Chapter Three

Pressured Proletarian Island

Bermondsey

On a superficial first glance, walking the streets east of London Bridge station and past London’s new riverside City Hall, Bermondsey might appear as a variant of Battersea: an old-established white working-class community, living in a stable housing area with strong family and neighbourhood networks, now undergoing gentrification. But, down in these streets and talking to these people, Bermondsey emerges as a very different kind of place from Battersea – even, perhaps, its diametric opposite. Here too, people have experienced multi-dimensional change: the loss of traditional jobs in docks or factories, the arrival of newcomers to the public housing estates, the gentrification of working-class streets, and the loss of a tight sense of community. But the impacts on them have been drastic and often quite negative. That makes it all the more important to try to understand how such a situation could have developed – which involves delving back into history.

Some History

Southwark, the borough in which Bermondsey lies, presents an intriguing comparison with Wandsworth borough and its Battersea neighbourhood. Four miles farther north-east along the south bank of the river, its early development was in many ways similar, although it has always been closer to the economic heart of the city. Its recent political evolution has shown distinctive twists and turns, as control shifted from Old Labour in the 1960s to militant Labour in the 1970s and 1980s; then to very New Labour in the 1990s, actively encouraging gentrification like the radical Conservatives in Wandsworth; and finally to no overall control in the early twenty-first century. But three in five of its residents still live in social housing, much of it substandard, and the borough continues to suffer the full range of ‘inner-city’ problems. In particular, while new jobs are arriving, many locals lack the qualifications needed to fill them.
These problems have deep roots. For centuries, at least since Shakespeare's day, Southwark has always been the poor neighbour of the City of London across the river. Developing first along the Borough High Street that led south from London Bridge - the only river crossing, down to the mid-eighteenth century - it became a place of intense traffic of goods and people. It was a place of markets, including the still-surviving Borough Market, while along the wharves which lined the 'Pool of London', for a mile or more below the bridge, was concentrated all of London's port activity until enclosed docks were built on clear land further east in the nineteenth century.

By then, packed into the intervening space was a mixture of industry, including noxious activities such as leather tanning, and one of the worst slum districts in London: Jacob's Island, immortalised in Dickens's *Oliver Twist*. Above the bridge, Bankside was traditionally London's red light district, a place of theatres, bear pits, taverns and brothels. The High Street was also a centre for coaching inns until London's first rail terminus was built nearby at London Bridge. Two major commuter railways, serving the City of London across the river, then produced a huge complex of east-west railway tracks on high arches, effectively severing the area in two. Below the tracks lay a tangled mass of slum housing, warehousing and industry, and trades ancillary to the City, such as printing and food processing, as well as heavier industry - including a gasworks on Bankside, replaced in the 1950s by London's last power station, itself transmogrified into the Tate Modern gallery shortly before we interviewed.

Slowly, from the mid-nineteenth century, charitable trusts and then municipal endeavour began to replace the worst of the slums, squeezing new housing into the limited spaces between the viaducts. This process accelerated in the twentieth century. As Southwark and Bermondsey Councils built as much public housing as their powers and finances would allow them. And after 1934 they were joined by the London County Council, as Herbert Morrison's Labour administration switched emphasis from peripheral out-country estates to denser inner-London renewal schemes. Then as later, one effect of reconstruction was to lower residential densities; even as early as the 1890s, with the arrival of LCC tram termini and then of Tube services, out-movement of population began, initially to new LCC cottage homes. It continued through most of the twentieth century, hugely accelerated by the Blitz, taking the combined population of the (pre-1965) Southwark and Bermondsey boroughs from a peak of 337,000 in 1901 to just 158,000 by 1951. Then, in the 1950s, a comprehensive renewal strategy brought huge new public estates on either side of a relocated Jamaica Road, but again housing and area improvements entailed reduced densities and substantial population overspill from these areas.

But for a time the riverside area of wharves and warehouses remained more or less untouched, until quite suddenly - between 1967 and 1981 - competition from more entrepreneurial east coast container ports led to the sudden and unexpected contraction and then closure of the Port of London, leaving a vast stretch of derelict land along 8 miles of riverfront. During the 1970s there were successive redevelopment schemes, involving much paper and much talk but very little action. To remedy this situation, in 1981 the Thatcher government removed both initiative and veto powers from the local authorities, and imposed a London Docklands Development Corporation with a single-minded remit to secure redevelopment of the entire dockland area, including the Southwark waterfront. It was fought all the way up to the High Court, delaying the LDDC's inauguration for a year. Even after this, Southwark Council - whose traditional working-class trade-union leadership had been displaced by a group of left-wing activists - pursued a bitter guerrilla war against the government, producing a rival development plan which had to be struck down in the High Court, and rejecting any collaboration with the LDDC.

Beyond simple issues of power, there was a fundamental conflict about the kind of area that this should be. The Council's priorities were to preserve traditional land uses and activities employing the existing working-class population; the LDDC saw the future in terms of an informational economy, and was determined to attract jobs in the service sectors and to build homes for the predominantly middle-class people who would work in them.

The LDDC's main impact was logically in the area it took over: the enclosed docks, both on the north bank and further east in the Surrey Docks. But its territory also included the line of riverside warehouses stretching up to London Bridge, most of which were converted into shops, restaurants, bars and luxury apartments, through two major developments in the 1980s: Hay's Galleria near London Bridge and Butler's Wharf just below Tower Bridge. The early 1990s collapse of the property market delayed a third major scheme, London Bridge City, beyond the LDDC's winding-up in 1998. By then, however, the Southwark riverside (like that opposite in Tower Hamlets) displayed two starkly dissimilar landscapes: one of public-sector rebuilding, 1934 to 1981, and another of commercial redevelopment under public-private partnership, 1982 to 1998, separated by a kind of invisible Berlin Wall.

