

John Edgar Mann

## Delmar Bicker-Caarten, Champion of 'Outcast' Southampton

In the closing years of the nineteenth century, a now long forgotten tub thumper took up the cause of the poorest of the poor and, in the columns of *The Southampton Times*, lambasted the civic fathers for their lack of concern at the conditions 'downtown', particularly in the Simnel Street area.

On November 8, 1890, the paper published a letter from this man, local radical Delmar Bicker-Caarten, under the title 'The Exceeding Bitter Cry of Outcast Southampton', in which he described just how bad things were in the, 'small, close, dirty and evil-smelling streets with their tumbledown houses, closely packed with human beings, with no provision for decency or

cleanliness, dismal, wretched, squalid and hideous beyond words to express'. He is appalled by the tribes of children, 'hungry, dirty, barefooted and wild, utterly neglected, growing up to swell the ranks of crime and pauperism'.

Bicker-Caarten, it's interesting to note, was a commercial traveller by profession and obviously as adept at putting across a cause as he probably was at promoting a product. What was the point, he asked the council, of spending money on waterworks and sewage works, if fever dens, 'abodes of misery and darkness', were left to spread diseases through the town?



*No mod cons: Castle Lane, 1892 (City Archive)*

On May 17, 1893, he answered his critics in a Fabian lecture called 'Objections to Socialism, with a light sketch of a probable socialistic development'. According to a note in the published lecture, it was delivered one morning 'in the Avenue'.

Bicker-Caarten, who would only be satisfied by the establishment of the Kingdom of God on earth, called for due reward for labour, equality of opportunity, and other then unachieved goals. The lecture, he claimed, showed how Socialism could be brought about in a reasonable and gradual manner without injustice to any class and without disturbance of present relationships. He had no time for bloody revolution.

Another critic who took up the Bicker-Caarten cause in the local press was a Liberal councillor, Edward Gayton. He too was appalled by the, 'filthy pestilential slums', where whole families lived in one room, the occupants eking out a precarious living as hawkers, rag-pickers, flower-sellers and the like. As many as 70 or 80 people shared one lavatory and one water tap.

The editorial staff of *The Southampton Times*, spurred by the revelations of Bicker-Caarten and Gayton, ran a series of articles on 'Southampton Slums and their Inhabitants'. With reform in the air things slowly began to change and by the turn of the century a brighter picture of life in the 'abyss' was forming. St. Michael's municipal lodging house (since pulled down) was opened in 1899 and new housing built by 1903.

What a contrast between the area today, with its neat and tasteful houses, and the medievalist wooden hovels of the nineties (Simnel Street was only five feet eight inches wide at its narrowest point). Needless to say, people were warned about going down to this brutal neighbourhood at night, particularly Saturday night when there was a great deal of violence.

In 1895 there was an inquiry into an application under the Housing of the Working Classes Act to clear away the offensive dwellings. A new

dawn was breaking and doubtless Delmar Bicker-Caarten watched it with pride.

He obviously made his mark on Southampton. In 1894 the *Southern Referee* included a poem about the forthcoming battle between the Saints and their Freemantle rivals, the Magpies,

*To the speeches of Bicker-Caarten  
No more any interest clings  
The bookies no longer offer  
To lay on the sport of kings  
But all on this semi-final  
Are willing to plank their tin  
For who can answer the question  
Will Saints or Magpies win?*



*The Bicker-Caarten home in Cranbury Avenue as it looks today.*

Bicker-Caarten lived for a time with his family at 4 Upper Chamberlayne Place, Cranbury Avenue. The house is still there, divided into flats. He later moved to 2 Forest View and is listed in Kelly's directory as late as 1916/17. He died in 1928 in Amersham, aged 74.