

## Social action and social crisis in late Victorian Southampton

One who strolls through this quarter of town, especially by night, must feel that below his ken are the awful deeps of an ocean teeming with life, but enshrouded in impenetrable mystery. As he catches here and there a glimpse of a face under the flickering, uncertain light of a lamp - the face perhaps of some woman, bloated by drink and distorted by passion - he may get a momentary shuddering sense of what humanity may sink to...<sup>1</sup>

This extract from 'An Autumn Evening in Whitechapel', is a perfect example of the middle class view of the poor in the latter decades of the nineteenth century. The poor were almost a different race, degenerate to the normal human race, an inevitable product of the process of industrialisation and urbanisation of the country. Froude commented on this inevitability in *Oceana* comparing the state of England with that of ancient Rome, where Horace 'noted the growing degeneracy. He foretold the inevitable consequences'.<sup>2</sup> Froude's cautionary note on English society, in particular that of the residuum, the poor city inhabitants, reflects one of the key fears of the Victorian middle-classes in the late Victorian and Edwardian period. Degeneracy, both mental and physical: immorality, crime, disease, prostitution, all were an inevitable symptom of the condition in which the poor were forced to live. That they were reduced to this was shocking enough but it was the fear that they may drag the respectable poor down with them or, worse still, rise up against the middle and upper classes that was the major concern of the day. These fears coincided with the rise in social action on both a local and national stage but the extent to which the one drove the other is difficult to assess.

<sup>1</sup> Littell, *Littell's Living Age* (November 3, 1888)

<sup>2</sup> J.A. Froude, *Oceana* (1886)

The focus of this essay is the housing crisis of the 1890s and the debate that accompanied this social action. In looking at the language that formed this debate I propose to form an overall picture of the extent to which Stedman Jones' argument that 'the more predominant feeling was not guilt but fear'<sup>3</sup> applies to social action in Southampton during this period. The housing issue will form the central focus but it is important to note that this was not the only social issue in the period. As a port city Southampton was caught up in the dock strikes of the late 1880s and although this essay may touch briefly upon this there is insufficient space to investigate this in any detail.

The belief that the 'residuum', as opposed to the honest poor, were criminal, dangerous and immoral was nothing new. As early as the eighteenth century the view was being expressed widely and featured considerably in the debate on the New Poor Law. They found popular expression in the writings of novelists from Charles Dickens to George Gissing for whom poverty, crime and immorality seem to go hand-in-hand. But by the 1870s there existed, as Jose Harris described it, the 'nightmare vision of social "degeneration" and inexorable racial decline'<sup>4</sup>. Social theorists expressed the notion that this residuum was made up of 'irredeemable social incompetents' who should be separated from the honest poor so that they did not drag them down; criminologists advanced theories that ascribed criminality and immorality to inherited mental or physical pathology. These fears found popular outlet in a massive range of late Victorian literature from

<sup>3</sup> Gareth Stedman Jones, *Outcast London*, (Milton Keynes: The Open University, 2002)

<sup>4</sup> Jose Harris, *Private Lives, Public Spirit: Britain 1870-1914*, (London: Penguin, 1994) p.241

popular fiction to government reports. Indeed, the reports on the Poor Laws commented that savages ‘lurked at the bottom of our civilisation’<sup>5</sup>, and if not brought under control would overthrow society.

These fears were fuelled by debate and events of the 1880s. Writers such as Engels wrote that, ‘the unemployed, losing patience, will take their fate into their own hands’, and revelations such as Andrew Mearn’s, ‘The Bitter Cry of Outcast London’ in October 1883, shocked the nation when he revealed the ‘vast mass of moral corruption, of heartbreaking misery and absolute godlessness [...] concealed by the thinnest crust of civilisation and decency’<sup>6</sup>. To this document alone can be attributed much of the middle class sense of social crisis and its associated dangers. Its publication essentially frightened the public and as such drove the politicians to action. Mearn’s pamphlet highlighted the danger that the poor posed,

One of the saddest results of this overcrowding is the inevitable association of honest people with criminals [...] Incest is common, and no forms of vice and sensuality causes surprise or attracts attention<sup>7</sup>.

