

Our Humble Abodes: Can memories of Liverpool's court housing challenge the official historical record?

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Abstract

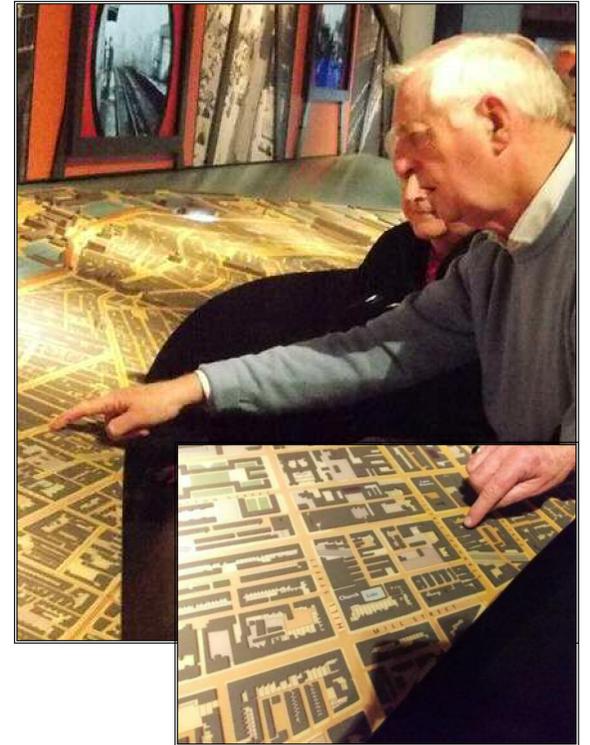


Above: 5 Court, Mann Street, Liverpool 8 in 1953: National Museums Liverpool

My wider PhD research suggests that there is potential for combining oral history testimony with physical archaeological evidence to enhance our understanding of community and place. The 'Our Humble Abodes' project aims to fill the gaps in knowledge of Liverpool's court housing by undertaking oral history interviews and historic building recordings.

Court housing was a form of low quality, high density 'slum' housing, arranged around courtyards and constructed back-to-back with the adjacent houses of the next court. In Liverpool 'slum clearance' programmes of the 1960's have resulted in few extant remains and so oral history is an important source of evidence to fill the gaps in our knowledge of court housing.

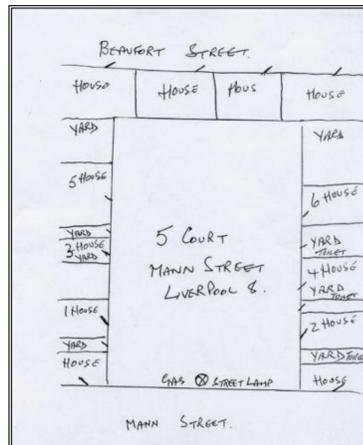
This poster will explore the significance of the memories and photographs the 'Our Humble Abodes' project has collected, particularly in regard to challenging the official historical record.



Above: Mr Smith sharing memories using historic maps: National Museums Liverpool



Above: 5 Court, Mann Street, Liverpool 8 in 1953: National Museums Liverpool



Left: Sketch of 5 Court, Mann Street by Mr Smith: National Museums Liverpool

Our Humble Abodes

Kerry Massheder and Liz Stewart interviewed eleven former court residents. We asked about room and court size, living conditions and community, and also sought personal opinions about poverty and the courts being labelled as 'slums'.

Court residents in the early 20th century were a tight knit community. Forced 'slum' clearances in the 1950s and 1960s resulted in a sense of loss for the court 'way of life'—the ex-residents did not agree their courts were 'slums'.

'The court had six separate houses, all occupied with young families living... a very close-knit situation, all helping one-another. It was hard, but it was pleasant to grow up as a child.' Kenny Smith 24.09.2013

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Court Housing

Court housing was a form of poor quality, high density 'back-to-back' style housing in urban Britain that existed from the late 18th Century until the mid 20th Century.

In Liverpool, court houses were commonly built three storeys high, both 'back-to-back' and 'side-to-back' with anything from two to ten houses in each court. The houses were built around a shared central court typically with an ash pit, standpipe, and toilet for the use of all court residents. As with other forms of Industrial Revolution era urban housing, courts were often overcrowded, insanitary, lacked adequate ventilation and were inhabited by the poverty stricken working-class and became labelled as 'slums' by health reformers. In fact, much historical writing on court housing has been intentionally biased, aiming to facilitate the demolition of 'slum' housing.

Conclusions

Although only a limited number of participants have been interviewed, their opinions were that the courts were not 'slums': *'Well it's totally unfounded, people found themselves....they were born into those conditions, there were some lovely people, you know.'* Bernard Rowan 06.02.2014.

The Our Humble Abodes oral histories challenge the official historical narrative regarding court housing in Liverpool.

'I have this little dream now and again... our house is still standing there, and I'm walking over rubble, you know, up the court, and I go in the house ... there's an armchair there, and the old steel fireplace, its got the oven and the range and everything, and I'm standing looking round and I see a little flicker in the ash like that, and I goes over and the pokers there so I just give it a little nudge and the next thing the fire lights up! So I just sit down there and look at the fire and then puff-it just disappears! It's like, you know, you were happy there so that dream is like, you get that little flicker of light and when you touch it, it all becomes lovely and warm again, so you're like...home.' Mike McCann 22.01.2014