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‘Back-to-Back Memories of Houses in Leeds’. In *Playing Out*, ed. by Julia MacKinlay and Jonathan Orlek (Threshold Editions, 2025), ISBN 9781068465413

The Leeds back-to-back has long been regarded as one of the most distinctive features of the housing landscape of the city. While the construction of terraces with shared rear walls was outlawed in Liverpool in the 1860s and more widely in the 1909 Housing Act, in Leeds they continued to be built into the 1930s. This housing type was alternatively popular, widespread and maligned. The first recorded reference to the term ‘back-to-back’ in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, dating from 1845, is a clear denunciation: ‘Back-to-back houses cannot be considered dwellings of proper construction’ (*OED*). While in his famous twentieth-century survey of northern cities, George Orwell denigrated entire neighbourhoods: “As you walk through the industrial towns you lose yourself in labyrinths of little brick houses blackened by smoke, festering in planless chaos round miry alleys and little cindered yards where there are stinking dustbins and lines of grimy washing and half-ruinous w.c.’s.’ He singled out ‘scores of thousands of “back-to-back” houses’ in Leeds and Sheffield that were condemned but, he suspected, might still ‘remain standing for decades’. Rhetorically, he asked: ‘it is worth considering what it is like for a child to grow up in one of the back alleys where its gaze is bounded by a row of lavatories and a wall.’¹

That way of looking down at housing landscapes of the industrial city, usually to judge it negatively, was a mode inherited from the Victorians, whose writings on urbanisation and sanitary conditions were driven by reformist principles (while also providing ample copy for readers of the expanding popular press). Delivered from the perspective of an outsider, and usually from a physically high viewpoint, this gaze emphasised uniformity and repetition as it mapped out a residential landscape strangely devoid of people or sociality. But other descriptions of urban neighbourhoods and houses, most notably those found in first-person autobiography, memoirs and oral histories, afford a very different and privileged kind of perspective. These first-person voices and images from the interior exist in substantial numbers, although they are harder to find – less well-known, less referenced, often squirrelled away on the shelves of local archives and libraries.² Individualised, sometimes quirky, these accounts are harder to assimilate into any coherent pattern. In my own work on historical representations of home and domestic space, I’ve nevertheless been drawn to these autobiographical sources because of the varied personal accounts that they offer. To do justice to these kinds of accounts of home and house, however, means letting go of the

search for symmetry or uniformity, in favour of collecting, bricolage-like, fragments of lived experience – whose result may be an uneven tapestry or rag-rug of memories, rather than a cohesive whole. Partial, varied and subjective as they may be, the evidence of autobiographies have answered Orwell's question of what it was like for a child to grow up in a back-to-back, while also revealing overlooked features of that residential landscape.

The shared rear wall of the back-to-back may have been its defining feature, but such dwellings contained a number of important thresholds. Houses were small relative to the number of inhabitants, and depending on the construction, the home could extend out into the street, back alley (the 'ginnel'), forecourt or front doorstep. One writer, living at Stockdale Terrace in Woodhouse in the 1890s, recalled the sociality of the back-to-back through her father's expression that 'ours was the ever open door, as we all had friends calling for us', and other autobiographers recalled the front step as a place for endlessly interesting people-watching.³ 'Home may be private', Richard Hoggart wrote of the Hunslet of his childhood, 'but the front door opens out of the living-room on to the street, and when you go down the one step or use it as a seat on a warm evening you become part of the life of the neighbourhood'.⁴ If the open door remains one of the most nostalgic images of working-class life, the memoirs remind us of other forms of boundary crossings. Some were practical; houses on different sides of the street could be literally connected by lines of washing that extended from one row to the other (Figure 1). And before toilets were installed in the basements of the newer back-to-backs, access to the locked 'privy', often shared by two or more families, was outside the immediate boundary of the home. Mary Gawthorpe, the future suffragette who lived in a terraced row in Woodhouse, never forgot the 'apprehensive tension' she felt as a young girl walking up Melville Street to the 'frightful closets'.⁵ While for one resident of Shaw Street in Burmantofts, it was the bugs from the house next door that breached the boundary walls.⁶



Figure 1. Back-to-back terraces, Leeds (1935):

<https://www.mylearning.org/resources/street-view-of-back-to-back-terraces-in-leeds>.