These fears found spectacular expression in the autumn of 1888 when the brutal murder of six prostitutes by Jack the Ripper in the East End of London shocked the nation. The outcry and debate that surrounded the case ‘condensed the vague fears of the West End about the brutality, immorality, and destructiveness of the East End into one mysterious entity’<sup>8</sup>. Despite the likelihood that the Ripper was in fact from a far more well-to-do background, the debate drew a clear link between the horrific crimes and the condition in which the poor lived. Even

scientific journals such as *The Lancet* stated that the poverty, overcrowding and poor sanitation ‘renders more probable the conception and execution of such crimes as those that now absorb the public attention’<sup>9</sup>. Similarly, public fears were all too evident during the London Dock strikes one noticeable aspect of which was the rush to contribute to the Mansion House fund, which led Morris to comment that although the generosity may stem in part from people’s consciences it was, ‘partly also, I think, from fear’<sup>10</sup>. This fear stemmed to a great extent from the belief in the susceptibility of the poor to socialist subversion, a subversion that would fulfil the long held fear that the poor would ‘burst their barriers at last and declare open and violent war against law and order and property’.

Charles Booth’s extensive survey of London did little to lessen this fear even though Booth himself noted that the conditions of the poor had improved and that if his survey had been carried out fifty years earlier it would have revealed, ‘a greater proportion of depravity and misery than now exists’<sup>11</sup>. His notes on the *Life and Labour of the People in London* are full of such comments that highlight these fears, immorality appearing to be a particular favourite of Booth’s, describing overcrowding as the ‘main cause of drink & vice’, that there existed ‘a good deal of sexual immorality – incest’ and ‘nothing can surpass scenes of Bank Holiday immorality & indecency’. In his analysis of the reasons behind pauperism the main factors are consistently drink, vice and immorality, and, he makes the distinction of those who are paupers through ‘association and heredity’. This latter point seems to be associated with the degeneration argument.

Although Booth notes that only a percentage of paupers are affected by drink, a statement that several historians have latched on to in their arguments, he goes on to point out that a closer inspection ‘might disclose a greater connection

<sup>5</sup> quoted in Harris, *Private Lives* p.242

<sup>6</sup> Andrews Mearns, *The Bitter Cry of Outcast London* (1883) ed. By A.S. Wohl (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1970)

<sup>7</sup> Andrews Mearns, *The Bitter Cry of Outcast London* (1883) ed. By A.S. Wohl (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1970)

<sup>8</sup> Robert F. Haggard, *Jack the Ripper as the Threat of Outcast London*.

<sup>9</sup> *The Lancet* (October 6, 1888)

<sup>10</sup> William Morris, *Political Writings*, quoted in A824 study guide (Open University, 2004)

<sup>11</sup> Charles Booth, *Life and Labour of the People in London* Vol. I (London: 1892), p.174

than here appears between pauperism and the public-house'. In an interview with the Rev A. Osborne Jay of Holy Trinity, Shoreditch he notes that 'Father J is convinced that for many of these people there was no alternative between crime and the workhouse: they are an absolutely degenerate lot morally and physically'. However, despite this language it is important to note that Booth himself disagreed that the poor were a threat noting that the criminal class constituted only 1.5 percent of the population and that the poor were 'a disgrace but not a danger'<sup>12</sup>.

But such reassurances did little to quash the belief. The social novel perpetuated such beliefs. A prime example being Arthur Morrison's *The Child of the Jago* (1896) in which he follows young Dicky Perrott's inevitable decline into brutality and crime. His description of why Mrs Parrott doesn't fit in with the other inhabitants of the Jago is almost a summary of the middle class fears of the poor: drunkenness, brutality and irreligion,

She was never drunk, she never quarrelled, she did not gossip freely. Also her husband beat her but rarely, and then not with a chair nor a poker. Justly irritated by such superiorities as these, the women of the Jago were ill-disposed to brook another: which was, that Hannah Perrott had been married in church<sup>13</sup>.

What was new in the debate was the belief that the race as a whole was degenerating. This had particular implications in terms of the future of the Empire as Arnold White noted in 1886 'Distress in London is not the distress of a great city, it is the distress of a great empire'<sup>14</sup>. This new cause for alarm had been inspired by the report that thousands of volunteers for service in the Boer War were found to be physically unfit. Popular opinion stated that this was a result of the unhealthy conditions of urban and industrial

life. The discovery that the condition of the poor was far more likely due to the fact that this was the first time men had been examined in such numbers but whatever the reason it led to a flood of debate and 'scientific' theories on the state of the race. This belief found its clearest expression in the debate surrounding the Physical Deterioration inquiry of 1904.

