

THE SQUATTERS OF 1946

I will first outline some events of the story of the postwar squatters, and then look at some discussion points from my research.

There was a severe housing crisis in the Summer of 1946, twelve months after the end of the Second World War. There had been almost no house-building during the war, there was extensive bomb damage, the workforce of the building industry had been dispersed, there was a marriage and baby boom, and there were 3.5 million ex-servicemen being demobilised. This housing crisis was not a matter of high prices, but rather a problem of lack of supply. Ex-servicemen who were demobilised and came back to well-paid jobs, for example as toolmakers at Hoovers in High Wycombe, could neither buy houses nor rent for themselves in 1946. The crisis therefore affected not just the poorest, but many average-income households; and crucially, many ex-servicemen.

Many people slept in kitchens and hallways, in the already crowded multigenerational households that were then common. Some couples doubled-up with another couple in a rented house. Jimmy Bowers from Hoovers got married and took his wife home, where they began married life on the landing of his parents’ house. For many families, the longed-for return of ex-servicemen and released POWs was actually also a source of great anxiety, as there was simply nowhere for those returning to stay. These problems were being talked about all the time, and were all over the newspapers in 1946.

All political parties had promised more housing in the 1945 election. Housing was part of

the brief of Aneurin Bevan as Labour's Minister of Health. He was devoted to the highest housing standards, as 'only the best is good enough for the working class'. But progress was slow, and Bevan did not quite grasp the time factor: he told his wife Jennie Lee that as quality was so important, it might be better if Labour built no houses at all in the first year.¹ The Communist party argued that just as in wartime the Mulberry harbours had been designed and built before the D-Day landings, now a similar national effort to build houses was needed. But the war was over, private property interests came before housing need, and the people were therefore advised to wait for houses.

There had been some limited but effective squatting in empty houses towards the end of the war, for instance by the Vigilantes of Brighton – they were 'vigilant' in finding empty houses. Churchill's Conservative caretaker government of May to July 1945 had responded by allowing local authorities to requisition empty properties for housing need.

The mass squatting that began in August 1946 was a national phenomenon. It may have been planned by individuals in some localities (groups of ex-soldiers, or occasionally groups of Labour party and Communist party members), but it had its own dynamic, as the BBC reported a 'strange new mood of orderly lawlessness' spreading rapidly across Britain. Once people realised that it could be done, it was done, all over the country – somewhat like the 1981 riots, or the 1990 poll tax rebellion, of more recent times. Although there were many claims to be 'the first squatter', one defining moment was a newsreel interview with cinema projectionist James Fielding of Scunthorpe. He had been bedding his family down with him in the cinema after showings, until he moved them into a Nissen hut on an abandoned army camp. This initiative of the newsreel journalists spread the squatting, as newsreels had a powerful impact in those days, and people sometimes commented on, or

¹ Jennie Lee, *My Life With Nye* (1963), p158.

clapped or booed the news items, if they felt moved to do so. There was urgent housing need, and there were thousands of these huddled ex-service sites all around the country. Soon 46,000 families were squatting on the camps.

This was a challenge to the government, but not yet a direct challenge. These were low-value dwellings, and private houses had not yet been squatted. The government acted to head off the movement. They announced that the squatters could stay, until Christmas, that facilities would be reconnected, and that the 'authorised squatters' would become council tenants and pay rent. General Anders' Polish Army was in Britain, ready for demobilisation but with 123,000 of its soldiers refusing to go back to Poland, so the government demobilised the Anders Army into those huddled camps that had not yet been squatted, and some camps that were already partly squatted.² There was much ill-feeling between the Poles and the squatters, but physical conflict seems to have been avoided.

At this point, in September 1946, the Communist party led squatting in five luxury blocks of flats in Central London. These blocks had been requisitioned for official use during the war, and then offered to the Tory councils of Kensington and Westminster for post-war housing, but the offers had been refused. The squatters talked about their war records to get past police, and in at least one case were helped in with their bags, and provided with cups of tea.

The government came down hard on the London squatting, refusing to provide services, and had the police lay siege to the blocks, in the full glare of media publicity. The Labour

² Mark Ostrowski, *"To Return To Poland Or Not To Return" - The Dilemma Facing The Polish Armed Forces At The End Of The Second World War*, <http://www.angelfire.com/ok2/polisharmy/> has the figure of 123,000. Jerzy Zubrzycki, *Polish Immigrants in Britain* (1956) has 91,000 Polish troops actually settled in the camps.

leaders were certainly shaken by this development. According to Michael Foot, ministers feared 'direct action spreading like a prairie fire'. Bevan met the London Trades Council and told them he had some sympathy - but for the homeless, and not for the squatters. His paper *Tribune* carried the front page headline 'Help yourself to a leg of lamb!', venomously comparing the squatters to common thieves, and even to Mosley's fascists. Others in the cabinet wanted the squatters placed at the bottom of the housing list, and the concern of one minister was 'want to tell my caretakers what in law they can do about squatters, after High Court decision'.³ Their crime, it was spelled out, was against the all-important waiting list. Five leading Communist squatters, who were all elected local Councillors, were arrested, imprisoned, and charged with the novel offence of conspiracy to trespass.

