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## The Origin, Development and Decline of Back-to-Back Houses in Leeds, 1787–1937

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# THE ORIGIN, DEVELOPMENT AND DECLINE OF BACK-TO-BACK HOUSES IN LEEDS, 1787–1937

JOANNE HARRISON 

*This paper traces the development of back-to-back house building in Leeds. It first outlines the origin of the house type, before examining the urban layout, building form and social aspects of back-to-back courts in the first half of the 19th century, and the role of speculative developers, building societies and sanitary reformers. The focus then turns to the bills, acts and by-laws of the later 19th and early 20th century, and the determination of the people of Leeds to retain their preferred house type. Together, these brought improvements to the design and facilities, culminating in a house type that was far superior to that which was condemned by the back-to-back critics, and arguably had overcome all of the criticisms by the time construction of back-to-backs was prohibited in 1909.*

**KEYWORDS:** *back-to-back houses, courts, Victorian terraced houses, Edwardian terraced houses, Victorian building regulations and by-laws, Leeds*

## INTRODUCTION

Back-to-back houses were the subject of controversy throughout the Victorian period as they were considered to be among the worst type of housing. They were associated with overcrowded slum conditions, poor sanitary provision and no through ventilation, which was thought to be the cause of disease. Numerous legislative attempts were made to prohibit their construction and they were finally banned in 1909, although a loophole meant that developments with permission prior to the passing of this legislation could still be built. In Leeds, they were the most popular type of housing, forming 71% of the housing stock in 1886, and they continued to be built there until 1937.<sup>1</sup>

The aim of this paper is to trace the historical development of back-to-back houses to understand both the popularity of this building type in Leeds, and the design of the houses themselves, which still make up a significant proportion of the housing stock in many parts of the city. The origin, development and decline of back-to-back house building in Leeds is traced, in the context of local and national legislation and the building process, and the effect these had on the form, character and status of back-to-back houses and communities. Although the focus will be on Leeds, back-to-back housing in other towns and cities will be considered as a means of contextualising events and practices.

## THE ORIGIN OF THE BACK-TO-BACK HOUSE

Several of the industrial towns of the Midlands and North of England had back-to-back houses in the

18th and 19th centuries, including Leeds, Bradford and the Pennine Yorkshire towns, Manchester and the textile Lancashire towns, Birmingham, Liverpool, Nottingham and Sheffield.<sup>2</sup> There is little existing research about the origins of back-to-back housing, although there is consensus that the first back-to-backs were probably constructed unintentionally, in the evolution of vernacular traditions.<sup>3</sup> It is thought that, in an attempt to maximise the use of urban land, houses were built to line the rear yard walls of street-facing buildings, facing inwards across a courtyard, creating what is known as ‘blind back’ houses where the rear wall is completely blank, without access or fenestration. The building up of adjacent yards in this way resulted in houses backing onto a party wall and the houses thus became ‘back-to-back’ (Figure 1).<sup>4</sup> The inner courtyard was often accessed at just one or two locations, through a ‘tunnel’ under the first floor of the building facing onto the street.<sup>5</sup>

Research on back-to-backs in Leeds and other towns has been undertaken by a small number of researchers, either as a dedicated study of back-to-back housing, or as a type within the broader fields of workers’ or Victorian housing. Others have been concerned with workers’ housing generally, and focus on issues such as philanthropy, industry, capitalism and finance, building regulations, and use and meaning of the home.<sup>6</sup> For instance, Chapman, Timmins and Sheeran concern themselves with back-to-backs in Nottingham, Lancashire and Bradford respectively, while Crouch concentrates on the related type, the blind-back. They consider the same themes that Rimmer and Beresford did for Leeds (the historical development of the back-to-back

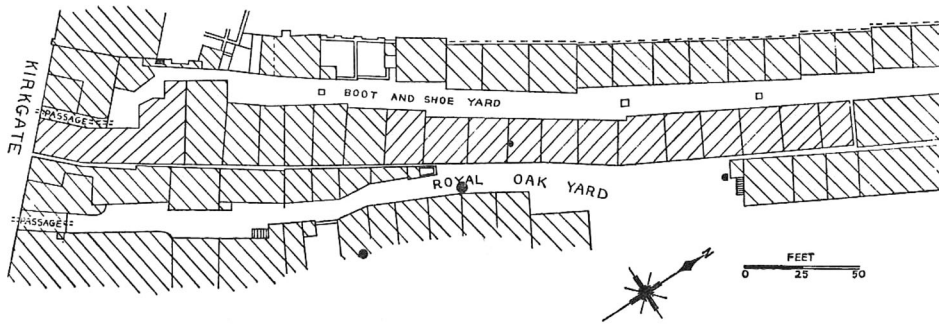


FIG. 1. Boot and Shoe Yard in Leeds is an example of the early type of development where buildings lined the perimeter of narrow plots, and became back-to-back with those on adjacent plots.

Image: Beresford, M., 'The Back-to-Back House in Leeds, 1787-1937', in *The History of Working-Class Housing: A Symposium*, ed. S. Chapman (Newton Abbot: David and Charles, 1971), 100

in Leeds, and its wider socio-economic and urban context), and so provide a useful comparison. Upton's publications about the National Trust back-to-backs in Birmingham provide a social history of a small number of back-to-backs at four intervals in a 100-year period. Exhibition material at three museums — Leeds City Museum, Bradford Industrial Museum and the National Trust Back-to-backs — demonstrates part fact/part speculative information on life in a back-to-back.<sup>7</sup>

## EARLY BACK-TO-BACK HOUSES AND THE COURT SYSTEM

### URBAN LAYOUT AND BUILDING FORM

According to Burnett, the first known mention of purposely designed back-to-back houses was in Bermondsey in 1706, although they did not become a common type there. They were being built in Birmingham and Nottingham in the 1770s, and Manchester and Liverpool in the 1780s. In Leeds, the first purpose-built back-to-backs were constructed in 1787 and most of the houses built in Leeds from then until 1850 were of the back-to-back type. At this time, the population in the industrial towns grew rapidly, and speculatively-built back-to-backs were an important solution in meeting the increased housing demand.<sup>8</sup>

