The British working class in postwar film
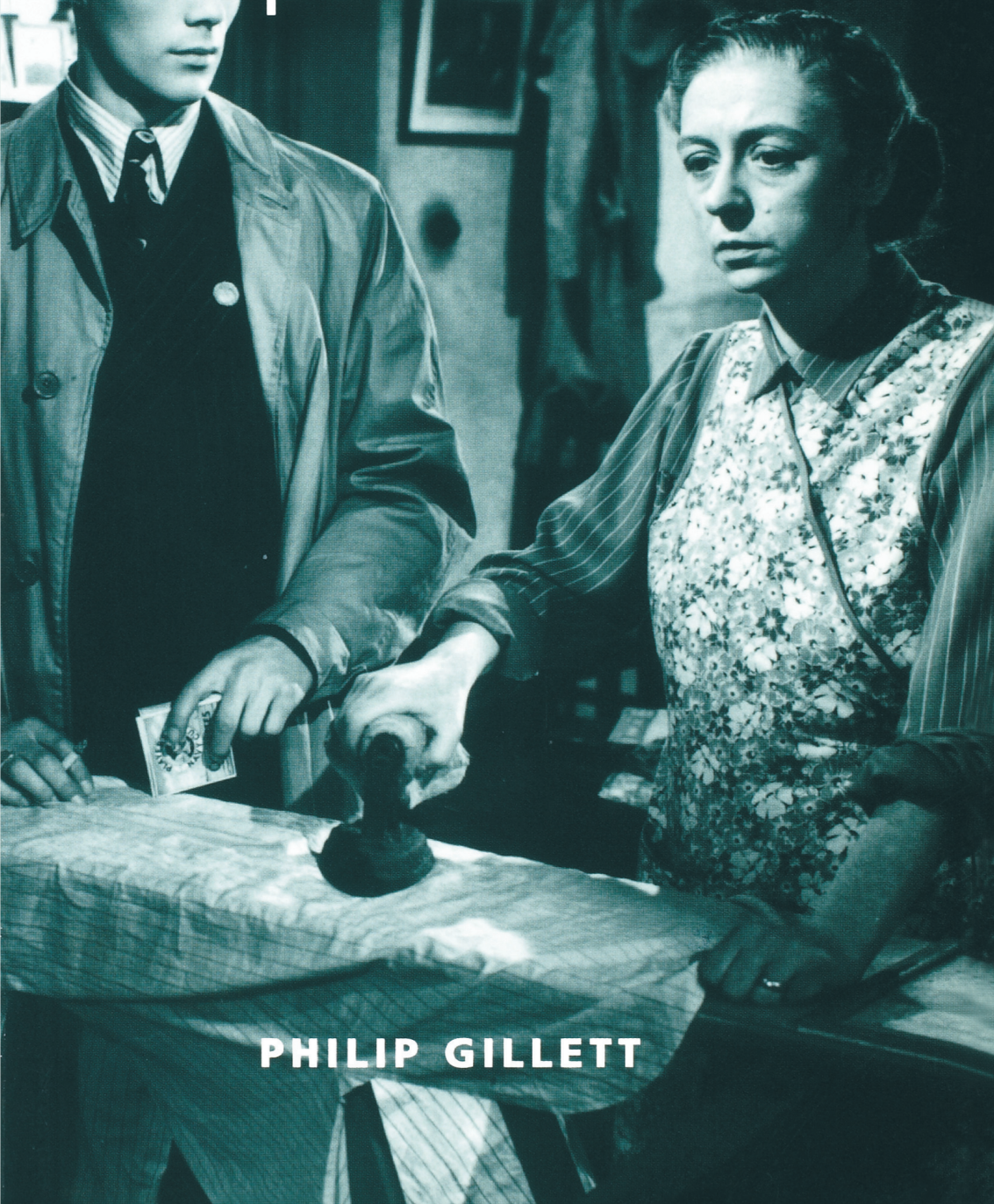
PHILIP GILLETT

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A working-class crowd queues outside a cinema, c.1946

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Abbreviations

ABPC	Associated British Picture Corporation
BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
BBFC	British Board of Film Censors
BFI	British Film Institute
COI	Central Office of Information
CTA	Cinema Theatre Association
NCO	Non-commissioned officer
PEP	Political and Economic Planning
PRO	Public Record Office
WEA	Workers' Educational Association

Exploring a lost culture   1

This book examines how the working-class people are portrayed in the British cinema. Leaving aside problems of definition, it is indisputable that class permeates British feature films, from Claude Hubert's silly asses to Norman Wisdom's little man in a cap. Sometimes it comes to the fore as in the films of Lindsay Anderson, though frequently it remains pervasive but unacknowledged.

