

Part I

Beautiful Homes

The home-life [of the Uranian] has a different colour from that of most homes which women control, but it is, none the less, a home-life.

Edward Perry Warren (1860–1928).¹

Introduction

On 11 February 1873, 32-year-old artist Simeon Solomon was arrested for indecent exposure and ‘attempting to commit sodomy’ with 60-year-old stableman George Roberts in Stratford Place Mews just off London’s Oxford Street. Roberts received an 18-month prison sentence; Solomon six weeks in the Clerkenwell House of correction and a hefty (for the time) hundred pound fine. We do not know what became of Roberts, but for Solomon the prosecution presaged a rapid descent.² Many members of the artist’s circle deserted him – most spectacularly his close friend, the poet Algernon Swinburne, with whom he had reputedly ‘cavorted naked’ in Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s studio in Cheyne Walk, Chelsea.³ After a couple of months with more supportive friends in Devon (supportive, that is, until his drinking became too much for them), Solomon was largely homeless, a state that seemed to befit his status as a sexual outcast and Jew (Swinburne dismissively referred to him in this period as ‘the wandering Jew’).⁴ He briefly entered a mental hospital in 1880 at the behest of his family, and then fended for himself on the streets as a pavement artist in Brompton, west London, and as a match and shoelace seller in the more poverty-stricken neighbourhoods around Mile End Road and Whitechapel to the east. Some family and remaining friends offered piecemeal help, though after entering St Giles Workhouse, just north of Covent Garden, in 1884 he wrote

to a cousin that he was happy where he was and refused alternative accommodation. 'Thank you', he wrote drily, 'but I like it here, it's so central.'⁵ Solomon spent a further 22 years based largely at St Giles until his death in 1906. When Robert Ross, Oscar Wilde's close friend, sought him out in 1893, he found him 'extremely cheerful. [...] Unlike most spoiled wastrels with the artistic temperament he seemed to have no grievances, and had no bitter stories or complaints about former friends, no scandalous tales about contemporaries who had remained reputable; no indignant feelings towards those who had assisted him'.⁶ Solomon continued to paint and draw, drank at a local pub when he could afford it, and – looking like a tramp – hung out at the National Gallery and gave impromptu tours.⁷

Solomon's story is certainly a sad one in many ways. It suggests the terrible losses that could accrue to a queer life exposed. Solomon's apparent contentedness with his later lot, however, also indicates some advantages to a life beyond the constraints of middle-class and even Bohemian homes and society. He chose to 'join London's teeming vagrants rather than submit himself to further discipline'.⁸ This was perhaps more plausible for a man who still had the resources of some family and friends to draw on occasionally (he had his first heart attack in 1906 *en route* to a cousin who gave him clothes and pocket money) and who had seen some revival of his reputation in the 1890s. But for other homeless men too there might be comradeship, intimacy, and sometimes sex in London's public spaces, shelters, workhouses and lodgings. For some it was an alternative culture of sorts which, though riven with multiple difficulties, might also offer occasional pleasures and support denied elsewhere.⁹

This introduction to Part I looks at the flip side to the lives presented in the two substantive chapters that follow. It considers the association of homosexuality with homelessness and overcrowding in the late nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century. In the last two parts of this book I take up the stories of some of those making their way in London with little or no money in the second half of the twentieth century, in part by using oral history testimony. For this earlier period it is more difficult. While there is a paper trail giving us access to the homes of artists and collectors Charles Shannon and Charles Ricketts, architect C.R. Ashbee, and interior designer Oliver Ford, the lives of the homeless and those in makeshift accommodation were most often not documented. *En masse* these men were a source of concern to those fearing moral and physical degeneration at the heart of Empire.¹⁰ Their individual biographies were seen to be unimportant, though, not least

because they stood outside the home and family and the associated respectability and active citizenship these things were seen to signal. The men I discuss in the main chapters meanwhile showed that they had a place within cultures of home. They contributed to – and were exemplars of – a stereotype which ran in parallel to that of the homeless homosexual: these were men who seemed to have an inimitable sense of how to make homes that looked and felt good. They did this in opposition to the (supposedly) less sophisticated taste of some of their ‘normal’ middle- and especially lower-middle-class contemporaries, and to the homeless or those living in cramped, overcrowded accommodation. Queer men in these circumstances were visible daily to my case studies. Although the latter most often ignored them, they sometimes took them as lovers (as Wilde famously did) or helped in piecemeal or more sustained ways (in the Guild of Handicraft that Ashbee founded, for example). These ‘other’ men and the circumstances in which they lived were not utterly separate from Wilde, Shannon, Ricketts, Ashbee and Ford. They were not only counterpoints but also interlocutors for those who had the money to make their homes beautiful.

