

Chapter 13 Plotters and squatters of the 20th century

"A combination of cheap land and transport, prefabricated materials, and the owner's labour and skills had given back to the ordinary people of the land, the opportunity denied to them for over two hundred years, an opportunity which, at the time, was still available to almost half of the world's non-industrialised population: the freedom for a man to build his own house. It was a freedom that was to be very short-lived,"

Anthony King: *The Bungalow: A Global History*¹

All through the first half of the 20th century, British agriculture was sunk in a depression that lasted until the introduction of government support with guaranteed prices in 1939 (with a brief respite from 1916 until the end of the first world war because of the loss of shipping importing food). Rural land-owning had become, in the eyes of the land-owners, a liability rather than an asset. The exceptions were, of course, the really big aristocratic families with vast holdings of urban land, mineral rights, or with lucrative marriages to the daughters of industrial millionaires.

Land which had been the subject of bitterly-contested enclosure battles, dispossessing cottagers, commoners and small farmers a century earlier, was sold to whoever made an offer in the 1920s. As Howard Newby explained,

"In four years between 1918 and 1922 England, in the words of a famous Times leader of the day, 'changed hands'. One quarter of the area of England was bought and sold in this hectic period of transac-

tion, a disposal of land which was unprecedented since the dissolution of the monasteries in the sixteenth century,"²

The word 'plotlands' was later devised by planners and conservation bodies to describe those areas of former farmland where, as one bankruptcy followed another, and as the willingness of migrating Scottish and Welsh farmers who were seeking a place to make good slowly evaporated, estate agents and speculators had devised other markets. They sought to sell fields in small plots where city-dwellers could, for a trivial sum, buy the site for their week-end or retirement home, chicken farm, chalet or holiday shanty. Sites were advertised in pubs and local papers and on the backs of tram tickets issued by the London County Council.

By 1939 this plotland landscape was to be found in pockets across the North Downs, across the Hampshire plain, and along the Thames Valley at sites like Penton Hook, Marlow Bottom and Purley Park. It was interspersed among the established holiday resorts of East and West Sussex at places like Shoreham Beach, Pett Level, Dungeness and Camber Sands, and, famously, at Peacehaven. It crept up the East Coast, from Sheppey in Kent to Lincolnshire, by way of Canvey Island and Jaywick Sands, and it clustered inland all across south Essex. There is an invisible geological line, running across the county of Essex, dividing the clay that farmers used to call two-horse land, from the thicker kind they knew as three-horse land which went out of use earlier.

When Dennis Hardy and I gathered together the story of the plotlands of South-East England in our book *Arcadia for All*³ we were conscious that we had been just in time to question the survivors from the first generation of these new country dwellers. Sometimes our conversations revealed that they themselves were only one generation removed from rural life. Their own parents had left the village for the East End of London in the agricultural depres-

sion of the late 19th century, and they had used a free rail trip from Fenchurch Street station to South Essex, to pay £5 at an open-air auction for a plot on which to erect, first of all, a second-hand army tent. Often only a pound was paid as a deposit on the title deeds, the rest to be paid in monthly installments. We had confined ourselves to the south-east of England and the London hinterland, but the plotland phenomenon was not confined to the south-east. Every industrial conurbation in Britain once had these escape routes to the country, river or sea. For the West Midlands there was the Severn Valley or North Wales, for Liverpool and Manchester, places in the Wirral, for Glasgow, the Ayrshire coast and even the banks of Loch Lomond, for the West Riding towns and cities, the Yorkshire coast and the Humber estuary, and for those of Tyneside and Teesside, the coasts of Northumberland and Durham.

It is as though a proportion of the population felt obliged to follow some ancient human habit in seeking out some place, however hard to find, where people could build for themselves. There are parallels of course with the 'chalet gardens' — the combination of allotment gardens and holiday cottages which are part of the culture of urban life in the Netherlands and the Scandinavian countries. When David Crouch and I were writing the history of the culture of the allotment, we found disbelief in other countries that spending the week-end on the allotment was a notion regarded with horror by British local authorities and completely outlawed.⁴ But the most suggestive comparison is with urban life in the former Soviet empire countries like Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia or Bulgaria, where the residents of city blocks of flats exercise endless ingenuity in finding a patch of land out of town which evolves from an allotment garden into a second home, or *dacha*, and ultimately to the place perceived as the family base, to which the week-day city flat is secondary.⁵

