

ascendancy and led, via measures such as the formation of the Green Belt and the passing of the 1947 Town and Country Planning Act, to the abrupt curtailment of the laissez-faire interwar building boom and the acceptance from the late 1950s onwards of high-rise development as the answer to Britain's housing problems – a policy which proved to have disastrous social consequences.⁵ However, much of the antipathy to the suburbs was to the values 'of home, of family, of stability and of

him. With one or two sails billowing in full, pregnant shapes, the 'galleon', as it was usually termed, rode high on a tumbling sea.⁹

In 1946, there was no doubt in the mind of J.M. Richards, that this was the future for which many had fought fascism during the Second World War and to which others aspired: 'The picture we have been painting [of the English suburban residence and its garden] is the picture the ordinary Englishman has in his mind when he is away at the war, or travelling about on business or living in digs in the middle of town till such time as he can afford a home of his own.'¹⁰ In later years, the utopian possibilities of the suburbs were retrospectively celebrated as, for example, in the scene from R.F. Delderfield's 1958 novel, *The Avenue Goes to War* in which two neighbours, who significantly had been on opposing sides during the General Strike of 1926, turn their back gardens into a common space:

Harold said 'it's a pity we can't have it in two gardens old man!'
 'Well and why can't we?' asked Jim suddenly
 'There's the Fence!'
 'Then the hell with the fence' retorted Jim.

....

The symbolic levelling of the fence, with Jim swinging a 14lb sledge hammer at the Verandah end, and Harold at the nursery end was a spectacular opening to a party that, from its outset, proved the most joyful and uninhibited in the Avenue's history.¹¹

However, in reality, this potential golden future was eclipsed by a rival utopian development: the largely unheralded election of the Labour party and the foundation of the Welfare State. The scope of the transition entailed by the 1945 political settlement has been cogently stated by the historian Ross McKibbin:

By the end of the 1930s the Conservative Party had created a huge, heterogeneous, but stable coalition. There was nothing to suggest it was provisional; everything to suggest it was a natural historical outcome. The only obvious threats to it were external. In this sense the Second World

War threw British history, and even more, English history, off course [...] More or less everyone in the interwar years agreed that England was a democracy. The question was – whose democracy? Before the outbreak of war the question seemed to have been answered [...] the ruling definition of democracy was individualist and its proponents chiefly a modernised middle class; in the 1940s the ruling definition was social-democratic and its proponents chiefly the organised working class. The class, therefore, which in the 1930s was the class of progress became in the 1940s the class of resistance.¹²

Nevertheless, the memory of that suburban utopia lingered culturally in the residual traces of middlebrow culture, such as Delderfield's novel, and eventually re-emerged in the late 1990s in New Labour's vision of 'Middle England'. This was all about ensuring, in the words of one of its key architects, Philip Gould, that the 'the politics of the suburbs' – 'the progress and well-being of individuals and their families' – did not remain 'forgotten'.¹³ By voting Labour after eighteen years of Conservative rule, a new classless era would dawn for the suburban new middle classes: 'the aspirational classes – working-class achievers and the middle class under pressure ... estimated by the British Social Attitudes survey to comprise 50 per cent of the population'.¹⁴ However, from the perspective of 2010, as Labour struggle in the opinion polls with an election imminent, the promised 'progressive century' looks increasingly unlikely to last for any longer than twelve ultimately disappointing years.¹⁵ The greatest irony of this failure is, of course, that the high point of New Labour's attempt to align their target suburban new middle classes into a cohesive political movement was on 15 February 2003, when two million of them marched against the imminent invasion of Iraq by Britain and the United States. Once that overture had been rejected, any prospects of a lasting progressive alliance immediately began to recede. Yet, in any case, such prospects were always doomed. In part, this was because all New Labour had to offer the 'forgotten suburbs' was the materialist consumerism of 'better houses, better holidays, better lives'.¹⁶ However, as

was to be revealed by the televised cultural experiment of Channel 4's *The 1940s House* (2001; screened in the run up to the end of the Party's first electoral term), even the utilisation of sunray symbolism in a direct appeal to the suburban utopian impulse would have fared no better in the long run.