When the LDDC was wound up in 1998 its initiatives passed back to the local authorities. But by then, ironically, the Council had transformed itself into a model of Blairite New Labour. Southwark eagerly accepted the revolution that the LDDC had wrought, and sought to push it towards its logical conclusion, pursuing both private investment and a more affluent population. It extended the area of extensive development and regeneration from the waterfront base to encompass a wide area across the northern
half of the borough, especially in five areas: the riverine areas of Bankside and London Bridge (home to the new Greater London Authority); North Peckham; the Aylesbury Estate; and the Elephant and Castle. The entrepreneurial strategy – promoted by Southwark’s then director of development, Fred Manson, in conjunction with a Cross-River Partnership – involved linkimg Southwark as a whole into the City and Westminster economies, with Bankside as the crucial bridgehead, all boosted by completion of the Jubilee Line extension in 1999.

Since the 1970s, during periodic boom spells this area has attracted overspill business service development from the City. But the key to its recent transformation is its incorporation into an extended cultural quarter, with the rebuilt Globe Theatre (1996), Tate Modern (2000) and associated development (including Vinopolis and smaller galleries) linking along the riverside westward to the postwar South Bank arts complex and eastward to the yuppified Hay’s Galleria and beyond. This in turn has brought gentrification, as evidenced by house prices which have risen faster than in most other parts of London since the mid-1990s, with average prices for all properties in Southwark reaching £273,000 in early 2006, putting it in sixteenth place, midway among London boroughs.

Bermondsey Today

There have been vast changes in Southwark’s economy since 1970: the docks have gone, and most manufacturing industry has either shut down or moved away. Between 1991 and 1998 a further 4,000 manufacturing jobs were lost. What survives is mostly printing, which retains its traditional advantages of proximity to CBD customers, and now operates alongside newspaper publishing, television and video production.

But, as in other parts of east and south-east London, employment in Southwark now means office employment. There are two major categories: public services – public administration, railway transport, post, telecommunications – which have been affected by reorganisation or privatisation, but overall seem to have remained stable in employment through the 1990s; and financial and business services, which have grown at no more than average rates but account for a third of all employment. More recently, regeneration policies on Bankside have brought new jobs in the creative, cultural and tourist industries. Even before the arrival of the Globe Theatre and the Tate Modern, there was an important local cluster of creative industries, and the area can now boast some sixteen art galleries and many advertising and design companies, as well as media operations. During the 1990s, borough employment in recreational and cultural services more than doubled, though they still only employed 6,000 people in 1999. A similar number work in catering and hotel services, where there has also been substantial growth, though this sector remains under-represented in the borough as a whole, and growth probably owes as much to expanding local demand as to that from tourists.

Overall, employment grew in Southwark during the 1990s – by about 8 per cent between 1991 and 1998. Even manual sector jobs contracted only a little, about 3 per cent, while non-manual work grew healthily. It seems that, after a low point in the 1970s and early 1980s, the borough economy has turned. But, of course, it has done so only by transforming itself from goods handling to knowledge production.

And this shows starkly in the social structure of the resident population. Its most striking feature – at least in comparison to areas farther west – is the high proportion of people who are economically inactive: just over 40 per cent in 2001, including 6.2 per cent unemployed, 8.0 per cent retired, and 5.3 per cent permanently sick or disabled. Significantly, though nearly 35 per cent have a degree level or higher, over 24 per cent have no qualification at all. In 2005, the largest single group of workers were managers and senior officials, closely followed by associate professional and technical and by administrative and secretarial and professional occupations, but next after those came elementary occupations – the clearest possible index of the economic and social polarisation that now characterises Southwark.

In 2001 only 31 per cent of households owned their homes, and no less than 38 per cent of Southwark households remained in social housing. But household composition Southwark is close to the London norm: almost 50 per cent of the population fall in the single never married category, 37 per cent of households have only one person and only 20 per cent are married couples, while 14 per cent are lone parent households – 10 per cent with dependent children.

Southwark is typical of inner London in another way: it has an exceptionally high proportion, 37 per cent, of non-white people. The largest ethnic minority is one that has arrived quite recently, the Black African with 16 per cent, followed by Black Caribbean with 8 per cent. Significantly, though, negligible numbers recorded themselves as other than Christian, no religion or religion not stated. In 1981 the ethnic minority population of the borough had been only 18 per cent; growth since then – including relatively large numbers of refugees and asylum seekers, estimated at around 4 per cent of the resident population by 1997 – has reversed a long-term pattern of population decline. The change is highlighted within the school population, where by 1999 55 per cent were from ethnic minorities (including 15 per cent Afro-Caribbean and 26 per cent African) and 36 per cent had English as a second language.

Unsurprisingly, Southwark appears among the four London boroughs with the greatest concentrations of deprivation, in 2004 it was seventeenth among all English local authority areas on the government’s indices of
deprivation. Average incomes of taxpayers in the borough are actually on a par with those in most of our other case study districts, but the large numbers of economically inactive people mean that the average conceals huge disparities: rich and poor are living side by side. As elsewhere in London, the level of housing deprivation is particularly severe: the 2001 Census showed an overcrowding rate of 25 per cent, eighth worst both in London and nationally. Other indicators of deprivation include a quarter of the primary school population with special education needs, and relatively high rates of child protection registration. Crime rates for almost all types of offences are the highest among the case study districts, most notably for drug offences, where they are more than twice the London average.

Our interviews took place in two distinct neighbourhoods: Bermondsey, along the river east of Tower Bridge, and the North Peckham estate, about a mile inland.

Bermondsey, like many other neighbourhoods where we interviewed, is not a single homogenous place at all, but at least two – or maybe, three. There is the vast area of public housing south of the dual-carriageway Jamaica Road passing the new Bermondsey Jubilee Line Tube station – which was itself a postwar creation, diverted during the course of the great rebuild of the 1950s and 1960s. This, the ‘four squares’ area, is the almost standard mixture of the 1950s and 1960s: a mixed area of four-storey maisonettes and seven-storey slab blocks, quite well planned and maintained, and generally peaceful. In the heart of it is Lockwood Square, a series of rather massive seven-storey slab blocks with deck access, arrayed around a nicely landscaped square, in a quiet area with some good character. Here also is the rather isolated and anomalous Cathy House: a massive twenty-storey tower block on the south side of Jamaica Road, close to the Tube station, and rather unusual for this area, which is generally not more than seven storeys. Farther east, on Tooley Street on the other side of Tower Bridge Road, are Devon Mansions: tall Victorian blocks which you can see from the railway line into London Bridge.