The Communists brought the London squatting to an end after ten days. The squatters were offered new, decent alternative housing, but they were double-crossed, and were housed temporarily in the dormitories of the former Bromley-by-Bow workhouse.⁴ The Communists ended the London squats in this way, partly perhaps because of the ferocity of the government's response, but also because the CP had a perspective of critical support of the Labour government in 1946.

After this, the remaining camp squatters and their Polish neighbours remained on their new homes, in some cases for ten years or more, until the camps were closed, by central government direction, after 1953. Local councils struggled with mixed success to maintain control over the squatters, who in turn organised to better their living conditions. Pots of money were spend improving the hutted estates. There was often a highly-political atmosphere on the squatted estates, and the squatters' movement contributed to the high

³ Cabinet Minutes extract at <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/releases/2006/march/squatters.htm>

⁴Reminiscences of Marine117570 Arthur Hill
<http://www.bbc.co.uk/ww2peopleswar/stories/01/a2053801.shtml>

priority of housing, and specifically of council housing, in public policy in the ensuing years and decades.

Most writing on the post-war squatters has concentrated on 1946, when the decisive events occurred, but I wanted in my research to assess the whole period of the existence of the squatted camps. My research looked at squatting in Wycombe (a Municipal Borough) and Amersham (a Rural District) in South Buckinghamshire. There was extensive squatting in South Bucks, but I think that many other areas, except perhaps in city centres where there were fewer hutted wartime sites, would have produced similar quantities of evidence.

The first camp to be squatted in South Bucks was the Vache in Chalfont St Giles, when former commandos believed that 500 Polish soldiers and their Italian brides were being sent to live there. The Army denied the story, and the 'Italian brides' turned out to be Polish women who had married soldiers of Gen. Anders's Polish army, in Italy, but the ex-soldiers of the area 'having been taught to take risks... took this one'.

Next to be squatted was the badly-vandalised former Italian POW camp in Chairborough Road, High Wycombe, where the father of the first squatter offered to buy his hut for renovation. Then the biggest camp in the area, at Daws Hill, High Wycombe, with 220 Nissen huts, was squatted by an initiative of Labour party members and Communists, with the support of Charlie Lance, politically 'independent' Mayor of the Borough.

Other camps squatted were at Beech Barn at Chesham Bois, Pipers Wood in Amersham and at Hazlemere, near High Wycombe. Demobilised soldiers from Gen. Anders's army also lived at several other similar local camps. At first, hostility to the Poles was widespread. It was encouraged by the Communists, who wanted 'Beech Barn for the British', and a local

residents' association that wanted the Poles housed on Salisbury Plain or in Cornwall.

Life at the camps was very hard at first. The huts had roofs of double-sheeted corrugated iron, and they were cold and damp. There were separate ablution blocks with shared bathing and toilet facilities. The locations of the camps were often inconvenient, and getting fuel was often a matter of spending afternoons pushing a pram filled with coke. At Daws Hill, telegraph poles were cut down and used for fuel. Later, money (gifted directly from central government) was spent to improve the huts, sealing the roofs with bitumen, plumbing in individual baths and toilets, and dividing the huts into separate rooms. Amersham Council had £33,336 from the national Exchequer for camp improvements in 14 months in 1949-50, at a time when the cost of building a new permanent council house was around £1,200. The plumbing work in particular made the huts much more attractive. There were 4,000 houses without bathrooms in High Wycombe, and the council opened new slipper baths for residents of these dwellings in 1947.

The squatters organised to improve their living conditions. The Communist party was active at Daws Hill, with Ron Williams's November 1946 election campaign as 'Building worker, Squatter, Communist'. In the early 1950s, three of the Daws Hill squatters became Labour borough councillors, and they promoted the building of more council houses in Wycombe. In 1949, when the Cold War was already changing attitudes, the Communist party was active in Amersham, recruiting members at Beech Barn over a demand for gas cookers. A campaign with the support of Phil Piratin MP compelled the council to take over Pipers Wood camp, and to make improvements there, and also in 1949 the CP had a Rural District Council election campaign.

Amersham council struggled with difficulty to tame the squatters. At first the squatters themselves controlled allocations. Once when the squatters went looking for their preferred

candidates, a couple who had gone to see a film, the cinema agreed to show an appropriate message on the screen. When huts were set to demolished, new squatters moved in 'due to a lack of despatch' by the contractors. When it took new squatters to court, Amersham council was unsuccessful, and indeed was publicly humiliated, as the judge demanded to know why the council was not helping these people, instead of evicting them? As late as 1956, Amersham had difficulty in getting evictions for squatters who had not paid the rent.