In Birmingham, most back-to-backs had a ground-floor kitchen with two rooms above. These were around 13ft to 14ft square (3.96m to 4.27m square) with ground- and first-floor ceiling heights of around 8ft to 9ft (2.44m to 2.74m) and 7ft (2.13m) to the second floor. Cellars, with heights under 6ft (1.83m), were used only for coal storage. In Liverpool, back-to-backs were 10ft to 12ft square (3.05m to 3.66m square) with a cellar, ground-floor kitchen and two bedrooms above; in Manchester, they were between 12ft and 15ft square (3.66m to 4.57m square); and in Nottingham, just 11ft square (3.35m square), although sometimes with a third floor serving as a workshop. Inquiries from the

1840s reported dense overcrowding in the courtyards, with poor sanitary conditions, cobbled yards devoid of vegetation, and little daylight and ventilation to the houses and the courtyard.<sup>9</sup>

In Leeds, there were few large estates and land tended to be owned by smallholders. This had a major influence on the urban layout as developers set out their streets within the old, often narrow, field boundaries independently of adjacent developers. The result was an array of disconnected streets at right angles to the main road, blocked off from each other by walls, level changes or houses. The disadvantages of this were multiple — ventilation along the streets was limited, the streets did not lead anywhere, so the highway authority did not want to adopt them, and the viability of installing a water supply, drainage and sewerage systems was reduced.<sup>10</sup> Initially, houses were built in a courtyard arrangement, with the front houses of a back-to-back terrace facing onto a street and the back houses accessed via tunnels leading from the street. The same type of arrangement occurred on the adjacent street, forming a courtyard between the back houses, and so the form was essentially the same as the original 'unintentional' back-to-backs (Figure 2).

Aside from the street pattern, the narrow plots used in Leeds also influenced the type of house that could be built. A plot needed to be at least 13yd wide to accommodate a row of back-to-backs, while wider plots could accommodate several rows of terraces, and where there was not sufficient width for a whole number of back-to-back rows, a 'blind back' row would be included.<sup>11</sup>

The Leeds houses often had just one room on each of their two floors, although some houses had either a cellar, or an 'under-dwelling', which was a one-roomed self-contained unit under the house. At around 15ft square (4.57m square), they were about the size of many rural cottages at this time, and larger than the back-to-backs being built elsewhere. Ceilings were commonly around 12ft high (3.66m). Their external appearance was similar to that of any

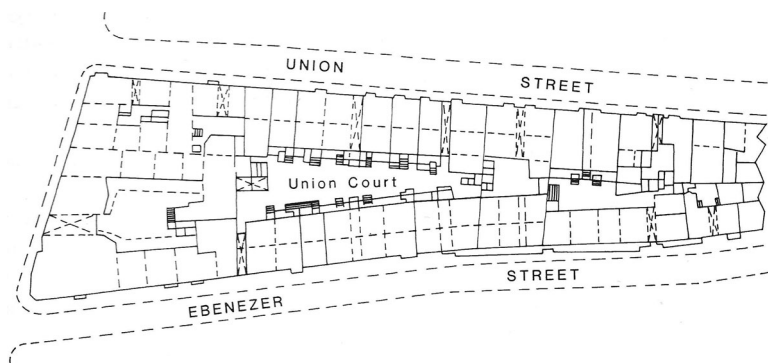


FIG. 2. It is believed that the back-to-backs in Union Street and Ebenezer Street were the first purpose-built back-to-backs to be built on new streets in Leeds, and Union Court gave access to the rear back-to-backs and cellar dwellings.

Image: Beresford, M., *East End, West End: The Face of Leeds During Urbanisation 1684–1842* (Leeds: The Thoresby Society, 1988), 203

row of workers' cottages, with brick walls, slate roofs, stone steps to the entrance doors and hinged, wooden shutters to the ground-floor windows.<sup>12</sup>

#### SPECULATIVE DEVELOPMENT AND BUILDING SOCIETIES

It has been suggested that the first back-to-backs in Leeds were not a speculative development, but the work of a terminating building society, and it is known from surviving documentation that several building societies were established in Leeds at the end of the 18th century.<sup>13</sup> They worked by charging an entrance fee and weekly subscriptions, terminating once each member had a house. By the 1840s, permanent societies were being formed, which were able to offer a more flexible approach to membership and subscription. Members were usually tradesmen who carried out the construction work themselves, and so it is perhaps surprising that some building club houses, notably the earliest back-to-backs in Leeds, were not built to good standards.<sup>14</sup>

The building societies were not especially concerned with the type of houses being built, but they were selective about the social position of the club members. They gave the upper working classes and artisans the opportunity to move up the social scale, and evidence available for West Yorkshire has shown that, although the poorer working classes could not become members, the houses constructed would have been suitable for them. Presumably this was because the member could subsequently let the property at an affordable rate, and evidence from 1839 suggests that members often built two houses, one for themselves to live in, and one at the back which would be rented out.<sup>15</sup> Since they were building for owner occupation, it would be reasonable to think that the build quality on these developments did reach acceptable standards for the time. Gauldie, however, believed that back-to-back builders were motivated by greed, that the houses for the poorest people were shoddily built using low-quality and unsuitable materials, and often without adequate foundations on made ground, which is consistent with the early critics. It would seem that Gauldie's comments about greedy speculators might not apply to these small-scale developers. Firstly, it is perhaps unrealistic

to think that someone would choose to suffer living in sub-standard accommodation in order to maximise profit on an adjacent one. Beresford's research for Leeds showed that in 1842 new back-to-backs were let for £12 a year, making a return of at least 7%. Where the landlord lived back-to-back with the tenant, 2% to 4% of this income might be reinvested in maintenance. Secondly, if these developers had aspirations of joining the middle classes, then living in squalor as a means to an end also seems unlikely. There is, however, the question of what an acceptable level of accommodation might mean to different stakeholders, and evidence from the 1850s has shown that, when workers built houses for themselves, they were of more humble means than those provided by model companies.<sup>16</sup>

Speculative development and building society development were not mutually exclusive. True speculative development also took place in Leeds, and although Caffyn found contemporary evidence that the Leeds Permanent Society preferred to avoid lending to speculative developers, she determined that many speculative developments were constructed with building society funding.<sup>17</sup> Beresford found that most tenants had an absentee landlord and so there was little incentive to invest in maintenance. However, he noted also that the investors Richard Kendall and Richard Paley each built many back-to-backs in the early 19th century, and one of Richard Paley's adjoined the garden of his own house.<sup>18</sup> This is suggestive that not all speculative development was motivated by greedy developers who had no regard for the living conditions of the occupants.

