attic. The cellar was meant for ashes and waste but many of them were sublet to the poorest tenants. The cellar floor was often a bed of ashes on which sacking was laid for sleeping. The water supply came from a single tap in the court and there was no gas. Two privies were provided but the waste ran down open channels before entering the street sewer which was meant for surface water. It was stated that there were ten thousand cellars of this type in the borough. The authors remarked that the houses in the courts were “packed closely together with an ingenious economy of space which does credit to the builder though Liverpool has little to be thankful for it”.

Despite the continuing efforts of the Borough Council, there had not been enough progress by 1883 to satisfy the Daily Post and hence it launched its own Special Commission. The three Commissioners visited courts, cellars and houses in over thirty streets in an area between St. George’s Hall and the Pierhead stretching for about a mile North to South. “It is here that persons must come who wish to see for themselves what squalid Liverpool is.” “Here still remain the courts, the alleys, and the houses which Dr. Trench [1809-1877; Medical Officer of Health 1863-1876] described and condemned twenty years ago.” “Here resides a population ceaselessly ravaged by fever, plagued by the blankest, most appalling poverty, cut off

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5 Report by Dr. Parkes and Dr. Sanderson on the Sanitary Conditions of Liverpool (1871).
from every grace and comfort of life, born, living, and dying amid squalid surroundings.” The commissioners did not complain that the Borough health authorities were not actively pursuing the matter. “On the contrary, they are as energetic as a child who sets itself to work to ladle out the Mersey with a tin bucket.”

There followed six chapters: “Where it is”, “Fever Dens at the North-End”, “Round Fontenoy Street”, “The Lowest Depth”, “Fever Dens in Toxteth Park” and “Saturday night in Scotland Road”. Each chapter is subdivided into named paragraphs covering specific streets or houses which the Commissioners visited. One paragraph, for example, “The Dens of Toxteth Park” where “Dr. Taylor” [1821-1901; Medical Officer of Health 1877-1893] reported last year that there were in the city 2,684 ‘infected and dirty houses’… 984 more than Dr. Trench had notified in 1875”. Its worst streets were Wolfe Street, Henderson Street and Mann Street. “Fever” would have been typhoid, typhus, or diphtheria and “dens” referred to areas where fever was endemic.

The commissioners paid a visit, in the company of a minder, to one of the lodging houses for travellers in Ben Jonson Street. “Lodging house” they aver is “only a nasty word writ large” i.e. a brothel, where they found drunken men and prostitutes, the only time the latter term was used in the report.

Another notorious street was Scotland Road where the inhabitants “represent the lowest type of squalid life, more uncivilised, more dangerous, more ignorant, more drunken than any to be found elsewhere”. The author describes the unsanitary hideousness of the houses and the moral hideousness of the people who live in them. In contrast, the public houses were brightly lit, warm, with well-polished beer pumps and well-dressed barmen. He also makes a political comment when he writes “The wretches you see in Scotland Road inherit probably the proclivities of a dozen generations of degradation. Many of them come from Ireland, and bitterly has the sister country repaid us for centuries of wrong inflicted by our hands”.

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The Commissioners visited a house in North Street where they witnessed the last hours of a woman lying on a bed of rags in a rubbish-filled room attended by a priest, a scene they would long remember.

On some streets lived squalid women such as the chip girls who made a living by chopping wood into bundles of kindling for sale. In another street there were watercress women who left surplus watercress to decay in the gutters. Squalid men did not have regular work but took up casual jobs on the docks or as building labourers. Squalid children lived in poverty, dependent on a parent to bring home scraps of food to fend off death from starvation. Street after street is described, some only yards from the prosperous, money-making Liverpool; the Liverpool of clubs, cafés, banks and businesses.

The Catholic Church represented the one single influence for good which reached the lowest depth of squalid poverty in Liverpool. The Commissioners themselves were not Catholic but they observed that the Protestant church played little part in the community, being more concerned with missions to foreign countries. “They know far more about the miseries of the savages of Africa than of the squalid life which their fellow countrymen are suffering.” The poorest of Liverpool, especially those of Irish origin, were Catholic and they had great respect for their priest who “is the parson, the policeman, the doctor, the nurse, the relieving officer, the nuisance inspector and the School Board inspector all in one”.

In their conclusion the Commissioners found a “depth of distress, of sin, and of suffering of which they had no conception” but the object of the articles was “to describe not prescribe”, nevertheless, they called for swift and strong action by the authorities.

Squalid Liverpool drew attention to the public health problems of Liverpool, which continued to be the concern of the Borough Council and as late as 1897 there was an article in the Liverpool Mercury showing how much remained to be done.

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