Nor does class know its place and keep to the screen. In British screen romances of the 1930s, class often keeps couples apart until love finds a way to overcome social barriers.[1] The heroines were played by stars such as Jessie Matthews and Gracie Fields who had themselves risen from humble beginnings. So fairy tales do come true. They came true for Grace Kelly.

Films from the late 1950s reveal more breaches in the class barriers. The truculent working-class lad has no difficulty in attracting a partner from among his social betters, even if the relationship ends in tears. Romance is hardly the word to describe *Room at the Top* (d. Jack Clayton, 1958) or *Alfie* (d. Lewis Gilbert, 1966). In *Blow-Up* (d. Michelangelo Antonioni, 1967), the lad has made good, but living happily ever after is still a chimera. Even in this more liberal climate, differences of attitude and behaviour can pose a problem when parents encounter uncouth, lower-class behaviour on the part of a suitor. These tensions surface in *Look Back in Anger* (d. Tony Richardson, 1959) and *A Kind of Loving* (d. John Schlesinger, 1962). Thora Hird as Ingrid Rothwell's disapproving mum in the latter film would sympathise with the middle-class parents in *Private Road* (d. Barney Platts-Mills, 1971), as their daughter is lured into working-class ways. The difference here is that the villain of the piece is a well-spoken dropout. With youth

culture allied to working-class culture, class and generational differences become difficult to disentangle.

But what precisely are films showing us? Are they charting a cultural shift, or merely presenting old ideas in new guises? The problems depicted in British realist films produced from the late 1950s onwards were not unique to a generation growing up during the Cold War. Fifty years earlier, the plays of Stanley Houghton dramatised young people rebelling against the class-bound (and gender-bound) prejudices of their elders. In *Hindle Wakes* (1912), there is the added tension that the fathers of the ill-matched couple once worked together, but one has gained from social mobility while the other has remained on the shop floor as his employee.

No industry can afford to alienate its customers, so it is axiomatic that the cinema industry seeks to please audiences. If people pay to see a film, a reasonable assumption is that it promotes values and attitudes more or less consonant with their own, or to which they aspire, however vicariously. Put more simply, they can empathise with the leading characters. Popular films are those offering greater consonance and to this extent they stand as testimony to the attitudes of audiences. As a check against rampant commercialism, censorship ensures that no film deviates too far from the consensus view. By this model, what is presented on screen, including attitudes towards class, is an ever-shifting compromise between censorship, public taste and commercial pressures. Successful films are those which get the balance right.

Whether overt or insidious, the presence of class imagery in films prompts three questions: whose assumptions are dominant in the collaborative process of bringing an idea to the screen, are the participants aware of these assumptions and what is the response of audiences? Viewing the films is an obvious first step in seeking answers, though the exercise may do little more than confirm prejudices. This is a particular danger when films from a generation or more ago are filtered through present-day sensibilities. It is tempting to judge the class attitudes of characters as regressive because ours must be progressive. In this way the past is remade for a new generation. We cannot see the films with an innocent eye. The caution applies to other social issues, though arguably views on gender and ethnicity are more explicitly formulated. Class is in danger of becoming the social difference which dares not speak its name.

A related difficulty is the way in which film contributes to societal memory. It shapes our view of phenomena as diverse as the First World War (ineluctably black and white), the Depression

(the hopelessness which infuses newsreels of Jarrow marchers is contagious) and swinging London of the 1960s (Carnaby Street lived off its legend long after the swinging ceased). Other evidence is judged against the celluloid images, so that seeking corroboration dwindles into self-fulfilling prophecy and another myth is perpetuated.