2. The 1940s House

In 2000, the Hymers family from West Yorkshire moved into an interwar semi-detached house in the South East London suburb of West Wickham to relive the experience of the Second World War telescoped into nine weeks, while being filmed by Channel 4. The resultant series and accompanying book of the same title, written by a leading historian of the period, Juliet Gardiner, were popular; but lasting cultural significance has been cemented by the continued presence of a full-scale replica of the house in the Imperial War Museum since 14 December 2000.¹⁷ If one compares this success with the poor reception of the contemporary Millennium Dome, in which zones such as 'Shared Ground' – a full-scale replica of a suburban row of shops sponsored by Camelot, the firm which runs the National Lottery – appeared to be deliberately mocking suburban values, then the cultural centrality of suburban life to Britain at the turn of the Millennium comes into focus.

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Fig.1 Design on paper bag from Imperial War Museum (Nick Hubble)

when bought for the programme, it was on the market for £187, 000.¹⁸ By the time of the housing market crash of 2007-08, it would have been worth well over £300,000 and may well have regained similar value by now.

The house was lovingly restored to its original condition. The frontispiece and title page of Gardiner's book prominently display the sunray design of the house's gates and the stained-glass window of its front door. This latter is not a galleon, but another common motif of the period: a budding rose. As with the account Paul Oliver gives of the equally popular peacock motif, the rose is displayed at the top of a 'glowing vaginal shape' and holds the promise of one day opening out into its full glory.¹⁹ This utopian symbolism is liberally combined throughout both the book and the series with iconic Second World War imagery to connote a distilled Britishness: the top corner of every page in the book is adorned with a floating Union Jack. During the war itself, defiance to the threat of air-raids and invasion became embodied in recognisably working-class figures as the dominant form of culturally representing Britishness, as memorably described by Mass-Observation co-founder, Tom Harrisson:

The simple working man, usually the Cockney, and in nine cases out of ten either a char lady or a taxi driver. This character usually speaks for the unshakeable people of Britain, untainted by Communism, and for that matter untainted by anything else, except a pint of beer or an occasional bomb story in which the Cockney invariably shows heroic stoic qualities.²⁰

On the face of it, the achievement of *The 1940s House* was to succeed, where earlier attempts such as Delderfield's novel had failed, in supplanting the dominant working-class imagery of wartime Britain with a revisionist history in which defiant Britishness retrospectively becomes embodied in the suburban new middle classes.²¹

as if Thatcher's appropriation of parts of the myth for party advantage in 1982 may have helped to reduce the potency of the whole paradigm' (271).²⁹ His argument is that in trying to separate the Churchillian rhetoric from the equally integral elements of people's democracy and social consensus that fed into the Welfare State, Thatcherism ending up ripping the constituent values of postwar Britishness apart and creating something of a vacuum. In the course of a decade, the historical and cultural reference points that had supplied meaning to British Life since the Second World War were dissipated. When, in this context, New Labour talked of returning to the forgotten politics of the suburbs, what they were really doing was playing on the different meanings that the suburbs convey. On the one hand, with their still recent interwar connotations of a 'restless, cultureless life', the suburbs provided a metaphor for the void which had opened up in the national consciousness. On the other hand, they also held the associations of home and car ownership, better schools and better lives, which could be held out to an electorate now bereft of alternative bearings to orientate themselves by. This ingenious would-be exercise in bootstrapping was dependent on a brave new world of consumerism in which no one ever looked back, but came undone because the past itself was rapidly becoming commodified.

As Patrick Wright presciently argued in 1985, it was precisely the sense of loss and emptiness that came to characterise British everyday life at that time that provided the conditions in which the heritage industry was able to boom by re-enacting the fullness of the past.³⁰ Hence, something like *The 1940s House* was always going to become inevitable once Britain became officially a suburban nation. However, what distinguishes the series from the heritage industry in general, is that it didn't simply re-enact a full past for millennial suburban Britain in the way that heritage properties frequently employ period-costumed performers, but, by sending an

1940s House, Lyn found ‘the time travel forward to her former life painful’.⁴⁴ As Gardiner notes, this return left her ‘marooned in a complex space’.⁴⁵ To be more precise, the experience of re-enacting the wartime period revealed to the Hymers, and their audience, the deeper truth that contemporary Britishness is itself no more than a continual process of re-enactment and that once that re-enactment has ended, then there is nothing left but a lonely and alienating vacuum. The Hymers took one look about them and promptly headed straight back into the past by buying a 1949 Ford Prefect and maintaining many of their 1940s shopping and cooking habits.

