

St Ann's

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Bill Silburn has taught at the University of Nottingham for many years. Poverty: The Forgotten Englishmen, a landmark study co-authored with Ken Coates, was published as a Penguin Special in 1970, and quickly became a set text for sociology students throughout the country. Coates and Silburn's work inspired 'St Ann's', a documentary film for Thames Television directed with love and affection by Stephen Frears. When the film was shown at the City's Broadway cinema in 2007, with Coates, Frears and Silburn all in attendance to discuss, the venue was completely sold out, and further screenings had to be scheduled. Many members of the audience were themselves from St Ann's, or had grown up there. Later, a similar event took place at the Chase Centre in St Ann's itself, attended by some people who had featured in Frears' film.

I

The publication in late 1965 of Abel-Smith and Townsend's monograph *The Poor and the Poorest*, and the linked establishment of the Child Poverty Action Group as a campaigning pressure group, rekindled serious concern about the extent and nature of poverty in post-war Britain. As the conventional wisdom in the 1950s and 60s was that the combination of full employment and the institutions of the welfare state had effectively eradicated poverty, so the suggestion that relative poverty was widespread, and had become steadily more widespread throughout the 1950s, seemed to many to be shockingly implausible.

At the time Ken Coates ran an adult education evening class examining aspects of the changing social structure of Great Britain. For this group of students *The Poor and the Poorest* became both a highly topical and a potentially controversial text. After careful examination it seemed to the group that while the evidence (based as it was upon official government statistics) was compelling, it didn't easily square with the perception that most people seemed to be better off than they ever had been, the shops were full of both goods and customers, there were plentiful employment opportunities, in short that (in Harold Macmillan's quip), 'England had never had it so good'. One possibility, of course, was that poverty might be unequally distributed, concentrated in some less favoured regions of the country. If that were the case, then Nottingham, with its broadly based and buoyant local economy, was unlikely to be one such region, and

consequently would not reflect the national picture. And so was set the scene for the recruitment of what eventually became known as the St. Ann's Study Group, determined to carry out an empirical enquiry to establish the truth of the situation as it was in one part of Nottingham. Little did anyone anticipate at this time that the work of the Group would continue for several years, and would lead to the publication of three local monographs (the first in 1967 and the third in 1980), and a Penguin Special that would go through three revised editions and is still in print as a Spokesman publication, more than forty years later; nor that it would be the subject of a radio-documentary by the Italia-Prize winning producer Charles Parker, and an hour-long television documentary, directed by Stephen Frears.

II

In September 1966 the study group started work, with Ken and myself as co-tutors. The student group was nineteen strong, full of enthusiasm for the project, and with a level of motivation that was to sustain them through long winter evenings trudging the streets and knocking on the doors of strangers. There were ten women and nine men, of all ages and backgrounds, and with very varied occupational and professional experience. Later on in this first phase of the research, when the time came to start to interpret our data, the diversity of the group was to be an enormous strength, adding depth and sensitivity to the analysis.

At the outset the plan was to carry out a city-wide sample survey, but we quickly saw that this was a task too great even for so highly motivated a team. However, several members of the group were familiar with the nearby district of St. Ann's, just a few minutes walk from our meeting-place, and they suggested we concentrate our efforts there. St Ann's was a densely congested and overcrowded slum area of dilapidated nineteenth century terraced housing. If there were to be pockets of poverty in Nottingham then surely they might be found in St. Ann's rather than in other more prosperous districts of the city.

For these practical reasons the Group decided to focus their enquiry on St Ann's, and spent the first few evenings familiarising themselves with the neighbourhood, and talking to as many local people as possible about their major concerns. Even at this early stage it quickly became clear that our initial preoccupation with measuring cash poverty was far too narrow a focus, and we needed to broaden the scope of the enquiry significantly. The topic that dominated casual conversations was the lamentable housing situation. The overwhelming majority of the houses in St Ann's were small

terraced houses, the front door opening straight from the pavement into the front room; in most cases there was no bathroom or indoor sanitation, with just one cold water tap in the kitchen supplying all the households needs for water. Most houses were seriously damp, making it very hard to keep supplies of food or clothing in reasonable condition. Coal fires were the norm, although coal was both expensive to buy and dirty to store and use. Housing conditions of this kind affected the overwhelming majority of the local people (whatever their financial situation), and impacted upon their lives in so many different ways that the study group felt obliged to make it an important part of the enquiry.

And once we extended our interest to include housing poverty, so we became aware of serious issues of personal and public health hazards exacerbated by the housing and environmental shortcomings. These impacted most obviously upon the many vulnerable older residents of the district, but many younger women and children also suffered badly, if less visibly. In the same way and as the enquiry progressed, so the group became more conscious of the educational disadvantages suffered by young people living in seriously overcrowded circumstances, without any personal space for private study, either in the home or outside it. The women members of the group argued for attention to be paid to the plight of housewives and mothers trying to maintain family life in cold, damp and cramped conditions, and this often meant struggling to balance a tight family budget. Family budgets brought us back to issues of employment, and it became quickly apparent that while there were plentiful employment opportunities in Nottingham, including in the many small factories and workshops in St Ann's itself, rates of pay were often pitifully low, and many men relied upon long hours of overtime to earn a barely adequate family income.