Out on the streets

Homelessness endured across the period (and of course beyond), and predictably worsened in times of economic depression – in the 1880s and 1930s especially.¹¹ Any accommodation homeless men could find – in workhouses, casual wards (providing one or two nights’ accommodation for vagrants), or lodging houses – was temporary, and usually for just a night at a time. There was little chance for them to establish the kind of rootedness that Solomon seems to have found at St Giles and which men with more money could afford. This lack of a domestic base was associated with a lack of moral compass: sexual dissipation, overcrowding and the lack of a permanent place in which to live were casually and frequently connected in writing from the period.¹² Social reformers pushed for new housing partly on the basis of the apparently morally improving effects of a properly constructed, clean and neatly furnished home.¹³

Homelessness and homosexuality were sometimes interchangeably envisaged as the cause and effect of each other. Solomon’s homelessness resulted from the sex he had with another man; for others, sex with other men arose out of the places they took refuge – under the bridges, on the Embankment, in Hyde Park and in countless other parts of the city. Reports of such activity, coming through court cases especially,

suggested that this was an undomesticated passion and the city was a dangerous place where men were apparently more likely to stray and to become – as *The Daily Telegraph* had it in 1895 – the enemies of ‘the natural affections, the domestic joys, the sanctity and sweetness of the home’.¹⁴ Richer men cruising and having sex in these various places had a home, hotel or chambers to retreat to; bases which could offer more safety and privacy than poorer men could enjoy. The poor ended up in court more often as a result and their apparent sexual dissipation was thus exposed more frequently.¹⁵

The Lambeth Workhouse was judged a ‘breeding ground’ for unnatural passions in 1866. The workhouse, wrote journalist James Greenwood, had been ‘transformed into a chapel of ease to the Cities of the Plain for the hideous enjoyment of those who are already bad, and the utter corruption of those who are obliged to hear what they cannot prevent’.¹⁶ Pioneer sexologist Havelock Ellis’ *Sexual Inversion* (1897) later drew attention to ‘Homosexuality Amongst Tramps’ in an appendix he commissioned from American Josiah Flint. Flint wrote that ‘every hobo in the United States knows what “unnatural intercourse” means [...] talking about it freely, and, according to my findings, every tenth man practises it, and defends his conduct. Boys are the victim of this passion’.¹⁷ He described a kind of queer reproduction via the seduction of boys between the ages of 10 and 15 by tramps who ‘excite [their] imagination with stories and caresses’, and so encourage them to enter an alternative world and set of relationships which stood in for family and were cemented by sex.¹⁸ Though apparently less entrenched in England, Flint had nevertheless met there ‘a number of male tramps who had no hesitation in declaring their preference for their own sex, particularly for boys’. Whether this ‘liking’ was something picked up on the road or was what led them away from home and family in the first place, Flint was ‘unable to say’. ‘That it is, however, a genuine liking, in altogether too many instances’ he did not ‘the least doubt’.¹⁹ The presumption was underlined legislatively in 1898 when the Vagrancy Law Amendment Act included measures against male importuning in public.²⁰

In 1932 George Orwell suggested that there were no ‘essential’ differences between beggars and ordinary ‘working’ men, and the homosexuality that was practised was situational, the result of a separation from women. He nevertheless cemented the association directly and indirectly in his comments and rhetoric. ‘It is queer’, wrote Orwell, ‘that a tribe of men should be wandering up and down England like so many wandering Jews.’ Tramps were, he said, ‘a queer product’.²¹ Though ‘queerness’ was not yet broadly understood as a synonym for

homosexuality, it certainly indicated eccentricity and a difference from the norm.²² Because this was also a chapter dealing with the supposed homosexuality of tramps, Orwell's use of the term suggests sexual strangeness too. The homeless, the homosexual, and also the Jew were in this way loosely linked in Orwell's account – and in ways that echoed Swinburne from half a century earlier.