As already mentioned, these fears of the poor were on the whole nothing new. What was new was the popular expression of these fears in middle class debate as well as a corresponding action in the promotion of morals, cleanliness and temperance. The reasons for this coincide, and are often attributed to, the publication of Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* in 1859. One strand of the debate that followed its publication was that religion and morality would be undermined. Historians such as Himmelfarb argue that what in fact happened was for morality to become a surrogate for religion. George Eliot summed up this chain of events, stating, 'I now believe in nothing, but I do not the less believe in morality'<sup>15</sup>.

This change in debate can also be placed in the socio-economic debate of the mid-1800s. Agricultural decline, economic depression and urban migration meant that the outcast poor, respectable working classes and middle classes were in closer contact than ever before as both urban and industrial congestion increased. In essence, it wasn't so much that the poor had changed but that the middle classes were brought into contact with them. It has also been argued that this developing concern with moral matters was specifically middle-class and that the purpose was to instil these into the poor for social control. Himmelfarb and others have argued against this, pointing out that the poor themselves had their own morals and values. Whether or not the poor did have their own values and morals is not in the remit of this project, but the important point to take from this argument is that if these fears were as popular as the literature suggests then by instilling their

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<sup>12</sup> Charles Booth, *Life and Labour of the People in London*, 1<sup>st</sup> series Poverty 1, p.39

<sup>13</sup> Arthur Morrison, *A Child of the Jago* (1896), ed. By Peter Miles (Lampeter: University of Wales, 1996)

<sup>14</sup> Arnold White, *The Problems of a Great City* (1886)

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<sup>15</sup> Quoted in G. Himmelfarb, *The de-moralization of Society* (London: IEA Health and Welfare Unit, 1995) p.27.

own values, the middle classes felt that the danger could be allayed.

The historian A.S Wohl commenting on Andrew Mearns's *Bitter Cry of Outcast London*, noted that, 'Suddenly, almost overnight, it seemed, England awoke to the grim facts of the slums', to which I would add, not in Southampton apparently! Southampton in the late Victorian and Edwardian period was by no means a hotbed of social debate and action and was far removed from the civic gospel that had so characterised Birmingham's social progress. By contrast, Southampton was led, not by the Unitarian industrialists who dominated northern politics, but by shopkeepers intent on policies of economy and self-help. A tight grip on the public purse strings was their sign of success rather than a nationally renowned civic programme. Southampton certainly lacked some of the problems that industrialisation had brought to the cities of the north such as Birmingham and Manchester and the consequent pressure for social reform was certainly less. As a journalist commenting on the housing problems in 1890 described it,

The fresh sea breezes sweep over it continually. There is no dense pall of smoke hanging over it, as in some manufacturing towns and the great metropolis<sup>16</sup>.

Yet, like these cities, Southampton had grown at a considerable rate in the latter half of the nineteenth century. In 1851 the population stood at approximately 48,000. By 1891, attracted by the growth of the docks, it had more than doubled to 114,279. Perhaps more significantly, in the central parish of St. Mary, which directly surrounded the dockyards, the population had jumped from 21,250 in 1851 to more than 41,000. With it came the social problems that afflicted nearly every population centre that had seen a similar influx of the poor looking for work as the surrounding rural economy declined. The areas nearest the docks quickly became overcrowded and by the 1890s the

population density averaged 441.4 persons per acre, higher than some of the worst areas of London.

Perhaps the most significant piece of social action and debate in Southampton was that surrounding the issue of slum housing in the early 1890s. It is also the most telling in terms of the language behind the debate, exhibiting many of the middle class' social fears including disease, immorality and crime.



*Blue Anchor Lane c1892 (City Archives)*

The problem was by no means a new one. The slum housing that centred round the notorious Simnel Street and Blue Anchor Lane had been the subject of various health inspections from the 1860s onwards but had gone largely unremarked by the majority of the population until the last decade of the Victorian period. Why this was so is unclear but it seems likely that the heightened awareness of the poor on the national stage produced a more receptive audience in Southampton in 1890.

The issue was brought to the fore by the radical candidate, Delmar Bicker-Caarten. In a letter to

<sup>16</sup> Southampton Times, (Dec 20, 1890)

the *Southampton Times* entitled, 'The Exceeding Bitter Cry of Outcast Southampton',<sup>17</sup> he drew to the public's attention in stark terms the conditions in which the poor of their town existed. The very title would have immediately set the tone for the public, jumping on the bandwagon of Andrew Mearns' famous exposé of poverty in London, *The Bitter Cry of Outcast London*<sup>18</sup> which had shocked the nation some seven years earlier. More telling was the language used by Bicker-Caarten, which although touching on many reasons for action to be taken to alleviate the situation of the poor, harks considerably on the fears of crime, disease and morality,

The district itself [...] with no provision for decency or cleanliness, dismal, wretched, squalid and hideous beyond words to express, and then the tribes of children, hungry, dirty, barefooted and wild, growing up to swell the ranks of pauperism [...] these fever dens in our midst to breed disease and spread it through the town. Then the scenes that occur in these abodes of misery and darkness, the drunkenness, brutality, immorality, they cannot be described [...]<sup>19</sup>.

