

From York to New Earswick: working-class homes at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

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word count 3,844

How to improve the lives of the working class and the poor in Britain has been a key concern for social reformers, architects and designers, and local and national governments throughout twentieth century, but the origins of this were in the preceding century. From the middle of the nineteenth century, reformers had understood the necessity of improving the living conditions, diet and material environment of those with low incomes. Housing, at the core of this, was increasingly a political issue, but as this case study of the development of a garden village in the North of England demonstrates, it was also a moral and aesthetic one.

Moving home from poor quality housing in York city centre to the garden village of New Earswick begun in 1903 symbolised not only a physical relocation a few miles north, but also an unprecedented change in social and material conditions. Life in New Earswick promised new opportunities; a chance to start afresh in carefully designed, better equipped housing located in a rural setting and with substantial gardens. Largely unexplored by those interested in social policy and poverty research on the one hand, and historians of architecture and design on the other, this essay compares the design, planning, goods, and services found in working class homes in York city centre in 1899 with those at New Earswick in the decade prior to the First World War.¹ Seebohm Rowntree's pioneering social survey of

York, *Poverty A study in town life* (1899) attempted to categorize different groups of the working-class according to their housing, material possessions, and attitudes.² These were described in *Poverty* and visually choreographed in contemporary photographs and postcards of New Earswick under construction, after completion and furnished.³ These textual and visual 'accounts' helped constitute working class everyday life and to mod class and gender identities that were heterogeneous, not homogeneous.

In *Poverty*, Seebohm observed that 'in this land of abounding wealth, during a time of perhaps unexampled prosperity, probably more than one-fourth of the population are living in poverty, is a fact which may well cause great searchings of heart.'⁴ Highlighting the cramped and inadequate conditions in which many people lived, Seebohm estimated that 3 million people in Britain were living without minimum standards particularly light, space, water, and heat and ventilation. New Earswick was a response by him and his father, the chocolate manufacturer, Joseph Rowntree to such inequality. It was informed by the Quakerism that provided their ethical compass and shaped their enlightened, though paternalistic employment and social reform practices, and by Charles Booth's seminal *Life and Labour of the People of London* (1889). Of this Seebohm wrote 'Booth's Life and Labour made a profound impression on me...but I thought to myself

“well, one knows there’s a great deal of poverty in the East End of London, but I wonder whether there is in provincial cities. Why not investigate York?”⁵ Within a familial and religious context of social responsibility and moral enlightenment, Joseph Rowntree’s decision to build housing nearby the company’s newly opened factory just north of York four years later, to enable people to stand on their own feet at rents within reach of those earning 25 shillings per week (approximately 80% of York’s working classes) was not surprising.⁶ Writing in 1902 in the *Cocoa Works Magazine*, he had declared ‘I am very anxious that those who are employed in the Cocoa Works may never merely be regarded as cogs in an industrial machine; but rather as fellow-workers in a great industry, and that the conditions of service shall be such as to quicken the desire of each for self-development in all that is best and most worthy.’⁷ Describing his plans for New Earswick, he wrote ‘the essence of the experiment is the provision of houses, which, though well built, are convenient, healthy and artistic in design.’⁸

Undertaken over seven months in 1899 when he was 28 years old, Seebohm Rowntree’s survey showed that working class poverty in York was largely due to insufficient wages to support a family. Uniquely, he differentiated between primary and secondary poverty.⁹ Primary poverty was when total earnings were insufficient to obtain

the minimum necessities of life for 'mere physical efficiency' (9.9% of the population of York): secondary poverty was when 'total earnings would be sufficient for the maintenance of merely physical efficiency were it not that some portion of it is absorbed by other expenditure, either useful or wasteful' (17%).¹⁰ Rowntree's investigators noted the wages of various groups of working-class people, and correlated this to housing, living conditions, material possessions, social practices and diet.¹¹ Class A, the 'struggling poor' earned less than 18 shillings and averaged 11 shillings and seven pence. This group struggled primarily because of ill health, unemployment, idleness or widow-hood. Class B, the 'laboring classes' (9.6% of the city's working-class) earned between 18 and 21 shillings. Class C, the moderate working-class represented 33.6% of the working-class and earned more than 21 shillings, but less than 30s, whilst Class D represented the 'well-to-do artisan working-class (52.6%) with earnings over 30 shillings per week.

