

The Suburban Growth of Victorian Manchester

H. B. Rodgers

For more than a century the middle-classes of Manchester have been in flight from a city which, through their enterprise in industry and commerce, they have done much to create. Indeed, the chief reward for material success in the city has for long been the ability to escape from the dirt and disorder which seemed the inevitable consequences of industrial growth. From time to time the migrant Mancunians of the suburban fringe have been taken to task for their abandonment of the city except as a workplace. As early as 1844 a French visitor¹ noticed that the town was one of "shopkeepers and operatives" while the merchants and manufacturers had retreated to "detached villas in the country or at least on its fringe." Thus, it was argued, the lower orders of society were deprived of the example of their peers. Certainly the social history of Manchester contains few parallels to the benevolent paternalism shown by some of the great manufacturing families in smaller towns nearby, for example by the Ashtons of Hyde. It is not, however, the purpose of this study to assess the social consequences of the continued emigration of the Manchester middle-class, but rather to trace its contribution to the physical spread of the city. The accumulation of a century of suburban growth has created an intricate patchwork of residential areas of varying age and character; the aim of this paper is to examine the processes of suburban growth—and decay—in fashioning the present complex pattern.

Late Eighteenth-Century Manchester

The Manchester of the late eighteenth century gave little hint either of the size of the city which was soon to grow or of the complexity of its spatial organisation. Though it was no longer possible to "walk round the Church and see the whole town" Manchester was little more than an overgrown market-town not only in size but also in structure. Its streets and squares were a chaotic jumble of buildings of different types and uses; houses, shops, workshops and even the earliest factories jostled each other in formless confusion. There was little tendency yet for quarters dominated by special functions to evolve. The town's retail trade, its professional services, its textile warehouses and offices—all of which were later to become accommodated in distinct zones within the city-centre—were still haphazard in distribution. Nor had the drain of population away from the centre of the town yet begun, for there was still no separation of workplace from residence. Shopkeepers lived above their businesses, professional men and the early bankers and insurers had offices in their houses, while the warehouses of the textile merchants and manufacturers were part of their homes, at first a few rooms or cellars though later an annex entered by a separate door. The social segregation

which was soon to become so rigid was yet only incipient; the pleasant Georgian terraces of the wealthy rubbed shoulders with the hovels and lodging houses of the poor. Though Defoe's description of Manchester as the "greatest meer village in England" was ungracious it was apt enough as a comment on its structure.

Despite the disorderly confusion of the urban scene in late eighteenth century Manchester—caught perfectly in many old prints and prospects—it is to this period that the evolution of a coherent pattern of land-use must be traced. Between 1750 and 1800 the town almost doubled in area. The new extensions—or "improvements"—were more homogeneous in character than the rambling streets of the old town, and in them could be seen the beginnings of social and economic segregation as distinct quarters became associated with particular branches of business and classes of society. The textile merchants and manufacturers tended to concentrate, at first, in the environs of King Street and St. Anne's Square, which were said to have been the most favoured sites for warehouses in the 'seventies. But the later development of this area followed a quite different trend; it became the home of finance and the professions, and by 1800 the nucleus of the warehouse district had shifted to Cannon Street, whence it spread to the angle between Mosley and Market Streets². The Directory of 1816 leaves no doubt that population was already being displaced from most of the warehouse area by the demand for business premises. Manchester was acquiring a dead heart as the outflow of prosperous families to the country fringe of the expanding town began.

The escape of the middle-classes from the town-centre, soon to become the principal force in the physical spread of Manchester, led at first not to the establishment of outlying suburbs but to the shaping of a fashionable residential area on the southern outskirts (Fig. 1). The new roads here, especially Mosley and Princess Streets, were lined by modern houses "more distinguished for their interior rather than exterior elegance." Lever's Row, the present Piccadilly, and Mosley Street were then considered the west-end of the city, but the entire segment of the outskirts from Quay Street and Deansgate to Lever's Row and High Street appears to have been middle-class in flavour. But already some Manchester families were becoming more adventurous in their choice of sites. Aston noted in 1804 that "many persons whose business is carried on in the town reside some little way from it that the pure breath of heaven may blow freely upon them." By 1800 the search for fresh air—in ever-declining supply—had taken Mancunians to Ardwick Green and to the Crescent beyond Salford.