#### THE HOUSEHOLD

Relatively little is known about the occupants and living arrangements inside the early back-to-backs, but it appears they were popular with a wide demographic within the lower classes. In 1801, census returns put the national average occupancy per house at 5.67, which was lower than earlier occupancy estimates. This may, however, have been due to the way dwellings were defined, or because of a shift from multi-occupancy dwelling to single-family occupation in back-to-back houses, and it did not



FIG. 3. Boot and Shoe Yard off Wood Street, c.1890. The photograph shows a marked contrast to the conditions described in 1842, and seems to indicate a wide and clean courtyard, which could have been ventilated reasonably adequately. Image: Young, M. & D. Payne, *Around Leeds* (Stroud: The Chalford Publishing Co., 1995), 49

necessarily mean more space per person.<sup>19</sup> Average figures disguise that households often consisted of large families and lodgers, although research by Rimmer showed that in Leeds during the 1780s–90s there were usually four or five people in a one-up-one-down back-to-back. It was 1891 before a definition was accepted for overcrowding, based on the number of occupants per room, and from this it can be inferred that the occupancy in the early back-to-backs was at that time considered to be reasonable. This figure of 5.67 people, however, relates to a period before dramatic population growth, and contrasts sharply with Leeds' Boot and Shoe Yard off Wood Street, where in 1842, 34 houses regularly housed 340 people, and sometimes nearly 700 people. It was reputed to be the most profitable property development in Leeds, despite its reputation as a filthy slum.<sup>20</sup> Rimmer calculated that there were a total of 57 rooms, giving an average of around six people per room, and a density in the yard of 3,000 people per acre, which equates to roughly 545 times the average density for Leeds, and 53 times the average for the Harehills Triangle district in 2011, an area that is mostly made up of late Victorian/early Edwardian back-to-back houses.<sup>21</sup> Yet Burnett has cautioned about the tendency of historians to represent the exceptional worst as the average, and this yard was indeed exceptional. The density figure cited here would be akin to citing the density of a high-rise tower block in isolation of the green space it stands in. Rimmer made a similar point in respect of overcrowding, noting the high density inside small rural cottages versus the lower density inside the Boot and Shoe Yard houses.<sup>22</sup> Referring again to the definition of overcrowding, occupancy was between one and a half and two times the threshold when only the regular occupants were in residence. This is a more sensible and comprehensible form of

comparison than the urban density of the yard, but must be considered in the context of the immediate urban environment, particularly in relation to the provision of sanitation (Figure 3).

#### HEALTH AND SANITATION

Health and sanitation became a major concern, instigated by outbreaks of cholera and typhus and the realisation that there was a link between disease, overcrowding and insanitary housing conditions. While it is true that ventilation in and around some early back-to-backs was limited, the spread of disease was not accurately understood, and the 'miasma' theory prevailed, whereby it was thought that gases from putrid matter caused disease, and therefore lack of through ventilation contributed to its spread. The back-to-back housing and court system were seen as being particularly problematic to health, and the focus remained on disease and health rather than an attempt to reduce overcrowding. Only in the mid-1800s was it discovered that cholera and typhus were waterborne diseases.<sup>23</sup>

Simon wrote of the poor construction practices and sanitary provision in speculatively built housing, intimating that back-to-back houses were among the least acceptable type of accommodation, but acknowledging that the conditions found were not exclusive to them.<sup>24</sup> He commented on limited access to ventilation around the buildings, small un-openable windows, no protection against rising damp to the floors and walls, and shared middens and water supplies. Similarly, Rodger believed that the features of back-to-back housing were prejudicial to health, citing initially lack of through ventilation, but then the condition of sanitary provision and shared water supplies.<sup>25</sup> These would have been in the courtyard, and therefore a problem related to infrastructure

and overcrowding more than the fabric of the houses. Back-to-backs as a house type, however, seem to have been tarred by this type of criticism, and it has been common, especially amongst those contemporary to the buildings, to link the problems firmly with the fabric of the houses. Beresford cited the *Leeds Mercury* claiming that back-to-backs were condemned by all and that they were detrimental to health and comfort, going on to explain that ‘critic after critic, decade after decade, national as well as local, fastened on a distinctive form of housing, to condemn the back-to-back’.<sup>26</sup> Beresford acknowledged that the back-to-backs were associated with sanitation problems, but, being an aficionado of them, commented that this was not specific to the type. He did, however, note that they had a unique defect — that of restricted light and no through ventilation — but, as later discussion will demonstrate, this must relate to the early houses built in high-density enclosed spaces rather than the type per se. Beresford was not alone in recognising that the houses themselves were not the primary problem.<sup>27</sup> Chalklin believed that working-class districts of the industrial towns provided a deteriorating standard of living in respect of sanitation, and sometimes of housing density and construction quality, but that, at the worst, the accommodation itself stayed the same, and in some cases improved. Burnett stated that the back-to-back was an improvement on earlier vernacular house types, and that the problem lay in the density of the houses, high occupancy and the poor external environment and amenities, while Newman similarly noted that, although the damp environment caused by lack of ventilation and high density was an inherent part of the building design, it was the overcrowding rather than the buildings that were the cause of ill health.<sup>28</sup>

