

ADOLESCENT BOYS OF EAST LONDON

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I

THE DISTRICT AND THE BOYS

What sort of place is Bethnal Green to grow up in? Two facts stand out. The first is its 'working-class' character: most local men work for a weekly wage at a manual job, many within a mile or two of their homes, in the docks, in a wholesale market, marshalling yard, factory or workshop. And the same is true of the neighbouring districts of East London; the East End as a whole is largely working-class.¹

The second fact is equally important. Both the East End in general and Bethnal Green in particular are changing fast. For a century or more these districts symbolized the old working-class way of life at its harshest - unemployment, poverty, overcrowding, slums. This was the background against which the fathers and grandfathers of the young men we interviewed came of age. For the boys themselves the setting is very different, and is all the time becoming more so.

The changing scene

The transformation is dramatically expressed in the buildings, which are being replaced at a speed that surprises the observer, if not the residents awaiting rehousing. Ten years ago, when we first went to Bethnal Green, the characteristic housing was two-storey Victorian cottages, row upon terraced row of them, low-browed and intimate, in patterned short streets with corner shops and pubs. 'Dilapidated but cosy, damp but friendly, in the eyes of most Bethnal Greeners, these cottages *are* the place' was how it seemed in 1957.² That is true no longer. Over large tracts the

¹ In this book the definition of the 'East End' is the one used in our earlier studies. In terms of the present structure of London government, this is the London Borough of Tower Hamlets and the London Borough of Hackney (with the exception of the former borough of Stoke Newington).

² Young, M. and Willmott, P., *Family and Kinship in East London*, p. 22.

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bulldozers have done their work, flattening the condemned terraces into rubble, erasing for ever the parlours, the wooden staircases, the stone-floored sculleries and the outside lavatories.

In their place rises the new Bethnal Green, whose symbol is the soaring glass and concrete of the Council flats. More rebuilding has been done locally than in other parts of London: 'A third of all the slum clearance work done by the London County Council since 1945 has taken place in the East End, although this area forms only 6.5 per cent of the County.'³ The effects are apparent. In 1957 we found that Council property accounted for less than a third of the dwellings in Bethnal Green; by 1964 the proportion was more than a half. The flats are in many styles – point block, slab or cluster block; some massive and ponderous, others delicate and light on podium supports; elsewhere cliffs of glass and curtain-walling dwarf the low promontories of the four-storey maisonnettes. As well as the skyline – still dealing out surprises as one turns an unfamiliar corner or glances over the roofs from the top of a bus in Bethnal Green Road – there is a new variety at ground level. There is, for instance, the paved Market Square off Roman Road where, surrounded by new shops, new flats and a new pub (The Weaver's Arms), the stallholders from Roman Road itself now do a noisy trade. On one housing scheme there is the familiar carpet of railed-off turf between the tall blocks; on another, cobbled foregrounds; on a third, a small hillock, furnished with white fencing and topped by a sculptured mother and child who would barely disgrace the near-by White-chapel Art Gallery.

The new shops deserve special notice, because they illustrate how Bethnal Green is becoming part of the wider society. Until a few years ago the place never had a Woolworths; now it has a brightly lit new one. The giant new supermarket, a few yards away, offers a range of foods previously unknown to most local housewives – Camembert, mortadello, chop-suey, pâté de foie gras. The East End, though not so much Bethnal Green in particular, has always catered for the tastes of its immigrant minorities, but this is something different: it represents an extension of local horizons and of freedom of choice.

The insides of people's homes have changed as well. More households have a separate home of their own. This is partly

³ L.C.C., *East End Housing*, p. 3.

