

# London Voices, 1957-2007

## – from family and kinship to London lives

Professor Sir Peter Hall gave the RTPI's Michael Young Lecture 2007 in July. Based on his new book, here are some excerpts.



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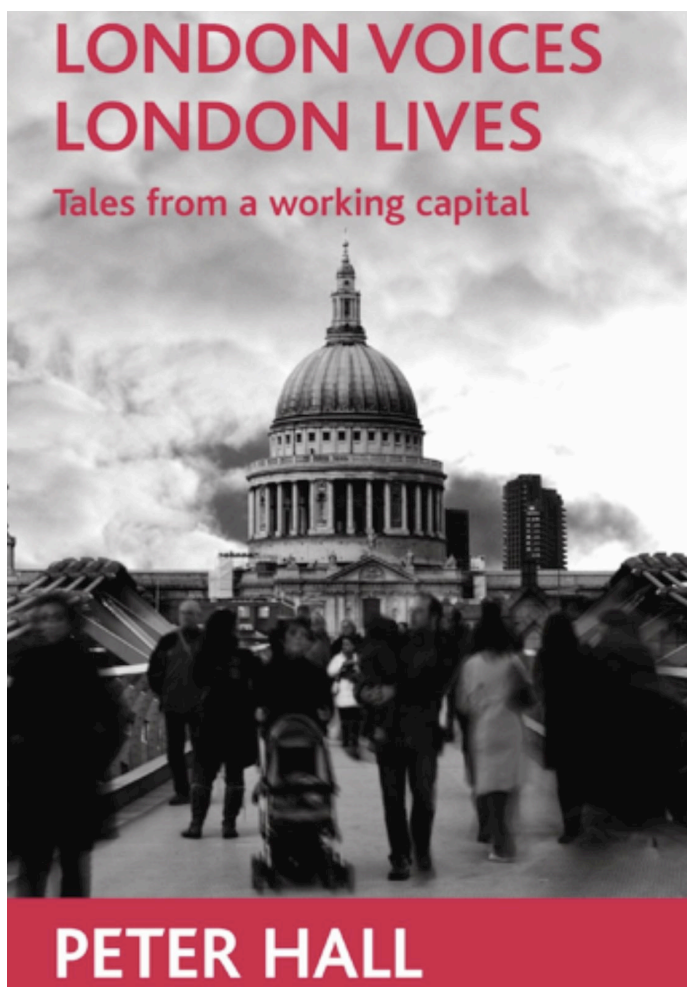
Many parts of London are experiencing upheaval of one kind or another, and the pace of change has increased and may increase further concludes Peter Hall in his new book.

It's totally fortuitous that *London Voices London Lives* is being published almost exactly fifty years after the appearance of *Family and Kinship in East London* by Michael Young and Peter Willmott, a book that became a runaway bestseller and established the reputation both of its authors and of the institute to which they belonged.

### London Lives, London Voices

It is worth stressing that this is a different book from *Family and Kinship* and *The New East End*. In its geographical sweep it more resembles the last major collaboration of Michael Young and Peter Willmott, *The Symmetrical Family*, which they published in 1973: it tries to capture a picture not only across London but also in the wider metropolitan region beyond it. True, it is based on only 132 interviews, dotted in eight localities in and around London: this was not that ultimate holy grail of the social scientist, a statistically significant sample – though our team can claim that we sought as far as possible that they should be representative. And we did seek places that seemed to represent significant trends, so that we tended to ignore the many other places where perhaps less was happening: the more stable, and therefore perhaps more boring, parts of London. That basic health warning needs to be underlined at the start.

The new book comes in two halves. The first takes excerpts right out of the individual transcripts: here Londoners tell their own personal stories, *London Voices* talking directly out of the page. The second seeks to generalise, summing up these different individual experi-



ences under a number of key themes like work, money, home, transport, friends and neighbours: these are representative London Lives.

### Making Ends Meet

Perhaps because we did go to the interesting places which attracted more than their share of newcomers – either to that particular area, or to London overall – we found significant numbers of people who were struggling to make ends meet. They told us that they were coping, but only just; they felt that they were constantly at risk of going under. Aspiring younger couples told us

how they needed two incomes in order to survive. Sometimes this was to achieve a standard of living that left money over for small luxuries like consumer goods or holidays; often, it was to bring up children – especially where, as in a significant number of cases, these parents were paying for a private education. And those who lacked such a supplementary income – such as lone mothers with small children – found life an endless struggle. Worst of all were those who found themselves assailed by a combination of poor health and resultant unemployment: for them, existence could become

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positively a nightmarish struggle to survive.