How might this Gordian knot be cut? Biographies go some way to clarifying the assumptions of film-makers, though Anthony Asquith remains an enigma in spite of the attention lavished on him.[2] But this is akin to history being written by the victors, with attitudes being inferred from the views of a select few. Lesser lights of the cinema industry might see things differently, but they seldom merit biographies. Trade journals hint at whose interests are dominant in the making and marketing of individual films, but they are less revealing about power relations across the industry: a David Lean can impose his views on a producer in a way denied to a prentice director, while distributors and exhibitors function as gatekeepers for what the public is allowed to see, whatever the hopes of film-makers.

Business records provide tangible evidence of which films were popular, but the British cinema industry has often seemed intent on destroying all traces of its past. Instead, popularity has to be inferred largely from snippets in the trade press. John Sedgwick's POPSTAT is an attempt to overcome this deficiency by examining what was screened in a sample of cinemas, but inevitably the accuracy of a surrogate measure is open to question.[3] A few Board of Trade returns have survived, along with a run of weekly returns for the Gaumont, Sheffield, and these are summarised in the appendix.[4] Also included are the results of my own research in which the fortunes of the films discussed are compared in ten independent cinemas in working-class Leeds and in socially more amorphous southeast Essex.[5] As to what cinemagoers thought of the offerings presented to them and how the cinema influenced their lives, oral testimony offers tantalising glimpses.[6] The views of newspaper critics have the virtues of being contemporaneous and committed to print, and these are noted for 'quality' films.[7] For the mass of films which were beneath the notice of critics, recourse has to be made to the brief reviews in the trade press, where these are useful.

It is evident that a range of skills are needed in examining class in films. To the historian's expertise in the use of source material must be added the psychologist's insights into the formation of attitudes – not to mention the sociologist's rigour in defining class. This diversity helps to explain the evolution of film studies as an

eclectic discipline, able to accommodate a range of interests in its nooks and crannies. The corollary is that exploring the impact of the cinema on society requires collaborative effort. The absence of such collaboration is apparent in the proliferation of studies of individual films and film-makers. Valuable as these are, the economic and social structures within which films are made and seen can too easily be forgotten. One objective of this work is to take a modest step in redressing the balance by considering the popularity of the films discussed.

A second objective is to demonstrate how film might be used by disciplines whose practitioners often display scant interest in its possibilities. When Terry Lovell surveyed sociological writings on the cinema in 1971, she found a meagre body of work; not much has changed in the intervening years.[8] Yet cinema-going is a curious activity: hundreds of people conniving in the fantasy that images of the iconic star projecting on a screen have significance. Given the weight of symbolism involved, it is surprising that no Erving Goffman has come forward to explore the phenomenon from the inside.[9] Among historians, Jeffrey Richards and Sue Harper have examined the relationship between the cinema and societal change, but they are exceptions.[10] Arthur Marwick has promoted the use of newsreels and documentaries as historical source material, but he is uncharacteristically dismissive of B-features, which can offer a less consciously manipulated view of the world than prestige productions.[11] Film does have something to offer other disciplines if professional caution can be overcome.

The third objective is to consider what films can contribute to the debate on the consequences of war. Should the postwar years be seen as a New Jerusalem, a reversion to the 1930s or a continuation of war without the bombing? Controversy has simmered since the 1960s, when Anthony Howard proposed that 'Far from introducing a "social revolution" the overwhelming Labour victory of 1945 brought about the greatest restoration of traditional class values since 1660.'[12] Marwick has remained consistently more optimistic, though he has his detractors.[13] Film offers a contemporaneous view of events – a view which could sway public opinion. The work of socialists like the Boulting brothers or Ted Willis can be considered from this viewpoint.

A final objective is to test received opinion. Raymond Durgnat's attitude to class in film is summed up in his idiosyncratic but indispensable *A Mirror for England*: 'A middle-class cinema will tend to acknowledge the working-class only (1) insofar as they accept, or are subservient to, middle-class ideals (2) where they shade into the feckless and criminal stream, and (3) humorously. All these

approaches can be concertina'd into one.' [14] Durgnat was a pioneer in broadening writing on film beyond aesthetic considerations. The paradox is that by largely ignoring crime films and proletarian comedies like the Old Mother Riley series, he offers an approach predicated on the dominance of middle-class cinema. Nor are his insights entirely original: the humorous portrayal of working-class characters was noted by earlier commentators. [15] His cautious wording is tacit admission that not all working-class characters fit neatly into his three categories. Something more wide ranging and less value laden is needed to encompass the richness of working-class experience.