These two earliest outer suburbs are shown on Green's map of 1793. The former was "surrounded by handsome dwellings" and the latter was thought to be "a spot unrivalled for a beautiful and commanding aspect." Its inhabitants "would always be sure of rich rural scenery in view of their front windows." Within twenty years their opaque panes were to give glimpses, through the smoke, of an imposing line of early print-works. In the selection of these first two sites of suburban colonies may be seen tendencies which were to govern the rapid nineteenth-century spread of middle-class housing. Both were easy of access from the city, lying on turnpiked highways. Both were set in pleasantly varied country and their

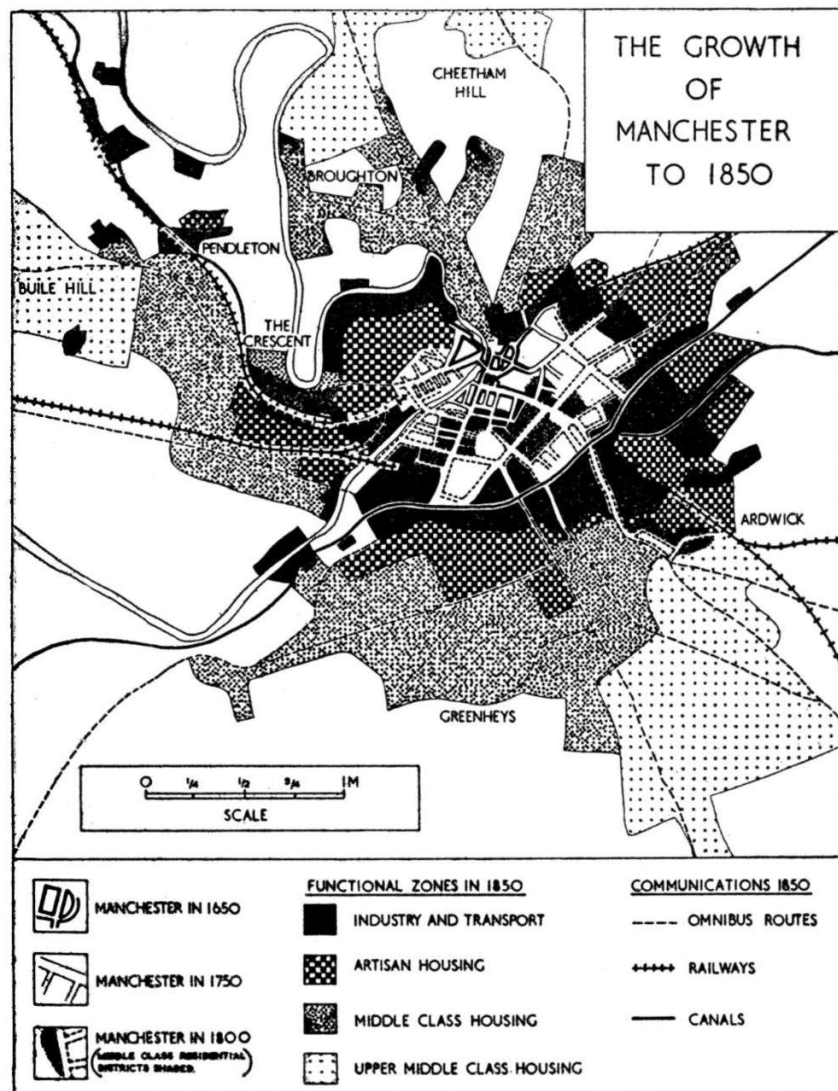


FIG. 1

sites had—by the standards of the very subdued relief of Manchester—some topographical prominence. Ardwick is just above the bluff of the Medlock valley, while the Crescent stands on the high scar overlooking the bold curve of an Irwell meander. Qualities like these were to predestine many other districts for middle-class occupancy during the next century.

Suburban Growth to 1850

Over the first half of the nineteenth century the population of Greater Manchester was to increase from 88,000 to more than 400,000. To the town's physical expansion no single factor made nearly so great a contribution as the multiplication of a prosperous middle-class with a taste for country air. By 1850 the built-up area covered about seven square miles; of this over one-half was occupied by prosperous suburbs and only one-fifth by artisan housing. Clearly, a small proportion of the population was responsible for the greater part of the urban advance.