The language reflects and enforces these beliefs that poverty, immorality and crime were deeply intertwined but more than this is the implication that unless action is taken the disease and immorality that is rife in these areas will spread outside the slums and infect the whole population. His urging of action to remedy makes the case in even more graphic terms arguing that the council must, 'in the interests of the public health and morality of the whole town, sweep these plague spots from our midst',<sup>20</sup> Here we have the paramount concern of the middle classes: that the poor would drag down the rest of society. The very use of the

term 'plague' suggests that the rest of the town could be infected with the disease of poverty. Bicker-Caarten's letter led to a series of letters and articles, which ran in the *Southampton Times* through the winter of 1890/1891. Before looking further at this debate it is important to take into account Bicker-Caarten's motives in terms of his decision to raise the issue and the language used. His radical politics are evident in his argument for the cause of the suffering amongst Southampton's poor,

[...] It is caused by lowness of wages, and by the casual nature of the work most of these people are employed upon, by the utter want of responsibility for, and interest in, their labourers by the employers after they have paid them the small pittance<sup>21</sup>.

In this respect Bicker-Caarten speaks to, and possibly for, the working classes but in the consequent debate it is noticeable how even he uses language that is clearly aimed at a wider audience. It is possible that Bicker-Caarten used this language purposefully as his association with the working class was not totally ignored by the middle class readership. In a letter to the editor of the *Southampton Times* in the ongoing debate, J.G. Gibson accuses Bicker-Caarten himself of being to blame for the destitution as he was, 'one of the principal agitators in the late strike',<sup>22</sup> referring to the Southampton dock strike which for a few brief days shook Southampton with the spectre of violence and revolution.

An important point to note in this debate is that the vast majority of the evidence and language stems from two sources. That of Bicker-Caarten himself and that of the subsequent series of investigations carried out by the *Southampton Times* itself which supported the Liberal cause in the town. However, whatever its political leanings it is important to remember that for the majority, the local press would have been the main source of news and opinion.

<sup>17</sup> *Southampton Times*, (Nov. 8, 1890)

<sup>18</sup> Andrew Mearns, *The Bitter Cry of Outcast London*, ed. By A.S. Wohl (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1970)

<sup>19</sup> *Southampton Times*, (8 Nov. 1890)

<sup>20</sup> *Southampton Times*, (8 Nov. 1890)

<sup>21</sup> *Southampton Times* (November 8, 1890)

<sup>22</sup> *Southampton Times*, (8 Nov. 1890)

Although morality had become one of the key social concerns of the Victorians, it is important to remember that religion still played an important role for many. Bicker-Caarten provides evidence of the godlessness of the poor quoting a letter that he claims to have received with the express wish that he draws the public's attention to the gambling, foul language and blasphemy that can be observed on any Sunday in the poor areas of the town, 'especially during the hours of divine service' (although why the poor would be more prone to swearing at precisely this point is anyone's guess). In the same letter Bicker-Caarten claims to have spoken to an old inhabitant who told him that, 'the streets and courts between Canal-walk and Orchard-lane are perfect hells upon earth on Sunday evenings'. While it is impossible to verify the source of Bicker-Caarten's information, and worth noting that a later letter signed C.N.S backs up these reports, it is questionable why Bicker-Caarten raises an issue that seemingly has little to do with the living condition of the poor and far more to do with fuelling the concerns of the middle classes.