Brief Encounter (d. David Lean, 1945) is probably the best-remembered British film from the early postwar years, with Noel Coward's clipped dialogue being the subject of endless parody. Whatever the film's virtues, Lean's handling of class is hardly subtle. At the preview in Rochester, Kent, a working-class audience laughed at the love scenes; twenty years on, a middle-class audience in London did the same. [16] Perceptions of class changed over the intervening years, but what cues were being recognised which made the scenes appear class-bound to both audiences? Some method of identifying and codifying the signifiers of class is needed.

In the next chapter, the contentious issue of defining class is confronted and a sociological model for examining class in film is put forward. The third chapter examines the treatment of class in films about the Second World War. As the defining event of the period, the war cannot be omitted, even though it does not fit neatly into the proposed model. Subsequent chapters focus on aspects of working-class which were exemplified in films. The concluding chapter broadens the subject to consider the significance of the cinema for working-class audiences.

Because representations of the working class from the late 1950s onwards have received attention elsewhere, the films considered here are drawn from earlier years. [17] They offer snapshots of an urban working class trying to adjust to life in peacetime, before wartime controls gave way to the consumer society. Inevitably there are limits to what can be covered. The self-conscious attempt to capture reality in documentaries and newsreels merits more attention than can be given here. The same applies to the working class in the countryside. Racial issues were accorded little attention in British films until the late 1950s and are not considered. Period dramas are also omitted to avoid the conundrum of what message is being conveyed by characters in Regency dress when the original novel was published half a century before the film.

Release dates and running times are as given by Denis Gifford.[18] A feature film was defined as having a minimum length of 3,000 feet, which gives a running time of 33 minutes.[19] By this criterion, 491 British feature films were released between 1945 and 1950. Of these, the National Film Archive held viewing copies of 247 in 1996, with a dozen or so additional titles being available on video. Television companies around the world may hold the rights to other titles, but for practical purposes almost half the films released are lost or unobtainable. Among these are such potential gems as *The Agitator* (d. John Harlow, 1945), with a plot involving a socialist agitator who inherits a factory, and *The Turners of Prospect Road* (d. Maurice J. Wilson, 1947), in which the pet greyhound belonging to a taxi-driver's daughter wins a Dog Derby. The frustration of history is what has been lost; the lure is what might turn up.

Notes

1 Stephen C. Shafer, *British Popular Films 1929–1939: The Cinema of Reassurance* (London: Routledge, 1997), ch. 6.

2 R. J. Minney, *'Puffin' Asquith: A Biography of the Hon. Anthony Asquith: Aesthete, Aristocrat, Prime Minister's Son and Film Maker* (London: Leslie Frewin, 1973); Charles Drazin, *The Finest Years: British Cinema of the 1940s* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1998), pp. 185–99.

3 John Sedgwick, *Popular Filmgoing in 1930s Britain: A Choice of Pleasures* (Exeter: Exeter University Press, 2000).

4 For other surviving records see Julian Poole, 'British cinema attendance in wartime: audience preference at the Majestic, Macclesfield 1939–1946', *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, 7:1 (1987), 15–34; Allen Eyles, 'Hits and misses at the Empire', *Picture House*, summer issue (1989), 35–47. The Macclesfield records cover an earlier period than the Sheffield returns, while the Empire, Leicester Square, is a prestigious West End venue and atypical. Fragmentary records survive from the Daffodil, Cheltenham. These are held by the present owner of the building, Mark Stephens.

5 For a full explanation of the methodology, see Philip J. Gillett. 'British feature films and working-class culture 1945–1950', Ph.D. thesis, University of North London, 2000, ch. 6.

6 One example is Margaret O'Brien and Allen Eyles, *Enter the Dream House: Memories of Cinemas in South London from the Twenties to the Sixties* (London: BFI and Museum of the Moving Image, 1993).