Fig. 2. The former 1940s House in 2008 (Nick Hubble).

advantage of its power. Suburbia's desire to drive everywhere, its insistence on hygiene, time-efficiency and overall niceness has created an environment that provides just that. A hold-my-hand culture [...]⁴⁹

In many ways, Sawyer seems to be upholding the truth of all the historical criticisms that have been made of the suburbs, with the simple proviso of insisting that it is a condition that can be enjoyed. Her book's conclusion invites us all to share the fun:

Because you know, what suburbia wanted, it has got. All life's experiences but in bite-size form. Time to work, time to shop, time to drive, time to play. Life compartmentalised, with no room for anything nasty to slip through the gaps in between. Drive up, enjoy, drive home again. Park and ride.⁵⁰

The subversive value of this conclusion rests in its similarity to another playful invitation issued sixty years before it:

Progress and reaction have both turned out to be swindles. Seemingly there is nothing left but quietism – robbing reality of its terrors by simply submitting to it. Get inside the whale – or rather, admit that you are inside the whale (for you *are*, of course). Give yourself over to the world-process, stop fighting against it or pretending that you control it; simply accept it, endure it, record it.

alternative ex nihilo. However, it is to be hoped that the Imperial War Museum will indefinitely prolong the exhibition of the 1940s House, so that once the new twenty-first century lifestyle has emerged there remains something to remind our descendants that our age, too, has not been altogether a bad one to live in.

Notes

¹ George Orwell, *The Road to Wigan Pier* [1937], *Complete Works*, V, (ed.) Peter Davison (London: Secker and Warburg, 1998), 102.

² Orwell, *The Lion and the Unicorn* [1941] in *A Patriot After All: Complete Works*, XII, (ed.) Davison (London: Secker and Warburg, 2000), 408.

³ Paul Oliver, Ian Davis and Ian Bentley, *Dunroamin* (London: Barrie & Jenkins, 1981), 13.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 18.

⁵ For an engaged account of the shortcomings of ‘tower block’ policy see Lynsey Hanley, *Estates: An Intimate History* (London: Granta Books, 2007), 97-147.

⁶ Oliver et al, 157.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 161.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 170.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 165.

¹⁰ J.M. Richards, *The Castles on the Ground: The Anatomy of Suburbia* [1946] (London: John Murray, 1973), 14.

¹¹ R.F. Delderfield, *The Avenue Goes to War* (London: Coronet Books, 1997). 440-442. This scene might be seen as a subconscious gesture towards breaking the walls between the classes; not the metaphorical walls but the material ones (built by the private developers) such as that in Cutteslowe, Oxford, which shut off the council estate from the neighbouring private suburban estate from 1934 for the next twenty five years. See Hanley, 11-13.

¹² Ross McKibbin, *Classes and Culture: England 1918-1951*, (Oxford: OUP, 1998), 531, 533.

¹³ Philip Gould, *The Unfinished Revolution: How the Modernisers Saved the Labour Party* (London: Abacus, 1998), 212, 398.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 122.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 398.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 237.

¹⁷ The 1940s House has now become incorporated into the museum’s ‘Children’s War’ exhibition, which will run until 2012: <http://london.iwm.org.uk/server/show/conEvent.381>

BBC London have a visual tour of the house on their website:

http://www.bbc.co.uk/london/content/image_galleries/1940s_house_gallery.shtml

¹⁸ The information in this paragraph is from Juliet Gardner, *The 1940s House* (London: Channel 4 Books, 2000), 22-24. The author of this paper grew up in a similar – although terraced rather than semi-detached – house in West Wickham.

¹⁹ Oliver et al, 167.

²⁰ Tom Harrison, ‘War Books’, *Horizon*, IV, 24 (December 1941), 421.

²¹ A more recent example of this cultural revisionism is ITV’s BAFTA award-winning drama, *Housewife*, 49 (2006), starring Victoria Wood as Mass-Observation diarist, Nella Last. Here the everyday heroism on the wartime home front revolves around a semi

²⁶ Quoted, *ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 179. The author of this paper remains shameless about his suburban origins.

²⁸ Quoted, *ibid.*, 174.

²⁹