The debate also included a series of articles that ran in the *Southampton Times* over the winter of 1890/91. These articles investigated the conditions of the poor in even more detail and were perhaps even more alarmist than Bicker-Caarten's own revelations. Of particular interest is their comparison of the poor with that of 'dark' Africa. This was a common theme in the period and one that which the public would have been very familiar, comparing the poor with the 'savages' of Africa. Indeed, the author clearly expects the reader to be familiar with both Stanley's 'In Darkest Africa' and General Booth's 'In Darkest England'. Again the moral crisis forms the central theme of the debate in these articles. Despite all their pitying of the condition in which the poor live, the reason for improving that condition is for the moral gain that this would have, both in terms of protecting themselves from the spread of moral decay and to prevent the poor being pulled further into the abyss by the irredeemable residuum. The majority of the third article in this debate is

devoted to this theme and notably recommends the inflammatory words of General Booth,

The reekings of the human cesspool are brought into the schoolroom and mixed up with your children. Your little ones, who never heard an evil word and who are not only innocent but ignorant of all the horrors of vice and sin, sit for hours side by side with little ones whose parents are habitually drunk, and play with others whose ideas of merriment are gained from the familiar spectacle of the nightly debauch by which their mothers earn the family bread<sup>23</sup>.

With such language forming the central tenet of the debate it is hard to imagine that public opinion on the matter of poor housing was not intrinsically linked to their fears of the immorality and criminality of the poor.

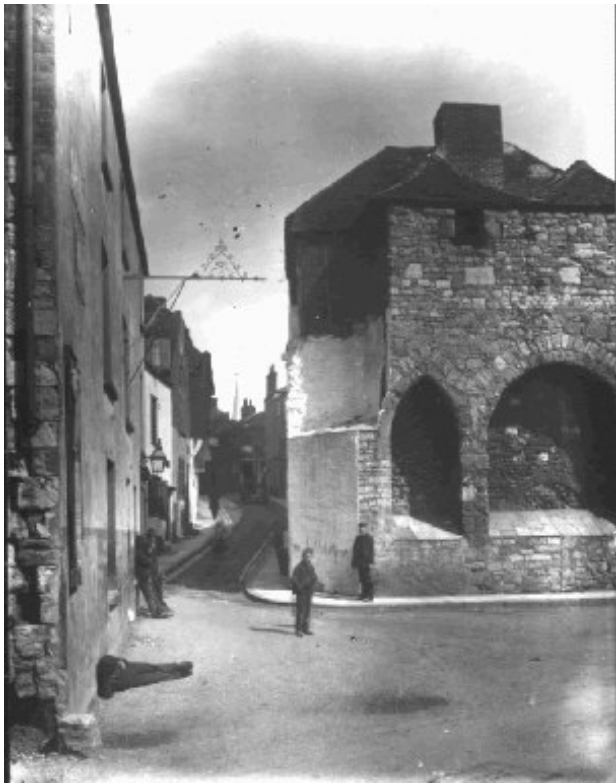
The outcome of this debate was that an enquiry into the condition of the housing was to be produced by the Borough Surveyor in conjunction with the Medical Officer of Health. That the council and public were not driven by any radical zeal when it came to social reform is evident in the subsequent delays in dealing with the report. The Medical Officer, A. Wellesley Harris, duly submitted the report in December 1893, by which point public interest had largely evaporated, and it was swiftly despatched to a joint committee of the town's Health and Works Committees where it was effectively forgotten until the following September when a newspaper report again shook the population into anguished action.

On September 15<sup>th</sup>, 1894 the *Southampton Times* reported the death of Ellen Wren in one of the lodging houses in Simnel Street. What struck a chord with the readers was not merely the fact that another pauper had died, but the circumstances in which she died were a classic encapsulation of the middle-class fears of the moral depths to which the poor could sink. The 49 year old Wren had been found naked, lying

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<sup>23</sup> *Southampton Times* (January 3, 1891)

face down in a pile of rubbish in her room, having apparently suffocated while drunk. Furthermore, the owner of the property had recently been fined for keeping a brothel<sup>24</sup>.



*Simnel Street c1892 (City Archives)*

Wellesley Harris's report makes for interesting reading in terms of the points that he, as Medical Officer of Health, deems salient to record. For the large part the report is an extremely dispassionate summary of 'the number of dilapidated houses, or tenements, or outbuildings, within the Borough', and as you might hope from a Medical Officer of Health, Wellesley Harris draws a clear link between poverty and disease but this emphasis is minimal in terms of the report and in drawing his conclusions notes that, 'Phthisis [consumption] and Anaemia are frequently started by living in confined spaces...[but] it is marvellous that not more of the inhabitants show this'<sup>25</sup>.

<sup>24</sup> *Southampton Times* (15 Sept, 1894)

<sup>25</sup> A. Wellesley Harris p.4

However where he does refer to individuals or physical symptoms it is invariably in relation to the morality and danger of the poor. There seems little in the tone and descriptions to indicate to the reader that concerns other than these should play a part in deciding social action within the town. An amusing footnote to the debate is to be found in his improvement scheme that proposed that removing the poor from the area between High Street and Westgate Street would make possible a direct route to the West End Station, an improvement of, 'great convenience to the public, who now have to travel by a circuitous route'. Wellesley Harris was clearly no Charles Booth.