#### THE WORKING MAN’S PREFERENCE

Back-to-backs were very low in the hierarchy of housing types, being above only cellar-dwellings, lodging houses and tenements, and, while there is clearly much truth in the living conditions described by the contemporary critics of back-to-backs, the evidence uncovered by Beresford indicates that the back-to-back was a popular form of housing in Leeds.<sup>29</sup> Their popularity in the early developments can be explained by two factors. Firstly, they provided self-contained accommodation which was preferable to sharing a larger dwelling with a cross-section of the poorest people, and secondly, back-to-backs were affordable. They could be built cheaply because of the high density, small size and economies in the use of building materials, and this translated into properties that were affordable to a large number of people, either as owner-occupiers or tenants.<sup>30</sup> Some tenants did not have a regular income and could therefore not commit to a superior

form of accommodation and Caffyn concluded from contemporary evidence on rental and income levels that, had houses been any larger, many labourers and artisans could not have afforded them. She also noted that running costs would have been cheaper than other housing types because there was only one external wall through which heat would be lost.<sup>31</sup>

## LATER BACK-TO-BACK HOUSES

### REGULATIONS, BY-LAWS AND IMPROVEMENT

Despite the popularity with speculators, building society club members and the working people of Leeds, the back-to-backs remained unpopular with social and sanitary reformers and the authorities. Research by Gaskell and Harper on Victorian building regulations and by-laws shows that there was formal opposition to back-to-back houses on a national scale as early as 1840. For almost 100 years, the back-to-back developments in Leeds were subjected to continuous attempts to control their spread, and to improve the living conditions of residents. According to Gauldie, housing reformers naively believed that providing new houses for the average family allowed the poorer families to inhabit those vacated by the average families, and that, in turn, allowed the slums to be cleared.<sup>32</sup> However, this process takes no account of running costs or other social and cultural factors which may have influenced the choice of residence.

The *Health of Towns* report of 1840 was instigated by the cholera epidemic and, together with three proposed Bills (which were not adopted), has been described as being the most radical proposal for reform. Rubinstein uncovered evidence from the Select Committee on the Health of Towns, in which Dr Duncan reported his findings of courts in Liverpool in 1840; namely, that the houses were not ventilated, communal sanitary provision was minimal and the courts were filthy.<sup>33</sup> In addition, we learn that the provision of water from a communal stand pipe would be stopped if a single landlord was in arrears, and that none of the courts had an underground drain. In Nottingham, the sanitary reports presented claims that the back-to-back houses in narrow, enclosed courts were the worst example of slums and overcrowding among the industrial towns. Tarn reported that at this time James Smith had described the unhealthiest parts of Leeds as being the yards and courts where there were open, filthy, communal privies, with ashes and rubbish thrown from the windows and doors of workers’ houses into the communal space.<sup>34</sup> These comments bear a striking resemblance to those of Dr Duncan.

The 1840 report recommended a Sewerage Act, a general building Act, and that each town should have a Board of Health in order to control lower-class housing. Among the initial proposals were that

habitable cellars should have windows, a fireplace and open area, that houses had to be built on streets at least 30ft wide, that drains were to be provided to all houses (including existing houses) and that back-to-backs should be banned.<sup>35</sup>

The first Bill to be put forward, the *Bill for improving the dwellings of the working classes 1840*, included an explicit clause to ban back-to-backs on the grounds of inadequate ventilation around the building, but it was unsuccessful.<sup>36</sup> Lord Normanby attempted twice to introduce a Bill. Initially, the *Bill for the better drainage and improvement of buildings in large towns and cities 1841* was proposed, and included clauses to allow ventilation around buildings by preventing houses being built back-to-back, through specification of an enclosed back yard, and the minimum distance between the backs of houses. There were also minimum dimensions for houses with only one room per floor, and a minimum window size that those rooms must have. Normanby's second Bill, an *Act for regulating building in large towns 1841* again included a clause that houses should not be built back-to-back in order to allow ventilation.<sup>37</sup> At this time, three-quarters of the houses in Leeds were small, poorly ventilated, and without piped water, gas or appropriate sanitation, yet the town clerk, Edison, opposed the clauses on the grounds that the working classes could not afford the increase in rent that the change would bring. Similar opposition came from Liverpool concerning the cost of house building. The key issue for many of the provincial towns was that, if the working classes could not afford the new, improved accommodation, they would be forced to move into existing accommodation of a lower standard. Edison proposed a compromise that back-to-back building should continue in blocks of eight with privy yards between each block; however, it was not taken up at this point.<sup>38</sup> Muthesius claimed that many of the large towns competed against each other to be at the forefront of health legislation, and so it is interesting to note that, despite opposition to back-to-back housing by the reformers, the clause was excluded because of the objections received from the industrial towns. The whole bill was dropped in 1842.<sup>39</sup>

#### ACTS

Dr Robert Baker was an important contributor to the adoption of the *Leeds Improvement Act of 1842*.<sup>40</sup> His reports of 1833 and 1839 were concerned with drainage, paving, sewerage and water supply, and many of the problem streets he cited contained back-to-backs. Although bedroom size was mentioned, this was in relation to overcrowding rather than the form and size of the houses. By 1840, he had directly criticised the back-to-backs, but again, rather than it being about the housing form, it was about the urban form of courts, and courts within courts, for which the economic and demographic

difficulties had created an increasing demand.<sup>41</sup> Beresford suggested that Baker's identification of back-to-backs as a form requiring regulation had been influenced by the recent bills to ban them.<sup>42</sup>

The Act stipulated that each new house should have a proper privy, that house drainage must run into a public sewer, and that streets and foot-passages should be a minimum width of 30ft (9.45m) and 20ft (6.10m) respectively, partly in response to concerns about fire safety.<sup>43</sup> Muthesius reported that the back-to-backs were not built in enclosed courts from the 1840s, but were laid out on open streets at lower densities than previously found, and while this appears to correspond with the requirements of the Act, it does not reflect what actually happened. Other research showed that the Act did little to improve living conditions, as houses were still being built back-to-back on streets that did not meet these regulations, and the narrow courts between them were not adequately ventilated. Enforcement action was not taken where the sanitary and building regulations were not complied with, and James Hole, an eminent local reformer in Leeds, suggested that this was not possible while the building of back-to-back houses was still permitted.<sup>44</sup>

