

'Problem families' in Burnley, 1940-70

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Abstract

The post-war years are often considered as a 'golden age' of full employment, political consensus, widespread affluence, and social security. Preceded by the privations of world war, global depression, and political polarisation, the establishment of the welfare state by the Labour Governments of 1945-51 is seen as the foundation and realisation of a post-war settlement. Yet one group remained impervious to these modernising efforts: 'problem families'. These were, in the eyes of welfare authorities, families that remained stubbornly backward in an era of modernity. They constituted an underclass in the New Jerusalem. Indeed, much of the expansion of the welfare state during the post-war years through increases in local officials, policies, and resources, was a direct response to the problem of the 'problem family. This paper explores the development of these processes and the lives of 'problem families' in the town of Burnley and its hinterland from 1940 to 1970. Using statutory and voluntary organisation records, correspondence with central government, and the social work case files of 'problem families', I show how the concurrent growth of state services and the lived experiences of families point to the uneven and unequal realisation of the post-war settlement and its 'golden age'. Ultimately, it demonstrates that "problem families" were not, in fact, the underclass of New Jerusalem, but those who lived in and with poverty despite the welfare state.

Introduction

The AP¹ family were, in many respects, a typical 'problem family' in post-war Burnley. In 1967 the mother of the family, Mrs AP, was referred for a period of domestic rehabilitation and re-education to prevent her household being broken apart by despairing authorities. The referral letter from the Divisional Medical Officer (DMO) for Health Division 6 of Lancashire County Council (LCC) comprising the hinterland for the town noted:

Long-known to local authority departments and welfare services as a family with poor household, financial, childcare and hygiene history. Involved with police re older children, and marital states; with the Public Health Department re state of premises. Housing department re perpetual rent arrears etc. etc.

This summary encapsulated many of the prevailing assumptions of the 'problem family'. Such families were 'known' to many social and welfare organisations, disproportionately consuming their scant resources and the time and energy of their workers. Much of this ongoing contact stemmed from inadequate domestic management – here meaning the physical condition of the home, management of household finances, and the behaviour of the children – which was ultimately, in the eyes of the authorities, the responsibility of the mother. The (DMO) continued:

Individual efforts by workers in the past have met with only slight response temporarily. Currently the family has no social interplay with others – the older boy and girl have left home. The children remaining are basically healthy and can respond normally.

Despite years of stalled improvement, it was this last glimmer of hope that the family *could* be redeemed, which led to the local authority agreeing to finance a three month stay for Mrs AP and three of her seven children at the Brentwood Recuperative Centre, Marple, in 1967.²

Mrs AP was but one of dozens of ‘problem families’ referred from Burnley to Brentwood from the 1940s to 1970. Such referrals were regular yet, owing to the costs involved, the numbers were comparatively few. The majority of Burnley’s ‘problem families’ did not travel to Brentwood or other centres, and instead were subjected to supervision, surveillance, and support in their own homes by what Becky Taylor and Ben Rogaly term a ‘phalanx of officials’.³ Indeed, for ‘problem families’ such officials *were* the welfare state and controlled their access to forms of social and material support. In Burnley the ‘phalanx’ reflected the ‘mixed economy’ of the ‘moving frontier’ of the welfare state in post-war Britain, comprising a spectrum of statutory and voluntary organisations.⁴ Each possessed their own form of expertise about the family and its problems, a defined sphere of activity, and access to resources. Both within Burnley and nationally, these organisations spilled much ink over what to do about the ‘problem family’ yet John Welshman reminds us that these ‘tell us little of value about the families themselves and rather more about professional rivalries and connections’.⁵ Many of these disputes and disagreements can be found within Mrs AP’s case file. Any understanding how ‘problem families’ were defined and delineated from ‘normal’ ones in Burnley must account for these conflicts within the ‘classic’ welfare state of wartime and post-war Britain.

However, the case file of Mrs AP and others subject to intervention by a ‘phalanx of officials’ tells us about more than just conflicts over the organisation and boundaries of the welfare state. They reflect the realities of living with poverty *despite* the welfare state in what is often imagined as a ‘golden age’ for Britain inaugurated by the Labour Governments of 1945-51, comprising full employment, political consensus, widespread affluence and social security and ushering in a New Jerusalem.⁶ Mrs AP and Burnley’s other ‘problem families’ were those who, in the eyes of welfare authorities, remained stubbornly backward during this era of unprecedented modernisation. Debates and intervention in the lives of ‘problem families’ were therefore primarily focused on those who seemingly failed to live up to what John Macnicol sees as new ‘normal social behaviour’ by officials and the state.⁷ But there remained a gap between national rhetoric on the subject and the realities of distinguishing a ‘problem family’ from a normal one in the working-class communities of Burnley and its periphery. As Selina Todd notes, there was a gulf between those who ‘generated social and political theory’ and welfare workers who ‘negotiated, modified, and implemented versions of their ideas’.⁸ Despite this such failures were attributed to the mother and her incapacity at a time when household responsibilities were firmly demarcated between men as the breadwinner and women as the caregiver. In reality ‘problem family’ meant ‘problem mother’ as noted by Pat Starkey, and gender loomed as large as class in shaping experiences of living with poverty.⁹