North of Jamaica Road is a rather different landscape resulting from the great rebuild of the 1960s: the Dickens Estate and Pynfields next door towards the Rotherhithe Tunnel, quite pleasant, with four-storey maisonettes, well landscaped, but with some traffic noise for the blocks directly facing onto Jamaica Road, and with some two-storey houses immediately behind. This, even more than the area south of Jamaica Road, is an oasis of peace: a reminder of just how good the postwar planners were at their best, especially now the vegetation has grown around their creations.

Finally there is the third Bermondsey: on the rear side of Hay’s Galleria, an itty-bitty mixture of old warehousing and new infill construction. Here is an ‘urban village’ street: a mixture of warehouse conversions and new infill apartments, including a large LSE hall of residence, in an area full of trendy wine bars and restaurants, just behind Butlers Wharf near the Design Museum.

This physical distinction of course results from history. The first two areas are closely identified with the area’s former port functions and remain essentially a white working-class community, with local internal divisions stemming from the physical division by Jamaica Road and by the wide rail viaduct a few blocks to the south, and also from the family linkage policies of local housing associations, typified by the father-son tenancies of the Peabody Estate. These can produce quite inward-looking and also backward-looking feelings: communities increasingly feel squeezed out of their own borough, because they find it hard to access the office jobs that have replaced dock jobs as the area’s mainstay, and also because their traditional amenities have been replaced by offices or tourist facilities. They also see rents rising beyond their means. On top of that, there is a shortage of local secondary school places, so that many of their children have to travel long distances to school while others stay at home. So – as in their futile campaign against the development of London Bridge City, an office development around the new City Hall – they tend to dig in and oppose further change.

North Peckham is very different: it is an area of huge 1960s and 1970s council estates, consisting of massive blocks with deck access, which became problematic during the late 1970s and 1980s, causing them to be rebuilt under the aegis of the Peckham Partnership with mixed tenures and lower densities, and with an upgraded town centre including an award-winning public library. For many older residents, this provided a welcome opportunity to leave a claustrophobic and crime-ridden estate, while those who remained have benefited both from housing standards higher than in many private developments and falling crime rates. But there have been teething problems, with delayed construction of social facilities, and bureaucratic problems in resettling families, while schools have been hit by steeply declining registers. The most vulnerable were the hardest hit; elderly residents, in particular, sometimes did not survive the move. Most recently the area achieved notoriety for gang activity, with the much-publicised manslaughter of the ten-year-old Nigerian child, Danitola Taylor. Property prices here remain low, averaging just £211,000 in early 2006.

Serena

Some Bermondsey residents appear to exist almost miraculously in islands of communal cohesion, while almost everything in the world around them has dissolved and changed. One of these is Serena, a divorced mother of two in her twenties, white, unemployed and a council tenant. She came from a large local family and has no less than eleven brothers and sisters.
She describes the feeling of community on her local estate in words that are almost lyrical, making it sound like something out of an almost forgotten age of social harmony, an almost rustic village quality where everyone knew everyone and where social controls were effortlessly maintained, informally and almost unconsciously:

They've got the... one of the best estates in London. Everybody on this estate knows everyone else... everyone on here just makes you feel welcome. We all sort of go out on day trips together on coaches. And... I think it's a brilliant area. I think everyone keeps their eye on everyone else's children round here. As soon as one of the kids goes off the estate, you know about it.

How do you know?

One of the others will come and knock on the door and say, 'Hey, how are you doing?' or even if one of them's talking to someone they shouldn't be speaking to, one of the older ones will come round and say, 'Oh, so, so... so's talking to a stranger'. But most of them know not to talk to strangers. Oh yeah. I mean, the teenagers on here, they're unbelievable. They really are unbelievable, the teenagers.

In what sorts of ways?

Um... I don't know. If I needed my garden done, I could say to the boys, 'Hey, I'm doing my garden, I've got to cut the grass. Can you take all the rubbish down to the chute for me?' And they'd do it. That's just the way that they've been brought up round here, though. And in terms of people who live in the area, would you know... I mean, how many people do you think you'd know, just generally, in the area? I would say about 40... you walk down the street and you know more or less everyone that I walk past.

Really? Like a village? How many people would you reckon that you knew? If you'd just, like, say hello to me, mean, if you had to put a figure on it?

To say hello to? Just in Bermondsey? About 150. Yeah. It's like... I can be walking along with my friend Donna, and she'll stop and talk to somebody that she knows, and then next time I'm walking down the street, that person will say hello to me, and I'll say hello to them. And that's how it goes.

She thought that this contributed to a minimal, almost non-existent level of crime on the estate:

And if the teenagers have been making too much noise on the estate, then somebody has a word with them. But, basically, no, it's a very, very good estate. I think we've had one burglary in 3 years, because everyone knows everyone on here, and they know who shouldn't be on here at certain times, so...

In her view, the estate was so hospitable because of its small size and intelligently-planned layout:

I don't know... I think it's because it's so small, and all the blocks face each other, and they've got, like, a communal area, obviously, in the middle. And it's got such a different age range.

She contrasted this to the design of other local estates which have a bad local reputation:

But it's just areas that they look at, that they don't have a community any more, like the... estate. I can't see them having a community... the tall blocks, because you don't know who lives two floors down from you. Whereas probably everyone in that block could tell you who lives on the ground floor and... and who lives opposite them as well.

But, she had no doubt, the local facilities contributed to the quality of life on the estate as well:

The shops are, literally, right in front of my front door... Yeah. The Tube station's right next door, that's in Jamaica Road. And the school's across the road. The bus stops are right in front of me as well... Yeah. And there's a park about 50 yards away. And there's swings in the back garden! So you don't really need to go anywhere else.

It was the same with the local tenants' association, which was extraordinarily lively and active:

... when I first moved up here, because I didn't really know anyone... and the Tenants' Association, the first thing they do is come round and introduce themselves to everyone that moves in... And they ask for a pound a month to each household, and then all the children get a card at Christmas, with £5 in it, and they also go on a day trip in the summer, which is where we're going next Sunday, actually... to Broadstairs. So we've got a 72-seater coach. But everyone gets the choice of going or not. And we're just going to go and have a day out in Broadstairs.