#### REPORTS AND BILLS

The *Metropolitan Building Act 1844* incorporated parts of Normanby's Bills of 1841. Among the clauses was the stipulation of a minimum size for back yards which effectively banned back-to-back houses in London. However, the Bill was unpopular, in part because of its strict enforcement, and it was 1855 before an improved version was passed.<sup>45</sup> Meanwhile, in Manchester a local Act of 1844 attempted to end the building of back-to-backs there, although a few were erected after this date.<sup>46</sup>

The *Public Health Act of 1848* was a significant piece of legislation, but it did not bring the expected improvements. It attempted mainly to control the quality of water supplies and sewerage as well as the condition of habitable cellars, and was not particularly concerned with building construction or the back-to-back form, as these issues were to be regulated through local improvement acts. However, there were two problems that would limit the impact of the Act — firstly, it was introduced before cholera was known to be waterborne and before the importance of water quality was understood, and secondly, not all towns, notably Leeds, were opposed to back-to-back houses.<sup>47</sup> Liverpool and Bradford had introduced by-laws to improve back-to-backs, but the *Leeds Local Improvement Acts* of 1843, 1848 and even 1856 did not identify back-to-backs as a housing form requiring regulation and control. This is particularly interesting in the context of reports written about Leeds around this time. A council report of 1839 listed seven back-to-back streets among the nine places most known for their

squalor. In 1842, the five worst streets for typhus were all back-to-back streets. Three of the four unhealthiest streets named in an 1844 sewerage report were back-to-backs, and the 1849 cholera deaths and 1854-8 diarrhoeal deaths were also worst in the back-to-back housing. Beresford noted that the reports focused on the condition of the streets rather than the houses, and what is not clear for all the cases cited is whether they were the newer streets laid out in accordance with recent legislation, or the older courts.<sup>48</sup>

Two important pieces of legislation were introduced in 1858. The *Local Government Act 1858* gave towns the freedom to more easily adopt clauses from the *Towns Improvement Clauses Act of 1847*, such as the requirement for all houses to be built with drains, and the *Form of By-laws* fused elements of the *Metropolitan Building Act of 1855* and the *Towns Improvement Clauses Act* in an attempt to provide a single set of regulations that could be used and enforced nationally.<sup>49</sup> Improvements were made to street layouts, structure, construction, sanitary facilities and the ventilation of rooms. The requirement for an exclusive back or side yard at least 150ft square (45.7m) with minimum widths depending on the number of storeys to the house is particularly relevant to the history of back-to-back house building. However, since much of the detail was left to the local authorities to interpret, even this legislation did not bring about their end in Leeds.<sup>50</sup>

#### BY-LAWS

More specific changes were effected under by-laws in the 1860s. Back-to-backs were banned in Liverpool from 1861, while Bradford restricted back-to-back houses to two pairs, so that each house could have open space at the side.<sup>51</sup> In common with many of the provincial towns, this could be considered as a local response to the *Form of By-laws 1858*. However, it was not popular because of the rising population which increased housing demand, and in 1864-5 the restriction was lifted. By way of compromise, a standard type of house developed which met many of the other by-laws and therefore improved conditions, but housing reformers could still not reach consensus on an acceptable back-to-back form.<sup>52</sup> They were particularly concerned with conditions in Leeds during the 1860s, and *The Builder* provided a platform for publishing their criticisms.<sup>53</sup> Hole, for example, had several articles published, and drainage was a common theme. His 1865 prize-winning essay was subsequently published in 1866 as *The Homes of the Working Classes with Suggestions for their Improvement*. It demonstrated his concern that back-to-back houses, and especially the older ones in courts, did not have sufficiently wide streets or open space to allow proper ventilation, that speculative house builders were not adhering to the building regulations, and that, contrary to the actions of other towns that banned

back-to-backs, Leeds did not take an active stance towards their improvement.<sup>54</sup> Hole was considered to be a radical thinker concerning himself not just with healthy living conditions and social problems, but the ways in which improvement could be funded, and he suggested that the philanthropic building societies had put home ownership within the reach of ordinary working-class families. However, according to Tarn, commercial pressures diminished the public's motivation to improve conditions, and support for philanthropic work was also lacking.<sup>55</sup>

Despite the criticism, and perhaps because of it, there were significant improvements in the quality of accommodation in Leeds at this time. Adoption of the *Form of By-laws* enabled the continuation of certain local traditions, and the introduction of by-laws, while still permitting back-to-backs, included clauses to improve their design.<sup>56</sup> For ventilation, air bricks were to be installed, and each habitable room had to have a window 10% the size of the floor area, of which half was openable. Sliding sash windows provided a good architectural solution to this, and, with increased ceiling heights to aid ventilation, the character of the houses took on a more uniform appearance. Baker had considered Leeds' housing to be monotonous in the previous decade, and it is generally considered that by-law housing did little to improve this. Other requirements of the by-laws were that drains were to be impermeable and ventilated, and rainwater goods were required.<sup>57</sup>

In 1866, a by-law was introduced in Leeds which included Baker's recommendation of a maximum of four pairs of back-to-backs in a block, with privy yards between. The style of house also changed and the new basic layout was built until the 20th century (Figures 4 and 5).<sup>58</sup> Instead of a one-up-one-down house with a cellar kitchen, these larger houses had a small scullery placed next to a ground-floor living-kitchen. At first floor there were two bedrooms, and usually a third bedroom in the attic. The cellar was given over to storage. In addition to improvements to the house, the street environment was improved with an increased width of 36ft (10.97m), and the spaces between the blocks allowed greater connectivity. Not all areas of the town were able to enjoy these improvements, however, as Hole found that some of the older, previously acceptable streets, had changed in the course of around 25 years, to become slums.<sup>59</sup> By 1872, legislation was passed that banned court houses from being built in Leeds.<sup>60</sup>