The camps were young communities, posing an alternative to the multi-generational households of the day. 'You could have right good row - it was heaven on earth', as one squatter remembers. The squatters were people who were perhaps a little more adventurous than the norm. The South Bucks squatters included single parents, divorcees, those who had remarried in wartime, and a Hoovers shop steward who was living with a woman factory supervisor described by my informant as 'promiscuous'. There was also a woman who came to the area on a post-demobilisation holiday and decided to stay. These were people who had responded to the opportunities of wartime. Councils often complained that squatters came from out of the area, and another informant told me that the Daws Hill squatters 'came from the town, perhaps not many were from Wycombe originally, but they had been in the town during the war'. Relations between the Poles and the squatters became more amicable over time, and one of my informants married a Polish soldier at her camp. These estates were closely-knit communities, and in this respect they were perhaps more like present-day sheltered housing schemes than general needs housing. At times there was a holiday camp atmosphere, and there were even moral welfare investigations of the squatters, but no proof of immorality could be found.

The squatters stayed on the camps until the mid-1950s. Hutted camps made a significant contribution to local housing, and by March 1950, Amersham RDC had 666 prewar and 333 postwar council houses, 90 prefabricated houses, 52 requisitioned properties, and 335

tenancies on seven hutted camps, making a total of 1,496 dwellings. All the original squatted camps had closed by 1956, with the residents rehoused, although some Polish camps remained open a few years longer. Ernest Barnett told me, 'I've never been ashamed of being a squatter, I've often been proud of it. At least we made something for ourselves, and didn't rely on other people'. Most of the squatters became tenants of council houses and flats, at a time when council housing was a tenure of choice for working class people, so squatting worked well for them.

The squatters were relatively few in number, and came from what might have been a somewhat marginal and not very respectable layer of the population, but they remained connected to the rest of the working class, and to the decision-makers in society. Their ideas may have embraced self-help, community and patriotism, class feeling, and a determination that the promises of war time should be delivered upon. Squatting worked to promote council housing nationally, by the fear it instilled at the top of society, by the agitation of the Communist party, and by the important intermediate role played by the ex-squatter Labour Councillors like Wally Wright, Harry Slight and George Fairbairn. The fact that they had had to squat after the war was part of these Councillors' political narrative, that served to legitimise their policies in later years. Similarly, a layer of new members joined the Communist party out of the squatting, and when in 1984 the CP Historians group held a conference on the 1946 squatters, the pride of members in their party's role was very evident.⁵

The 1946 squatting perhaps set a problematic example in terms of housing standards. Bevan had been determined to invest in housing that would last – 'We will be known in a year for the number of houses we build. We will be known in ten years for the type of houses we

⁵ The conference proceedings were published as Noreen Branson, *London Squatters 1946* (1989).

build.’⁶ He must have hated having to spend millions (possibly seven to eight millions, if the Amersham RDC figures were at all representative) to patch up low quality housing that was set for early demolition. In subsequent years Harold Macmillan, Shadow Housing Minister and then Conservative Housing Minister from 1951, and the real villain of council housing policy in the 1950s, cleverly responded to the need for numbers of new houses, setting a high numerical target of 300,000 new homes a year. The Tories achieved this target by cutting standards, incentivising high-rise, promoting the 'residualisation' of council housing, and replacing true direct investment with council borrowing. Of course, the squatters cannot be blamed for any of these later policies.

The experience of the post-war squatters helps to inform arguments about the extent and limitations of the radicalism of 1945. Writers such as Stephen Fielding, Peter Thompson and Nick Tiratsoo (*England Arise! The Labour party and popular politics in 1940s Britain*, 1995) argue that there was little socialist content or working class militancy attached to Labour's election victory. Strike figures in 1945-51 remained low, as the right-wing union leaders held the line in support of Attlee.⁷ In this context squatting, with its strange new mood of orderly lawlessness, reminds us that there was indeed a volatile social force acting from below, as working people demanded a better world in this period. The indications are that the squatters both in camps and in the central London luxury flats seemed to have had the support of public opinion. We can note that oftentimes, housing struggles move in a different register compared to industrial class struggles. Anger can be translated into action over housing, while strike action is slow to develop, or is being held back by the trade union leaders.

⁶ See chapters on the housing policies of Bevan and Macmillan in Nicholas Timmins, *The Five Giants: a biography of the welfare state* (1995).

⁷ Kenneth O. Morgan, *Labour in Power 1945-1951* (1984).

The post-war squatters set a positive example for the squatters of the 1960s. They showed the creativity of working class people, and they proved that a determined minority could exert mass pressure on government housing policy. They are a part of tenants' history that should not be forgotten.

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