All these factors meant that — unlike some other parts of Bermondsey — this estate had a low turnover, no one wanted to leave:

No, a lot of people don't tend to give their flats up on this estate. It's very, very hard to get a flat on here, and it's very rarely you actually see one going, unless it's for a specific reason, like if it's an old person that's got stairs in their flat. But I think that they... they'd actually rather move into one of the ground floor ones, rather than move off of the estate.
Liz

Liz echoed many of Serena's sentiments. Like Serena she had grown up in a nearby area, in her case the East End on the other side of the river, and had fifteen brothers and sisters. In her thirties, a council tenant, she was also white, divorced and had three children.

Although Liz lived on a much larger estate than Serena, she found it surprisingly congenial:

Yeah, yeah, I've got, there's a few good friends, yeah. Yeah, there is. No I can honestly say it's a nice, it's a nice area to live, I wouldn't live nowhere else, I wouldn't go back over the East End ... even though my family live over there, I don't think I could ... go and live back over in that area. Even though, I mean I go over there quite a lot, but I don't think I'd like to live where they live, I really like it here. The people, they are, they're all quite nice really ... they're quite friendly and you get the odd one, but then ... you get that anywhere don't you?

And this made her feel safe:

I feel very safe, I mean, I can honestly, cos like, I do know, sort of, everyone to say hello to, so I would feel safe, yeah, walking round here, I wouldn't have no qualms about...

Any time of the night?

Yeah, I wouldn't have really no, that is because I know everyone and...

And this feeling of safety comes from her familiarity with the area:

Yeah, yeah... But as for crime, I think everyone gets a little bit of crime, but I can honestly say, like I say, I'd feel safe walking round this area, this particular part, you know what I mean. I don't know about down the Blue, down that way late at night, I wouldn't, you know, I'm not saying that cos I don't really know it down there so.

She also appreciated the convenient local facilities, especially the shops, and the easy access by public transport:

Well I can't, we're on top of everything really here aren't we? We've got Surrey Quays, you only have to get a bus at the top here, it takes you right into the Quays. We got the Bermondsey Station, that takes me right to my sister's, takes you right through to Stratford Shopping Centre, up the West End. So I've really got no complaints about the transport. You know, I mean, where I can go sort of anywhere from here, you know, it is so easy, I mean, I'm in walking distance to London Bridge, Tower Bridge, couldn't be better really.

But there were a few concerns in her mind too. One, almost inevitably, was the progressive 'yuppification' of the area and its effect in breaking down the old close social relationships:

I don't really know, you don't really know who lives over there to be honest. Do you know what I mean, you might see 'em at the window, but ... I can't honestly ... say that ... you don't really know who lives there.

And this was associated with a certain feeling, amounting to mild paranoia, that the Council was encouraging the process while allowing traditional local services to run down:

No, there's no improvements, it's just ... I mean, I don't know if you've seen the chute just there, you know, when you come in ... I can't understand it, because like the dustmen I come, and they ... take the rubbish, but leave half of it on the floor just seems, they've got no time, it's all being built up round here, it seems it's like for, you know, them that can afford their houses and that. That's what it seems to me.

At an everyday level, she felt that the Council could cater better for local needs – for instance, of mothers looking after small children during the day:

I think they could do with like a nice little play park or, or anything, you know, a little park on there. I don't mean for the big uns, I mean for the little children, cos obviously you can't let 'em out, so wouldn't be as nice if they could just come down and their parents could watch 'em from the window, you know, and play along. They're lovely the flats, they're beautiful, they're very nice but don't forget us, do something for us.

But, as her own children were now all of secondary school age, her main concern is with the trials and tribulations of the local school system, typical of a borough like Southwark but compounded by the sheer shortage of school places:

The schools are terrible, the trouble I've had with the three of mine, my boy is 17, he never went to school, because he couldn't get in a school, and he was on the waiting list at ***, and you know they didn't even know he was off school until he was 13. And then I got a letter to say I had to go ... to get his place, but the time he was 13 they sent him ***, and he couldn't get on because he hadn't been to school, and then he went to a centre. I had the same trouble with my two girls, one was off for a year, the other one, to be honest, I've, be truthful, I went to the Catholic Church because I wasn't Catholic, and I went all through the things for two years to get 'em into the school, one of 'em got in, one of 'em never. Now ... she, the one that was at ***, she's gone *** now because she couldn't get on round there.
Del and Kenny

Del and Kenny are two brothers in their thirties, one single, one a divorced father, one unemployed, the other employed, living in council housing in a tower block on the Jamaica Road in Bermondsey. Both grew up in the area and went to school there. Like Liz, Del and Kenny are starting to feel the consequences of gentrification and had strong views about the process:

You've got wharves and all that over there that have been converted for, like, people coming into the area. It's all progress, I know. But they're shopping, like, we're getting windows put in now, right? It ain't like... They're having a spruce up... Oh, let me finish, mate, please? Right. The reason we've put, like they're putting the windows in now, it's not because all of a sudden we all need windows now, it's because all of a sudden, this looks like an eyesore. I'm telling you, that door's been hanging off for, like, 3 years, no one's wanted to know... Basically, yeah. 'Let's make Jamaica Road a little bit picture perfect', that's all it's about. And everywhere you go round here, you'll see the same thing. It's exactly the same thing.

Del has mixed feelings about this. He concludes:

The more the merrier. If it improves the gaff, I'm all for it. But, like, I don't like the hypocrisy of why we're getting things done, and then expecting us to thank them and vote for them. We ain't that stupid. I resent the fact that they're insulting my intelligence, by like, 'Well, we put your windows in, mate', they should have put them in years ago. We needed them, seriously.