He surveyed York's working-class housing (largely terraced) identifying three categories: class 1 (which housed 12% of York's working-class), provided two rooms and a scullery downstairs and three bedrooms upstairs with rents of 7s.6d; class 2, (62%) with rents between 4s and 6s.6d, had two rooms and a single-storey extended scullery downstairs with two bedrooms upstairs. **[fig 1-plan for class**

2 housing] Class 3 included York's slums of Aldwark, Bedern and Walmgate and housed 26% of York's poorest families. Rents there ranged from 2s.2d for two-roomed terraces of one-upstairs room and one down-stairs room, to 4s.4d. for two-up and two-down terraces.

Whereas Thorstein Veblen, also writing in 1899, had observed that by the end of the nineteenth century, the further struggle for wealth was a competition for an increase in the comforts of life,¹² Seebom's had demonstrated that working classes domestic consumption was governed by how effectively they avoided poverty, and this, within a context of rising working-class incomes (of 90%) between 1850 and 1914.¹³ Describing domestic practices in some detail, Rowntree used the possession of certain goods, the maintenance of the home, and attitudes towards domesticity as markers of working-class respectability and diligence. In the houses of those categorized as 'well-to-do artisans' (Class D), Rowntree recorded a sitting-room (or parlour), that occasionally had a piano, but usually had an over-mantel, imitation marble fireplace and brightly-tiled hearths. But the hub of the house was the kitchen in which would be found a horsehair sofa or comfortable armchairs, china ornaments, and polished tins. In the house of a clerk earning 35s, it was noted that 'the house is nicely furnished and comfortable with 5 rooms, and the wife who buys food from the Co-op makes all her own and her

children's clothes plus she makes fire-screens and cushions'.¹⁴

Another example, was that of a railway employee who earned £2 each week was buying his house in installments. His five-roomed house was 'freshly painted outside and papered inside. The furniture is comfortable and good. The front parlour contains a piano and a bureau, and with a wall-paper of an artistic design.'¹⁵ In the scullery there was a sink, a tap and the copper (boiler). Such homes were likely to have books, and with no gambling, drinking or wasteful expenditure, there was also no poverty. In the houses of his Class C (moderate, but regular wages), pianos were less common, and often the parlour (if there was one) was used to store a bicycle or pram. Generally the kitchen and parlour were combined, and in such a room would be a table, two or three chairs, a wooden easy chair, and perhaps a couch. Describing the home of a labourer earning 22s each week, it was noted that 'the front door opens into a tiny hall, about four feet square, and the stairs to the bedroom rise out of this. In the living room is a sideboard with glass handles to the drawers and a shelf for ornaments at the back, a table, an easy chair, and one or two other chairs... The cooking was also done in this room, and the bread baked, but nevertheless all is kept wonderfully clean...homely and attractive'.¹⁶ Unusually this house had a wringing machine that was paid for in instalments of 6s per week. The heavy domestic work was

untaken in the outside yard using a shared copper and tap. The rent paid was 3s.9d. ¹⁷

Discussing the homes of several families in Class B, Rowntree observed that with steady work and careful housekeeping, these could be kept clean and tidy. An example was Mrs Smith who had three children and a husband in regular work earning 20s per week. By re-making old clothes bought from the ragman, she clothed her children, but for her, one new dress lasted three years. Any unusual expenditure such as a new pair of boots for the children reduced the amount of food on the table, 'we've to get it out of the food money and go short; but I never let Smith suffer – 'e 'as to go to work, and must be kept up, yer know!', she said.¹⁸ This last statement demonstrated one of Rowntree's central propositions, namely that a large number of the working-class were either living in a state of actual poverty or so near to it that they are liable to sink into it at any moment. ¹⁹ These might rise to a higher class once their children started to work, only to sink back again when the children married and left home. ²⁰

Another 26 per cent of people lived in conditions that were poorer than those already described, in slums, back-to-back houses and lodgings in which it was difficult to keep goods clean, but some managed this. For example a labourer earning 19 shillings a week and

his wife (described as a good manager who took in washing and an occasional lodger) had barely any furniture, but their children looked bright and intelligent, and food was nicely cooked.²¹ More typically furniture comprised boxes, perhaps a couple of chairs, old, often dirty flock bedding, in interiors lacking ventilation. Children in such families were pale and half-clothed. And homes were dilapidated and dirty with an occasional chair and a box, with people concentrated in one or two rooms: 'House no.4. Seven inmates. Walls, ceiling, and furniture filthy. Dirty flock bedding in living-room placed on a box and two chairs. Smell of room from dirt and bad air unbearable, and windows and door closed. There is no through ventilation in this house. Children pale, starved-looking, and only half clothed. One boy with hip disease, another with sores over face.'²² Rowntree's emphasis on the ownership of particular types of things -china ornaments, an armchair, wallpaper of an artistic design- and the deployment of specific domestic practices -seamstress skills or baking bread - articulated a particular ideal of respectable working-class domestic identity.