In Britain, the spread of plots and settlements across derelict farmland aroused horror among right-thinking

and privileged people. They were seen as a blot on the landscape and a sanitary menace (since they failed to comply with the building by-laws), and their existence was a major factor in winning support for the comprehensive system of development control that has existed in Britain since the post-war Town and Country Planning Act. Plotland development was outlawed, and some planning authorities sought to eliminate them. On most sites they evolved through the usual processes of improvement over time into ordinary suburban housing, hidden in woodland. As everything is eventually sanctified as history, several plotland sites have been designated as Conservation Areas, and one of them, at Basildon in Essex, has a Plotland Museum.⁶

The plotland settlers were quite often described as squatters, with the word being used as a term of abuse. It was, in fact, inaccurate since most had paid for their sites at what was the highest price that the sellers could obtain. But when, in south Essex, a plot was bought for a one pound deposit and four further monthly installments, the seller lacked the clerical staff to chase the missing pound, so title to the site might be dubious, but was eventually validated by time and undisputed possession. The developer of Peacehaven on the South Coast, Charles Neville, staged a competition in which thousands of entrants were told that they had won a free plot, but were asked to pay three guineas for legal fees for the transfer of the land. "Sceptics were quick to point out that at a purchase cost of £15 per acre and with a 'conveyancing charge' equivalent to more than £47 per acre, even allowing for minimal expenses, Neville stood to gain a profit in the region of £30 for every acre."⁷ The case ended in court and the judge concluded that the plots were absolutely worthless and that the scheme was no more than a clever fraud. When I discussed the developer's reputation in 1980 with Mrs Sayers, a Peacehaven resident for sixty years, she responded with the observation that she and her husband had found opportunities in settling there, which were denied them everywhere else.⁸

At the end of the second world war the concept of squatting was given a new emphasis. No new houses had been built in Britain for six years, while there was a vast number of new families, and the age at which young people found partners had lowered significantly. Demobilised members of the armed forces were desperate to get away from overcrowded parental households. In May 1946 large numbers of families began to occupy empty military camps. Aneurin Bevan, the Minister of Health (then the department of government responsible for housing) sought to turn public feeling against the camp squatters by suggesting that they were "Jumping their places in the housing queue", although in fact they were jumping out of the queues by moving into buildings which would not otherwise have been used for housing purposes. In September, Aneurin Bevan, back from his holiday in Switzerland, instructed local authorities to cut off gas and electricity supplies to property occupied by squatters, but in October the government announced that 1,038 camps in England and Wales had been occupied by 39,535 people, and began to urge local authorities to install families in military camps.⁹ By this time local councils were already directing homeless families to occupy huts in camps where the unofficial settlers were already organising communal cooking and nursery facilities and forming a rota to stoke the boilers left behind by the armed forces. Early in 1947 a newspaper correspondent provided a very revealing report from a Lancashire camp:

"There are two camps within the camp — the official squatters (that is, people who have been placed in the huts after the first invasion) and the unofficial squatters (the veterans who have been allowed to remain on sufferance). Both pay the same rent of 10 shillings a week — but there the similarity ends. Although one would have imagined that the acceptance of rent from both should accord them identical privileges, in fact it does not. Workmen have put

up partitions in the huts of the official squatters and have put in sinks and numerous other conveniences. These are the sheep; the goats have perforce to fend for themselves.

"An interesting commentary on the situation was made by one of the young welfare officers attached to the housing department. On her visit of inspection she found that the goats had set to work with a will, improvising partitions, running up curtains, distemping, painting and using initiative. The official squatters on the other hand, sat about glumly without lifting a hand to help themselves and bemoaning their fate, even though they might have been removed from the most appalling slum property. Until the overworked corporation workmen got around to them they would not attempt to improve affairs themselves."¹⁰

Meanwhile, as the camps began to fill, squatters turned to other empty buildings: hotels, shops, mansions, disused schools, race tracks and a stadium were among the places occupied. The most spectacular phase of the 1946 campaign of urban squatting was the occupation of a series of hotels and luxury flats which had been requisitioned for wartime use and were now empty. Police attitudes to the squatters varied from day to day from sympathy to threats, according to their instructions from the Home Office. Described in the press as a Communist stunt, the wave of squatting ended with a 'general evacuation' by the London squatters when a High Court injunction against them was granted.