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Domestic thresholds were permeable in ways that were both positive and problematic, but the memoirs remind us that they were also places of exchange and transaction. It was at the threshold of the house, for instance, that the rag and bone man exchanged cooking salt, scouring stones and pottery for rags, bones, bottles and jam jars, and where the tinker ‘sold and mended articles of tin-plate and other sheet metal on the spot’.⁷ The same locale was where money was handed over to the rent collector and it stood as the point at which the state could attempt to intervene into the lives of the poor. Elizabeth Kelly, for example, recalled how the ‘School Board Man’, responsible for ensuring children were attending school, was a frequent visitor to the everyone’s door ‘chasing the truants’.⁸ But her mother was able to keep him at bay on the occasion when, standing in the doorway, he glimpsed the children in the main room straight ahead of him lying under blankets. Given a warning that they were recovering from the mumps, he left quickly, mindful no doubt that infection was another thing that could cross thresholds.

The back-to-backs were also a location for children’s play, despite limited space and amenities. Play, after all, is the ultimate makeshift practice, and as folklorists Iona and Peter Opie put it, ‘Where children are is where they play’. Staying in or playing out, children crossed borders into a world in which they could make their own rules, ‘extend [their] environment ... and gain knowledge of sensations beyond ordinary experience’.⁹ Memoirs, privileging the child’s-eye view, often revel in details of improvised play through which children laid claim to the space around them. As Joseph Armitage recalls of his

Hunslet 'slum boyhood' of the 1910s, 'as there were no playing fields nearby, and only the street to play in, active games were limited in extent. Still we managed to adapt any open ground such as the space where old buildings had been demolished.' In such contexts, toys could be repurposed and adapted from the surrounding environment. He recalled how 'a real ball was a luxury, so we improvised. A tight bundle of rag or paper would do as a substitute'. Failing that, he added, a pig's bladder from the butcher's slaughter yard or an empty tin might do the trick. Girls, he noted, with more restrictions on how far and how long they could play out, mostly gathered around a street lamp, 'playing a ball game or swinging from one arm of the gas lamp'.¹⁰ Indeed, Mary Gawthorpe brightened her descriptions of the 'brick and slate street' of her Woodhouse childhood with memories of playing with 'spinning tops, gaily chalked, mostly wooden, except for that gorgeously coloured top of metal which had a musical buzz' and shuttlecocks with 'coloured feathers'. Skipping, and the singing that accompanied it, remained one of her favourite activities: 'Plebian or plutocratic, plain rope or with colours, decorated handles, the fun was the same: "Salt, mustard, ginger, cayenne, PEPPER"'.¹¹ Not all children were so free. For Elizabeth Kelly, growing up in harsh poverty of the 1930s, the situation was starker and she commented simply, 'I couldn't afford to play'. When she wasn't at school or helping to looking after her siblings in the one-up, one-down in Shaw Street, she joined her mother selling ice creams, although she did manage to read her copy of *David Copperfield* sitting on the ice-cream cart handles. Kelly recalled other children's makeshift games and toys – girls skipping for hours with a clothes line, and a next door neighbour whose favourite doll was makeshift, made of a 'half brick wrapped in a bit of old rag' that she proudly wheeled around in a doll's pram contrived from 'a loaf tin on wheels, with bits of wire for handles which her Grandad had made'.¹²

Autobiographies of childhood are often intensely focussed on space. Across the social classes, writers' memories seem to quicken when they thought back to the inside and outside spaces of childhood. Some literally mapped out their memories for the reader. Armitage, for example, who pulled no punches when looking back to his Leeds home that his steelworker-father referred to as 'this hell hole that we have to live in', traced in meticulous detail the contours of the family living rooms in the back-to-back (Figure 2). As a supplement attached to the memoir, he added sketch elevation drawings of the intricate rows and courts of his Hunslet neighbourhood (Figure 3). Above all he seemed to want to convey the familiar oddity of what he thought of as the back-to-front arrangement of the house: "I have often said that I was brought up in a house with the front door in the back yard, and no window in the kitchen!"¹³

Figure 2. Drawing of kitchen from Armitage, 'Twenty Three Years'.

Figure 3. Sketch of streets from Armitage, 'Twenty Three Years'.

Gawthorpe inscribed a sense of place in the very title of her published autobiography – *Up Hill to Holloway* – and inlaid in the front cover pages of the memoir is a hand-drawn map of the neighbourhood (Figure 3). Like an urban counterpart to the map at the front of Kenneth Grahame's *The Wind in the Willows* (1908), Gawthorpe located her back-to-back house within the spatial coordinates of street, church, school, moor, cemetery, chemical works and tanneries. Some things, however, could only be mapped in her reflective mind's eye. One of her favourite childhood places was the pocket of urban nature of Woodhouse Ridge with the silhouette of a windmill at the top of Sugarhill Mount (presumably the converted 'round house' on Potternewton Mount today): 'Though I have

not been on the Ridge since youthful years, I feel sure that closely packed streets of houses cover the graves of the red-tipped daisies and those buttercups of solid gold'.¹⁴

Figure 4. Detail of hand-drawn map from Mary Gawthorpe, *Up Hill to Holloway*.