Morality in particular seems to be a favoured topic of Wellesley Harris, far more so than disease which one assumes is what he would be more conscious of as Medical Officer of Health. In the introduction to the report he makes reference to the water-closet accommodation, or lack thereof, on which he comments 'the tone of female morality is much lowered by the existing condition of things in this particular respect'. Reference is also made whenever there is even a rumour that a particular house has been used as a brothel or is inhabited by individuals of 'low character', but more telling is the summary to the report that describes effects of residence in these districts. Morality is given particular weight and is worth quoting in full,

The situation of many of these houses in blind narrow Courts leading out of our principal streets by a passage, and hemmed in on all sides by taller houses renders them pretty well secluded from passers by. Near neighbours, however, can bear witness to the misery, vice and drunkenness which are rife in such Courts. Owing, as I have suggested, to their secluded position, the general public are unaware of these scenes, and consequently they exist without interference.

In addition to the immorality found in the report, Wellesley Harris emphasises the direct dangers that the poor present to the middle



classes in terms of violence and revolt. In his scheme for improvement he recommends the removal of the poor housing not for health or social welfare reasons but to remove the 'riotous class'. That Southampton had suffered riots, scuffles would be a better word, some years earlier and that the dock labourers involved would most likely have come from one of the areas in question was correct but in describing an entire class as 'riotous' Wellesley Harris' words would have reminded readers to the fears that had gripped the town during these strikes and which had led to two companies of the King's Royal Rifles being placed under arms at Winchester to quell the riots, which in the event never erupted.

The fear of racial degeneration found little expression in the local housing debate. Other than the references to 'dark Africa' and its connotations of racial development the debate largely focussed on morality, disease and crime. This is not to say that belief that the race as a whole was degenerating did not find expression locally. In a lecture on the Local Government Act of 1888, then mayor Sir James Lemon, commented on the decision to devolve the management of 'Asylums for Pauper Lunatics' to the county council as being, 'an important duty, considering how lunacy is unfortunately increasing in this country, and the heavy cost thus entailed upon the ratepayer'<sup>26</sup>. This apparent rise in the number of pauper lunatics sat well with the degeneration argument, although in reality it was more likely the introduction of the concept of feeble-mindedness at this point that informed Lemon's argument.

Although morality, crime and disease form the central theme of the housing debate in Southampton during this period it was not the only factor that drove social debate. Despite the fact that the town lacked the civic gospel of Birmingham or individuals with the zeal of Chamberlain, Booth or Webb, social action was not unknown. Among the poor areas on which

the housing investigation focussed there were several missions, most notably the Simnel Street Mission, that had been working to better the condition of the poor for a decade providing Sunday services, Sunday school, a savings bank, a coal and clothing club and a temperance society among other things. But the hard work of these clergymen did little to affect the overall attitude to social action in Southampton. Some evidence of sympathy was to be found from other quarters. Edward Gayton, a member of the Council, had undertaken his own investigations and in a letter to the *Southampton Times* commented, 'Let anyone go into some of the houses in Simnel Street, or to Back-of-the Walls [...] and he will realise that it is no wonder that the glare of the public-house is such an attraction'<sup>27</sup>. But voices such as these were few and far between.

From the language that dominated the public debate it seems clear that middle class fears of criminality, immorality and degeneration were indeed the main driving force behind the issue of poor housing in Southampton. That this debate was conducted by relatively few needs to be taken into account but it is also true that this is the limited opinion that most of the middle class readership would have been receiving. Coming as closely on the back of the dock strikes it is did it comes as no great surprise that the language of fear dominates. Constant references to riot, disease, immorality and crime were not designed to prick the middle class conscience but to warn of the dangers that inaction could lead to. Whether these fears were the main factors in driving social action and debate generally would require further research into social debate within the town as well as in similar towns such as Plymouth or Bristol. The important point is that Southampton and cities like it were not the centres of social philosophy that could be found in places such as Manchester, Birmingham and London. Further research may demonstrate that these parochial towns, governed by shopkeepers, acted on different motives, motives of fear that may have

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<sup>26</sup> James Lemon, *A lecture on the local government act 1888* (Southampton: 1888).

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<sup>27</sup> *Southampton Times* (December 13, 1890)



reflected the majority of towns rather than the social conscience of the cities.

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