Local authorities found accommodation of one kind or another for the urban squatters, while the camp settlers had settled down until they could find something better. Urban squatting continued quietly, especially as local councils acquired vast tracts of urban housing and left it empty for eventual comprehensive redevelopment. It re-emerged as a public issue in 1968 thanks to two activists,

Ron Bailey and Jim Radford, who had been busy agitating against the failure of local authorities to comply with their statutory duty to the homeless, trying after long and bitter campaigns to draw public attention to conditions in hostels for homeless families. By this time, as Bailey put it, "a squatting campaign was clearly on the cards; it only needed a spark to set it off."¹¹ They installed homeless families in unoccupied houses which had been publicly acquired and earmarked for demolition years later for eventual road improvements, car parking or municipal offices.

Local authorities responded violently, using so-called 'bailiffs' to intimidate squatting families and using their own employees to wreck the interiors of empty houses to keep the squatters out. Widely reported in the press and on television, these activities brought public sympathy for the squatters. Several London boroughs entered into legal agreements for accepting squatters as tenants, with the result as Bailey later put it that "tens of thousands of homes that would otherwise have stayed empty have been brought back into use and hundreds of thousands of homeless people given new hope and dignity."¹²

Municipal politicians have come to agreements with squatters (and this is perhaps more evident in other European cities like Amsterdam and Copenhagen), but central government politicians of both major parties in Britain have been unremittingly hostile. Once they discovered that squatting was seen as a civil, rather than a criminal offence, and was governed by legislation dating back to the year 1381, they set about changing the situation. The Law Commission responded in 1974 with a document on Criminal Law Offences of Entering and Remaining on Property, which was incorporated into legislation by the Criminal Law Act of 1977. This failed to deter the country's 50,000 or so squatters, and in practice, so did its successor, the Criminal Justice Act of 1994.

In preparation for this Act, the Home Office issued a Consultation Paper in which it stated that it "does not

accept the claim that squatting results from social deprivation. Squatters are generally there by their own choice, moved by no more than self-gratification or an unreadiness to respect other people's rights." (Para 62). It also observed that cases of squatting "involving young children were negligible." (Para 9).¹³ But in the year when the Act became law, Ron Bailey used the latest available survey figures to show that the facts were different. He found that,

"About one third of squatting households contain children and this has been the case for over five years. Under Section 58 of the Housing Act of 1985 all such families are statutorily homeless and so entitled to be accommodated by local authorities. The fact they they are squatting actually saves ratepayers vast amounts of money. Many other squatters need psychiatric help, since 1990 more than 28,000 hospital beds have been lost and only 5,000 residential places provided. Thus, many ill people have drifted into sleeping rough and squatting. In addition, currently 2,000 squatters are women escaping violent partners. Even more squatters are homeless single people for whom there is no statutory provision at all and for whom council waiting lists are meaningless. About one in twenty squatters (2,500 people) are ex-owner occupiers, evicted as they were unable to meet mortgage repayments. In conclusion, therefore, all the available evidence shows that squatters are homeless people in desperate housing need, often with other social problems such as mental illness or the need to escape violence and harassment. These are the people that the government is attempting to make into criminals."¹⁴

In shifting the act of squatting from the category of a civil offence to that of a criminal action, successive Home

Secretaries of both major parties reflected the fears of readers of the popular press that they might return from holidays and find strangers sleeping in their beds. The reality is different. The overwhelming majority of squatted buildings had been empty for years and had been the subject of a compulsory purchase order from a department of central or local government for a vast project: new roads, housing or hospital-building, which, through a change of policy failed to happen. People like Ron Bailey persuaded some local authorities to make these houses available for 'short-life housing co-ops' and some of those co-ops have had a very long life.