The significance of gender and class become more apparent when situating Burnley in wider developments associated with the ‘golden age’ of Britain’s New Jerusalem. Even by 1951 the DMO noted that the economic prospects for the textile industry in the districts surrounding Burnley were ‘not very bright’ following a recession.¹⁰ This was significant given that the industry continued to dominate both Burnley and the surrounding districts, accounting for more than a third of registered employment.¹¹ The following year a study for progressive left-leaning think-tank Political and Economy Planning by Peter Townsend, later an eminent sociologist of poverty,¹² noted that ‘the amount of real hardship this year in the cotton towns of Lancashire has been small, despite a rate of unemployment similar to the mid-thirties’.¹³ Given the historic feminisation of the low paid textile industry workforce, the depression of the 1930s proved catastrophic for many families, causing

widespread hardship and exposing the failures of Poor Law cruelties through mass unemployment.¹⁴ It was these which the New Jerusalem sought to overcome from 1945, and these difficulties were reflected in the strength of the organised workers movement and Labour Party in the town and surrounding district over the period.¹⁵ But Townsend cautioned that the ‘public is apt to assume that the social security scheme protects everyone from hardship. This is not true’.¹⁶ As Lancashire and its textile industry ended up on the scrapheap from the 1940s to the 1970s,¹⁷ the shortcomings of the idealised ‘golden age’ became apparent in encounters between the state and families experiencing problems stemming from poverty.¹⁸ These experiences were not confined to Burnley or textiles alone and were found in other declining industries such as coal mining and manufacturing which marked the town and its periphery.¹⁹ There is, then, a discrepancy between the idealised affluence and safety net welfare state which portrays ‘problem families’ as behaviourally different – or comprising an underclass – and the socio-economic realities of family poverty and work in Burnley which offer a structural explanation.

This paper explores the tension between the behavioural understanding of the ‘problem family’ as deficient on the one hand and the structural problems of poverty in wartime and post-war Burnley on the other. It does this in five ways. First, by summarising contemporary debates over the ‘problem family’ which emerged with wartime evacuation and continued throughout the post-war period. Second, in considering the socio-economic context of Burnley and its surrounding mining and textile districts during the period which shaped the realities of family poverty. Third, by reconstructing the ‘mixed economy’ of welfare state structures responsible for monitoring ‘problem families’ in Burnley and its hinterland. These fitted uneasily into national ‘problem family’ policies and were compounded by divisions in local government between Burnley County Borough (BCB) responsible for the town and LCC which administered its hinterland. Fourth, with a brief consideration of the place of Brentwood in re-educating and rehabilitating ‘problem families’ in the North West of England. Fifth, and finally, through a detailed exploration of the lives of several mothers and their children contained in the Brentwood case files who lived in Burnley and its district from the 1940s to the 1970s. These illuminate many of the preceding tensions and demonstrate that ‘problem families’ were not the underclass of post-war New Jerusalem but simply families who lived in and with poverty despite the welfare state.

The Problem of ‘the Problem Family’

Anxiety about ‘problem families’ as a behaviourally different social group imposing a burden on the community stems from the moral panic surrounding the evacuation of children from the threatened cities to the safe countryside during the Second World War. The term was coined by an influential report in 1943, *Our Towns*, undertaken by the Women’s Group on Public Welfare, containing ideas which would ‘shape the welfare state in the post-war years’.²⁰ Its preface opened in conveying how:

The effect of the evacuation was to flood the dark places with light and bring home to the national consciousness that the “submerged tenth” described by Charles Booth still exists in our towns like a hidden sore, poor, dirty and crude in habits, an intolerable and degrading burden to decent people forced by poverty to neighbour with it.²¹

The reference to Booth was significant as his survey of the slums of London in the late nineteenth century was associated with disquiet amongst elites about a ‘residuum’ as the basis for national degeneration.²² The term was the first of many based on the same behavioural characteristics of poverty which were periodically reinvented including the ‘unemployable’ of the Edwardians and the

‘social problem group’ of the interwar years.²³ The report, however, was more precise on singling out ‘problem families’ from within the ‘submerged tenth’:

Within this group are the “problem families,” always on the edge of pauperism and crime, riddled with mental and physical defects, in and out of the Courts for child neglect, a menace to the community, of which the gravity is out of all proportion to their numbers’.²⁴

Following widespread national coverage, the report coined and propelled the problem of the ‘problem family’ into the public and social policy limelight for the next twenty-five years.²⁵

The effect of the report was to turn what was often poor civil defence planning, ‘personality clashes’ and culture difference into a moral panic about poor families.²⁶ Following widespread social disruption and a political desire to return to normal with reconstruction in 1945, these issues took on growing significance for the development of the nascent welfare state.²⁷ Established and new interest groups each staked their claim of expertise and legislative authority in dealing with ‘problem families’ which cut across neat functional divisions of different welfare needs.

One of the most prominent groups staking their claim were social workers. They aimed to consolidate their growing professionalisation centred upon university education, social needs exposed by the depression and war, and forms of expertise. Foremost were children’s officers created in 1948 as a new local authority department resulting from further wartime scandals about the poor condition of children’s homes and the lack of services specifically for children surrounding the death of a boy in foster care in 1945.²⁸ Alongside these statutory social workers were voluntary ones. Here, new organisations emerged specifically to deal with ‘problem families’. Most notable were the Pacifist, later Family, Service Units (P/FSUs) which emerged during the war amongst Blitzed cities to provide billets for families unable to obtain new accommodation owing to their poor housekeeping. This model of intensive intervention with a hands-on approach became the gold standard in social work with ‘problem families’ after the war, making their services highly sought after.²⁹ Other voluntary organisations seeking to retain relevance aped the approach of FSU. The influential Victorian Charity Organisation Society (COS) renamed itself the Family Welfare Association (FWA) and adopted a similar casework approach.³⁰ The National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC), which possessed a reputation as ‘the cruelty man’ for their harsh judgments on parental capacity, began to employ Women Visitors who worked intensively with families rather than pursuing prosecution.³¹ Yet currents within social work, often university academics, contested the homogenising and pathologizing label of the ‘problem family’ and growing criticism during the 1950s and 1960s began to slowly reshape professional attitudes.³²