7 For a definition of the 'quality' film see John Ellis, 'Art, culture and quality – terms for a cinema in the forties and seventies', *Screen*, 19:3 (1978), 9–49.

8 Terry Lovell, 'Sociology and the cinema', *Screen*, 12:1 (1971), 15–26.

9 His distinctive brand of sociology is displayed in Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1990). For its applicability to films, see Dudley Andrew, 'The neglected tradition of phenomenology', in Bill Nichols (ed.), *Movies and Methods*,

vol. 2: *An Anthology* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1985), pp. 625–32.

10 Representative of their approaches are Jeffrey Richards, *The Age of the Dream Palace: Cinema and Society in Britain 1930–39* (Basingstoke and London: Routledge, 1989); Sue Harper, *Picturing the Past: The Rise and Fall of the British Costume Film* (London: BFI, 1994).

11 Arthur Marwick, *Culture in Britain since 1945* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991), p. 57.

12 Anthony Howard, 'We are the masters now', in Michael Sissons and Philip French (eds), *The Age of Austerity 1945–1951* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1964), p. 33.

13 Arthur Marwick, *Britain in the Century of Total War: War, Peace and Social Change 1900–1967* (London: Bodley Head, 1968); Harold L. Smith (ed.), *War and Social Change: British Society in the Second World War* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1986).

14 Raymond Durgnat, *A Mirror for England: British Movies from Austerity to Affluence* (London: Faber & Faber, 1970), p. 48.

15 Glyn Roberts, *Film Weekly* (23 April 1938), p. 11, cited in Shafer, *British Popular Films 1929–1939*, p. 38; Richard Winnington, *Drawn and Quartered* (London: Saturn Press, [1948]), p. 106.

16 Kevin Brownlow, *David Lean: A Biography* (London: Faber & Faber, 1997), p. 203; Durgnat, *A Mirror for England*, p. 180.

17 Stuart Laing, *Representations of Working-Class Life 1957–1964* (Basingstoke and London: Macmillan, 1986); John Hill, *Sex, Class and Realism: British Cinema 1956–1963* (London: BFI, 1986).

18 Denis Gifford, *The British Film Catalogue 1895–1985* (Newton Abbot: David & Charles, 1986).

19 Donald Alexander, *Facts about Film* (London: Bureau of Current Affairs, 1946), p. 9.

2 Who were the workers?

Class is one of those phenomena like love, depression and the feel-good factor which resists definition, though we know it when we see it. This hardly satisfies sociologists, whose quest is to bring precision to their concepts. For those concerned with social structures, the grail is a quantitative measure, the ideal being ratio data such as income, with a known interval between each category. This can be used alongside dichotomous variables such as occupation (manual or nonmanual), housing tenure (owner-occupier or rented), housing type (terraced or semidetached), type of education (secondary modern or grammar) and length of education (ending at the secondary or tertiary stage). In practice, such precision can be illusory. Where the line should be drawn between a working-class and a middle-class income, or whether the owner of a corner shop in a slum district should be categorised as upper working class or lower middle class are matters of judgement rather than fact. Nor does income distinguish between the lifestyles of the genteel poor and affluent workers. A census might be expected to yield definitive conclusions, but using the 1951 census, the proportion of working-class people in Britain has been estimated variously at 64, 72 and 86.9 per cent.[1] The grail of a definitive measure remains elusive, leaving class as a semantic battleground for generations of sociologists. Like a dog with a particularly juicy bone, John Goldthorpe has devoted his career to the subject, refusing to be sidetracked during the Thatcher years when class slipped down the agenda. His career sums up changing perceptions of social differentiation – and its complexity.[2]

If at least two-thirds of the population were working class in 1951, a reasonable assumption is that a similar proportion of

cinema patrons were working class. In all probability this is an underestimate. Using Board of Trade data for 1950/51, H. E. Browning and A. A. Sorrell calculated that admissions per person were higher in the industrial heartlands than elsewhere: 36 in Scotland, 37 in the North East, 35 in Lancashire and 34 in the East and West Ridings of Yorkshire, against a national average of 28. Only the Midlands went against the trend at 26.[3] The implication is that the working class were disproportionately exposed to the values promoted in films, including the representation on screen of people like themselves.