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because of the rebuilding programmes; also because the migration of families to the new towns, housing estates and suburbs has reduced the population of Bethnal Green – in June 1964, at 46,000, it was three-quarters what it had been fifteen years earlier. According to successive Census figures the proportion of households sharing a house with others was 61 per cent in 1931, 39 per cent in 1951, and 26 per cent in 1961.⁴ The household fittings are of a much higher standard: tiled bathrooms, stainless-steel sink units, built-in cupboards are becoming common. In 1951 less than a quarter of the households had a bathroom, by 1961 nearly half.⁵

Nearly half or only half? The figures show the improvement and also how far there is to go. Many local families are still without modern housing. Many homes still lack bathrooms, fitted kitchens and the like. Among the sample of boys, just under half were living in local authority flats. Most of their homes were relatively well equipped, though not all were new and some had no baths, including flats in the London County Council's first slum clearance scheme – the Boundary Street Estate, built between 1895 and 1900 on the site of the notorious 'Jago' in western Bethnal Green.⁶ A fifth of the boys lived in 'buildings' – the Victorian and Edwardian blocks where little two and three roomed flats, nearly always without baths and sometimes without W.C.'s, were crammed around stone staircases. And as many as a third were living in the nineteenth-century terraced houses that remained, most of them poorly equipped and many shared by two families.

Bryan Wills, aged 15, lived with his parents and younger sister in a three-bedroomed flat in a new Council block.

To reach the flat means travelling up six storeys in the aluminium lift that stops at alternate floors – at the other end of the tiled entrance hall is the lift for floors three, five and seven. (As a result, Bryan's family does not know the people immediately above or below.) A ring at the illuminated bell-push labelled 'Mr. and Mrs. J. B. Wills' and into the thickly carpeted hall. The kitchen had an electric cooker with eye-

⁴ *Census, 1931, 1951, 1961, London.*

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ For a description of life for adolescent boys in nineteenth-century Bethnal Green, see Morrison, A., *A Child of the Jago.*

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level grill, a white enamelled sink unit, a tall refrigerator, a red formica-topped table and four stools upholstered in red and black plastic. The interview took place in the living-room, which had a wide view over the chimney-pots and the tiny workshops in the foreground to more tall blocks and beyond to the River Thames. The room was large and dustless, with an enamel and chrome electric heater filling the fireplace. Loose covers in a broad autumn-leaf print were smoothed carefully over the chairs and sofa, and various ornaments – a miniature ship's wheel enclosing a thermometer, a cruet set labelled 'A Present from Herne Bay', a felt scotch terrier dressed in a tartan kilt – were arranged in a straight line along the mantelpiece. A framed studio photograph of Bryan, taken about three years earlier, stood beneath a table lamp on the television set.

Other homes were more like that of Stephen Archer, aged 17, who lived with his parents in an old block of 'charitable dwellings'. The Archers had two rooms, plus a tiny kitchen-scully and a W.C.; no bathroom. Stephen slept in the living-room and, as his father was in there watching television, the interview was in the parents' bedroom. Drawn across the window were dull red curtains that had, in places, become detached from their runners. A single unshaded 60-watt bulb provided the only light.

We also went into homes reminiscent of the slums of an earlier era: places where beds and cots were congested together, where there was newspaper on the table, dirty cups and plates, broken furniture and a pervasive smell of urine. But these were now rare. The equipment and furniture in most of the older houses and flats belied their physical condition. The home of Robert Young was one example. It was a two-storey terraced cottage, eighty years old; the Youngs lived on the ground floor and the back room on the half landing, the other two rooms being tenanted by Mrs. Young's uncle and aunt, who 'lived separately' (in other words, they did their own cooking on a gas-stove on the top landing, where they also had a sink). There was an outside W.C. shared by both households. Inside the ground-floor kitchen, Mr. Young had fitted a new sink unit and an Ascot water heater, and there was also a small refrigerator and a washing-machine. The front living-room had a bright mottled carpet – grey with

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irregular shapes of black, yellow and red. The window was covered in nylon net and impeccably draped with green silk curtains. There were cleanly painted hardboard panels and chromium handles on the door. Inside this sparkling room, it was easy to forget that the house was due for slum clearance, until one noted that the bamboo wallpaper was peeling away at the bottom corners of the damp walls and showed signs of damp staining up to the height of nearly three feet.

Although we saw evidence of poverty in Bethnal Green – and would doubtless have seen more had we been interviewing old people, for example, or widows – the general impression from most homes was of relative prosperity. Bethnal Green has clearly shared in the ‘affluence’ that has spread among the working classes of Britain in the last decades. In consumption standards, if not in other ways, the lives of local residents are now much more like those of people in other classes and other districts than they ever were in the past.