The main opponents of social workers were public health professionals, especially the director of local authority services, the Medical Officer of Health (MOH). The creation of the NHS in 1948 left MOH as a ‘dispirited rump’,³³ as their vast empires of hospitals, environmental health, community services, and sanitation were residualised into a ‘miscellaneous collection of responsibilities’.³⁴ This left public health as a profession and a discipline seeking new avenues of expansion, and their wartime involvement in supervising ‘problem families’ through clinics, health visitors, and public health inspectors produced a deluge of publications in the medical press about their suitability to expand to deal with this new social pathology.³⁵ In close association with the public health profession was the Eugenics Society, with the two possessing an extensive overlapping membership which dated to the fashionable growth of the idea by progressives and reactionaries alike during the interwar years.³⁶ Seeking to retain relevance, the Eugenics Society conducted research through six local authorities in conjunction with their MOH into the characteristics, concentration and policy ramifications of dealing with ‘problem families’.³⁷ Despite possessing

committee members from the great and good of the medical and social science communities,³⁸ their research recommended that MOsH were ‘the best person’ to lead inquiries and services with ‘problem families’.³⁹ Crucially, the contest between social work and public health in disciplinary terms mirrored their contested functional boundary in service terms. This was inextricable from resourcing, staffing, and departmental power at both the local and national levels given the incremental growth of the welfare state. Unlike social workers, public health professionals remained doggedly aligned to the problem of the ‘problem family’ from the 1940s to the 1970s.⁴⁰

Whilst professional and service disputes between social work and public health propelled debates from the 1940s to the 1970s, other statutory and voluntary services were involved. However, at the core of disputes were conflicts about the signifiers of, and responsibility for, family poverty in the new welfare state. This is articulated most clearly by Elizabeth E. Irvine, who would later become a social work academic at the new University of York, in 1954:

Problem families are easy to recognise and describe, but surprisingly hard to define. Unemployment, pawn tickets, rent arrears, debts, child neglect, undernourishment, mental deficiency, mental illness, drunkenness and squalor, coals or worse in the bath – all are characteristic, and none are indispensable.⁴¹

The above dispute over definitions typically drew on, alluded to, or considered most of these issues in families and attributing their significance to varying degrees. A rare contemporary critic of the ‘problem family’ concept, Barbara Wootton,⁴² notes that definitions identified ‘social or economic inferiority with personal inadequacy’, assuming that ‘it is the quality of the poor which explains their poverty’.⁴³ She castigated the essentially ‘descriptive’ nature of the debate, pithily – but accurately – commenting that ‘a problem family might well be defined as one whose consumption of social workers’ time greatly exceeds the average of the local community’.⁴⁴ Given the propensity for contemporaries to adopt a pick-and-mix approach to ‘problem families’ presenting multiple issues to services from a range of potential options, Wootton affirmed that ‘the only common characteristics of these families, it seems, are the financial ones’.⁴⁵ Crucially, definitions of the ‘problem family’ whether from social work or public health, blamed the poor for their poverty and adopted a model of intensive intervention seeking to reduce the time, cost, and energy to the state through concerted action by many welfare organisations. This was achieved by focusing upon improving parenting, or more accurately, mothering, in their eyes. Lacking a concrete definition beyond descriptors of poverty, professional discretion was central in choosing who was, or was not, a ‘problem family’, in any given place or time in post-war Britain: ‘Whilst workers struggled to define *the ‘problem family’*, they knew one when they saw one’.⁴⁶

The Political Economy of Burnley and District

Place was as important as competing professional definitions in determining who was, or was not, a ‘problem family’. Moreover, place cannot be extricated from the wider prevailing political economy or its social composition. Burnley and its surrounding district incorporated Barrowfield, Brierfield, Colne, Nelson, Padiham and Trawden along with smaller communities stretching towards Rawtenstall and Haslingden in the south, Accrington in the west, and the West Riding of Yorkshire to the north and east. It formed one geographical and specialised component of the Lancashire textile industry whereby each town and its hinterland was the centre of a single form of production which was broadly divided between spinners around Greater Manchester and weavers in Central and East Lancashire.⁴⁷ Across much Central and East Lancashire the economy was dominated by a ‘mill-and-

pit' model which vested power in the hands of a small number of employers.⁴⁸ Low wages and this division of labour led to a workforce which was highly feminised and often industrially militant in Burnley and especially its surrounding area.⁴⁹ However, following a brief wartime resurgence after the depths of the interwar depression and a brief boom in 1950-51, there was a 'painful contraction' in the textile industry which intensified over the following two decades.⁵⁰ This economic shift shaped the operation of the local welfare state which was responsible for identifying and intervening in the lives of 'problem families' over the same period.

A contemporary economist wrote in 1962 that 'irreversible decline of a staple industry in a region of economic over-specialisation must inevitably bring problems of social dislocation to the communities which once lived by it'.⁵¹ This was undoubtedly true of Burnley and district where officials complained of rising juvenile delinquency as some married women returned to the mills in 1954.⁵² Youth crime was among a litany of associated social problems which were characteristic of the pick-and-mix descriptive characterisation of 'problem families' noted above.⁵³ Yet it would be misleading to see a rise in unemployment and deprivation linked with industrial decline as causally increasing their prevalence. The growth of alternative, better paid employment opportunities with less arduous conditions, however slow, proved a popular attraction, and local employers lobbied the government to find an alternative source of cheap labour. Initially this was provided by the European Volunteer Workers (EVWs) comprising racially acceptable 'white' workers from the Baltic countries and Ukraine located in refugee camps from 1945 to 1951.⁵⁴ Notwithstanding 'ignorance and antipathy' against them, these mainly female EVWs 'largely came to be accepted as individuals, even if their origins were not entirely forgotten'.⁵⁵ Such a statement also applies to earlier generations of migrants from Ireland, predominant poor Catholics, attracted by the employment opportunities.⁵⁶ Similar disputes were played out in the coal industry with male EVWs, Italians and Poles, where the coalfields around Burnley were similarly in decline owing to decreasing demand in under-invested and low productivity pits.⁵⁷ Following this initial wave of migration to supply the cheap labour needs of textile magnates was another prompted by the sector investment and restructuring implicit in the 1959 Cotton Industry Act.⁵⁸ This increased a flow of migration from Pakistan and India into the textile mills and the central terraced slums of the town and district.⁵⁹ Accordingly, the associated issues of poverty central to the delineation of 'problem families' by the local welfare state must be understood against a broader changing social backdrop which is particular to place.

