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BIRMINGHAM BACK TO BACKS



Back to back Introduction Transcript

<http://www.swanshurst.org/microsites/backtobacks/>

Introduction

Doug: Fiona, can you tell us what the Back to backs are?

Fiona: Yes the backs to back are literally houses that are built back to back so that the front door to the house on the street and that's the front house and the front door to the back house which is fronted onto a courtyard. They are houses where they are featured round a courtyard up to maybe four or as many as you like with a courtyard of different sizes with those back to back houses.

Back to backs were built as the first form of social housing except they were let by landlords. They were small houses built to house people literally. People came from the countryside, from agricultural work and were attracted for the industrial work of Birmingham, as well as Sheffield, Leeds and other cities. They were built to hold as many people as they could. And that's what they were.

Doug: What rents did people have to pay?

Fiona: Ok. It was always a small amount of money quite relative to how much people earned. I think it was approximately about forty per cent of their weekly wage, they were paid weekly them, and they paid their rents weekly. It would be the landlord who would come round himself or send somebody to collect the rents each week.

Doug: You mentioned that they were built in Birmingham and other cities but how common were back to back houses?

Fiona: Back to backs were really common in Birmingham. The majority of people, working class people, would have lived in back to backs throughout the nineteenth century and for some time before that. They were lived in by hundreds of thousands of people and lots of people nowadays have recollections of living in back to backs, their grandparents lived in them or they in fact lived in them and it really touches on the fact that they were a big part of the social history of Birmingham, in fact in a big part of people's history in a lot of the country.



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Doug: How many families lived in a house?

Fiona: That really varied on how much money they earned and how poor they were. We know that some families would just be a family of four, or five and six living in the back to backs with the three rooms but we also know that there were other cases where people sublet rooms off them and other cases where you may have a really large family, obviously more mouths to feed, more of an expense and so you may sublet even just a bed to a couple, which is obviously really crazy nowadays and would never happen. And we know that in poorer cities and poorer areas, I have been told that, especially in Liverpool you would have a family, a big family living in a back to back and another family completely living in the cellar of the back to back, and really that was the poorest of the poor

Doug: Fiona thank you ever so much for talking to me.