As a character on screen can become a real person to the audience, so the risk of emphasising measurement in sociology is that class assumes material reality instead of being merely a convenient way of grouping social phenomena. This is the social scientist's cardinal sin of reifying a concept. One way of avoiding this pitfall is to adopt Ervin Goffman's strategy and focus on how people perceive their own class position. One consequence is that the numbers change. In Gallup polls from 1948 and 1949, 45 per cent of respondents called themselves working class – a figure well below those proposed by sociologists.[4] As Arthur Marwick puts it somewhat acidly, 'I prefer "class" to mean what people in everyday life mean by it, rather than what Runciman or Weber tell me I should mean by it. I have never yet heard anyone speak of "working-status" homes, nor "middle-status" education. Sociologists, I fear, often preach in preference to practising.'[5] At first sight this returns the concept of class to the will-o'-the-wisp state from which sociologists seek to escape, but examine what class means to people and something more complex emerges. Certain defining characteristics keep recurring in the neglected body of social science research from the 1940s and 1950s. Cultural continuity is implied if these were apparent earlier in the century as evidenced by autobiographies of working-class people, though the risk must be acknowledged that these may be coloured by hindsight.

Neighbourhood referred to the surrounding district which inhabitants knew intimately. Particularly for women, most journeys outside the home were made on foot, so that the neighbourhood would not extend beyond easy walking distance of the front door: 'The Cockney fellow's street was his kingdom, and not lightly trampled on by outsiders. Even we small girls felt the bristling pride in belonging.' (Doris Bailey, born 1916, Bethnal Green, London).[6] In a wartime survey conducted in urban Scotland, 48 per cent of respondents went to a cinema within 600 yards of home.[7] Blackouts and bombing hardly encouraged adventurousness, but there was certainty in the known. Going outside the

boundaries meant a loss of security and could be perceived as intimidating.[8] The neighbourhood mentality was highlighted by officers of a Junior Employment Board in the 1930s, who found that youths in a London suburb were unwilling to venture out of the area for work; even in the 1980s, working-class youths in Brixham, Devon, were unwilling to look for work elsewhere in Torbay.[9] During the war, mass entertainment, displacement by bombing, evacuation and work in factories might be expected to reduce women's ties to the neighbourhood, while child rearing and a lack of transport served to reinforce them. If the neighbourhood was less prominent in postwar anthropological literature, it was still influential enough to be enshrined in the doctrines of town planning which shaped postwar redevelopment.[10]

The neighbourhood implied more than the built environment, but *community* more aptly described the social network within the neighbourhood.[11] It is also the concept most at risk of being distorted by nostalgia. By means of gossip and threats, the community could define and police standards of behaviour which were not necessarily the norms of the wider society in such matters as sexual mores and attitudes to violence and private property.[12] There was little sense of community in the inner-city St Ebbe's district of Oxford in 1950: though 36 per cent of the population had been resident for twenty years or more, 60 per cent of families reported having no friends, compared with 30 per cent making a similar claim on the more modern Barton council estate.[13] Conversely, a study conducted on a Sheffield estate revealed that between 1927 and 1952, two-thirds of tenants married another resident, which might be expected to strengthen links within the community.[14] Ties were likely to be stronger in isolated settlements, or where everybody was dependent on a single industry. As a former miner wrote: 'The "lump" [a collection of houses plus a pub and a shop] is a closely coherent social organism more important in the life of the residents than the individual families of which it is composed.'[15]

Neighbours were those members of the community in close physical proximity. The nature of facilities in older urban areas – corner shops, shared WC blocks and washing lines strung across streets – made frequent contact unavoidable, although there was no reason why this should make for friendship rather than friction. On a Liverpool estate in 1951–52, families with four or more children asked for help more frequently than others, while older residents felt that there was too much privacy. The researchers concluded that 'the degree of contact between neighbours is regulated by convention, and there is probably rather less permitted or