As two typical young 'Bermondsey boys', Del and Kenny didn't exist in quite the same universe as Liz and Serena. Their formative experiences ranged more widely and their impression of their neighbourhood was far less benign:

I'll be honest with you, love, right, this area alone, right, people I've grown up with, we go to work for a living. He ain't no hard man, he's just... we're just normal people, we like a laugh more than... like all our... not egotistical that way, don't believe in violence or nothing like that, but I swear to you, if you walked out that... you know, if you wanted to go in any pub round here, you'd find the equivalent, because that was then and this is now, and now, I'm afraid, you've got bits of kids 17 and 18, who are tooled up in pubs, meant to be having a social drink. And I don't understand that. I don't understand it. And a lot of people I've known have either been killed or shot, or whatever. I've known a few deaths in my time, and I'm nothing special, I don't know everybody. But there's a lot of spiteful people round here, and there's a lot of capable people round here, and it don't really take too much to set them off.

Consequently there were few local people Del felt he could trust:

...when it really boils down to it, I mean, living, coming from round here, I know what friends I mean, but I wouldn't know how to define it. I wouldn't know how to, like, you know, if I was talking to you about a friend... I mean, my mate in the Army, I trust him, simple as that. But round here, well, I wouldn't know where to begin, because there's a very few people that, like, I'm likely to, like, leave my money on the table in front of. Or talk about things that... that somebody could... tuck you up over, or... you know, anything. I mean, you don't put your wealth on offer, and you don't let on too much. You know, you play, what is the saying? You play your cards close to your chest.

Del had explanations for the causes:

Political correctness has ruined, like, it's ruined, it's ruined so many things for so many people, because at the end of the day, they've tried to teach people a new way of seeing right from wrong, and dealing with it. And basically, it's something you know, everybody knows the difference between right and wrong. And, like, the thing with it is, with this political correctness, right, say you saw a guy who was looking really sultry like, look how you'd imagine a paedophile, and he's got a kid by the hand, and he's dragging the kid, and the kid's crying, right? Ten years ago, longer, you'd have walked over and gone, 'What's the matter with that child, mate?' And you'd have been justified in doing it. You can't say nothing like that nowadays. You can't say nothing to nobody. You've just gotta bury your head in the sand. And when things go off...

And he had decided ideas about solutions too:

Be honest with you... I'll be honest with you. I honestly believe, and I don't believe... if this is possible, without sounding like an hypocrite, I don't believe in violence, right? But, at the same time, right, how do you... like, where discipline's concerned, right, a lot of people... there's a lot of people, right, in this world, who would be better people if someone had either kicked them up the arse, or slapped them round the head, put them in their place. And that goes right through the board. Don't matter where you're born, who you are, your preferences, nothing. At the end of the day, there's people running round in this world, thinking they can do what they like, because the punishments, I mean, let's face it, they're almost like fucking treaties!

Perhaps part of Del's cynicism towards life stemmed from the difficulties he had experienced over the years in earning a living:

I was in a mortuary up until last Christmas, at St. Thomas's, I think I was on the minimum wage.
You were in a mortuary?

Yeah, I was playing with all the dead bodies and that, like that was my job, and wheeling people in and out who were virtually not far off of dead. And that was the minimum wage... I tell you what I was clearing, and this is a bit embarrassing, really, for a grown man, right, bearing in mind that, yeah, I've got commitments that I can't get out of all the time, moneywise. And basically, I was clearing, after tax, after I'd paid me fares as well, I was clearing 23 quid a day. And that's eight to five.

Del felt that he was actually very capable:

And to be truthfully honest, there's no... like, I mean, I can do quite a few things. I'm no expert, but I can turn my hand to most things. And the thing of it is, I won't go and work for £2.50 an hour, and be spoke to like a moron, right.

But his lack of a CV meant it was difficult for him to find a job:

But the thing is, I mean, nowadays, you go for a job, and you've gotta have a CV. I mean, what is a CV? It's a French car, isn't it? I mean, like, what can I put on it? Like... at the end of the day... I mean, my CV reads... I'm the first man to swim the Channel without getting wet, or I was an astronaut, I was this or that. If you put the truth, at the end of the day, somebody will look at it, and go, 'phooey! You know what I mean?' That ain't gonna get you a job, that's gonna get you hung!

Despite all his difficulties, Del had carried on working. But his brother Kenny had not been able to overcome similar problems:

So, anyway, this geezer signs me up. I went, he went, 'Have you got steel toe-cap boots?' I went, 'No,' he went, 'Oh, we'll supply you with them, then.' He didn't tell me I had to pay for them, you know what I mean? My first wage packet...

Oh, they took it out your wage packet?

Yeah. Right, soon as I started... it was a Bank Holiday. I started on the Tuesday or something, so I done four days, right, in these new boots, right, going down roads, somewhere where I've never been before, with a fucking broom, you know what I mean, sweeping up leaves in the winter. You can imagine it in Putney. It's all full of trees. So the boots are killing me, I can hardly walk, I get me wage packet, I've got fucking about two quid in it, because he took the score out for the boots straightaway, you know what I mean?

As well as earning very little money, Kenny suddenly found himself in the notorious poverty trap: because he was no longer on benefit, he had to start paying bills that he had never before had to face:

You're in debt, like, as soon as you go to work, cos... Because you had to pay rent, and then you get banged Council Tax, bang, bang, bang. They don't give you no grace, do you know what I mean? You've gotta start paying from when you start work. I was getting up at half past four in the morning. I was writing to the Council, 'What am I paying like a rent, right?' Didn't get a reply off them at all, like, after four letters. So I was getting up half four in the morning, by the time I get home, they're shut anyway, and it's pointless trying to phone them, because they're useless down the phone. So anyway, I ended up in court over that, because of non-payment of rent, and all that shit. Do you know what I mean?... I was going to work, and coming back and just crashing out. Getting up and going to work, crashing out. It was just... And then I was taken to court and in debt over it.

His conclusion was one that many others in a similar position had reached:

Well, I'm better off not working, because I can't find a thing that'll pay the actual... a living fucking wage, you know.

As Del explained, there was a very basic psychological aspect to this: by coming off benefits, you gave up the whole cocoon of Social Security that had protected you, leaving you on your own in a harsh world with virtually no protection:

Cos... It's, see, you get on the dole, I've been on the dole before, and there's this paranoia of... it's like, it's like being stuck. You sign off, right, and then you're out in the big wide world, 'Where am I going to get my money from?' This, that and the other: you know. And it's a psychological thing, I think, because that's how it felt when I come off the dole.