Teetotalism was a pivotal influence on the Quakers, including both Joseph and Seebohm, and throughout *Poverty*, alcohol is held responsible for many of the problems experienced by York's working-class.²³ Noting the concentration of public houses in the central poor

areas of the city, and observing that social progress required more than adequate wages, Seebohm observed in 1894 'You cannot live in a town like York, with its poverty, its intemperance, its vice without a sense of responsibility being from time to time borne in upon you.'²⁴

Both Joseph and Seebohm, who had joined the family business in 1889, were enlightened employers introducing a 48-hour week in 1896, employing a 'lady' to take charge of girl's health and behaviour, and both teaching at an Adult School extension, and establishing a domestic school for girls to disprove 'the contention that factory life unfits a girl for home duties'.²⁵ Rowntree's observations about the experiences of women were unusual and were to inform the planning of New Earswick:

'No one can fail to be struck by the monotony which characterizes the life of most married women in the working class. Probably this monotony is least marked in the slum districts, where life is lived in common, and where the women are constantly in and out of each others' houses, or meet and gossip in the courts and streets. But with the advance in the social scale, family life becomes more private, and the women, left in the house all day whilst their husbands are at work, are largely thrown upon their own resources. These, as a rule, are sadly limited, and in the deadening monotony of their lives these women too often become mere hopeless drudges.'²⁶

Rowntree's study of the working-class in York highlighted the fact that the consumption of new technologies within the home at the end of the nineteenth and first decade of the twentieth-century was

primarily a middle-class affair, although education was proposed as a tool to prepare working-class women for appropriate consumption.²⁷ From the 1880s, they were educated formally and informally via women's magazines to invest in simple domestic technologies such as gas cookers, a range of cutlery, pots and bowls, simple washing and mangling machines. New technologies within working-class homes in York were limited. In two cases, wringing-machines were evident, but these were paid by weekly installments. In another, a soldier's widow had a sewing machine, but this was very rare.²⁸ Gas lighting was common, gas coopers were found only in artisan houses, but generally coal fuelled cooking ranges, and the better off had coal fireplaces in the bedrooms.

To establish New Earswick, Joseph Rowntree bought 150 acres of agricultural land in 1901 for £6000, on which was built several hundred houses in the first phase of the development (between 1904 and 1914) at a cost of between £250 and 400 per house (including land). Rents were to be kept low, but a modest commercial return on the capital invested was required. At a density of 12 houses per acre, New Earswick had playgrounds, open recreational centers and leafy streets. Such low density represented a bold decision on Joseph Rowntree's part but it increased costs and the semi-rural location necessitated a new sewerage system being erected and maintained.

For the overall plan for a new 'garden' village as well as plans for housing, Rowntree commissioned the planner and designer Raymond Unwin and the architect Barry Parker. In partnership from 1896 in Buxton, Derbyshire, Parker and Unwin's had been involved in the development of Letchworth garden city (1901), and their ideas were shaped by Arts and Crafts thinking. Parker had trained at South Kensington School of Art in London in 1886, and in 1889 was articled to the Manchester architect, G. Faulkner Armitage, whose office, workshop and smithy provided 'an excellent training ground for a young Arts and Crafts architect.'²⁹ Unwin's wife, Ethel, described Parker as 'primarily an artist. Texture, light, shade, vistas, form and beauty were his chief concern. He wanted the home to be a setting for a life of artistic worth.'³⁰

Unwin, who had a strong interest in social issues, 'had all the zeal of a social reformer with a gift for speaking and writing and was inspired by Morris, Carpenter and the early days of the Labour Movement.'³¹ In their various writings, including the book *The Art of Building a Home* (1901), Parker and Unwin drew on Arts and Crafts Movement ideas. Their plans for model estates, garden cities and suburbs helped to popularise Arts and Crafts design principles.³² Speaking in January 1901 on 'The Art of Designing Small Cottages', Parker and Unwin outlined the importance of new housing in the

countryside being in harmony with the scenery, local materials and traditions of building.³³ Their emphasis on the significance of sunlight, ventilation and the good positioning of houses as well as the importance of creating a balanced village community also resonated with both Rowntrees. Precedents for this development included William Lever's model village for his workers at Port Sunlight (1889) outside Birkenhead, Liverpool, although closer philosophically was Quaker chocolate manufacturer George Cadbury's Bourneville built from 1879 outside Birmingham. Like New Earswick, Bourneville was intended for the working classes generally not only those employed in the cocoa factories. The architectural language of these pioneer garden villages was established at Bourneville and Port Sunlight with the deployment of a mixture of architectural idioms; small paned, white-painted sash windows, red brick construction with large chimneys, black and white half-timbering, with decorative elements which looked back to traditional vernacular and domestic styles from the fifteenth through to the eighteenth centuries.