desired nowadays than in the past.'[16] Similarly, in Houghton, a modern and planned working-class neighbourhood of Coventry, the tendency was to be reserved with neighbours, though the district was sometimes described as poor because of the low standard of privacy.[17] Geoffrey Gorer's 1951 national survey confirmed these findings: people who visited neighbours had an income of less than £5 or more than £15 a week, which excluded most of the working class except the poorest and those who could flaunt their affluence.[18] This may be compared with evidence from the late 1930s: of 500 children who wrote essays on 'My home and who lives there', 16 per cent mentioned neighbours, compared with 61 per cent of the subgroup who lived in tenements. The latter children mentioned their parents far less frequently.[19] In the 1950s, a teacher in Liverpool could still write: 'The people of the tenements have no privacy. Everything is community life. If a mother comes here to see me, she brings a friend with her. One feels sometimes people don't want to be individuals. They go through life with arms linked, holding one another up.'[20] These clues suggest that if neighbourliness had once been important, a change was taking place by 1950 where there were smaller families and improved living conditions.

Family was an amorphous term, embracing not only the nuclear family, but the wider kinship network. A consistent feature of the studies is that kinship remained important, particularly for the wife. Townsend's thesis is convincing: a mother could be fifty-nine before her last child reached the age of marriage. This prolongation of the time spent caring for children was a major reason for the maintenance of family ties, particularly when there was a short period between children depending on parents and parents depending on children. The corollary is that a reduction in family size reduced family contact.[21]

The family promised not only emotional support, but help with such practical matters as child-minding, finding a job and a house, and support in old age.[22] With more official involvement in social welfare, these aspects of family life were declining. Mum had no power in the town hall.[23] Whatever the psychological benefits of familial closeness, it acted as a constraint on geographical and social mobility. This is apparent from a 1954 study made in a secondary modern school, probably in Leeds. These working-class girls generally had two or three siblings. Their preference was to spend leisure time outside the home and in the company of friends, siblings and boyfriends. Though most girls did not wish to follow their parents' occupations, they were unwilling to take work which the parents believed would necessitate living away from home.[24]

Home occupied an ambiguous place in the working-class world. Marriage could mean escape from an overcrowded parental home where there was parental discord and little privacy. Wanting a home was the most common reason for marriage, according to a postwar study conducted in London by Eliot Slater and Moya Woodside.[25] Diana Dors' character in *A Kid for Two Farthings* (d. Carol Reed, 1955) exemplifies the desire for a home packed with consumer goods. The risk was that a new home on an outlying estate could become all-enveloping for the wife, restricting wider contacts.[26]

If family links militated against the desire to leave the parental home, a lack of savings and the postwar housing shortage reinforced this pattern. In a study of industrial Wales dating from 1959, 50 per cent more couples shared a home with parents than before the war.[27] Similar results came from Sheffield and the East End of London.[28] Home was the place for the family, to the exclusion of the community – what Townsend calls the privacy of the hearth – with neither workmates nor neighbours generally being invited inside.[29] Overcrowding and the practice of heating only the living room were constraints on extending the social life of the home beyond the immediate family.[30] This enhanced the value of the street, pubs, cinemas and dance halls as meeting places.

The lack of privacy within the home deserves emphasis. Closeness was not necessarily perceived as a problem – at least until there was a basis for comparison among people in the same social group, which occurred as housing improved.[31] For the girls interviewed by Pearl Jephcott in 1945–46, these improvements had yet to be enjoyed at first hand.[32] Living in a spacious home must have been experienced vicariously through films, though whether with envy or frustration is not recorded.

Gender roles were generally unambiguous, though contradictory accounts imply that there was considerable variation according to local circumstances. Women in the poorest families and in large towns had more authority.[33] Fathers played a shadowy role in Liverpool, Oxford and London, though the mining community of Ashton was more patriarchal.[34] The social researcher Ferdynand Zweig sketched a complex picture of change for the miner's wife. Facilities such as pithead baths and canteens made life easier, but they gave her a different order of importance from when she scrubbed her husband's back and cooked his meals.[35] Ambiguity also showed in the husband's degree of involvement in housework and child rearing, with a north-south divide becoming apparent.[36] The northern attitude is summed up by John Barron Mays, who recounts how a working mother in Liverpool with a bed-ridden husband wanted her daughter to have time off school to look

after him. When it was pointed out that two unemployed teenage sons were at home, the mother responded: 'I pray that as long as I've my strength, no man will ever be asked to cook in my house.'[37] Geoff Mungham suggests that male intolerance of bad language by women was the product of a strongly matriarchal society, though he offers no evidence.[38] Drunkenness and violence by the husband were less prominent than before the war. They hardly figured in Slater and Woodside's London study, though Gorer referred to them as persisting in the Midlands and they received mention in studies of poor communities.[39]

