

HERITAGE CIRCLE

Frances and Michael Holmes, The Old Courts and Yards of Norwich

Frances and Michael Holmes gave an excellent talk to the August meeting of the Heritage Circle at Rickinghall Village Hall about the old courts and yards of Norwich. It was based upon their extensive research into areas which housed about 10% of the city's population in the early 20th Century when there were 650 yards.

The courts and yards were mainly cul-de-sacs which were dark contained shoddy houses occupied by the poorest people in the city as the rents were very low. They had been built from the 18th century behind the grander houses which faced on to the main streets of the city centre. They were intended to house the rapidly rising population of Norwich which trebled in size during the 19th Century to 120,000 by 1911. The yards were unplanned, infill developments with narrow entrances from the main street. The small houses were often poorly built and lacked basic amenities. There would be a communal toilet and a single water pump serving up to a dozen families. The poor ventilation, combined with piles of refuse and insanitary conditions would have made the air foul in the yards. Despite this, the yards often had elegant names, such as Queen of Hungary Yard or Unicorn Yard. These were often derived from the name of a nearby pub.

Conditions in the yards were appalling when it was wet. Drains would get blocked and refuse was difficult to remove. However, families did take a pride in their appearance and the yards frequently had a very strong communal spirit. The talk included interviews with people who lived in the yards in their childhood. They commented on how the front step was kept white and the door furniture sparkled. Some houses were whitewashed inside every week to keep down the bugs. One woman said that every autumn she and her sisters returned to school with new dresses made by their mother. Similarly, their father made shoes for all of the family. Women worked constantly to manage the household with none of the technology available today but they chatted with neighbours while collecting water or were washing clothes. Families in the yards made their own entertainment, such as street parties or carnivals. Neighbours tried to help each other through difficult times as there was little state support available.

From 1897 Norwich City Council tried to improve the yards but tended to try to address single issues, such as toilets, rather than pushing addressing the whole gamut of problems of yards. Real change began after World War I when Lloyd George talked of creating 'Homes fit for heroes.' Government funding allowed the building of new council estates in areas like Lakenham and Mile Cross. Unfortunately, these developments had little impact on the yards as the rents were unaffordable. Real change only began after the Housing Act of 1933 when local authorities were given access grants if they rehoused people living in slums. Many yards in Norwich were designated as slums and cleared. People living in yards were given newly built council houses but the slum landlords received little or no compensation. People's lives were transformed by being given good quality, but cheap, houses in open, tree-lined streets which had running water, gardens. Often communities from the yards were kept together as they were rehoused on the same estates. There was a cost. Some of the historic buildings of the city were demolished as well as the yards that stood behind them.

The post-war period saw a continuing movement of people out of the city centre, initially into suburbs, but later into the villages around Norwich. However, in recent years there has been a trend to return to the city centre to live in renovated old houses or new developments, some of which have retained the names of the yards that once stood on the site.

The next meeting of the Heritage Circle will be at 7.30pm on Wednesday 26 September at The Village Hall, Rickinghall. A short AGM will precede a talk by Martyn Taylor entitled *The A-Z of Streets of Bury St Edmunds – how they have changed over the years*. Further information about the Heritage Circle is available on its website, www.heritagecircle.onesuffolk.net.

Gerry Gurhy