In many ways, of course, the old Bethnal Green survives. Mothers and their married daughters go shopping together down Bethnal Green Road on Friday afternoon; the old choruses are sung in the pubs on Saturday night; the open-air markets flourish on Sunday morning. People shout cheerful greetings across the street to friends and relatives. There are large family parties and rowdy street-corner quarrels. In some parts the housing is still jumbled up with tailoring factories or furniture workshops. There is also no doubt about the changes. Not only has there been a long-term improvement compared with the old East End; the process of reshaping the district is still going on.

Effects on the boys

The young people of the district are clearly affected by all this. The boys we interviewed, born between 1940 and 1950,⁷ were members of the first generation of Bethnal Greeners to grow up without malnutrition and poverty. Some of them were aware of the change. A 17-year-old tailor’s presser said:

‘You can have a lot more things than they would, the previous generation, televisions and things like that. And a working

⁷ This is including those interviewed in the earlier stages of the research as well as the main sample.

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man can own a motor-car and go out at week-ends. There wouldn't be any worry about work, because there's plenty of work now, and there wasn't none then, was there? What some people call the good old days were really the bad old days.'

Some could draw upon their own memories to illustrate the change. A 20-year-old plumber's mate remarked:

'Maybe it's just that my own personal family has got on, but I don't think so. People don't seem to be as poor as before. It used to be quite a common thing for children to wear second-hand things. I think I had one new suit, which was something to be proud of, but usually I wore second-hand clothing from Brick Lane. I was about nine then. After that things changed. I don't quite know how; my father didn't change his job or anything like that. Things just seemed to get much better. We started to buy new things.'

A 15-year-old schoolboy was one of those whose family had been rehoused under 'slum clearance'.

'Where we used to live it was real rough, just three rooms upstairs and we shared the toilet and there wasn't any bathroom. When we moved into these flats three years ago it made a big difference. I got a room of my own, for one thing. And Mum having a modern kitchen and there being a modern bathroom and toilet - it was all much better.'

In all sorts of ways, the boys' experiences tell the same story. Compared with earlier adolescent generations in Bethnal Green they enjoy higher standards of life, their horizons are wider.

The boys are certainly wealthier than their fathers were at a comparable age. Abrams states that in the country as a whole '... since the 1930's the real earnings of teenagers have risen much faster than those of adults . . .'⁸ and most of the boys in our sample who were at work were relatively well-off. All but a handful earned, after income tax and other deductions, £5 a week or more, and a third earned £10 or over. The older boys, of course, usually earned more, as Table I shows.

Among the 17 and 18 year olds nearly all took home £5 or

⁸ Abrams, M., *Teenage Consumer Spending in 1959*, Part II, p. 4.

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TABLE I

*Age and net weekly earnings
(Boys in full-time work)**

	15/16	17/18	19/20
Less than £5 a week	18%	3%	—
£5 or more, but less than £10 a week	80%	70%	21%
£10 or more but less than £15 a week	2%	20%	58%
£15 a week or more	—	7%	21%
Total %	100%	100%	100%
Number	56	70	48

* Excluding three boys whose earnings were not recorded. Boys are similarly excluded from some later tables because the information about them was incomplete.

over, and at 19 and 20 three-quarters got £10 or more. Some of the apprentices earned less than others of the same age; an electrical apprentice of 17 received £4 10s. a week, and an apprentice silversmith of 19, £7 10s. Those who earned more naturally gave their mothers more for their 'keep', but they usually kept the lion's share. Of those who earned under £5, nearly all gave their mother less than £2; of those earning £10 or more, three-quarters gave her under £4. Characteristically a boy aged about 16 would get £6 or £7 of which he would give his mother £2, leaving £4 or £5 for himself, while a 20 year old earning £12 would give his mother £3 or £4, leaving himself £8 or £9.

Among those still at school half aged 14, 15 and 16 got 10s. or over weekly pocket money and, of the six aged 17 or 18, all but one got £1 or more. A third of the schoolboys — particularly among those with less than 10s. weekly pocket money — supplemented their income by working part-time on a newspaper round or in a local workshop, all earning at least 10s. a week and most £1 or more. Thus most boys, and some even of those at school, had fairly large sums to spend on themselves.