In 1875, the 'by-law' back-to-backs in Bradford had a storage cellar, ground-floor living room and two first-floor bedrooms. There was often a front garden, ash pit and a privy. A superior type was also being built which had a side scullery on the ground floor and a third bedroom in the attic. The last approvals were made in 1875, but construction continued for some time after that.<sup>61</sup> In Birmingham, three of the four types of working-class houses were

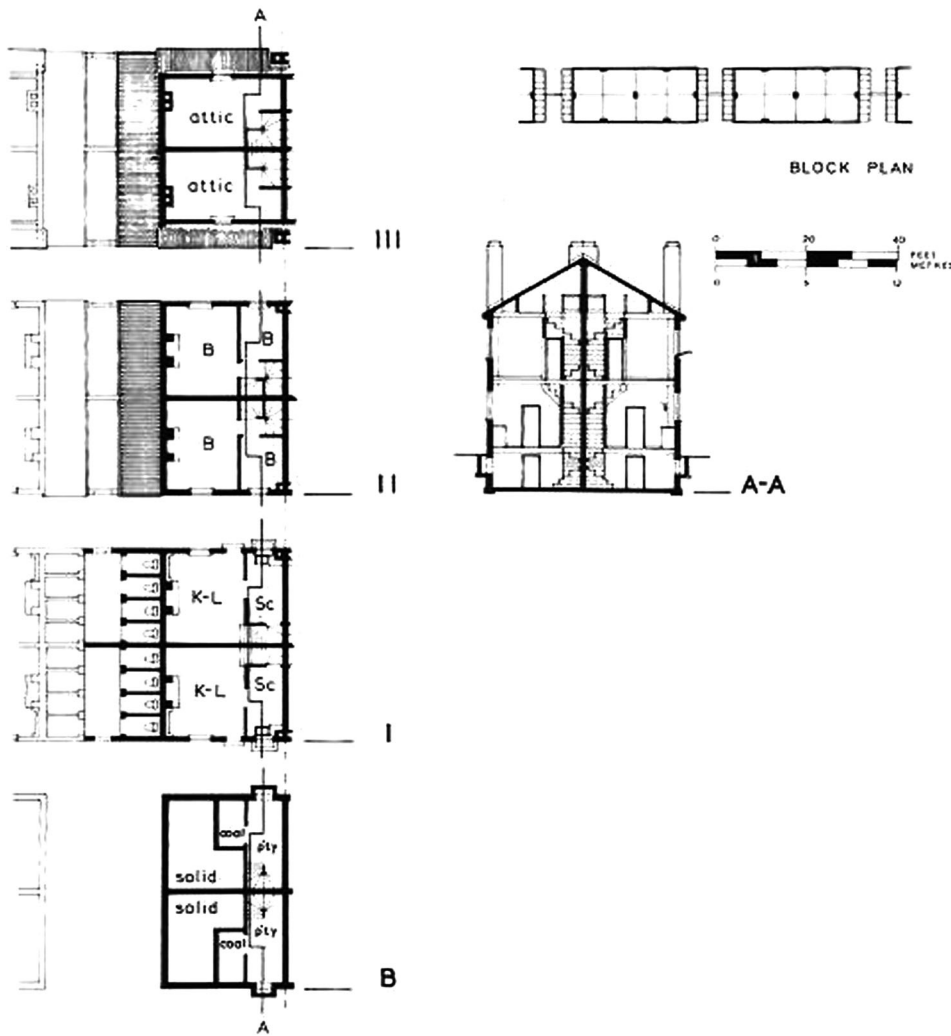


FIG. 4. By-law back-to-backs in Leeds. The block plan shows the basic arrangement in blocks of eight with privy yards between. The plans and section show the room arrangement, and the storage cellar which was almost fully subterranean in order that the ground floor could be accessed directly from the pavement with few or no steps to the entrance door. Image: Muthesius, S., *The English Terraced House* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), 118



FIG. 5. Stanley Terrace was built in 1890. The chimneys positioned to the front of the property indicate that the copper was positioned in the scullery. Image: By kind permission of Leeds Library and Information Services, [www.leodis.net](http://www.leodis.net)

back-to-backs, mostly in courts and without internal water or drainage. They were prohibited in a by-law of 1876, although by 1901 they still housed 30% of the city's people.<sup>62</sup>

In Leeds, the character of back-to-back houses was improving and it was common to find the larger, superior, scullery-style houses with gardens, better sanitary facilities and features such as bay

windows.<sup>63</sup> It is clear from the improvements that legislation brought, that back-to-backs were still a popular and evolving form, and the secretary of the Leeds Permanent Building Society confirmed their popularity when he reported that, of his 9,348 members, one-seventh had built two pairs of back-to-back houses, of which one was their own home, and the other three rental properties.<sup>64</sup>

The *Model By-laws Act* of 1877 was based on earlier regulations, including the *Public Health Act 1875*, which had attempted to consolidate earlier sanitary legislation and provided a method by which the local authority could administer it. Among the clauses was a requirement that the council had responsibility for providing sewers to new house developments. Significantly, however, a clause was included requiring that open space must be at the rear of the house, and this meant that it was no longer possible to build back-to-backs with a yard to the side.<sup>65</sup>

By the 1880s local authorities were able to tailor by-laws to suit their specific problems, although most adjusted their earlier by-laws to reflect the national model, introducing quantitative rather than qualitative regulations.<sup>66</sup> However, there were still difficulties in interpretation, and in West Yorkshire the type continued to be built in accordance with earlier by-laws.<sup>67</sup> The Royal Commission on Housing 1885 found that sanitary provision in working-class houses was inadequate, and Gaudie noted the contradiction that the middle-classes accused the working-classes of not washing, while at the same time complaining about washing on lines strung across the street making it difficult for carriages to pass. The Leeds Medical Officer of Health found that the working classes preferred back-to-backs rather than through terraces with rear yards. It might be supposed that there must be some distinct advantages to living back-to-back, if the inconvenience of restricted access along the street and the public display of laundry did not affect their popularity.<sup>68</sup>