The interviews very often illustrate the fact that comes starkly out from the statistics, analysed in the earlier *Working Capital* to which *London Voices* forms an accompaniment. Increasingly, London is a city polarised between the very comfortable rich and the desperately insecure poor. One resident of Newham put it graphically as he struggled to find words:

*"I mean example I want to buy house, I mean they'll ask me, give me £10,000 as a deposit for mortgage or something but I have no, how can I get house.*

*"And what do you think will change to help things get better? "Because the richest people they are going to richer rich and poor people they are going to poor, it is very hard I think."* (Nahar, married father, sixties, employed, Bangladeshi, private tenant, Upton Park) (Hall 2007, 464).

That response shows how basic insecurity is massively complicated, for many interviewees, by the problem of access to housing. For those on low incomes, some kind of affordable housing is essential. That means social housing from the borough or from a housing association. But such housing is supplied according to rules that are often complex and difficult to understand, involving a process that can drag on for years, in which people may come to feel that the system has completely forgotten about them. Those people languish in some of London's worst accommodation: privately-rented housing with shared or substandard facilities. And even those who finally succeed – such as lone mothers, who receive top priority and therefore can bypass other applicants – may find themselves in unsuitable substandard accommodation, or at least accommodation they

dislike and which may drag them into psychological depression.

Some battle the system and win; many others eke out a marginal existence. Here, life can be a constant battle to survive. Finding a place to live for you and your family can mean endless hassle; but, even for those who succeed, the system often offers little choice, and at worst it may leave people living a marginal life with difficult or impossible neighbours. More affluent Londoners, some of whom may also experience minor troubles with their neighbours but have the freedom finally to move, may never fully understand the hellish conditions that obtain on some of London's worst estates.

#### Finding a Place

Thus, many of our interviewees desperately crave the sense of freedom, the sense of free choice that most Londoners take for granted as a basic human right. These are the people trapped in social housing they dislike; they live where they do only because they have no option. Other social housing tenants are so far secure, but feel a great uncertainty that they could be impacted because they have no control over their council's or housing association's policies, which may introduce difficult neighbours without consultation and without warning. There may be a racial element here; but the real reason often appears to be a clash of lifestyles, particularly associated with age, which may, for instance, bring an incursion of younger noisy partygoers into a formerly-peaceful estate of older people.

Others, more favourably placed, are owner-occupiers who have that basic freedom to move, but who feel that their neighbourhood has declined because 'the wrong kind of people' have come in. Again, as in

Bethnal Green, there often seems to be a racial element to these complaints, but it is far from simple: an older Afro-Caribbean in Newham complains about the arrival of Muslims from the Indian subcontinent, Indians in Heston complain about new white asylum-seekers. They tell of rising crime levels, they object to owner-occupiers who have disappeared and let their homes to irresponsible tenants, and above all they talk of falling standards in the local schools. Many are themselves planning to leave; they quote many cases of neighbours who have already gone, they describe their own exit plans in detail, and some are in the course of moving.

For those with children, schools were a major concern – perhaps the concern. Every parent seemed to talk endlessly about it, and all seemed almost alarmingly well-informed about the merits and demerits of the choices on offer. Some had moved, others were contemplating a move, to the catchment areas of what they regarded as the best schools – but even more so in order to avoid what they saw as bad ones. They might do so locally, but in addition schools appeared to be a key factor for those who moved from inner London boroughs to the outer London suburbs or beyond. Again, there could appear to be a racial element here, but it was complex: an Indian mother in Newham could describe how they were moving out because the local schools were overwhelmed by new arrivals with learning problems.

It clearly mattered hugely to almost everyone that they felt comfortable and settled in their local neighbourhood, with a general sense of physical security, and with neighbours whom they felt to be congenial and to whom they could turn in an emergency. In this sense, you might say that almost all Londoners

shared middle-class values. And certainly, this is the impression you would get from tramping or driving down the endless streets of impeccably-maintained terraced or semi-detached housing where we did most of our interviews: semi-detached London is still the London that most Londoners know, even though the people who live behind the lace curtains or the double-glazed picture windows may be very different, ethically and culturally, from the people who first lived here 70 years ago. Most did have such a sense of living a good life in a good neighbourhood.

But a minority clearly felt they did not, and sometimes this seemed to cloud their entire view of their world, giving them a general sense of insecurity and anxiety. This seemed equally true of an inner London neighbourhood like Upton Park and a middle London neighbourhood like Eltham; it invariably appeared to reflect the presence of a relatively few anti-social young people. In some such neighbourhoods, especially in parts of middle and outer London, there was a more general feeling that the area was going downhill, that the former sense of community had been eroded, that everyone was leaving and that it was essential to join the stampede as soon as possible. This was a far from general response: these areas were exceptional, but in them there was a sense that newcomers were bringing with them an erosion of the entire social fabric. This was one of the few really negative findings of our study, but we felt that it was a significant one.