This is reflected in the local shops. Alongside the supermarkets, the furniture showrooms and electrical suppliers, are the record shops, with their displays of brightly-coloured LP sleeves and the current 'Top Twenty' lists, and the men's-wear stores, their windows full of the latest in shirts, suits and slacks. The clothing

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shops, in particular, show an awareness of their teenage customers. Some of the displays emphasize modernity – ‘Hippy Hippy Hipsters’ on a pair of blue slacks, ‘Latest Fly Front’ on a shirt. Others stress the international inspiration – ‘Wrangler Super Denim . . . Preferred by Champion Cowboys’ on a display of jeans; ‘Pigalle . . . from France’ on a pale grey cardigan; ‘Lugano’s latest styles from Italy’ in a shoe store.

The Bethnal Green boys, most of them, were manifestly contemporary ‘teenage consumers’. In music, in television programmes and films, their tastes were close to those of their counterparts elsewhere in Britain. In clothes, shoes and hairstyles they looked almost indistinguishable from boys of similar ages in Plymouth or Wolverhampton, Newcastle or Glasgow, except that the East Enders, being at the heart of the clothing trade, are probably somewhat smarter, trend-setters rather than followers.

Attachments to East London

I remarked earlier that the East End, for all its changes, is still recognizably itself. In the same way most of the boys, despite their affinity with young people elsewhere, were unmistakably East Enders. Though their speech owed something to Hollywood and Leicester Square, its rhythms and diction were usually distinctively Cockney. Nearly all were local boys. Four out of every five had been born in the East End. In terms of Bethnal Green itself, 85 per cent had either been born there or had lived there for ten years or more. ‘I’ve lived here all my life,’ said a 16 year old, ‘I know my way around here. It’s the same with nearly all my mates.’

It does not necessarily follow, however, that they spent much time locally. It is commonly assumed that today’s adolescents are less tied to their locality than earlier generations, that modern communications – in particular, motor bikes, scooters and cars – enable them to range far outside their own neighbourhood.

Of the boys in the sample aged 16 or over (those legally eligible to ride a motor bike or scooter), one in ten had a scooter, mostly 16 and 17 year olds, and one in twenty a motor bike, mostly 17 and 18 year olds. One in ten of the boys of 16 or over had a car; these were predominantly older – of those aged 19 or 20, as many as a quarter had one. This means that altogether a quarter of

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those aged 16 or more had some form of motorized transport of their own, and frequent buses and the Underground offered the others easy access to Central London and other parts of the metropolis. How much did they take advantage of their potential mobility?

There was evidence that some boys travelled quite far afield. One, aged 18, was setting off on a Continental hitch-hiking holiday with a friend the day after we interviewed him. Another had just come back from a holiday in Spain. Then there were those who went by scooter, motor bike, car or train 'to the Coast' - Southend, Margate, Brighton, Hastings or Clacton - at Bank Holidays. Among the motor cyclists, some told us of evening rides in groups along the arterial road towards Southend, to London Airport via the Hammersmith flyover, or out to cafés on the M1 or the A20. There were scooter boys who regularly drove to Epping Forest together. Other boys went fishing in the Lea Valley or at Walton-on-Thames, others camping at Thorpe Bay or Burnham-on-Crouch, climbing in Snowdonia or the Lake District, or - closer to home - dancing at the Tottenham 'Royal' or the West End jazz clubs.

For all the individual mobility, most boys spent much of their time locally. Only one or two attended a school more than about a mile from home. Of those in a job, three-quarters worked within two or three miles - about a quarter in Bethnal Green itself, a quarter elsewhere in the East End, and a quarter in the near-by City of London. The local setting was almost as important outside working hours, at least during the week. The boys were asked where they usually spent their time at evenings and week-ends, and given three possible answers to choose from: 'In and around Bethnal Green', 'Right outside it', and 'About half and half'. Nearly three-quarters said they spent most of their evenings locally and over a third spent most of their week-ends there - this even in midsummer, when the interviewing was done. About one in seven usually went 'right outside' the district in the evenings and a third at week-ends. The diaries suggested that boys who said they were 'right outside Bethnal Green' at week-ends mainly went to the coast or countryside in Essex or Kent, camping, caravanning or fishing, often with their family or with relatives. This seemed particularly true of the younger boys.

