

WINCHESTER: THE COMMUNITY ON THE EVE OF THE GENERAL STRIKE, 1926

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyses the community of the Winchester Municipal Borough in 1926; the General Strike of that year is to be considered in a second paper.

INTRODUCTION

1926 was the year of the General Strike, and the seven months' lock-out of the coal miners. Much has been written about these events, but little, even in the recent spate of regional studies (Skelley 1976; Morris 1976), about the events in the smaller country towns.

This article attempts to delineate the community of Winchester, a small cathedral city in Hampshire, on the eve of the Strike, and in particular to shed light on the condition of the working class. A second article will describe the small Labour movement in the City and the events of the strike itself, the nine days, 4-12 May 1926.

MAIN EVIDENCE

There is a good deal of evidence about Winchester in 1926, to be derived from the local newspapers, the *Hampshire Chronicle* and the *Hampshire Observer*, both of which are solid, accurate and detailed; the directories, Kelly's, and particularly Warren's *Winchester Directory*, and the Census returns, of 1921, which may reasonably be taken as an accurate guide to 1926 since Winchester was not expanding, declining or changing at all rapidly; the recollections of citizens, and the photographs culled from public and private sources in the City Museum and Library collections.

We lack, however, the kind of evidence that is available for some other fortunate communities, that provided by the social survey. As early as the turn of the century two social investigators,

J S Rowntree and C Booth had compiled detailed pictures of two communities, York, and part of London, respectively. They used the street by street and random sample techniques to learn in accurate detail how much money was earned, how it was spent by households; and from the facts had drawn certain conclusions, supported by statistics, about the level of poverty, the division of the population by income, and the adequacy of diet, housing and education. In the twenties and thirties Rowntree again, and many others, carried out such investigations.

Winchester was not one of the chosen towns, and nowhere in the kingdom was a survey carried out in 1926. The lack cannot be made good now. The nearest we can get to this knowledge is by examination of two studies, firstly that of Bowley and Hogg (1925), based on surveys of five towns including Reading, in 1924, and secondly that of Ford (1934) based on an initial survey of Southampton in 1928. Both were essentially concerned, as were nearly all the social surveys, with the working class, which included a wide range of incomes, skills and standards of living. Southampton had the peculiar problems of a port, in particular the casual nature of much of the employment associated with the dock, sea-going and ship-repairing, and those of a town without a strong manufacturing sector; Reading was untypical in at least one respect, a low rate of unemployment. However, the evidence of these two studies is supported by many other studies and may be checked against national statistics from the former Ministry of Labour. Thus, *mutatis mutandis*, these studies, particularly that of Bowley and Hogg, may be used, with care, to throw light on Winchester.

BROAD CHARACTERISATION

It is as well to start with a broad impression of the city's community. In the municipal borough there were 23,791 people, of whom females exceeded males by just over a thousand. Of the total, 19,390 were over twelve years old, an age of significance because then some youngsters might expect to proceed from schooling to employment although the official school leaving age was fourteen. The Rural District contained another 12,000 people, rather more men than women; it included 24 village areas, from Hunton and East Stratton in the north, Spars-holt in the west, Avington and Owlesbury to the east, and in the south as far as Fair Oak (*Census* 1921, Table 3). Geographically, most of the borough population lay still within the ancient walls of the city, though the Stanmore estate had been built just after the war. Weeke Without was a rural, separate, aristocratic and farming area; Winnal had only a small but growing population; Teg Down, Harestock, Chilbolton Avenue and Oliver's Battery were largely un-built upon (Maps, WD, 1926). Some building was in progress, including the large church of St Peter's described as 'the new Roman Catholic Church' in 1926 (Maps, WD, 3). The main differences from the present appearance of the town would be seen particularly in the St George's Street (Fig 2), and Tower Hill areas, and in the mixture of cabs and cars in the High Street (Fig 1). One of the exits from the city was the road under the Westgate.