In the early decades of the nineteenth century middle-class Manchester was on the move. The growth of the city as the centre of business for the country's most densely peopled industrial region led to the progressive exclusion of population—and especially its well-to-do element—from the city centre. Census data for Wards commence only in 1841, but over the next decade Market Street Ward lost population, and between 1851 and 1861 Deansgate and London Road Wards joined it in steep decline. As the demands of commerce for space in the old town grew, land here increased rapidly in value; a site on Piccadilly brought, in 1840, 60 times its value in 1790³. Families fortunate enough to own central plots sold them and moved to the ever-receding outskirts. By 1830 the middle-class district south and south-west of the town-centre had changed radically in character. A generation earlier it had had an open fringe, but now a belt of industry along the Medlock sealed it off from the countryside. Its inhabitants needed little encouragement to sell their homes and move elsewhere. Thus Mosley Street, "almost entirely inhabited by wealthy families" when a Peterloo demonstrator marched his contingent down it⁴, was by the 'forties mostly warehouses⁵. The expansion of the city core threatened Portland Street, then a fashionable quarter in process of transition. Farther south some of the older terraces of large houses along Oxford Road were already being engulfed by the back-to-back housing growing in association with the Medlock industrial ribbon. Grosvenor Square, laid out as the nucleus of a fashionable district at the beginning of the century—it had one "elegant" house in 1804—seems never to have fulfilled its planned function.

By far the most convenient way of taking stock of the residential expansion of Greater Manchester between 1800 and 1850 is to make an analysis of the Ordnance Survey maps on the very large scale of 60 inches to the mile published in 1846. These maps are among the most detailed ever made; together with contemporary descriptions and directories they provide ample evidence not only of the extent of the suburban additions of the period but also of their social character. As Map 1 shows, the suburban growth of the city was very closely guided by the evolving

industrial pattern. Factories were no longer scattered haphazardly about the town but had become concentrated into distinct zones, each of which offered specific advantages for industrial development. Along the Medlock and the canal parallel to it, just south of Central Manchester, a continuous belt of land in industrial use is apparent in the survey of the 'forties. In East Manchester ribbons of industry followed the Rochdale and Ashton canals and the new Sheffield railway, while factories clustered thickly in the valleys of the Irwell and Irk, close to water for power and processing. The broad sweeps of the Irwell through Salford were followed by a succession of mills; their chimneys cast a pall over the rural scene which the families of the Crescent believed theirs in perpetuity. Farther west, on the fringe of Salford, the Bolton railway and canal were proving magnets to industry.

Wherever it grew, industry repelled middle-class housing. East Manchester was already blighted by it, and even in the open country beyond, coal and lime workings and isolated mills marked the future path of industrial expansion. A less pleasant setting for suburban growth could hardly be imagined, and East Manchester has always remained dominantly artisan in character. The western outskirts of the town had fewer factories, and here a number of districts of pleasant villas and terraces were built, especially along the Chester Road and in Pendleton. But it has always been to the north and south that the dormitory expansion of Manchester has been most rapid. North of the city industrial communications were poor and factories scattered. Here was a safe and suitable environment for the migrant middle-class, on high ground overlooking the town, and by the middle of the century suburbs had grown astride the old and new Bury roads. South Manchester had little of the scenic variety of the north, but it has proved to be even more secure against industrial penetration. Here the Medlock has marked a permanent limit to the spread of factories. Beyond there were no canals or local coal; streams were too tiny to provide an adequate water supply, while the two railways, when they arrived, were peripheral to the district.

This complete separation of the prosperous suburbs from industry and from the artisan housing which never lay far from the factory gate greatly strengthened the social segregation already incipient in late eighteenth-century Manchester. But now a subtler pattern of social contrasts was evolving, even within the suburban areas. Study of the directories reveals that the geographical separation of the merchant and industrial aristocracy from the main body of the middle-class was well advanced. A twofold division of the suburbs of the day is clearly recognisable. Some consisted entirely of imposing—often ornate—terraces and large villas set in gardens of park-like dimensions. These, the directories show, were occupied by the most successful of the town's business families. But over the greater part of the suburban area the sound, solid terraced house of more modest size was the dominant unit. The very wealthy—as distinct from the merely prosperous—were very critical in their choice of sites. Distance from the city meant little to them, provided roads were good, but they insisted on an almost rural setting and preferred high ground with a view. In the west and north of Greater Manchester several districts satisfied these requirements. The high ground of

Cheetham Hill, the scar of the Irwell at Higher Broughton and the swell of glacial sands at Buile Hill, Pendleton, had all been colonised by the upper-middle-class by mid-century. South Manchester had no such attractive natural features, and here the best sites were those with easiest access to the city. Consequently the largest terraces and villas monopolised the line of Oxford Road, extending continuously to Fallowfield as an early example of ribbon development. Farther south dormitory colonies had grown at Withington and Didsbury, pleasant villages served by omnibuses from the city.