**Gary and Dawn**

Gary and Dawn are a married white couple in their fortieth, with five young children, and live in housing association accommodation. Gary had worked as a tax driver, but ill health had caused him to give up that job and become a radio controller:

I work in, as a controller in an office three nights a week because I was chauffeuring up till last week but me back went and they told me I couldn't do that sort of work any more, like sitting behind a wheel. So all I do is Sunday, Monday and Tuesday night, 8 hours a night, just sitting on the phones, answering the phones. But apart from that I can't really do anything...

Faced with a debilitating injury, he found that his benefits ran out and he had to find some kind of work:
I don't know what the hell it was, they didn't know... I could stay on the sort of sick for so long, you know what I mean, but they weren't going to put me down and, and I'm not disabled, you know. They wasn't going to put me down for that so I had to go back to work but I obviously couldn't do the sort of work that I've been doing all my life, you know, like sort of driving and lifting luggage and that. I just couldn't do it. I don't know, I don't know what happened. I suppose it's a bit of old age as well but...

Jobs like his previous one, or the one he was now doing, were never advertised: you heard about them by word of mouth, by being connected into an informal network:

I mean no-one kind of like advertises a job, someone always knows someone who knows someone who's looking for someone who's doing this, you know what I mean, and I don't think, well that chauffeur firm it was only that someone I know, he started there and I see him and I said 'Oh I'll have some of that' and I had it for about 2 years but this time last year I was like a cripple when I did me back... But, so, so the job I'm working for, you know, it was never advertised, you know what I mean, someone I knew I was talking to in the park, phoned up... phoned me up. And that's how it is...

Like Serena and Liz, Gary is part of the traditional Bermondsey community:

I suppose... well for years we all stayed in the area, family stayed in the area, and everyone, I mean if I walk down the street I always see someone I know, whether it's, you know, if it's not someone's... I know, I know their mum, their dad, their brother, their sister, their uncle, their cousins, everyone knows everyone. But...

But Dawn, who had grown up in Welwyn, was not. And, even after years in the area, she still felt it:

I mean even with me, I could be with his friends and I feel OK but there's always that little bit that tells you you're not one of them. It's strange, it's a strange feeling. Yeah, cos they always tend to make you feel as if you're an outsider, they say they don't but they do... Yeah. They can be friendly, they're nice and friendly to you but deep down you just get that, you know when you get a feedback, you feel... They don't like adapting, they're like little, they like, all I can explain like a little village...

And, like Del and Kenny, both Gary and Dawn were pretty cynical about the way the area was changing:

She: We're more worried about the children really and the crime and everything and what they can get into, this is the problem.
Because of all these changes, despite Gary's attachment to the area, Dawn no longer wanted to stay. And she felt that her husband was beginning to feel the same:

She: At one time I would have said no because he was born here and he said he wanted to go out in a box here, you know, but I think he's changing his mind because it is changing a lot.

Janice

Janice is a British-born half-white, half-Afro-Caribbean woman in her thirties, unemployed, living as a single mother with three children in a council flat. She is an 'immigrant' to the area: she previously lived in Walworth Road, south of the Elephant and Castle, only a couple of miles away, which nevertheless she seemed almost to regard as a different world. She moved into this area when her previous flat became too small for the children:

Well, what it was was, they said to me, because I was in a bit of arrears, so they wouldn't move me on that ground. Then ... my son's the eldest of them all, then I had a girl, and then I went back to them, and I said, 'Well, look, I've got a daughter'. And they said, 'Oh, not till when she was 5'. And when she got to 5 years old, they measured up the flat, and told me ... because I had a kitchen and a dining room, they told me I could make my dining room into a bedroom, which was totally stupid! And after that, I had two more. And it was only until ... when my other daughter, my last one was born, when they decided that I was...

As a mixed-race woman coming from outside the area, she experienced the disadvantages of trying to settle into a close-knit community:

I've got a couple of people I say hello to, but I more keep myself to myself. When I first moved in the area, I had a lot of racialists.

What sort of form did that take?

... when the kids were outside playing underneath, because I didn't want them to go too far, he would come in drunk and he would start swearing at them and everything, and telling them to go over there and play. So I went out and I shouted back at him, and the man just started spitting at us all, and calling us names. So I said, well, I wasn't having that.

She lived on an estate just slightly farther out from the Jamaica Road, which meant that she didn't have access to quite the same facilities as some of the other people:... they haven't really got, like, much for the children to do round here. All they've got is that grass. And they used to have two slides and a swing. They knocked that all out and put in a baby slide. So the big kids ain't got nothing, and they're not supposed to play ball games, so there's nothing for them to do. And you can't really let them wander off somewhere, because it's too dangerous.

What about in terms of like, shopping, leisure facilities, and that kind of thing, is it...? Quite hard, because I don't drive. So I have to go all the way to either Surrey Quays, Deptford, Peckham, or ... for instance, I've got quite a long journey to keep going backwards and forwards to get what I need. One, there isn't no decent shops around here, so it's very hard for me, with the three kids, to get around and get what I need. Two, buses are not direct enough. I mean, to get to certain places, I have quite a walk a certain distance, then take a bus, or I have to just walk all the way. Three, not really a lot of schools round here, like in secondaries. Well, I'm just trying to keep ... once they give me the forms for her, because I should get them this year, then I can work out from them what to do.

As a single parent, not currently working, she was also plagued by the difficulties of trying to make ends meet. And for her this was not cushioned, as it was for Serena and Liz, by having a loose network of sibling support:

Clothes, because I can only afford to give them a certain amount of clothes once a year, so most of the time they go without. I mean, right now, my daughter's in need of trainers, and I've just said she's got to wait until I can actually afford to get it for her. And certain foods, because I suffer from a B	ables deficiency. Oh, I can't even say that word! I've got problems with my B	ables, my body's not storing what it's supposed to. So the hospital wanted to get in touch with the Social, for them to give me a little bit extra, for me to buy the certain food that I need.