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In general, whether the boys stayed locally or not was affected by their age; this is shown in Table II.⁹

TABLE II

Age and leisure time in Bethnal Green

<i>Proportion in each age group 'usually in or around' Bethnal Green:</i>	<i>14/15</i>	<i>16-18</i>	<i>19/20</i>
Evenings	87%	71%	54%
Week-ends	53%	33%	24%
Total number	68	128	50

The table indicates that the boys become less tied to their locality as they get older, although even at 19 and 20 as many as half said they usually spent the evenings there.

Where the boys work also matters: those who work locally are more likely to spend their leisure time there too. Of the boys who worked in Bethnal Green, 37 per cent were mostly 'in and around it' at week-ends; for those working elsewhere in the East End or in the City the proportion was 32 per cent; and for those working farther afield 18 per cent. But there was no marked difference, age for age, between those who had cars, motor bikes or scooters and those who relied on public transport.

The boys were also asked in particular when they had last been to the West End. There seemed to be similar variations. Of those aged 14 and 15, a fifth had been during the previous week, compared with a third of those aged 19 or 20. Those who worked in or near the West End had obviously been there more recently; and since boys with non-manual jobs more often worked in Central London, this meant that white-collar workers spent more time in the West End than those with more 'working-class' occupations.

⁹ The age-groups in Table II - 14 and 15; 16 to 18; 19 and 20 - are also used in most of the subsequent analyses by age. Our initial analysis suggested that this was usually the most meaningful distinction: most of the 14 and 15 year olds were still at school, and those who were not had only just left; the 19 and 20 year olds were mostly mature young men; and in many respects the 16, 17 and 18 year olds proved to have more in common with each other than their juniors or seniors. In some analyses other age distinctions are used for reasons that are either obvious or stated.

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Attitudes to the West End differed as well. There were those who felt at home there or were gradually finding their way.

'I'm often up West, either after work or at the week-ends. I like it up there – the pubs and cafés are more lively and you get more of a mixture of people. My mates and I often have a meal in a Chinese restaurant in Soho.' (17, *clerk*.)

'Up the West End, it's really an exploration. We watch all the posh people coming out of their clubs, the way they dress up makes you giggle. And you see a bloke running after a cab for one of these posh people, then the posh bloke gets into the cab as if the other one didn't exist. You learn a lot just watching.' (16, *grammar schoolboy*.)

To some the West End was as remote as the Antipodes:

'I've never, ever been to the West End. My hobbies are photography and weight-lighting; you can get all that at the Club.' (16, *apprentice toolmaker*.)

'I never go to the West End. I reckon the West End is over-rated. You get up there and you find no one so much as looks at you. You're dirt, they don't want to know. You're better off where you belong.' (15, *secondary modern schoolboy*.)

Attitudes to the local community itself differed as well. Many clearly felt a sense of loyalty and affection towards it.

'Some people, when they find out you live in the East End, say, "Oh well, you can't help where you live." But I'm proud of it. There is a great thing attached to being an East Ender, a great pride in it.' (19, *fitter's mate*.)

'I like Bethnal Green – it's my home town. I know the place and I know the people. I'd like to go on living here. I've got all my mates round here. I've got my job here – it's a good job too.' (17, *upholsterer*.)

These sentiments are similar to those expressed by older residents of the district. A minority of boys made it clear that they did not share them; they felt no love for Bethnal Green – they wanted to leave as soon as they could.

'There's not much green in Bethnal Green,' said an 18-year-

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old draughtsman. 'You can't see far - all the houses wall you in. I've always had the urge to break out and stand on my own two feet. You can't think for yourself here.'

And a 17-year-old shop assistant, working in Oxford Street:

'I want to get as far away as possible from Bethnal Green. There's no social life in Bethnal Green, no appreciation of the arts - whenever they put up a statue it's defaced. People laugh at a statue; they think they won't be able to understand it, they're afraid of widening their outlook. I'm ambitious. I suppose you'd call me a social climber. You might think that's immoral but I do want to get away. Bethnal Green is untidy, a pigsty.'