#### FURTHER IMPROVEMENT

In 1888 Dr Barry and Mr Smith submitted a report to an official inquiry on the back-to-back housing of West Yorkshire which was exceptionally critical of the form. They showed that, between 1875 and 1887, around two-thirds of the new houses built were back-to-backs, and that they were the preferred type by both developers and occupants. They reported on the extent of back-to-backs, density and the space around them, structure, ventilation and sanitary arrangements, as well as the economics and social factors.<sup>69</sup> While some construction methods were found to be rather dubious, such as walls just half a brick thick and party walls that terminated at the ceiling so that there was a single roof space to a

terraced block, there were no specific criticisms about the quality of bricks, mortar, timbers or the sanitary system.<sup>70</sup> The standards of legislation and enforcement were found to be particularly low, but Muthesius considers that this was probably rare.<sup>71</sup>

By the 1890s back-to-backs were being built in three urban layouts in Leeds, all with a maximum street length of 120yd (36.58m). The first type was the street-lined house built in blocks of eight, with closet yards between each block and a minimum street width of 42ft. The second type featured houses built in blocks, but with each having its own exclusive outdoor space, and a minimum street width of 36ft. The third, and most common type, was the house built in a continuous row, with an outdoor space of at least 15ft, and a minimum street width of 36ft (Figure 6).<sup>72</sup>

A local act of 1893 in Leeds brought about further improvements to sanitary facilities, so that back-to-back houses were being built in a variety of sizes and designs (Figure 7).<sup>73</sup> The most common type was the four-room house which had a living-kitchen and scullery on the ground floor, two bedrooms on the first floor, and a third bedroom in the attic. The basement contained the coal cellar and wash-kitchen, with the newest and most 'superior' type including an outside toilet, usually shared between two houses (Figures 8 and 9), although sometimes they had one each (Figure 10). In the five-roomed houses, the scullery was located in the basement so that the ground floor had two habitable rooms. It can be considered that the improvements to the urban layout and the plan form and facilities in the houses themselves had combined to provide adequate ventilation and sanitary provision — the back-to-backs had overcome two of the longest-standing criticisms.<sup>74</sup>

Although the by-laws already controlled space, density and materials, the *Housing and Town Planning Act 1909* was to incorporate them, and, significantly, the building of back-to-backs was prohibited.<sup>75</sup> The Corporation of Leeds fought the case to keep them, arguing that back-to-backs had been improved considerably and that the criticisms of the early back-to-backs were not relevant to those now being built.<sup>76</sup> This point is noted by Muthesius as a problem in working-class housing generally.<sup>77</sup> The Leeds Master Builders Association also objected on the grounds that rents would be increased beyond the means of working-class people. The Act, however, came into force, although a loophole meant that building could continue for those developments that had been approved before May 1909. Building in Leeds had traditionally been slow, and with a six-year break in building after the First World War, the last street was not completed until 1937.<sup>78</sup>

These final back-to-backs — Moderns — incorporated further improvements to the design. The streets

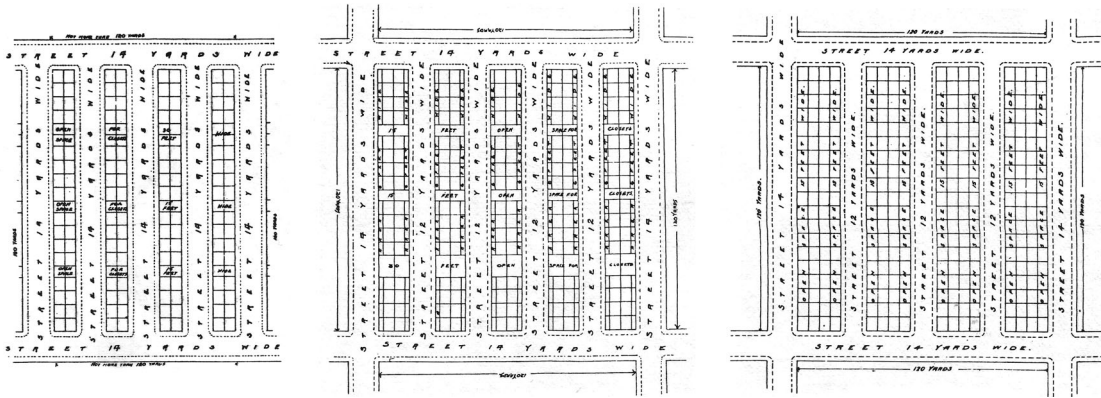


FIG. 6. The three types of urban layout for back-to-back housing. Left — Street-lined houses in blocks of eight; Middle — Garden-fronted houses in blocks of eight; Right — Garden-fronted houses in continuous rows with integral, externally accessed toilets.  
 Image: Daunton, M., *House and Home in the Victorian City: Working Class Housing, 1850-1914* (London; Baltimore, Md., USA: E. Arnold, 1983), between 88 & 89

Type	Plan-form features	Urban arrangement & sanitary provision
Type 1	One room per floor	Maximum of eight in a block with shared closet / WC yards between
Type 2	Two rooms per floor on at least the ground and first floors	
Type 3	One room per floor	Continuous row with a WC integral to the house footprint (at least one WC per two houses)
Pseudo Type 3	One room per floor	

FIG. 7. The back-to-back types being built in Leeds in the late 19th century  
 Source: Dolman, M., *How to Identify Types of Back-to-Back Housing in Leeds* (2007), 2-10