At New Earswick, the cottage-style housing picturesquely-arranged in small blocks, each house with its own garden, was Arts and Crafts in mode, but additional housing built in the 1920s veered towards the neo-Georgian with sash windows and uninterrupted facades.³⁴ **[fig 2- Poplar Grove]** Preferring simple vernacular styles

for architecture, but appalled by the monotonous rows of working-class housing found in most British towns and cities, new streets, such as Station Road, Poplar Grove and Ivy Place, were made up of groups of four to six houses; they had large gardens with fruit trees and enough ground to grow vegetables; and there was ample space to dry clothes outdoors.

Rents were relatively low: from 4s.6d per week for a non-parlour house and bath in the scullery to 7s.9d for a house with a parlour and a separate bathroom. Other features included south-facing sitting rooms with through light and ventilation, inside toilet and bath, and ample cupboards (built into recesses). **[Fig 3 Station Road]**

Generous open green space, grass verges with trees, and playgrounds provided space for children to play, and by 1912 a co-educational primary school had been built. In 1905 the Folk Hall opened as the community centre, followed by a bowling green and tennis club. Shops were built and good transport links were provided by the LNER Hull to York railway.³⁵ Contemporary postcards and photographs of New Earswick depicted a healthy, rural, life-enhancing village where inhabitants enjoyed gardening and leisure activities in marked contrast to the lives of York's slum dwellers. New technologies found in these homes comprised coal-fired ranges for everyday cooking and hot water via a back boiler; coppers and lighting were

fuelled by gas. Ranges were either in the centre of the main living room or in the scullery. **[fig 4- living room with range]**

Interiors varied according to incomes. The more modest houses had no parlour, but instead had a long living-room from front to back with a window at each end to give light at all times. Poplar Grove was such an example. Pitched gables varied the monotony of what was in effect a block of four houses, string coursing delineating ground floor windows and doorways added a touch of decoration, and horizontal small-paned windows gave a cottagey feel. The weekly rents of these houses, which had cost £274.18s.8d. to build, were 4s 9d and for this, the new inhabitant of Poplar Grove had a through living-room with ventilation at each end, a built in dresser off the living room, a pantry, a scullery with a bath, a large coal-fired range and three bedrooms.

[Fig 6- Plan of Poplar Grove-type house]

The parlour, viewed by Unwin as merely imitative of middle-class values, had been observed by Rowntree in his 1899 study as being an under-used space, and given the limitation on costs; it was not included in the early houses. This proved to be a bone of contention for inhabitants who were keen to have a room separate from that in which the family lived, ate and cooked. The parlour was important in that it provided a place in which objects and furniture of value could be displayed. Additionally it was the inter-face between the private world

of family and the wider public domain, a space to meet the doctor, the vicar and the undertaker. In the early houses, baths were in the scullery covered with a wood board so as to provide a workspace when not in use, but by the mid 1920s houses had baths and toilets in a separate indoor room. The scullery had a sink with running hot and cold water, and space for preparing food under a large bright window. Photographs from 1912 show tidy, well kept interiors with an open coal fire and range, built-in cupboards, ceramic tiled floors with mats, and simple furniture in the sitting room - a table and dining chairs- with one or two comfortable chairs and side tables.³⁶ **[Fig 7 – Parlour interior]** A profusion of ornamental ceramic vases, jugs and plates, plants and framed prints filled these photographs that operate not merely as records of 'model' housing, but also as constitutive of 'model' consumption and domestic practices that re-iterate paternalistic middle-class expectations and working-class desires for certain types of goods, services and interior designs. Photographs showing the copper and inside bath; cosy fire-side with comfortable chairs; ordered and clean cupboards; a kitchen with sink, light window and hot and cold running water; and an array of decorative objects (well-polished brass fenders, coal scuttle and tools, upholstered furniture with ornamental cloths and covers, and decorative, matching jugs, vases and bowls) were not merely describing ideal working-class

'homes', but choreographing working-class identities. New Earswick 'The Model Village' was frequently reproduced as postcard images that idealized working class life by depicting blossoming, productive gardens, happy children and spotless housewives, but some historians have noted that for all their radical planning, the cottage designs of Parker and Unwin, perfectly expressed 'the ideology of women as keepers of the domestic sphere', and situated well away from industry, they inscribed the separation of men's paid work outside the home from women's unpaid labour within it.³⁷ This inherent dichotomy is implicit in the design of New Earswick where gender identities were clearly articulated in relation to specific notions of domesticity.