Inextricable from any assessment of the political economy is the place of politics which loomed large in the organisation of local government, whose responsibilities and resources were increased radically in line with a range of central demands with the introduction of the welfare state.⁶⁰ Party government was not separate from technocratic administration, and the embedded traditions of unions and the Labour Party in many of the textile towns of Lancashire exerted a strong influence on the distribution of resources and services.⁶¹ Moreover, where single party power dominated in relation to the social, health and welfare services of the state, long-serving individual members could exert considerable authority.⁶² After the war, the Labour Party dominated both in Burnley CBC and the surrounding district councils, giving rise to a distinct politics of patronage.⁶³ This pattern was aligned upon a Burnley-Nelson axis which was key East Lancashire within the County Council.⁶⁴ This extended into the children's departments where the Chair of the Children's Committee which oversaw the service for Burnley CBC was 'a strong socialist' who was interested in the problem of 'problem families' and backed the departmental agenda for expansion in the late 1960s.⁶⁵ It was not just traditional conservatives who saw a segment of the poor as behaviourally deficient then, but also important portions of the organised labour movement and their political representatives. Moreover, given the historic alignment of the local Labour Party to the municipal

politics of urban public health,⁶⁶ the disciplinary debates of the ‘problem family’ discussed earlier played out in the work of the council and its officials who governed the local welfare state.

The ‘Mixed Economy’ of the Local Welfare State

The local welfare state in Burnley from 1940 to 1970 comprised a ‘mixed economy’ of statutory and voluntary social and welfare services, even if this ‘moving frontier’ remained fluid. This ‘mixed economy’ was composed of all organisations interested in the family and their staff which together constituted the ‘phalanx of officials’ which kept ‘problem families’ under surveillance. This did not occur in a vacuum, and the disputes between professionals over spheres of influence noted earlier were mirrored in central government. Following a Parliamentary Question by a Labour Member of Parliament (MP) in 1949, the government established a working party between the Ministries of Health and Local Government, Education, and the Home Office, to draw up guidance on how local authorities should coordinate ‘problem family’ arrangements.⁶⁷ They, too, did not exist in isolation, and each government department drew on the pioneering activities being undertaken locally along with leading ‘problem family’ studies of the day to decide upon a course of action.⁶⁸ The result was a joint circular in 1950 which recommended that each local authority should establish a ‘coordinating committee’ attended by all interested organisations, chaired by a single local authority department who would be the designated officer – with only administrative costs recoverable from the Exchequer – responsible for compiling a register of ‘problem families’ to prevent excessive visiting by different services.⁶⁹ This technocratic compromise offered a template which many local authorities had been pursuing since 1942.⁷⁰ Crucially, this allowed central government to pursue a cheap course of action which mirrored practice elsewhere without upsetting the delicate local balance of power.

Local ‘problem family’ arrangements only took root with the 1950 circular, although Burnley’s MOH from 1931 to 1958, Dr Donald Colin Lamont,⁷¹ took an interest in regional meetings on the issue led by Manchester from 1947 and tried to attract an FSU in 1949.⁷² For the surrounding district beyond the town limits of the CBC, LCC was also only spurred into action with the introduction of the circular. This is unsurprising given that many of the debates and policies were spearheaded by the large cities of Liverpool and Manchester, each home to an FSU, and at the forefront of policy developments shaping national thinking along with Salford.⁷³ Both Burnley CBC and LCC chose public health as the designated department. This reflected their historically strong professional positions in the urban problems of Victorian towns in North-West England. For LCC this was complicated by the county being split into seventeen health divisions, each responsible for the rural hinterland surrounding a town, and possessing a considerable degree of delegated autonomy from county hall.⁷⁴ For Burnley the hinterland formed Health Division 6 of LCC, led by the 3 DMOs in post from 1948 to 1974, each accountable to the County Medical Officer (CMO) who for most of the period (1950-68) was the archetypal medical administrator, Dr Stanley Clucas Gawne.⁷⁵

Despite being the designated officer in both the town and country of Burnley, in both instances there was interest from across the ‘mixed economy’ as well as a steer from the regional arms of central government. In 1955 a regional inspector for the Home Office – responsible for regulating the new children’s departments formed in 1948 – complained that Burnley’s Children’s Officer (CO) as head of the service had a ‘lack of interest’ in both ‘problem families’ and the coordinating committee as ‘there is an extremely active NSPCC Officer in the town’.⁷⁶ Indeed, Burnley’s ‘problem family’ committee typically referred all cases to him.⁷⁷ The regional inspector and the Home Office, lacking meaningful enforcement powers, expressed their dissatisfaction in a meeting with the Chairman of the Children’s Committee who backed his CO. Concerned that Burnley

was 'falling between two stools' of CO inaction and an NSPCC 'monopoly', the Home Office wondered how the local NSPCC could visit every 'feckless mother in her own home' and pressed for the appointment of a Woman Visitor as a solution.⁷⁸ Instead Burnley's coordinating committee turned to the local Council of Social Service (CSS) who had been involved with 'problem families' since the committee's formation in 1950. From 1954 they 'inaugurated an experimental service of intensive visiting' with 'problem families' which, like so many post-war voluntary social work organisations, aped FSU methods.⁷⁹ These continued independently of the coordinating committee which fell into abeyance with the retirement of Dr Lamont from 1958 and the unexpected death of the CO in 1961.⁸⁰ Unable to find a replacement despite repeated advertisements, John Moorwood was appointed as CO in 1965, having served as a Child Care Officer (CCO) from 1958 and Acting CO from 1964.⁸¹ Moorwood became the designated officer during a national shift of such appointments to COs with the introduction of the 1963 Children and Young Persons Act which gave children's departments far more sweeping powers to investigate 'problem families' and offer forms of material and social support.⁸²