In their choice of suburban sites the main mass of Manchester's commercial and professional class could not afford to be so selective; they snatched the crumbs from the rich man's table, colonising any part of the outskirts not already bespoken by the very well-to-do. In their heyday these districts of more modest housing must have seemed very attractive, and certainly they were eminently respectable. Narrow strips of garden reinforced the screen of lace curtains at the front of the houses and there was always a yard—sometimes a garden—behind. Accommodation not only sufficed for the large families of the day but even allowed some imitation of the social graces of the merchant gentry, for many of these houses had a second half-storey for servants' quarters. In the newest suburbs terraces were often spaced discontinuously along the wide streets. Though this at first emphasised their near-rural setting it was later a factor in their decay, for it permitted the gradual permeation of these middle-class districts by artisan housing.

A large district of this character was evolving in the mid-nineteenth century centred on Greenheys and extending from Ardwick to Old Trafford. East Manchester had little share in the extension even of the most modest middle-class housing, but in the west and north suburbs similar to Greenheys were growing. Pleasant terraces formed ribbons along the Bury roads; and in Lower Broughton, below the bluff of the Irwell valley, a suburb populous enough to have its own horse-bus link had developed. The western fringe of Salford, too, was composed of similar substantial terraced housing. As Map 2 shows, none of these districts was more than a mile or two beyond the industrial girdle, with its congested artisan housing, which already imprisoned the city-centre. They could not be, for suburban transport was still very expensive; sixpence was the fare for a journey of two or three miles. Unfortunately the situation and the rather open character of these areas led to their progressive penetration by smaller housing as the century advanced. Inevitably they lost popularity and slowly decayed; to-day it is precisely these citadels of Victorian respectability that have become—in both a physical and social sense—the city's worst slums.

The Late Nineteenth-Century

By 1850 there had evolved in Greater Manchester a simple and rational residential pattern. The working class lived in congested slums in Central Manchester, among which Angel Meadow, Little Ireland and Back Deansgate were the most infamous, or in tiny terraces of back-to-back houses within and on the fringe of the industrial collar. Immediately beyond lay the belt of middle-class suburbs, absent only in East Man-