This smallish compact community included people in a variety of occupations, distinguished by considerable differences of income, education and standards of living. The owners of businesses constituted an important group. There were small manufacturers, as, for instance, of surgical instruments, golf clubs, coach and motor bodies, and the proprietors of family shops, whose names are repeated in the lists of local councillors, the Poor Law Board of Guardians, and local societies. High Street shops included some sixteen nationally recognised stores, including the Go-op, Curry's, Maypole Dairy, Sainsbury's, Boots, Burtons, Lipton's, Empire Meat Co and the Inter-

national Stores, but most of these were small, and run by managers with the status of tradesmen. Five national banks had branches in the High Street. There were numerous small builders. The presence of twenty seven garages acknowledged the new importance of the motor car. Makers of socks, shirts and gloves, four brewers, 'ten dairymen and cowkeepers', blacksmiths and harness makers, hotel keepers, thirteen inns and sixty public and beer houses added the flavour of the small country market town, with some continuity still with its Edwardian and Victorian past (WD, 1926). Most of its activities were connected with agriculture, brewing, laundry, and motor repairs, and with the needs of a residential district for food, clothing and building. Though there were two railway stations, that of the London and South Western Railway, off City Road, and the small Chesil Street Station of the Great Western Railway, and a sizeable gas undertaking in Staple Gardens, there was no large scale industrial activity. The report of the Housing Committee (CCHC 1919) summed it up, if perhaps over stating the case, in declaring Winchester 'almost wholly a residential district'.

Influential was a large public service, educational and ecclesiastical sector: Winchester College, the Cathedral and thirteen other Anglican churches, the army, regular and territorial, the grammar schools, elementary schools, and the Diocesan Training College just below the Royal County Hospital on Westhill; doctors, lawyers, the county and City administrators, and a second hospital, the Victoria Isolation Hospital, outside the City. The census officials commented on the high proportion of professional people.

The census (*Census* 1921, Table 16) provides the raw material for some quantification of these impressions. The total number of employed people in the municipal borough was 10,788, or 45% of the total population. Of these 3,589 were females, or 33% of employed people, and 7,199 men. This is a high figure for female employment compared with neighbouring Southampton, where, of a working population of 68,600, 25% were female; it is higher than for most towns other than those like, say, Blackburn in



Fig. 1. Winchester High Street, 1929. Reproduced by kind permission of the County Record Office.

Lancashire with a high rate of such employment in the textile mills. The main occupations are shown in the following list:

	% of total			
	population	Male	Female	Total
people engaged in personal service (of these, indoor domestics)	10.05 (6.70)	353 90	2,038 1,506	2,391 1,596
people engaged in commerce	5.43	765	428	1,293
transport and communication	4.43	833	23	1,056

The importance of the personal service group is clear.

After these groups, comes a sharp drop to:

	% of total			
	population	Male	Female	Total
Clerks and draughtsmen	2.16	285	229	514
Agricultural employments	2.11	493	11	504
General labourers	1.99	464	11	475

The census takers themselves commented on the high proportion of women in personal service, 68 per 1000, and on the high proportion of defence workers, reflecting the presence of the army in the city.

These may be compared with the numbers



Fig. 2. Winchester — St. George's Street before 1956. Reproduced by kind permission of Hampshire County Library.

engaged in the small scale manufactures of the town – about 1,500, or 6.7% of total population. Other figures which shed light on the occupations of the citizens include:

- 131 nurses, of whom 1 was a man
- 287 teachers of whom 121 were men
- 26 doctors
- 17 solicitors
- 38 Anglican clergy
- 267 women dressmakers and milliners

There were then 29 male barbers against 6 women hairdressers. More in line with expectations, 60 women and 3 men worked as daily 'chars'. Of 300 gardeners, 5 were women.

The thirty or so main occupational groups listed in the census, include the numbers of people who come under the heading of 'owners, employers, managers, managing directors, managers of wholesale and retail businesses'. If to this group are added the professions (excluding civil servants and local authority clerks and officials), and farmers, a rough and ready managerial class is arrived at, totalling nearly 1000 men and 500 women, 14% of the total employed population.

The 'middle class' as a whole would be, of course, much larger than this, but it is not easy to discover how much. Definitions of terms such as 'middle class' are notoriously difficult. The most useful one, though it is not very precise, is based on income: the privilege of paying income tax was a sure sign of middle class status, implying an income of £250 per annum or more. Ford's investigations in Southampton suggested that 20% of the earning population would come into this category, allowing for the inclusion of some people, such as teachers and clerks, who would think of themselves as middle class though paid less than £250 per annum. The national figures established by the census (Branson 1975, 101) show that 22.9% of the employed population were to be described as Employers and Professional, Managerial and Clerical workers. Winchester was not likely to be widely different from the national picture. The Housing Committee (CCHC minutes 1919 CRO) described 76% of the houses in Win-

chester as working class. There does seem to have been a greater number of people in Winchester working in non-manual occupations than was the case nationally, reflecting its lack of large-scale industry, and the strong presence of the County administration, the Church, and Education probably affected the balance. The security of middle class and professional employment gave the city as a whole some immunity against the economic depressions after 1921 which followed the post-war boom. The tax burden was light – a married man with one child aged ten did not pay the standard rate of 20d. in the pound until his earned income reached nearly £600 (Key Statistics, Table H) and retail prices fell after 1920. The effect on the general prosperity of the City may be deduced if not proven or measured.