In brief, the Study Group started to amass evidence of the multiple and often interlinked levels of deprivation that blighted the lives and hopes of those afflicted by them. The first report, *St. Ann's: Poverty, deprivation and morale in a Nottingham Community*, published locally in late 1967, tried to capture all these different but linked aspects as graphically as possible, but supported at all stages by strong empirical evidence.

III

The report attracted considerable local interest, with very mixed reactions, some strongly supportive and some severely critical. Some critics rejected our findings outright, and felt driven to question our motives for having undertaken the enquiry in the first place. More serious were those who

criticised us for having identified St Ann's as the area we studied, as this might be seen as stigmatising to both the neighbourhood and its inhabitants; if that were so, then maybe our efforts would lower already low levels of local morale and pride. This possibility was a real one, but opinions were sharply divided about it, both within the group and beyond. But these different public reactions highlighted what many extended discussions within the group had already exposed, namely that our research could be understood from a number of alternative perspectives, and that each different perspective would alter how the data might be interpreted, the significance that would be attached to it, and the policy priorities and recommendations that might flow from it. One such difference of perspective was between those whose concern was with the specific local situation that had been studied and who were keen to explore the scope for local policies and activities that would ameliorate the situation, and those who understood the local data as being illustrative of a larger set of systemic shortcomings, requiring a broader and more fundamentally radical response.

Clearly the study was a local one, the conditions it described were experienced and felt locally, and the issues raised were seen as a challenge to local institutions and organisations. Most members of the study group (and most readers of the first report) had strong local connections and attachments, and were understandably keen to explore what local initiatives might address some at least of the issues raised by the report. Moreover an essentially local-centred approach was at the time reinforced by a number of developments taking place in the wider public environment. For example, the Plowden Report of 1967, 'Children and their primary schools', recommended that extra funds should be channelled into primary schools in deprived local areas. This idea was eagerly taken up by some members of the group who were determined to ensure that the children of St Ann's would not be overlooked if funds of this kind became available. A little later, the Skeffington Report of 1969, 'People and Planning', made a powerful case for much wider public participation in the development planning process, particularly at the early formative stage. This suggestion was seized upon by those who wanted to prioritise local and community involvement in all levels of public administration, and fundamental in the case of housing and town planning policy. Finally and more generally, there was throughout the 1960s considerable interest in the possibilities of local community development projects and programmes and, in 1969, Government funding was made available for a number of ambitious local schemes to explore the

feasibility and potential of this approach. Even as we started our own research, a vigorous Tenants' and Residents' Association was established in St Ann's.

There was certainly much to discuss about local policies and strategies for improvement. Foremost amongst these was the City Council's decision in principle, made even as the Study Group was establishing itself, to comprehensively redevelop the entire neighbourhood of St. Ann's. This was a plan that would take several years to accomplish, and some people were worried that the sense of local community would be destroyed in the process. Meanwhile, a spirited debate took place between those in favour of radical redevelopment, and those who favoured a more modest programme of improvement of the existing housing stock. The needs of the youngest children and their harassed mothers encouraged an interest in establishing or extending pre-school playgroups staffed very often by volunteers.

But all the time there was a parallel set of concerns, based on the recognition that what was revealed in St Ann's was evidence of a much wider set of systemic and structural failures, of a kind that could almost certainly be replicated in other major towns and cities. The St Ann's study was an illustrative example of something that had to be seen as part of a much bigger picture, of a national and international scale. In this case, local initiatives might (quite properly) attempt to minimise the damaging impact of multiple deprivation on individuals and families, but would not directly confront the fundamental driving forces that generated the deprivation in the first place.

I think that it was this larger challenge that came to preoccupy Ken Coates more and more. While he was certainly active in local political life, rather too much so for the Labour Party hierarchy, he already had a long track record of active involvement in the wider Trades Union Movement, in the Peace movement and the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, in the Anti-Apartheid Movement, and an abiding commitment to expanding democratic practices in the workplace. The importance of the St. Ann's research was that it very vividly illustrated his understanding of the most insidious (though invisible) aspect of deprivation. This is the lack of opportunity the poorest have to make effective decisions about their own lives and well-being, the constraints on choice, even of the most mundane kind. For many of the mothers trying to stretch their budgets to the maximum, such meagre choices as they had usually served not to improve their situation, to enhance their families well-being, but to stop it from getting worse. Their lives were a constant struggle to maintain what little

they had, with no realistic prospect of things getting better for them. And for many working men and women this democratic deficit was most marked in their own workplaces. Here they served their time, put in the hours, doing whatever they were told to do, little more than wage-slaves. This was not a matter that could be resolved locally, but one that required the widest possible mobilisation of ideas and individuals. In 1968, Ken and colleagues established the Institute for Workers' Control, and Ken developed his long and fruitful working partnership with Tony Topham. Towards the end of his life, as we see elsewhere in this volume, Ken wrote about the genesis of the IWC and the link he saw with the work of the St Ann's Study Group.

Twenty years later, as a Member of the European Parliament, Ken's tireless work on the global extension of human rights was, in a sense, the culmination of a mission that started during his years in the 1950s as a miner and union activist, that informed his long career as an academic and socialist thinker, and was exemplified by the collective enterprise of the St. Ann's Study Group.