More than anything else, back-to-back memories frequently tell stories of families through time, in all their diverse and extended forms. There is a precise historical point to this too. Housing historians note that despite its maligned reputation, from the nineteenth century the back-to-back represented an important and often desirable choice for families because they were affordable self-contained houses.¹⁵ In that sense they were preferable to rooms in residual or subdivided houses, courts or tenements, such as those found throughout the industrial neighbourhoods of London, Manchester and Liverpool. A back-to-back might not have had the advantages of the 'through house', with its backyard or garden, but nonetheless it represented a dwelling with its own locking front (or back) door, while also giving access to street, shops, neighbourhood, and networks of non-resident family and kin.

The significance of the dwelling as family house appears unexpectedly in the writing of one of Leeds's most famous chroniclers of the back-to-backs – the cultural critic Richard Hoggart. His influential hybrid study - part-autobiography, part-cultural analysis - published as *The Uses of Literacy* (1957), combined an anthropological gaze with the 'intimacy of detail' of the native insider.¹⁶ But in a separate and lesser-known autobiographical essay, he mapped out the more personal coordinates of the streets, houses and rooms of his own complicated family story. In his own words, he was an 'orphan' at the age of seven (Hoggart's father died in 1921 when he was three and his mother around four years later) and the three siblings were subsequently dispersed among the extended family. Hoggart himself moved into his grandmother's house in Hunstret, while his sister went to a half-aunt in the next street. The possibility of an orphanage had been mooted but quickly resisted by the family; 'What they were feeling, I think, was that nothing could make up for "belonging to somebody" rather than being

part of a public institution.’ He then settled into his grandmother’s household of six in the Hunslet landscape of back-to-backs, an end terrace with the advantage of a small ‘L’ shaped yard and attic. The house contained few books, and Hoggart’s attic bedroom was too cold for him to work in, so he studied at the end of the living-room table among the activities of the older members of the household. That shared table came to mark a threshold too – his grandmother did her best to protect his space for study (‘The lad’s got to get on’) and Hoggart, passing the eleven plus, would go on to grammar school and higher education.¹⁷ From there he wrote *The Uses of Literacy*, a landmark study in the development of the field that would become cultural studies. It seems apt, then, to end on this point – with the observation that the field of work that helped to broaden academic understandings of cultural forms and value stemmed, at least in part, from the home-centred landscape of the ‘ordinary’ back-to-back.

¹ George Orwell, *The Road to Wigan Pier* (New York: Harcourt, 1958), pp. 51, 53, 58.

² The memoirs referenced here provide only a selection. But I want to make special mention of Sam Wood’s three-volumed *Back-to-Back Memories* series published in the 1990s, from which I’ve borrowed the title.

³ Ellen Gill, ‘Ellen Gill’s Diary’ (1961), Burnett Archive of Working Class Autobiographies (BAWCA), 1:269, p. 3.

⁴ Richard Hoggart, *The Use of Literacy* (London: Penguin, [1957] 1992), p. 58.

⁵ Mary Gawthorpe, *Up Hill to Holloway* (Penobscot, Maine: Traversity, 1962), p. 17.

⁶ Elizabeth Kelly, ‘The Dirty Thirties’, Leeds Central Library, local history collection, L Q B KEL, p. 7.

⁷ Joseph Armitage, ‘The Twenty Three Years, or The Late Way of Life and of Living’ (1974), BAWCA, 2:15, pp. 19-20.

⁸ Kelly, ‘Dirty Thirties’, p. 14.

⁹ Iona and Peter Opie, *Children’s Games in Street and Playground* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), pp. 10, 3.

¹⁰ Armitage, ‘Twenty Three Years’, pp. 70-71.

¹¹ Gawthorpe, *Up Hill*, pp. 41, 117.

¹² Kelly, ‘Dirty Thirties’, p. 5-6, 20.

¹³ Armitage, ‘Twenty Three Years’, pp. 15, 21.

¹⁴ Gawthorpe, *Up Hill*, p. 37.

¹⁵ John Burnett, *A Social History of Housing, 1815-1985* (London: Methuen, 1986), p. 70.

¹⁶ Hoggart, *Uses of Literacy*, p. 60.

¹⁷ Richard Hoggart, ‘Richard Hoggart’, in *Breakthrough: Autobiographical Accounts of the Education of Some Socially Disadvantaged Children*, ed. by Ronald Goldman (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1968), pp. 98, 102.