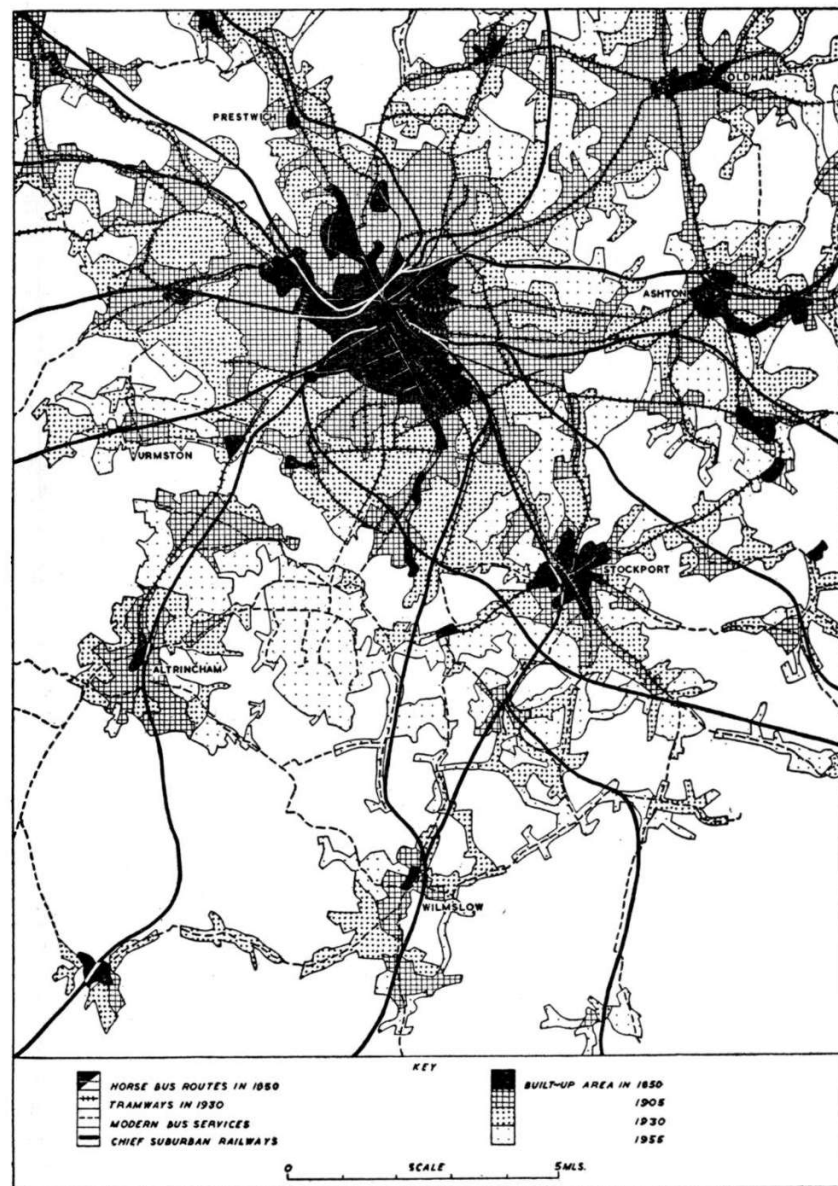


FIG. 2

chester, while the merchant aristocracy were firmly in possession of the high sites to the north and west and dominated Oxford Road and its continuation to the south. Thus had "the different classes of society (become) rather too much estranged from each other." But there was nothing stable in this pattern; it began to suffer change and decay while still evolving. Already, by 1850, previously middle-class districts—for example, Ardwick Green and its environs—were being surrounded and invaded by the spread of poorer housing. The recognition that this process was inevitable and must continue conditioned the middle-class approach to suburban development during the second-half of the century and goes far towards explaining subsequent patterns of growth.

Two alternative solutions to the problem of preserving the integrity and character of the middle-class suburbs against the expansion of working-class housing was adopted increasingly after 1850. Both had been foreshadowed a little earlier, but they had far greater influence on the city's growth in the second half of the century than in the first. One solution was flight not merely to but far beyond the urban fringe, to towns and villages so far distant that it seemed they could never be spoilt. The growth of dormitory colonies in Didsbury and Withington were early examples. The second solution was to surround middle-class areas by a ring fence with toll-bars, thus protecting them against the tide of more modest housing which could be deflected but not stemmed. Victoria Park, established in 1837, was the first attempt at this, and set a new fashion in suburban growth which was to be widely copied during the next half-century. But it is not suggested that the whole of Manchester's residential expansion in late-Victorian times took the form either of precipitate retreat to a safe distance or embattled entrenchment behind toll-bars. Both courses were the prerogative of the very prosperous, and more modest suburbs continued to be added to the town's outskirts in the same fashion as formerly. But these tendencies give a distinctive flavour to the residential growth of the period.

The residential parks, of which more than a score had appeared before the first world war, were all modelled more or less closely on Victoria Park. This was begun in 1837 when a company, later to fail and become a trust, purchased 140 acres of land to the east of Oxford Road. Behind a boundary wall, pierced by only four toll-gates, the proprietors laid out an elaborate pattern of crescents and avenues. Later, land was leased and sold, but at first the company itself built houses, let at annual rentals of £100 to £250⁶—rates high enough to secure social homogeneity. These "gentlemen's seats," of which 50 had been built by 1839, "combined the advantages of proximity to town with the privacy of a country residence." Though the countryside was to retreat far to the south over the next two decades the park seems not to have lost favour, at least before 1914, though it is significant that later building was on a progressively more modest scale.

Victoria Park's success encouraged other similar ventures, some of which were gated and had a formal legal basis, though others were simply planned estates given a degree of privacy by the design of their road patterns. Ellesmere Park at Eccles and Fielden Park on the bluff of the

Mersey at Didsbury, both half a century later than Victoria Park, were perhaps its closest imitators. Broadoak Park, Monton, and Beaver Park, Didsbury, were other examples on a smaller scale. In the parks north of Manchester—Broughton, Sedgley, Hilton and Prestwich—through traffic was deflected by the use of an internally orientated road layout rather than by toll-bars. From Manchester the park concept spread to some of the towns of the periphery of the conurbation. Wilmslow and the nearby Fulford Parks and Davenport Park at Stockport are among the outlying examples. Closer to the city traces of the influence of Victoria Park may be seen in the layout of parts of Whalley Range, while the more modern "garden suburbs" at Burnage and Chorltonville are in some measure variants on the same theme.