Respectability was a key component of working-class life, with a distinction being made between rough and respectable families. The former were usually poor, while the latter avoided this state by the application of hard work and self-improvement.[40] Though the distinction is clear, where to draw the line between the two groups was a fine social judgement. Zweig caught the complexities:

Working-class women divide themselves not so much by the jobs their husbands do – and still less by the jobs they themselves do – but rather by ways of life … The main line of division is respectability, and the sense of respectability, i.e. conformity to accepted standards, is much stronger among women than men. A labourer's wife, if she is respectable and leads a clean reasonable life, doing her bit and coping sensibly with adversities, is much more respected and classed higher in the social hierarchy than a craftsman's wife who leads the irresponsible life of a waster.[41]

Zweig's views were echoed a generation later:

Social historians studying the working class in the recent past are almost overwhelmed at times by the total devotion and dedication shown towards the concept of respectability. It can be seen in the lives of almost all members of the working class, even in those who in the eyes of others were 'rough'. 'To be respectable' was in its original sense, to be respected, and in closely-knit communities, it was difficult to live comfortably without the respect of one's family and neighbours.[42]

One of the girls interviewed in the 1940s by Josephine Macalister Brew put it more succinctly: 'The closer you live together, the more respectable you have to be.'[43]

Respectability limited social interactions: children's contact with their rougher counterparts was discouraged, while families with social aspirations might be treated with suspicion for 'getting above themselves'.[44] Poverty militated against respectability by making it difficult to keep up standards. The important point was not to let it show. In Nigel Gray's words, the working class 'instead of fighting poverty, try to hide it like underwear under the cushions'.[45]

Status was linked inexorably to respectability. Superiority could be asserted by such means as clothing, speech or occupation. As a shipyard joiner recalls, 'Engineers thought they were better than boilermakers, they were more highly skilled. Boilermakers used to think they were the salt of the earth, because they literally built the ship, and if they didn't build the ship, the engineers couldn't finish it. There was a sort of class warfare'.[46] Status could also be indicated by the display of ornaments in the parlour. Creating a shrine in this way meant that the room was seldom used: 'You lived in the kitchen and you went in the parlour for your best room … It was dusted and kept nice and never sat on [*sic*]. It was just used on special occasions … [for] visitors, weddings, funerals, birthdays, happen on a Sunday'.[47] In Dennis Chapman's Liverpool study from the early 1950s, interviewers were shown into the formal room on 44 per cent of occasions in bye-law houses (nineteenth century terraced housing conforming to basic legal standards), compared with 22 per cent in semidetached houses.[48]

Status might imply an element of change, of a need to keep up with the Joneses, but the desire for respectability and for doing the proper thing meant that the prevailing attitude of the working class was one of *fatalism* and acceptance of the status quo, summed up in the third verse of the hymn 'All things bright and beautiful' by Mrs C. F. Alexander (1848):

> The rich man in his castle,
> The poor man at his gate,
> God made them, high and lowly,
> And ordered their estate.[49]

Subservience was less overt by the late 1940s, but the passive acceptance of one's role in life and the fatalism which this engendered were not completely lost.[50] C. S. Wilson saw the relative freedom of working-class children and the inherent opportunities for developing chance relationships which this provided as determining their attitude towards fate.[51] Life was a matter of chance, with gambling as a logical extension of this principle.

Conservatism was allied to fatalism and showed itself in an unwillingness to change working practices. This was more apparent in older industries like mining and shipbuilding. Though significant economically, it was not a prerogative of the working class.[52]

The Welfare State brought a reduction of *insecurity*, though after studying inner-city Liverpool in the late 1950s, Mays could still write that 'Old customs and habits die hard. The years of scarcity