#### Getting There

One stereotype proved true: Londoners are obsessed by transport, for the good reasons that they rely on it to get to work and live their lives, and that often it fails to work

either as well as they would want, or even at all. But people were positive as well as negative about their experience of transport. Many had invested considerable intelligence in choosing where to live, in order to get access to their jobs or their children's schools. Some – especially in east and south-east London – quoted new roads or train services as major new advantages.

But many spoke of appalling experiences, especially on their daily commuter journeys, and claimed that they had got worse – perhaps because, when we were interviewing, there were special problems with rail services. Yet the problems seemed to extend to all forms of public transport, especially buses, as well as to private car drivers. Particularly notable were those who told us of their refusal to use public transport, even where it was locally available. They told us again and again about their problems with congestion, road works and parking. Here, those living in the new suburbs outside the M25 seemed to suffer as much as Londoners – and they confessed that they had far fewer and poorer choice of public transport than did the latter.

Transport and traffic are bound to be a concern in any big city. But it was impossible to avoid the conventional, often-quoted conclusion: that London and its region were suffering from a seriously inadequate transport system. Here again, there is a clear indication that London could serve its citizens better – with the difference that here, almost everyone seemed to suffer.

### Friends and Neighbours

In partial compensation, our interviewees found that most Londoners seemed to find a good sense of neighbourliness – so much so, that it was noteworthy to find its absence. Londoners had a very highly

developed sense of their social obligations, and in many cases these went far beyond a mere formal reciprocity – such as taking in each others' parcels, which was almost universal – to embrace a wider sense of obligation to neighbours who might fall on temporary misfortune. And this might extend to a system of informal social control over deviant behaviour.

### Fearing Crime, Avoiding Crime

One of the most surprising things were found in our neighbourhoods was that – contrary to what everyone seems to think – most people in London do not appear much concerned about crime or personal security. But, equally strangely, for a substantial minority it seems to be a major worry, in some cases overshadowing their lives. These people told us of unpleasant events immediately outside their front doors or a neighbour's door, often caused by a tiny minority of delinquent youth. They and others seemed to share a general fear that the social cement that had structured their lives was eroding away, leading to a sense of anarchy, a sense of danger always present. They see the authorities, particularly the police, as powerless and ineffectual.

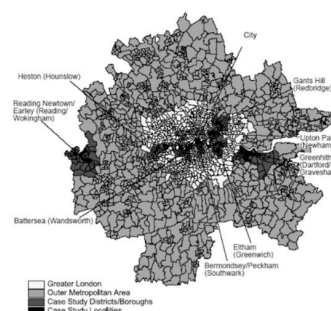
### Melting the Pot

It is almost a cliché by now that London has become one of the most multi-ethnic, multi-cultural places in the world. And, in many areas, it seems to have achieved this with remarkably little tension in comparison with other cities in other parts of the world, and even in Britain. But we were surprised by the complexity of the relationships that people reported to us. There are, we were told, all kinds of prejudices: of one non-white group against another, of Afro-Caribbeans against Africans, of Caribbeans from one island or island

## 2007: *London Voices London Lives*

- London-wide (and wider still)
- 132 interviews in 8 neighbourhoods
- 2 halves:
- *London Voices*: people tell their own tales
- *London Lives*: comparing their experiences

Sub-Regions and Case Study Areas



group against another. There does appear to be anti-white feeling on the part of some black people, especially against those who 'marry out' to form mixed marriages. And we certainly found evidence of the old-fashioned archetypal prejudice, of whites against non-whites.

### London Voices

There are other questions that refer back to the voices we recorded in the first half of the book: what difference does locality make to all this? Do London lives vary so much from one area to another? Do those local voices sound so different in Battersea and in Bermondsey, in Greenhithe or in Gants Hill?

The answer to that question is slightly difficult, because in each area there were so many voices and because they did not always tell the same tale. That was particularly true of some of the areas which we judged to be in the throes of rapid change. The newcomers often told different stories from the long-time residents – sometimes almost diametrically opposed. Many of them seemed to feel that they were living a good life, while the old timers felt they had been invaded by people whom they did not understand and whose customs and

lifestyles they did not share. This was partly a function of age: in many parts of contemporary London, one could say with Yeats that 'That is no country for old men' – or old women either. But it was also, perhaps more deeply, a question of social identity.

That said, it seemed also to be true that people had more of a sense of social wellbeing in some areas, where a larger proportion felt they were living a reasonably good life. That again seemed to be a function of rapid change – demographic, ethnic, economic, social and physical. People felt less secure, less at ease with their neighbours, in areas of rapid transition than in more settled and more stable areas. In areas with a lot of new development, they disliked the physical disruption and the loss of qualities they had experienced before, like rural peace and quietness.

This is perhaps a case of social research proving the obvious: why should people feel otherwise? But it does remain a fact that many parts of London are experiencing upheaval of one kind or another, and that the pace of change has increased and may increase further. London is a growing city, struggling to house hundreds of thousands of extra people within its borders.