Alongside these changes in oversight were the realities of rationing resources in the welfare state. In Burnley this meant housing, squeezed between the advancing bulldozers of the slum clearance programme and the lack of a large council housing programme. The condition of the town and district's properties were often worse than their county neighbours, lacking basic amenities and reflecting decades of neglect following rapid jerry-built construction.⁸³ Despite their severity, these problems were not unique to Burnley, and allocating scarce modern accommodation entailed a process of differentiating the deserving from the undeserving in the eyes of both local authorities and central government. Accordingly in 1959 the Ministries of Health, and Housing and Local Government, issued a joint circular suggesting the use of 'halfway houses' for 'problem families' to prevent them as an unworthy and undeserving group from obtaining council properties they could not keep to appropriate standards.⁸⁴ This, as an alternative to the more expensive temporary accommodation for homeless families run by local authority welfare departments which entailed separating families by taking older children into care and preventing fathers from living with mothers and young children.⁸⁵ A 1959 survey of policies for 'halfway houses' in the North found that the 'problem in Burnley seems to be a new one which has arisen as a result of the Corporation's slum clearance programme'. Given the abeyance of the coordinating committee no condemned houses were earmarked for use, although 'it is appreciated that it is a definite social problem'.⁸⁶ This meant that homeless families continued to be broken up, with mothers sent to Moorfields and their children taken into care until 1966.⁸⁷ The slow pace of the bulldozers only aggravated this difficult as houses adjacent condemned and bricked-up properties often became 'untenable and derelict in their town' according to the MOH, placing greater strain on a limited housing stock under growing pressures with the arrival of new migrants to work in the declining mills.⁸⁸ This, despite progressive depopulation from a peak of 84,290 in 1950 to 76,610 by 1970.

Outside Burnley in the district arrangements were marked more by continuity than change. The 1950 circular left the DMO as designated officer, although this appointment was vacuous as meetings largely concerned matters of policy rather than discussing cases, and the overlapping territory of LCC Health Division 6 with several municipal, urban, and rural councils ensured slow progress.⁸⁹ This experience was far from unusual, and a recognised source of tension in a later review of social work training which extended to 'problem family' coordinating arrangements.⁹⁰ In LCC Health Division 6, it was not until a further 1954 circular from the Ministry of Health which advocated greater use of health visitors to work intensively with 'problem families' that the work of the local coordinating committee obtained traction.⁹¹ Following the circular, a register of 'problem families' was maintained by the committee to which other organisations contributed and had access,

along with regularly discussing them at case conferences held in individual districts.⁹² By 1955 these were Reedley and Padiham, Nelson with Brierfield and Briercliffe, and Colne.⁹³ This was formalised in 1963 following the Children and Young Persons Act with a policy committee for the Health Division chaired by the DMO and case committees within districts by run his deputies.⁹⁴ Their stated aim was to keep ‘families together, adequately housed, and educated to live up to the standards generally accepted these days’.⁹⁵ As with Burnley, the reality entailed judgments between investing the time, energy and resources of organisations into families which made little improvement towards accepted social norms in order to keep them together, and taking punitive action primarily focused on the mother, to show that welfare services were not funding the lifestyles of the undeserving poor. It is in both instances that Burnley and LCC Health Division 6 referred mothers to Brentwood, as discussed below.

These policy arrangements were subsumed by a series of national changes between 1970 and 1974 which moved all social work and public health personal services into new social services departments, and modernised Victorian local government boundaries with new two-tier authorities which bridged the gap between town and country in Burnley.⁹⁶ ‘Problem family’ coordinating committees, influenced by professional changes towards children at risk of physical abuse rather than neglect and cruelty, became Area Review Committees and part of the architecture of modern child protection policies.⁹⁷

Brentwood Recuperative Centre

Given its records permit glimpses into the realities of family poverty in Burnley and district discussed below, the place of Brentwood for ‘problem families’ is considered. Brentwood was originally a holiday home for unemployed workers during the 1930s run by Lancashire Community Council but was transformed into a residential rehabilitation centre for ‘problem families’ during the Second World War. It was the residential equivalent to the domiciliary work of P/FSUs in training mothers how to undertake housekeeping and childcare to a standard accepted by the community and – more importantly – the authorities responsible for billeting.⁹⁸ Just like FSU, it soon obtained a prestigious national reputation and its limited capacity for mothers and their young children for two-, four-, or six-week stays were in high demand, leading to several imitation centres to be established in Plymouth, Harrogate, Birmingham, Dundee, and Surrey. The regime hinged upon a combination of housework, childcare, supervised leisure, and stern affection from the Warden for much of the period (1943-63), E. Doris Abraham. Mothers initially came from the Blitzed cities of London, Manchester, and Liverpool but after 1945 LCC became a key source of referrals, especially from its seventeen ‘problem family’ committees established in each of its health divisions. After the departure of Miss Abraham in 1963 a succession of wardens modernised the programme to include psychoanalytic interviews, flatlets for families with their husbands rather than shared bedrooms, and a greater emphasis on working with mothers before and after their stay. This led to a reduction in the number of mothers attending, an increase in the length of stay, and associated costs from local authorities who were reluctant to pay given that many of them were imitating the new Brentwood regime on a smaller scale with the Children and Young Persons Act. This led to the closure of the centre by 1970 having had roughly 3,600 ‘problem family’ mothers and their children through its doors since its wartime transformation.⁹⁹

Table 1: Problem Families and Brentwood Cases as a Proportion for Burnley CBC, 1945-70