So she was looking to move out of Bermondsey, although still in the borough. In fact, she wanted to move back to the southern part from where she had come, and where she clearly felt at home. The Old Kent Road, that great south-east London boundary, obviously resonated in her consciousness.

Do you want to stay in Southwark, or are you looking to move out of Southwark?

I actually want to stay in Southwark ... because all my family, well, part of my family is still in Southwark. I don't want to go too far.

Which part of Southwark would you like to live in?

I'd like to go back to Walworth Road, but on the outskirts of it, not actually on the Aylesbury Estate itself. A certain part of Peckham, more like the Dun Cow end. And they're my main two options. And Old Kent Road. I quite like Old Kent Road.
Is that just because you know it really well, after living in Walworth Road?

My nan used to live in Old Kent Road, so, as a little one, I've just grown up ... and I've always been in Old Kent Road.

And always, presumably, would be.

Mark

All the council tenants interviewed, except Dawn, had grown up within 2 or 3 miles of the area. That made sense, of course, in terms of council allocation policies and also the limited mobility of most of the tenants. In contrast, Mark, a single employed white man in his thirties living as a private tenant in a new build housing development, had come in from outside London, from a country town:

I was living in Horsham, in West Sussex, before this, and the other guy that lives here, he was just moving down from Glasgow, he was part of a promotion in his job. So I wanted to move up here to move to a job in the City, so I just decided to move nearer the area. And just sort of looking through ... Loot, actually, and found it.

Coming originally from Scotland, he said he moved to London mainly to take advantage of work opportunities:

Would that be the main reason you moved to London?

... partly it was professional career, because I believe that, in London, there's a lot of people who get places without trying very hard, and from my experience, when I moved to London at first, I was a restaurant manager, and I found it was ... it's hard to get young people to work. I find there's a sort of bad ethic, or a different work ethic. And provided you apply yourself down here, you can get promoted, or you can do well, reasonably well.

Although someone like Mark would be seen as a yuppie, he too, like the others, is having to scrimp and save, especially at the start:

For a long time, there are lots of things that I had to go without, until I actually started to earn any money at all. I had to, for a time, from the moment I got paid, until the end of the month, I'd have to budget myself on £3 a day, which would cover food and ... and would also incorporate bills, so if I could, that would bring it down to £2 a day. So I had to really scrimp and save all the time, I couldn't afford nights out; but eventually, that started to build up. It's just so expensive to ... to ... I don't know why, I mean, it's not a terribly expensive place to rent here, compared to the rest of London, but...

But some compensation, as he anxiously scanned his living costs, seemed to come from the community spirit he found in the private development where he lived:

Oh, it's one of the big points that I like about the area, is that there is actually a definite community spirit, just the fact that they've got a Residents' Association, everyone's been here a while, so they all want to know who their neighbours are, and we have, like, clean up days, where everyone does their gardens, and everyone just wants tools and things round about, and then we have the Annual Barbecue, where that whole parking bit there is closed off, and we have a big barbecue and outdoor music, and we just have a big sort of street party, till about midnight. There's all ages of people there. It's just, it's just nice to ... I think it's refreshing to actually get to know who your next door neighbours are.

But, while he sees his immediate area as being very friendly, if he ventures into local pubs he is immediately made aware of the tensions—also mentioned by Dawn and Janice—experienced by anyone coming in from the outside:

When you go in there sometimes, it's not because I'm Scottish, but sometimes, it's almost intimidating to go in the pub there. You have to go in a few times. It's almost like being a lone wolf trying to get into a pack of wolves, because it just takes a bit of ... seeing your face, to accept you, because everybody knows each other; even if they're sitting outside, and somebody's driving by in a car, they know who that is. A very close community. I don't mean to say that's making any reference to the ... at all, but they're very ... that's what they are, they're just sort of ... not racist, but...

It seemed not so much a matter of hostility, as the fact that the locals were so closely bonded together in a common culture, constituting almost a private club:

They're all sort of predominantly male 40-something Millwall fans, or West Ham fans, so ... you start talking about football, and you're accepted. But if you sit there, or if you're going in with a couple of friends, which I've done, and just sit there, and everyone else in there knows each other, if you're not talking to anybody else, then you're aware of people looking at you out the corner of their eye.

Henrietta

Henrietta is a resident in Butler's Wharf, close to the river, and therefore lives on the 'right' side of Jamaica Road: the north side, some of big warehouse conversions and new blocks next door to older council estates.
Single, in her twenties, employed, white, a private tenant, well educated and in a well-paid job, she occupies an entirely different universe from the other women to whom we spoke. Her parents lived in Essex; in moving to Bermondsey, she thus reversed the traditional outward movement. Where other residents are very rooted in their local area, Henrietta had only lived there a year when we spoke to her. And she travels a great deal:

I spend 50 per cent of my time in Surbiton, 50 per cent out on the road. So far this year I have been in Zürich for two weeks, Amsterdam for nearly three months and two weeks in Utrecht in Holland and the rest of the time I have been in Surbiton.

She was also planning to move permanently to Sydney in a few months’ time.

While the other women are not working, Henrietta is an asset management software consultant whose job means a lot to her:

Probably it's the challenge. The challenge of what they are going to ask me to do. If it is too easy I won't want to do it, if its too hard I won't want to do it but it also has to be money. I've gone beyond living in shabby student digs. I won't do that anymore. I did that then and now I am not doing that. I lived for two and a half years without central heating and I'm not doing it again. So money plays a big part but not a huge part otherwise I'd have a job earning more money. The experience of what I'm doing - not so much. Who I'm doing it with - not so much. The challenge, the adventure, being able to do it. Power to a certain extent as well. Not power that's not the right word. Kudos? I don't know how to say it. Every job has to be better than the last one. Has to be perceived by my peers to be better than the last one. Tragic isn't it.

