



The boundaries of law and criminality in this area were dramatically put to the test in the summer of 1946, almost a year to the day after the last shots of the war were fired. The greatest post-war problem, it seemed, was not food. However unappealing the diet, no one starved. Nor was it to be clothing. At the worst, one could 'make-do-and-mend'. It was certainly not employment. The worst damage that the war had done, and the most difficult to repair in the short term, was in what the economists called vaguely 'the housing stock'. More simply, many of those returning from the services were virtually homeless.

As demobilization continued and men rejoined their families or created new ones, the extent of the deficiency was clear. Houses which had been condemned before the war were still standing, fit for nothing but demolition. They would have to be occupied in the emergency. Towns and cities were scarred by thousands of rubble-strewn bomb-sites, some not cleared until well into the 1950s. About 250,000 houses had been destroyed by enemy action but about fifteen times that number had been more or less severely damaged. Many

thousands would never be habitable again. Even where the damage to buildings was less, there had been neither the materials nor the manpower during the war to do more than patch them up. By 16 November 1945, the situation had deteriorated so far that Aneurin Bevan, as minister responsible for housing, invited the more fortunate to join a 'share-your-home' plan. If a voluntary scheme failed, he threatened to use a Defence Regulation to impose wartime billeting again.

The government had initiated a building programme to produce council houses of a high standard. By 1950, it claimed to have built a million homes since the war but its opponents pointed out that more than a third of these represented temporary accommodation. Some were estates of 'prefabs', metal bungalows whose sections were made in factories and then bolted together on site. Though intended to last only ten or twenty years, a few were still occupied by satisfied tenants sixty years later. 'One hundred thousand houses a year' remained an electoral slogan for a decade after the war.

In the summer of 1946 the shortage was at its worst. Two million servicemen and women had been demobbed in twelve months with more joining them every day. There were also 160,000 Polish servicemen who chose to stay in Britain rather than return to Communist-ruled Poland. Against this flood the government had done its best. It had built 60,420 houses, two-thirds of them as estates of prefabs. It had repaired 100,000 damaged houses and, in all, had housed 210,000 people. There had been 400,000 people in need of rehousing in London alone. Families throughout the country, a large proportion of them with small children, found temporary refuge with their relatives or else in sub-standard accommodation. In the summer of 1946, one woman described to a newsreel reporter how she and her husband shared a

single room with another married couple. Such conditions were little better than the London slums of the 1880s.

In August 1946, a movement began which in the 1930s might have been denounced as robbery and even now had an air of political revolution. With 40 per cent of its troops demobbed, the Army had declared 800 sites redundant, the Royal Air Force added forty- five camps and the Royal Navy another five. They varied from those big enough to become holiday camps to others which were individual anti-aircraft batteries or Royal Artillery coastal batteries with living quarters and facilities for the gun crews. Once the services had withdrawn, the property became the responsibility of the Ministry of Works.

For some weeks a number of 'squatters', as they were now called, had been living on a former army site near Sheffield and another at Beighton in Derbyshire. No one in authority had apparently noticed them or, at least, no one had cared. Then, on the weekend of Saturday to August, thirty families moved into army huts near Middlesbrough and were installed there before the local authority.

On the same weekend, other families occupied thirty-two army huts at Harnham, near Salisbury, which had stood empty for six months. Eight miners with their wives and children, who had nowhere to live and were staying with relatives, moved into Royal Artillery huts at Seaham Harbour. The arrivals were orderly. Men and women chalked their names on the doors of the huts, elected camp committees to see that no damage was done, and put seven shillings a week into a 'rent pool' to show that they were willing to pay the owners of the accommodation.

In most camps vacated by the services there was no water supply, sanitation or electricity. Doncaster Rural District Council was the first to turn on water for its new tenants. As news broke of the weekend occupations, the movement drew followers from all parts of the country. On Monday 12 August, a hundred squatters took over Vache Camp at Chalfont St Giles, Buckinghamshire. This had been prepared by the Ministry of Works for Italian women whom Polish soldiers had met and married in the Mediterranean campaign. Army officers with Military Police escorts visited the camp but made no attempt to intervene. These squatters also showed their good- will by forming a camp committee and putting seven shillings a week into the rent pool. However, the chairman of the committee told the press, 'We must resist any effort to turn us out and by sticking together we can do it. If the local authorities try to move us, they will have a bit of a job now.'

The Ministry of Health was still the government department responsible for housing. As the occupations gathered pace, it warned the squatters and local authorities that some camps were not fit to be lived in and must be cleared out before a slum developed. It insisted that the proper course for those wishing to occupy unused sites was to discuss this with the local authority and the area office of the ministry. Unfortunately for the ministry, most local authorities quickly decided that restoring supplies of water and electricity was preferable to having an epidemic on their hands. Any attempt to evict the squatters would also have had to take into account a very large number of children. The occupants at Chalfont St Giles had now increased to seventy families, including 130 children. In the event of evictions, what was the local authority to do with these?

By this time, within two days of its first occupations, Vache Camp, near Chalfont St Giles, was an organized community. Some of its billets resembled prefabs, though many were metal Nissen huts. Each family had a single room divided by a curtain into bedroom and living room. There were old-fashioned army stoves which allowed a primitive means of cooking, fuelled by dead timber nearby. Each door had the chalked message 'Taken by ' followed by the name of the family.