Other such houses have been in the unchallenged occupation of squatters for so long that they have chosen to secure their future by claiming what is still known as 'squatter's rights'. As the law stands, under the provisions of the Limitation Act of 1980, a squatter can gain title to land or premises through 'adverse possession' if he has been in unchallenged possession for 12 years. A great deal of publicity has been given to a handful of cases in south London where squatters have succeeded in gaining title in this way.¹⁵

Not far away was Tenants' Corner, an old shop acquired for a redevelopment that never happened and which lay empty until it was occupied as a meeting place for tenant groups when the Thatcher government began compelling local authorities to dispose of public housing. It had an important role in the campaign for tenant co-operatives. As I knew that they had been the occupiers for longer than the statutory period, I asked the people running Tenants' Corner whether they intended to claim possession. "Of course not," was their reply. "Why should we join the queue to make a private profit from public assets?"

The instances of claims for 'adverse possession' that actually reach the courts tend to arise when one land occupier seeks payment from another for the right of access across a particular piece of forgotten land. In 1994 a Suffolk businessman published a book called *How to*

Claim Land and Houses in the UK, remarking that "It sounds unbelievable, but there are millions of pounds waiting to be made."¹⁶

The last decade of the 20th century witnessed two interesting examples of creative squatting. The first was Exodus in Bedfordshire. This grew out of the 'rave' culture of instant large-scale overnight music festivals.

"On 4 January 1993, Exodus supported fourteen homeless people who had squatted a long-empty property in Luton, the Oakmore Hotel. Money from bucket collections at the parties helped renovate the derelict property... On 15 January police raided and severely damaged the Oakmore Hotel... Six weeks after the initial police raid, the Oakmore was evicted during a snow storm. The occupants were given half an hour to leave. St Margaret's Hospice, a derelict old people's home, was immediately occupied. Exodus were eventually granted a lease, and renamed the property HAZ Manor, Housing Action Zone Manor. People pay their rent/housing benefit into a communal pot, which is used to renovate the building. Decisions are reached by consensus rather than majority rule at collective meetings. Space has been created for some forty people to live there now, with their own rooms and a communal kitchen and living areas. Workshops are being built, crafts learned. It's a big miracle, a beacon of Do-it-Ourselves help."¹⁷

Tim Malyon, who watched and enthused over this "history of reclaiming territory for the dispossessed", went on to describe the next step in the evolution of Exodus. One of the party venues for rave parties initiated by Exodus was Longmeadow Farm. In the days of continuous compulsory purchase by the Department of Transport for new roads (in this case the widening of the M1) the farm had been acquired and then left to rot. Exodus, Tim Malyon

explains, squatted the farm and was eventually offered a lease by the DOT. As at HAZ Manor, the buildings and a house and bungalow were renovated, with a busy use of wood recycled from donated pallets, and a herd of animals was acquired.¹⁸ Before the end of the century there were new efforts by government departments to evict Exodus.¹⁸

The second of these end of century campaigns was the attempt to put the issue of the right of access to land back on the popular agenda in Britain with a network of propagandist groups called *The Land is Ours*.¹⁹ Its first manifestation was the invasion of a site near St George's Hill in Surrey, where Winstanley's Diggers had squatted in 1949, and this was followed in May 1996 by the occupation of a long-empty site on the banks of the Thames at Wandsworth in London. This derelict industrial land was of thirteen acres (5.2 hectares), and the local planning authority had rejected one superstore proposal after another, on the grounds that they contributed nothing to the locality. The campaigners submitted a planning application pressing the claims for a new urban village of do-it-yourself homes and gardens. Five hundred activists settled on the site in May 1996 in a glare of publicity and began to put up shacks and shanties, tents and yurts. They cleared rubbish and planted gardens. It fell to me on the third day of the occupation to be the invited speaker describing the hidden history of squatter housing, talking in a building that had not existed a day before.

One of the people supporting me there was the late Eric Mattocks, a founder and treasurer of the Advisory Service for Squatters, bringing with him, straight from the press, the tenth edition of the *Squatters Handbook*.²⁰ It was he who had negotiated with the Greater London Council, the amnesty of 1978, in which about 12,000 squatters in council-owned property, were given authorised tenancies, and he sought to stress that squatting was not merely a demonstration, it was an initiator of social change. The owners of the site, Guinness, held back for five and a half months, and at dawn on 15 October 1996, employed bailiffs supported by

nearly 250 policemen in riot gear to drive out the squatters. The occupation of the site, known as Gargoyle Wharf, had served to re-awaken interest in Britain in the issue of urban land and its uses.

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