Nevertheless, it is important to note that Rowntree had observed the isolation faced by working-class women in York and the design of New Earswick was, in part, an attempt to overcome this. The overall layout allowed for communality by placing streets at right angles and in small closes, and by putting large rear gardens back to back so as to enable informal social interaction. Importantly working class and women's identities, as presented in these photographs and postcards of New Earswick, was part of the same terrain as that described in *Poverty*. Respectability and successful housewifery required order, cleanliness and work, but astutely Seebohm Rowntree recognized both the necessity to build 'community' and the importance of women as 'social

glue' in the creation of this. But ultimately these identities – both at New Earswick and in York - were borne of the hard work and emotional effort required to hold down a regular job, tend a productive garden, maintain a good home (with appropriate things), and keep children fed, well dressed and shod.

¹ In social policy and poverty research see: Howard Glennerster et al. *One hundred years of poverty and policy*, (York, 2004), Huw T.O.Davies et al. *What Works? Evidence-based policy and practice in public services*,(Bristol, 2000). In architecture and design, Gillian Darley, *Villages of Vision*, (London, 1975), Stephen Bayley, *The Garden City* (Milton Keynes: The Open University, 1975), David Jeremiah, *Architecture and Design for the family in Britain, 1900-70*, (Manchester, 2000).

² B. Seebohm Rowntree, *Poverty. A Study of Town Life*, (London, 1901),

³ Photographic collection at the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, York.

⁴ Rowntree, 304.

⁵ Asa Briggs, *A Study of the Work of Seebohm Rowntree 1871-1954*(London, 1961), p.17.

⁶ William Wallace, 'A Tribute to the Life and Work of Seebohm Rowntree', *Yorkshire Bulletin of Economic and Social Research*, vol.11, no.2 (December 1959).

⁷ Wallace, 99.

⁸ The Joseph Rowntree Village Trust, *New Earswick*,(York), 1913, 5.

⁹ Seebohm Rowntree's research methods were innovatory. Subsequently they became a cornerstone of 'evidence-based practise', a key methodology of social policy research.

See Glennerster et al.

¹⁰ Rowntree, viii.

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- ¹¹ see Laura Mason, 'Poverty and Policy: The Rowntree Study of 1899', in Eileen White, ed. *Feeding the City: York. The Provision of Food From Roman Times to the beginning of the twentieth century*, (York, 2000), 203-212
- ¹² Thorstein Veblen, *Theory of the Leisure Class*, chapter 2 'Pecuniary Emulation', (New York, 1899).
- ¹³ Joanne Bourne, *Working-class Cultures in Britain, 1890-1960*, (London, 1994), 5.
- ¹⁴ Rowntree, house no.17, 247.
- ¹⁵ Rowntree, house no. 18, 282.
- ¹⁶ Rowntree, house no.13, 282.
- ¹⁷ Rowntree, 282.
- ¹⁸ Rowntree, 57.
- ¹⁹ Rowntree, 54.
- ²⁰ Rowntree, 59.
- ²¹ Rowntree, 283.
- ²² Rowntree,156.
- ²³ Joseph Rowntree was an active member of the Temperance Society and wrote several books and pamphlets on this.
- ²⁴ Asa Briggs, *A Study of the Work of Seebohm Rowntree, 1871-1950* (London, 1961), 14-15
- ²⁵ Wallace, 94.
- ²⁶ Rowntree,77.
- ²⁷ Wallace, 99.
- ²⁸ Rowntree, 269, and 282.
- ²⁹ Peter Davey, *Arts and Crafts Architecture: The Search for Earthley Paradise* (London, 1994), 171.
- ³⁰ Davey, 171.
- ³¹ Davey, 171.
- ³² Barry Parker and Raymond Unwin, *The Art of Building a Home* (London, 1901)
- ³³ Barry Parker and Raymond Unwin, *The Art of Designing Small Houses and Cottages* (London, 1901), 111-2.

³⁴ see 'Cottages at New Earswick' *Country Life*, (Oct 31, 1925), 680-1 and Joe Murphy, *New Earswick. A Pictorial History*, (York, 2000).

³⁵ See *New Earswick*, The Joseph Rowntree Village Trust, 1913 at Joseph Rowntree Foundation Library, York.

³⁶ Photographic collection at the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, York.

³⁷ Matrix, *Making Space. Women and the Man Made Environment*, (London, 1984), 69-71.