We did not ask systematically about attitudes to the district, but it seemed as if critical views were often expressed by a particular sort of boy. He worked outside the East End in a non-manual job or, if still a schoolboy, was at grammar school. He spent more of his leisure time outside the district than in it. His attitudes and his behaviour were of a piece.

Variations among the boys

One question posed in the introductory chapter was if it would be possible to distinguish different patterns of response among the boys. The material on their relationships to the local community suggests just such a distinction - between those who are broadly sympathetic to its way of life and its standards, and those who are more critical of the East End, more 'aspiring'. This distinction emerges again in later chapters. So too does another, concerned with attitudes and behaviour not so much towards the local community as towards the wider society: some boys are, for example, more anti-school, anti-employers, anti-police than others. Meanwhile, some impressions of three boys, from those interviewed in the summer of 1964, may help to illustrate the variety.

Kevin James had gone to a secondary modern school and at 17 was working in a manual job. 'School wasn't all that bad,' he said, 'but I packed it in as soon as I could.' He now works for a firm of heating and ventilating engineers, as an 'apprentice fitter welder', earning £9 a week; 'I got the job through

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my uncle. I like the work – it's quite interesting.' When interviewed he was getting ready to go out 'with some of my mates'; 'we sometimes go down the club or up Victoria Park. Have a bit of a giggle on our scooters, pick up a bird or two if we can.' He has few complaints about his lot: 'I'm out for a gay time, until I get hooked. And I do enjoy life. Get a bit bored sometimes, I suppose, but no real gripes.' He spends his money on his scooter, records and clothes – 'I choose my gear carefully; I like to get the best.' After the interview he waved as he rode off on his scooter, wearing sunglasses.

When interviewed, Arthur Dukes, aged 18, was wearing his grammar-school blazer, white shirt, school tie, grey flannel trousers, black shoes. He likes school, is a prefect there, and is pleased with his progress: 'I can't complain at all: ten "O" levels is no mean achievement.' He is now preparing to take four 'A' levels. His father is a local shopkeeper, but Arthur hopes to go to a university and then to 'some sort of work in science, obviously – I'd like to end up on the business side of a scientific or technical firm.' He says he thinks it important to 'look to the future' – 'If you're just going to live for the moment,' he said severely, 'you can't expect to do well later on.' That is his criticism of most Bethnal Green teenagers – 'Most of them lack intelligence, personality and ambition.'

Jimmy Grove, aged 16, had been to a secondary modern school. 'I hated school,' he said; 'Most teachers stink – they don't really care about you. I didn't learn much at school, and I was always getting the stick – usually for fighting. Anyway it was a crap school I went to. You're supposed to be brainy and go to one of those G.C.E. schools if you get your scholarship when you're 11. I didn't take the scholarship – what do you know about it when you're 11?' He has had five different jobs in the year since he left school, and is at present a labourer in a veneer warehouse, where he earns £8 a week; 'It's just a job,' he says. 'As long as I earn the money, that's the main thing. I couldn't afford to be an apprentice, getting about £4 a week. When you're young, that's the best time of your life, you ought to enjoy yourself.'

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Enjoying himself, to Jimmy, mostly means 'going around with the boys'. 'Sometimes there's half a dozen of us, sometimes as many as forty - everybody turns out if there's a real punch-up with another mob. We lark around, go up to the youth club - sometimes we get chucked out. Sometimes we do a job, do a warehouse, nick a load of fags, that sort of thing.' He says: 'I'm very quick-tempered. If I see someone looking at me and I think they're sneering, I say, "Had your bleeding eyeful, mate?" or something like that. That's how fights start.' He does not think much about the future: 'I don't know what I'm going to do. I don't want to work for a living, I know that. And I don't intend to get married - I don't fancy sticking to one girl all the time. Not me, mate.'

This chapter, to conclude, has tried to suggest something of what the district is like and where its adolescent males fit in. As the boys themselves get older, their local community is also changing - improved housing, rising living standards, widening opportunities. All this is close to the common view of how working-class life is being transformed, and the boys, too, seem on the face of it like the popular stereotype of teenage 'affluence'. But behind the familiar exterior their lives are more complicated.