FIG. 8. Superior back-to-backs in Darfield Place, Leeds. The presence of gardens allowed the ground-floor level to be raised and accessed via steps, which had the benefit of positioning the basement at semi-subterranean level.  
 Image: By kind permission of Leeds Library and Information Services, [www.leodis.net](http://www.leodis.net)

had increased to 42ft wide, in addition to the requirement for forecourts, and two notable typologies emerged — the smaller two-storey ‘cottage’-style

back-to-back with a living room and kitchen on the ground floor and one bedroom and bathroom to the first floor (Figure 11); and a cleverly devised split-level

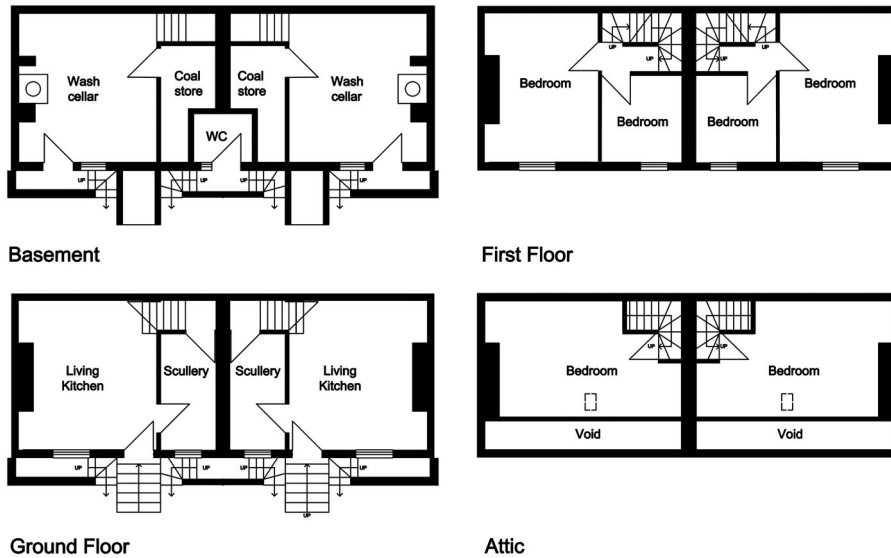


FIG. 9. Plan of typical 'superior' back-to-backs.

house with a basement, living room and kitchen to the ground floor, bedroom and bathroom at first floor and two further bedrooms in the attic (Figure 12).<sup>79</sup> With the inclusion of an indoor toilet, the houses had at last overcome the final criticism, to become self-contained.

### CONCLUSION: CHARACTERISING LEEDS

In tracing the historical development of back-to-back terraced houses in Leeds, it has been shown that the urban layout, construction, household amenities, layout and architectural design were continually improved, and that this happened for a longer



FIG. 10. Luxor Avenue back-to-backs, built around 1907. These were particularly decorative, incorporating dormer and bay windows, the latest style of window design, stone window surrounds and a small entrance hall.



FIG. 11. Small, cottage-style back-to-backs in Arley Street. These did not have attic rooms or basements.

period and to a greater extent in Leeds than elsewhere in Britain.

There has been much debate over why back-to-back houses were such a popular form in Leeds, yet there has been no conclusive judgement. Beresford could not explain the distribution, saying that, although back-to-backs continued to be built for longer in the industrial textile towns, the house form itself had no industrial purpose, and analysis of land values and tenure could also not offer a satisfactory explanation because there was no common pattern between towns.<sup>80</sup> Continuing the economic theme, he also argued that, since some back-to-backs were made of stone, they were not necessarily built to the cheapest standards, and so the only explanation lay in ‘cultural’ factors. Burnett considered that their popularity might be related to the high level of home-ownership among the working classes, although it is still not clear why Leeds should be different to anywhere else in this respect. In 1910, the critical Dr Mair commented that the by-laws for street widening had helped prolong the building of the type, and it could be considered that pressure from the reformers gave the people of Leeds the motivation to legislate in order to find a solution to keeping their vernacular style of housing.<sup>81</sup> It could also be argued that the timing of the national prohibition coincided with the point at which back-to-backs overcame all of the criticisms and when

the quality of accommodation they provided was at least as acceptable as other forms of workers’ housing.

The research presented in this paper forms part of a larger research project, which sought to understand the heritage significance of back-to-back housing in Leeds. It was, even so, purposely limited in scope, and it is recognised that there is much more to discover. The research is now being extended, and the historical aspect of this will trace the development of back-to-backs to include more detailed socio-historic research on the use and meaning of space within and around the houses, and archaeological analysis of the surviving houses. This will likely deepen our understanding of the local influences on plan form, architectural style and construction.

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FIG. 12. Split level back-to-backs in Luxor Avenue. One side of the house has full-height floor levels, while the other side has lower floor to ceiling heights to create extra space in the small attic bedroom.

## NOTES AND REFERENCES

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and health and sanitation issues are among the issues discussed. It has been suggested that this book may not quite exhaust the study of housing in Leeds during the period; however, the areas identified for potential further scrutiny are of a purely historical nature, and do not attempt a venture into the legacy of the back-to-backs in the period beyond which they were built. Burnett, J., *A Social History of Housing, 1815–1985*, (London and New York: Methuen, 1986), 70, 74. There are numerous unpublished PhD theses on the history of housing, and a common theme is the study of people and houses. Although the back-to-backs are absent, the focus and methodologies of these works could be a valuable addition to the study of back-to-back housing. Betts, O., 'Working-Class Homes in Three Urban Communities 1870–1914' (PhD thesis, University of York, 2014); Jenkins, M., 'The View from the Street: Housing and Shopping in York During the Long Eighteenth Century' (PhD thesis, University of York, 2013); Morrell, C., 'Housing and the Women's Movement, 1860–1914' (PhD thesis, Oxford Brookes University, 1999). Reading Gaskell's work on building regulations and by-laws in Victorian England together with Harper's outline of clauses in the Bills and Acts from 1835, it is possible to understand the concerns of the reformers, the complexity of introducing national legislation into regionally distinct cultures, and the ambiguity of clauses which led to regional differences in their interpretation (Gaskell, S., *Building Control. National*

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## NOTES ON CONTRIBUTOR

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