Although she lived very close to the other residents we interviewed, the world she occupied could have been a million miles away:

I love it here. I love getting up and going down for a coffee at the shop and getting the freshly baked bread 'cause there is a bakery here and I love ... the All Bar One has made a big difference. You can go round there for a drink, it's a proper bar and I love being near the water. I love coming into all the lovely restaurants, the Chop House or you know the ... I haven't actually been to the Pont de la Tour restaurant erm but I have been to all the others, Cantina... Pizza in here and the little shops for gifts if you've got to buy something and there is always taxis round here, there is always taxis round here so...

She has a low opinion of the world on the other side of Jamaica Road, which she sees as proletarian, unpleasant and alien:

... the prices have already gone up quite considerably. They charge 182 grand for the

nasty flat I was in just 'cause it's on Tower Bridge Road even though its about 2 miles down Tower Bridge Road, it's a bit much and its too near the nasty Old Kent Road.

And although she knows the council estates exist, she simply sees them as an unpleasant fact of life:

There are really expensive flats round here and then so many you know, really nasty council estates just across the road; it is really quite a strange place.

But they do not impinge upon her consciousness.

You mean you are not really aware of the estates in the area?

Not at all.

Whereas other residents had complained about local health facilities, her ability to pay meant that she could keep these at a distance:

Doctors are a total pain in the arse. They are only open from nine to five and they are only open for ... you have got to be actually dying, emergencies, for one hour on a Saturday morning. So even though the doctor is reasonably close to where I live ... its actually in one of the council estates up the road, but its hardly open. It means that I would have to take half a day off work to go to a doctor that is open from nine to five. It's ridiculous I have no choice so what I sometimes do and it's a bit cheeky and I shouldn't really do it but what I sometimes do is go to the medical centre at Waterloo ...

Why do you think it's cheeky?

Cause you shouldn't really waste your money going to a private doctors should you?

But it sounds as if there is not actually much choice in the matter, if you think of it in terms of the hours you have to take off work to go to a doctor ...

Absolutely. If I'm getting the train to Waterloo then the MediCentre, I can get an appointment at 6 o'clock and any prescription I get is private I have to pay for it but I don't have to take any time off work to do that, so if I have to go that's what I usually do ...

And the public transport, which other residents praised, played no part in her world:

Where we are here, we are right in the middle of Bermondsey and London Bridge Tubes, I hate the Tube anyway ... I always get, I hate being underground, I like to
watch the world go by... I always get a taxi. I'm a devil for taxis. I can't stop myself... if I walk out of here I can always get a taxi and 20 minutes later at the absolute maximum I'm at Waterloo station and I'm not stressed. I'm not. I haven't had to stand in a smelly bus and I get to where I'm going that much more relaxed. So it's expensive it's about six or seven pounds each way. I only get in one way I get the bus home but even still...

Interestingly, in complete contrast to other residents, she does not find her immediate area quite so friendly:

I say hello to anyone I meet in the lift that's just being polite. But they are quite reasonably friendly. A little bit stand-offish. I mean you would say hello but you wouldn't necessarily talk to them.

And, unlike many of the other residents of the area, she did not feel safe:

The crime and the fear and the scariness of London is getting worse. And I don't necessarily... I'm a reasonably nervous person about walking alone at night anyway. But my best friend is half Swiss white and half Jamaican black and she feels London is becoming very racist and she's very scared and she wants to leave.

The more we talked to her, the more we sensed that though she liked certain features of her local life, she wasn't really a natural city dweller at all.

**Hard Lives and High Hopes in the Proletarian Island**

Her sentiment, unfortunately, was shared by others. There were undoubtedly those in Bermondsey, whether old-time Bermondseyans or new-time yuppies, who felt that this was not an area in which they felt physically safe or emotionally comfortable. Some were finding it hard enough to struggle for a living or keep their heads above water. Others were doing well materially but still felt threatened. They saw problems in their neighbourhoods and in their children's schools. Some were battling valiantly to try to change their circumstances; for others, flight was the obvious option.

Doubtless, some of these problems were those of any area in any city undergoing rapid demographic and social transition; doubtless, eventually the area would reach some kind of stability. And it must also be said that there were many, perhaps the majority, who cared deeply about the area, who had a deep attachment to it, and were actively working to make it a better place to live. What we found most remarkable in Bermondsey was that ordinary people, without any special qualifications for the task, found their own feet and their own voice, assuming not merely active roles but even the leadership of local civic or tenants' organisations. And these included especially the children of the old Bermondsey working class, who were seeking to recreate the sense of solidarity, of community, that they remembered from their childhood.

True, some people – the newly-arrived gentrifying minority – were living comfortably enough in the middle-class niches they had colonised, especially in Bankside, as abundantly marked by the presence of shopping, culture and entertainment that caters for their interests and their lifestyles. Here, we found places and people reminiscent of Battersea: people who rate the quality of their neighbourhood highly, because here they find the facilities they value and the access to others close by. But for the working-class majority, it could not be more of a contrast. Their reactions to change have been very different: they desperately try to defend their turf against newcomers, whether decanted black and white tenants from neighbouring council estates in Peckham, or asylum-seekers, or gentrifiers. They are doubly frustrated and very angry: they see their housing disappearing to the gentrifiers on the one hand, and to 'outsiders', especially non-white ones, on the other. And it is the older members, who have the strongest memories of a sense of community now lost, who are the angriest of all.

They see rising crime and insecurity everywhere, affecting them and their children, and they seek to contest it, often by informal means (The lads will have a word with you). Frequently there is a racial divide: whites report problems with noise and mayhem, blacks report abuse and harassment. A poor physical environment adds to this: lack of space directly affects quality of life, causing people to feel claustrophobic, trapped, or cramped. High density and limited space amplifies the noisiness of a neighbours’ music or their playing children, increases the possibility of a football going through a window, the likelihood of bored children being naughty, the offence caused by uncollected rubbish and dog mess, and even the problems presented by badly-parked cars. Unsurprisingly, all but the gentrifiers seem to want to move out.

The sense of stress can become almost intolerable on some problematic estates, where different groups are brought suddenly together in layouts which provide little protection against crime or mayhem. These, we found, are among the unhappiest neighbourhoods in contemporary London: places where perceptions of the quality of neighbourhood life, especially by contrast to how it once was, are of the lowest. Mercifully, such neighbourhoods seem to be very uncommon in London.