Year	Population	Problem Families	Brentwood Case Files	Designated Officer
1945	79080	X	0	D. C. Lamont (MOH)
1946	82680	X	2	
1947	83650	X	3	
1948	84560	X	5	
1949	84590	X	6	
1950	84920	X	3	
1951	84280	X	4	
1952	83860	X	1	
1953	83290	X	1	
1954	83090	X	0	
1955	82870	X	0	
1956	82350	X	0	
1957	81760	X	1	
1958	81360	X	0	
1959	81080	X	0	L. J. Collins (MOH)
1960	80560	X	0	
1961	80590	X	0	
1962	80540	X	0	
1963	80200	X	0	J. Moorwood (CO)
1964	79250	X	0	
1965	78680	X	0	
1966	78380	X	0	
1967	78060	X	0	
1968	76880	X	0	
1969	76610	X	1	
1970	76610	X	0	

Table 2: Problem Families and Brentwood Cases as a Proportion for Lancashire CC Health Division 6, 1948-70

Year	Population	Problem Families	Brentwood Case Files	Designated Officer
1948	95170	X	0	R. E. Robinson (DMO)
1949	95960	X	0	
1950	96500	X	0	
1951	95049	X	0	
1952	94922	X	0	
1953	94134	*	0	
1954	93910	*	0	
1955	93580	31	0	
1956	95755	32	1	
1957	92010	25	1	
1958	91410	21	2	
1959	90860	26	1	
1960	90420	21	0	
1961	90878	25	0	
1962	91110	21	1	

1963	91180	27	0	J. V. Dyer (DMO)
1964	90560	26	0	
1965	90180	33	0	
1966	89850	72	0	
1967	89390	75	2	
1968	90430	61	0	P. G. Holt (DMO)
1969	90460	78	0	
1970	89970	86	1	

Sources: Compiled from the annual reports of the MOH for Burnley CBC, DMO for LCC Health Division 6 and surviving Brentwood case files for the authorities kept at Lancashire Archive. X indicates no mention of 'problem families'; * indicated a mention of 'problem families' without corresponding figures.

As the 'problem family' committee and case files for both Burnley and LCC Health Division 6 do not survive, the case files of individual mothers deemed to be 'problem families' by workers and these coordinating committees who attended Brentwood are used to provide a glimpse into the realities of family poverty. The quality and quantity of material contained in such case files vary from case-to-case, although there is a growth in both from the 1940s to the end of the 1960s. Table 1 indicates the proportion of mothers who went relative to the population for Burnley whilst table 2 does the same for LCC, where more complete records owing to a more constituent coordinating committee shows how the 'problem family' register was maintained and grew over time, especially following the 1963 Children and Young Persons Act. The cases are by no means representative. Indeed, they represent either the most hopeful or hopeless 'problem families' in the view of the authorities, being dispatched to Brentwood to reward their compliance with the wishes of the committee or as a last resort before being broken apart. In both instances some mothers left after a few days whilst others asked for their residential stay to be extended, and frequently corresponded with staff on departure.¹⁰⁰ This makes judgment on any common local characteristics of being constituted a 'problem family' difficult. Families' circumstances matched the pick-and-mix approach described earlier. Instead, the cases are indicative of the types of economic and social difficulties under which so-called 'problem families' struggled, and the judgmental fashion in which authorities of every shade, along with the politicians of the local council, acted in their purported best interests.

Family Poverty in Burnley and District

The contradictory purpose of Brentwood for 'problem families' is shown most clearly in the case of Mrs EP, aged 33 and living with her husband, a car engineer, and their two children in well-kept modern terraced home in the Queensgate area in who was referred in 1946. She was mainly run down caring for her home and family in the eyes of Burnley CSS who supported the stay, and the Warden reported back that Mrs EP 'is a spotlessly clean, good type "Lancashire" woman. She appeared to be happy here but we think rather expected much more of a "holiday" than Brentwood could provide'.¹⁰¹ Mrs EC was referred for similar reasons in 1948 by Burnley CSS. Aged 24 and sharing a two-up, two-down with another family in Burnley Wood with her husband, a wireless engineer, and their two young children, the referral report noted that the mother was in need of a 'rest and change' following a deterioration in circumstances with her youngest having to undergo an amputation accompanied by bouts in and out of hospital for a litany of 'childish ailments'.¹⁰² Burnley

CSS also referred Mrs ZB to Brentwood in 1948. Married to a miner injured in a motorcycle accident and living with their children in Rosehill, the brief handwritten note comments that the ZB family 'are not very poor. But [Mrs ZB's] nerves are so bad. I do think a rest and change of company would do a lot of good'.¹⁰³ Given the enormous burdens placed on mothers to work in order to make ends meet, maintain a home, care for children, and keep up appearances, it is little wonder that all too often neglectful and uncaring 'problem families' were conflated with the more acceptable image of 'tired mothers'.¹⁰⁴ Such experiences are far from exceptional when compared with the oral testimonies of working-class Lancastrian women and their memories from 1890 to 1970 collected by Elizabeth Roberts.¹⁰⁵