The second distinctive tendency in the suburban expansion of Greater Manchester in the late nineteenth century—the establishment of outlying dormitories—was made possible by railway building, for road transport was still far too slow to influence the growth of distant suburbs. Though by 1850 a score of main lines radiated from Manchester, only a few served areas pleasant enough and not too far distant from the city to attract middle-class migrants. Two lines alone—to Altrincham and to Wilmslow—were responsible for the greater part of this expansion, while three others—to Urmston, to Prestwich and the Midland line traversing South Manchester to Stockport—made slighter contributions. It was during this period of railway-guided suburban colonisation that the south became overwhelmingly the most popular route of escape from the city. To the north and west the lines quickly ran into a web of small manufacturing and mining towns with nothing to attract the dormitory settler.

To contemporaries the speed of suburban growth inspired by the railways must have seemed spectacular indeed. Before 1850 it had been considered venturesome to live as far afield as Broughton or Fallowfield, but during the next decade colonies of Mancunians settled as far from the city as Bowdon and Alderley Edge, ten and fifteen miles away respectively. Despite their distance from Manchester these were the earliest Cheshire dormitories to grow. By 1860 villa building was well advanced along the broad, sweeping avenues which lead over the pleasant swell of the Downs between Altrincham and Bowdon. A description of Alderley in 1857 notes that "the greater part of the edge nearest the station is covered by gardens and villas." It cannot be doubted that the principal factor in the rapid early growth of Altrincham and Alderley—apart from the speed of rail travel—was that the Downs and the Edge provided the high, scenically attractive sites so dear to the merchant gentry.

For a century these two suburbs have marked the limit of Manchester's invasion of Cheshire. Dormitory settlement has penetrated only weakly beyond, but between them and the city, strung like beads along the railways, the nuclei of most of the Cheshire suburbs had been established by 1914. Both Sale and Stretford shared in the southwards expansion along the Altrincham line; at Wilmslow, Cheadle Hulme, Bramhall and Heaton Moor villas clustered round the stations on the London line. Though it was rather a latecomer, the Midland railway, which swings from Central Station across South Manchester, accelerated the growth of Chorlton,

Didsbury and part of Withington. The population of these three districts increased by more than half during the decade following its construction, and Didsbury, in particular, tended to expand along the line. Neither to the west nor to the north did the railways guide the spread of the city so closely. But the opening of the Warrington and Bury lines, in 1873 and 1879 respectively, was followed by the development of suburban salients, though on a smaller scale than those of Cheshire. The former initiated the growth of Flixton and Urmston, while the latter served Heaton Park, Crumpsall and Prestwich.

The overall effect of the railways on residential expansion was not only enormously to enlarge the evolving conurbation but also entirely to change its shape and character. Before 1850 suburban growth had been fairly continuous and cohesive, with untidy ribbons reaching outwards only for short distances along the main roads. But now the spread of housing had become diffuse in the extreme, and small nuclei, quite surrounded by open country, lay deep in Cheshire far beyond the edge of continuous building. So much faster was the pace of dormitory expansion after mid-century that within thirty years towns and villages which remain to-day the outposts of the conurbation were already flourishing suburbs. On the maps of 1900 the modern conurbation may be identified clearly; its limits were almost where they are to-day, though its form was still skeletal. It was the function of the bus services developed during the interwar period to break the inflexible grip of the railways on the directions of growth and, by the provision of a closer network of routes, to fill the great gaps left during the railway age.

The Modern Fate of the Victorian Suburbs

The fate of the nineteenth-century suburbs of Greater Manchester has depended on their situation and on the success of the residential parks in resisting invasion by smaller housing and industry. The outlying dormitories of the Cheshire fringe—especially Bowdon and Alderley Edge—preserve even the subtler nuances of their nineteenth-century character. Here, embalmed as it were by the clean Cheshire air, Victorian suburbs—even traces of Victorian society—survive unaltered. But not even Bowdon and Alderley have withstood quite unyieldingly the impact of modern social change. Many of the larger villas have become flats, but in areas such as these this may imply no social dilution. Where distance from the city is reinforced by enclosure within the walls of a park the Cheshire dormitories show still slighter modification. Even the division of villas into flats is uncommon in the parks of Wilmslow and Bramhall, but these are so modern, in part, that they scarcely fall within the scope of this study.