This conflation endured, and still in 1967 the campaigner for homosexual law reform, Anthony Grey, felt the need to counter it. 'Sex deviancy is no respecter of persons', he wrote. 'It isn't only the homeless, the wanderer or the drop-out who discover themselves to be homosexual or bisexual in a heterosexual world.' Grey was nevertheless alert to the particular problems faced by homeless homosexuals: in a period when such 'types' were more widely recognised and discussed, the homeless hostels prepared to take avowed homosexuals were, he wrote, 'few and far between'.²³ And yet, such places had been and still were important to those who had sex with other men.²⁴ Some became notorious in the interwar period for the traffic in casual sexual encounters – albeit curtailed by the danger of interruption and exposure.²⁵ George Orwell described the 'nancy boys' in a boarding house on the Strand and wondered if the 'old Etonian' staying there was in fact in search of them.²⁶ It was partly in such texts and representations that homosexuality was conjured as alien to those elusive 'norms' of home and family life and incompatible with all they represented: respectability, restraint, containment, and 'true' (middle-class) Englishness.²⁷

Overcrowding

Many men could not afford any form of permanent or semi-permanent housing; many more could only get the most basic of places to live. Overcrowding was common. A third of London's population in the 1930s lived more than three to a room – and even this was an improvement on the situation as it stood 30 years earlier.²⁸ The vast majority of queer working-class men in London lived in close proximity to others in the first half of the twentieth century and for most of the second – in boarding or lodging houses, with families, or cheek-by-jowl in cheap rented accommodation and bedsits (the homosexual was one of the 'types' to be found in bedsitter land according to a 1967 study).²⁹ Secrecy and privacy were well-nigh impossible in these kinds of home.³⁰

Local councils covering London did begin to develop a stock of social housing in the first half of the twentieth century and especially in the interwar period.³¹ Such housing was, though, generally designed

and designated for families.³² Just 277 of the 68,629 London County Council dwellings in 1935 were one-room tenements.³³ Even though married couples were a bare majority in the interwar years, housing policy and design underscored the pre-eminence of that particular marital and familial ideal – one that was also touted in the growing number of magazines focussing on home in the 1920s and 1930s.³⁴ The distance between such depictions and what was practically available and pragmatically possible was huge, however, and if the English domestic ideal of one house per couple or family was rare enough nationally, it was exceptional in London.³⁵

Houses shared with others invariably brought restrictions. The companionship and emotional and practical support of family and co-residents should not be underestimated, but these other people could also be inhibiting.³⁶ Police only rarely searched private property in cases of homosexual crime, but there were almost invariably others who made caution and discretion necessary. Three landladies and one fellow tenant were called to testify against Wilde's co-defendant, Charles Taylor.³⁷ Many working-class men who had sex and relationships with other men were, moreover, also married and had homes with their wives, children, and often with lodgers and members of their extended families.³⁸ These homes were shaped – for good or ill – by these other affections and imperatives and also fundamentally by household income. Homosexual sex often took place beyond the home or else clandestinely within it.

Self- and individual expression – those hallmarks of the middle-class home – were clearly limited in such contexts. Decorating cost money and London County Council homes were, for example, decorated from a prescribed palette of yellow ochre or pale green (unless the tenant could afford to pay for an alternative).³⁹ Private landlords and landladies were unlikely to be receptive to requests for a lick of paint. Postcards or pictures might be as far as it was possible to go in terms of individualising a room, though these might still be important in alluding to a sense of difference – for the 'young prostitute' in Edward Carpenter's epic prose poem *Towards Democracy* who 'arrang[ed] the photographs of fashionable beauties' in his room.⁴⁰ For many poorer or working-class men, how they acted, what they wore and where they went was more important than the décor and arrangement of the places they lived.⁴¹

The same was often also the case for men who were working in the service sector – in hotels or the private houses of the wealthy. There seems to have been a preponderance of queer men in these roles in the first half of the twentieth century.⁴² Many servants 'lived in'. The 1901 census showed, for example, that 176 live-in servants (78 male;

98 female) were employed to service the 132 households at the 'modern' Queen Anne's Mansions in fashionable St James.⁴³ For some queer servants, 'living in' provided an opportunity to find sex, relationships, some camaraderie, and a means of living away from possibly restrictive family homes. Living on site, though, often also meant compromised privacy and a double insecurity: both job and home could be lost if they were found out. Though in domestic roles, these men paradoxically often did not have a home of their own – or at least not the kind that was being idealised more broadly.

It was those with money who could do something materially different. As we will see in the two chapters and epilogue that follow, the relative safety and comforts of the middle-class home, the descriptions of inverts and homosexuals emerging through sexology, and the self-conscious way in which some homosexual men related to art and culture, made a domestic flourish a tacit marker of queer difference in the first half of the twentieth century and a trenchant stereotype in the second. This was the case even though it was far from the majority experience or impulse, and even though ideas of the homeless and rootless homosexual endured alongside.