The case files also reveal domestic difficulties to be behind many cases of 'tired mothers'. In 1949 Mrs JS was 24, pregnant and 'living apart from her husband and four children owing to difficulties with her mother-in-law whose home they have been sharing. She is very deprived and debilitated' in the view of Dr Lamont, the MOH. The house in question was a run-down two-up, two-down in Burnley Wood where her husband was employed as a miner. The Brentwood stay was part of a rehabilitation plan by the authority which aimed to show that Mrs JS could run her own home so that the housing department might look favourably upon her case for rehousing.¹⁰⁶ In terms of domestic difficulties, the circumstances of Mrs EH were comparable. She was first referred in 1947 aged 32, having been known to Burnley CSS since 1945. The caseworker commented that Mrs EH was a devoted wife and a good hard-working mother' to her five daughters, but struggled with her husband, a 'neurotic' in receipt of full war pension on being demobilised from the army at the end of the war. He was described as being in 'a really bad state' who 'inflicts minor injuries on himself, and is full of morbid suspicions and jealousies' leading to periodic institutionalisation at Whittingham Mental Hospital.¹⁰⁷ Such violence was not confined to Mr EH and Mrs EH regularly found herself unable to call for intervention by the authorities as neither the doctor nor the social worker would attend without being called for by him.¹⁰⁸ For Mrs EH Brentwood served as a refugee, and she wrote to the warden about returning, writing in her letters about her husband's threats to 'choke' or 'knife' her, leaving her domestic life 'a pretty terrible time'.¹⁰⁹ After a failed attempt to return following further threats from her husband, Mrs EH had a second period in 1949 after her husband was voluntarily institutionalised but not certified. The Warden remarked in her report on Mrs EH that 'only the permanent removal of Mr EH can assure a satisfactory home life for this family'.¹¹⁰ Yet despite this, all efforts of the authorities were targeted upon her as a mother and wife.

Another mother who attended Brentwood at the same time as Mrs EH in 1947 and also lived in Rosehill was Mrs AR, aged 36. Burnley CSS once again noted that she 'has had a very difficult and trying time during the War years. With [her] Husband away on active service, she has had the care of 4 small children and a bed-ridden mother to nurse and attend to'.¹¹¹ Mrs AR also wrote to the Warden, reflecting that 'my home life is happy' compared with Mrs EH who, she noted, 'I feel terribly sorry for'.¹¹² The authorities did not look so favourably upon Mrs RB when she was referred in 1955. They were 'known' to LCC public health department since 1947 when Mrs RB was only 24 and had one child, a 'mental defective' according to the DMO, and lived together with her husband in one room in central Brierfield. The authorities thought rehousing would improve the circumstances and the situation remained satisfactory once Mrs RB's mother moved in, as she ensured the house was 'kept in reasonable condition'. However, once the housing department discovered they increased the rent, leading to Mrs RB departing and her husband appearing before the magistrates for stealing ducks. During this time Mrs RB gave birth to twins, one of which died, leaving her 'undernourished and ailing'. Despite this, the health visitor complained that she 'never does a stroke of housework. The home conditions are dreadful. I am convinced she has reached absolute rock bottom and does not care a jot what happens next'. The same health visitor wrote

that Mr RB 'earns a reasonable wage' but was a spendthrift, leaving no money for housekeeping which left the larder bare, instead spending it on 'all the things that take his fancy eg. Wireless, dog, bird, etc', not to mention heavy drinking which led the neighbours to 'complain of the rows every night'. By 1954 Mrs RB was pregnant, already having four children which her husband 'strikes... in temper', leaving the health visitor to question whether he was a fit person to leave them with during Mrs RB's stay in Brentwood.¹¹³ She wrote in 1955 after Mrs RB returned from Brentwood that '[f]rom the day she arrived home, she never did a stroke of housework. I saw no change at all in her visit to Brentwood'.¹¹⁴

Following her stay at Brentwood, Mrs RB remained under the watchful eye of both the health visitor and LCC Health Division 6's coordinating committee as she was deemed insufficiently rehabilitated to be removed from the register. By 1956 the family had moved again, 'a good-class family house' which was rented from a local printing company where Mrs RB had obtained employment. 'The house is very untidy' reported the new health visitor, 'but [it] has not deteriorated to any extent since their arrival' three months before. Like her predecessor, the new health visitor bemoaned that 'it appears as though [Mrs RB] cannot see the necessity for cleaning and bed-making every day, although he can see the need for cooking and a certain amount of washing'.¹¹⁵ By 1957 a different health visitor reported that:

[Mrs RB] has recently had another baby. Her mothering has improved, she is breast feeding the new baby and has made a complete set of baby clothes. The general condition of the house has improved slightly, [Mr RB] having decorated throughout. [He] is still on the sick list but improving. The children are better cared for and attending school regularly. [Mrs RB] is not quite as well as she might be, but her general practitioner is attending for severe anaemia.¹¹⁶

Although lower than his previous wage, the report commented that the household income was deplorably low but stable from Mr RB's statutory sick pay, the National Assistance Board (NAB) claim, and Family Allowance (FA). This, along with irregular donations from the Women's Voluntary Service (WVS) for clothes, bedding and furniture – dependent upon good reports from the 'phalanx of officials' – led to sufficient improvement without further prospects of deterioration in the eyes of the 'problem family' committee by the end of the year. Decision-making was driven by pragmatism as much as moralised judgments.

The implicit ethnic lines along which 'problem families' were demarcated from the population are evident in the case of Mrs AB. Aged 32 with three children born within two years, she lived with her husband, a casual labourer when she was referred following a stillbirth which left her 'very debilitated' in 1951. The referral details noted that Mrs AB 'is an illiterate, poor type of woman who originally came from the west coast of Ireland. She lives with her husband and family in an old back-to-back house and has very little idea of homecraft'. Such an impression was confirmed in the Warden's report which portrayed Mrs AB as

[A] fond but stupid mother. As the children did not like proper meals she had fed them, even [her five year-old] on Farex. We tried to make her understand that they needed a balanced diet, but it was difficult to convince her – how far this was due to stupidity we do not know, or it might have been due to laziness'.¹¹⁷

Although laden with prejudices against the Irish – which also meant Catholic in this context – Mrs AB was still seen as a mother capable of rehabilitation as she was white, and not beyond the pale. This was also the case for mothers who were EVWs across Lancashire, although there are no surviving

cases of this in Burnley and district.¹¹⁸ Instances where men from Pakistan or India entered relationships with local women aroused ire, but of a different sort requiring separate policies. In 1967 Burnley and District Moral Welfare Association sought to bring a Pakistani man to court to pay for maintenance of his three children with his unmarried cohabitee, an 'action [which] might be a warning to other Pakistanis'. This never occurred as she left him for 'an Englishmen' soon after, rendering a different course of action necessary.¹¹⁹ In short, notions of 'whiteness' in the eyes of the authorities demarcated the availability many of the social or material forms of support associated with being a 'problem family'.