Closer towards the city the effect of protection by enclosure on Victorian residential areas becomes progressively more marked, reaching its maximum in the parks of North Manchester. These, especially Broughton Park, have been completely outflanked by the spread of small housing, and within half a mile there are old middle-class districts which have fallen into the condition of slums. Yet there is little sign of decay within the park, though it is protected only by limited access and not by toll-gates. Even walls and gates have not solved the problems of the

parks of inner Manchester, but the pace of social change has been slower than in similar areas outside, and it has taken different forms. In Victoria Park scarcely a single house—except the smaller types of later periods—remains in the occupance of a single family. Subdivision into flats—many very tiny—is almost universal, and as many as a score may occupy a single “gentleman’s seat” of earlier vintage. Hotels and University Halls of Residence are other uses to which large old villas have been put, while some have become institutions of various kinds, for example clinics and homes for the elderly.

Sad though its loss of character and dignity may be, that Victoria Park has been saved by its walls from much worse is evident from the present condition of districts of similar age and original character close by. The streets of early Victorian terraces and villas here, especially in Greenheys, have become not merely a slum, but modern Manchester’s most intractable social problem. In Greenheys subdivision has produced not flats but tenements; the lodging house replaces the hotel, and conversion for industrial use is common. The chief feature of this most grossly decayed—indeed, degraded—of all Manchester’s early suburbs is its ethnic variety. The prospect of cheap, easily found accommodation has drawn to this area many of the most recent immigrants to the country and to the city. A large coloured community, mostly of West Indian origin, has established itself in a few streets of tenements near Moss Lane. West of Whitworth Park the large old terraces contain an incredibly crowded population of recent Irish immigrants, while elsewhere groups of Indians and East Europeans are found.

In the northern counterparts of Greenheys—Broughton and Cheetham Hill—decay has taken a rather different form. These, too, are largely slums and near-slums, though they are not multi-racial, but here the industrial conversion of large old houses is the dominant feature. For this the clothing industry has been chiefly responsible, for in this trade the average firm is a small one without large capital resources. Thus a cheap old house, which may be modified very easily to meet the simple technical requirements of the industry, is an attractive alternative to an expensive new factory. Indeed, very few of the smaller firms could even contemplate the sinking of capital into a new building. Thus the converted villas of North Manchester, eyesores though they are, have encouraged the growth of an industry which is now the city’s greatest employer of female labour. But the construction of small factories from old houses is confined neither to North Manchester nor to the clothing industry. Many other branches of light manufacturing in which the average unit is small have taken up such premises, and along Chester Road west of the city and on Mrs. Gaskell’s Plymouth Grove in the south industry now forms an almost continuous frontage.

It is evident that in the later history of the abandoned Victorian middle-class suburbs there is a cycle of decay and change which, once initiated, tends to gather pace. Bowdon illustrates the first stage in the cycle, the occasional conversion of the most rambling houses into flats of a very pleasant type. The process has gone farther nearer to the city, especially outside the parks. Flats now dominate much of Fallowfield and

Ellesmere Park. In Greenheys and Broughton racial mixture and widespread industrialisation represent alternative end-stages. But no matter how deeply the dissolution of these once-charming areas may be regretted, these progressive changes have not been wholly harmful. One wonders how the post-war housing shortage, especially of middle-class accommodation, could have been met without the enormous number of flats which the villas and terraces of Victorian Manchester have yielded. And it would be difficult to over-stress the importance of cheap, converted premises to young, new firms which, when their early struggles are over, may contribute substantially to the city's industrial well-being. Districts like Broughton are industrial nurseries, and if tighter land-use control is to prohibit conversion, alternative accommodation must be found either on trading estates or in "flatted" factories on the Birmingham model.

- 1 Faucher, M. L.: *Manchester in 1844*: p. 26.
- 2 Aston, J.: *Manchester Guide* (1804): p. 272.
- 3 Love, B.: *Handbook of Manchester* (1842): p. 16.
- 4 Perrin, J.: *Manchester Handbook*: 1857: p. 38.
- 5 Faucher: *op. cit.*: p. 17.
- 6 Love, B.: *Manchester As It Is*: 1839: p. 182.