The social circumstances of the austere 1940s in which many families lived were recognisable in the 1960s despite the prospect of affluence in the intervening years. In 1967 Mrs SK, aged 32, was referred by LCC Health Division 6 as being 'unable to cope with home and family' which included 'drinking and "affairs" with women' from her husband, repeated pregnancies since marriage leading to three children and another on the way, 'mental lapses and emotional strain' and a poor home environment in Padiham. The health visitor felt that she was 'of a weak character though from quite a good family background' whilst he was 'from a "typical problem" family'.¹²⁰ The case history of Mrs AP and her family mirrors this image of a typical 'problem family', who was also referred from Padiham in 1967. A 43 year-old mother of seven, the DMO wrote:

Long-known to local authority departments and welfare services as a family with poor household, financial, childcare and hygiene history. Involved with police re older children, and marital states; with the Public Health Department re state of premises. Housing department re perpetual rent arrears etc. etc'.

The family had 'no social interplay with others', effectively being ostracised by their neighbours and workers were frustrated that their efforts have 'met with only slight response temporarily' up to now. There was 'little to show materially, except debts and arrears' but, according to the report, there is sufficient 'family solidarity' for action.¹²¹ The context of the case is key as the family was due to be evicted from their council house and broken apart and rendered 'intentionally homeless' owing to arrears. Brentwood, and engagement with workers, was the last hope for the family. Following a stay where Mrs AP's performance was judged to have improved and Mr AP cleared the arrears, the family moved into a 'halfway house' which – according to the local press – was 'unfit to live in'. An intervention by the Chairman of Padiham Urban District Council following coverage led to their allocation of a house on the edge of an older council estate.¹²² Both of these strategies, of older 'halfway houses' and peripheral properties, being familiar to local authorities in their management of 'problem families' to keep them apart from the rest of the community.¹²³

The case of Mrs EH points towards how the changes in the organisation of 'problem family' policies in Burnley changed in the late 1960s with the ascendancy of the 1963 Children and Young Persons Act and the influence of Moorwood as CO. By November 1969 only two of Mrs EH's five children survived, with her eldest dying through bronchial pneumonia, her next of asphyxia following the inhalation of a teat, and her most recent it was suspected at the hands of her father, Mr EH. The family had been 'known' to Burnley coordinating committee since 1965, with the case mainly being handled by the NSPCC Inspector and a health visitor. Mrs EH kept appealing for help owing to utility debts at their two-up two-down in Burnley Wood, leading to 'loans' from the children's departments as part of new powers under the 1963 Act for reconnection and to cover arrears, but these were never repaid. 'Marital troubles' were reported in the committee, as was a 'stabbing incident' with a 'Pakistani who lived next door to them' in early 1969. It was shortly after this that the most recent baby in the family died, and Mr EH was soon apprehended, the 5-month-old having sustained a 'cerebral haemorrhage, broken ribs and facial injuries'.¹²⁴ The DMO in the neighbouring Health

District 12 which served the hinterland of Bury wrote that the family was 'prone to battered baby syndrome' as part of a handover process once Mrs EH separated from her husband and moved to Rawtenstall shortly before Christmas 1969.¹²⁵ The 'battered baby syndrome' was part of the growing medicalisation of child neglect which saw a shift away from the generalised concerns of 'problem family' committees and the 'mixed economy' of the welfare state towards narrow categories of diagnosed risk.¹²⁶ Yet the lived experience of poverty for Mrs EH, along with most of Burnley and district's 'problem families' combined with their consumption of the time, energy and resources of the 'moving frontier' of the welfare state which this entailed, was never far from the surface.

Conclusion

The idea that there is a distinct underclass in society which is behaviourally, culturally, or socially different was played out in the thoughts and actions of the 'mixed economy' of the welfare state in Burnley and district from 1940 to 1970. Officials, living and working in a national climate of full employment, political consensus, widespread affluence, and social security identified this group as different from the rest of the working-class communities in which they lived. In the eyes of this 'phalanx of officials' these 'problem families' remained stubbornly backward and resistant to the modernising and civilising mission of New Jerusalem and the 'golden age' this created after 1945. As time advanced, they continued to disproportionately consume the time, energy, and resources of different statutory and voluntary organisations. Yet this paper has shown the circumstances in a which a 'moral panic' about 'problem families' emerged following a succession of predecessors, and the underlying professional struggles that these debates represented. Moreover, the political economy of Burnley as a declining town in increasingly post-industrial Britain combined with the 'problem family' policies which developed in the town and district point to the realities of officials managing the complex realities of poverty. These did not fit their neat functional divisions. Brentwood formed part of these strategies which mirrored the intensive visiting and supervision by officials of 'problem families' in their own homes. Both sought to rehabilitate 'problem families' by instructing mothers on household and childcare, with their judgment as to whether there was sufficient improvement opening or closing the door to the material and social support available within the 'mixed economy'.

The brief glimpses of the circumstances in which the families identified as a 'problem family' lived, worked, and managed contained in the Brentwood case files offer a more complex picture. This suggests that 'problem families' did not constitute an underclass of the post-war New Jerusalem but were working-class mothers striving to do their best, and what they could, in the conditions they found themselves. Ultimately it shows that the idealised post-war settlement was far from realised on a day-to-day basis for many, leaving officials to grapple with dilemmas of resource rationing, and for those deemed to be underserving 'problem families' to live in and with poverty – under the watchful eye of a 'phalanx of officials' – despite the welfare state.

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