There is room only to mention salient features of the Rural District. Compared with the city, the area was one of the villages and country houses, still for the most part well-staffed. Of 5,221 men, 1,623 worked in agriculture (*Census* 1921, Table 16) and 830 women had jobs in service. Something of the sharp class division of Victorian/Edwardian society, – landowners, tenants and labourers – had survived the social impact of the Great War.

Winchester enjoyed sound services and amenities (WD, 1926), still largely under the local control of the mayor and corporation and their paid officials. Law and order was in the hands of a head constable, one inspector, four sergeants, one detective, and 27 constables, able to cope with the additional strains of the General Strike without calling on the 'Specials'. There was a Fire Brigade in the Broadway, a cemetery company, two hospitals, the Winchester Provident Dispensary by which citizens could get good medical advice at a low rate, by payment, and by help of charitable subscriptions; the prison enclosed 273 men and women. There were many Benevolent Institutions including Christes Hospital, St Cross Hospital and St John's Hospital, for the aged, and three Temperance Societies, a picture house, 30 acres of recreation ground at North Walls, three golf clubs, a public library and reading room open 9.30 to 9.00, and public baths in Silver Hill,

though these were scarcely recreational. The city included twelve Public Elementary Schools, including one recently opened in Stanmore (1922) for 250 children and two grammar schools, provided by the local authority, but under the control of a Winchester City sub-committee of the Education Committee. There were a number of private schools in addition to the famous boys' public school, Winchester College. The School of Art was then housed in the Guildhall.

WORKING CLASS WINCHESTER: LIVING STANDARDS

It is in establishing realities of the social picture which lie below the bland generalisations of class that the lack of a contemporary social survey is felt most keenly.

In particular, it is difficult to establish how much poverty existed, and what the life of the working class was like. Something may be attempted by using the surveys of Southampton, Reading and the national figures. As a generalisation it may be said that the aim of social investigators was to establish income available to the households investigated, and then to translate this into the appropriate purchasing power in relation to goods. This was then set against some minimum definition of 'human needs', expressed in terms of food and clothing. Standards were low, requiring only that recipients should be able to live at a physically efficient level. If the income failed to meet this level, the household was 'in poverty'.

This apparently simple process was complicated by many variables, but by three in particular: the size of the household dependent on the income, the number of earners in a household and by the regularity of the income, as determined by the rate of unemployment. No family allowances existed, and since the poor did not pay income tax, the scope for income redistribution was small.

In Southampton, in 1928, Ford distinguished eight incomes groups among the population (Ford 1934, 96) which may be usefully reduced to four:

% of population	Class	Weekly income	Description
13.8	1	under 42s.	casual and unskilled
24.9	2	42s.-50s.	semi-skilled
42.6	3	50s.-80s.	skilled
18.7	4	80s. and over	supervisory and middle class

The *average* national earnings of adult males in manufacturing industry was £3.00 per week (Key Statistics, Table E).

Bowley, in Reading, defined his own standard of human needs; (Bowley and Hogg 1925, 35-37) the income needed to meet these, including fuel, clothing and cleaning, food and a typical rent (with rates) of 8s. per week for a three-bedroomed terrace house was as follows:

- 1) Man, wife and two children 37s. 6d.
- 2) Man, wife and three children 42s. 6d.
- 3) Man, wife and four children 46s. 2d.

Compulsory insurance payments were also included. He set this against the income received by his sample working class families in a particular week in July 1924, yielding the following results (Bowley and Hogg 1925, 17, D):

	%
Certainly above standard	82.5
Probably	2.3
Marginal	3.9
Probably below	1.7
Certainly below	9.6

Bowley was investigating actual households, and therefore took account of the number of dependants, the number of people bringing money into the household, the effect of unemployment and any social wage, other than Poor Relief. He found that 15.2% of the families were perhaps below the income level which would ensure that they were above the minimum standard of human needs. In Southampton, using Bowley's definitions, Ford's figures indicated a similar picture.

It was made clear from both investigations that wages had risen compared with those before the First World War, and that fewer

households had to support three or more dependent children. The chief reason for below the minimum households lay in unemployment, or unemployability due to sickness and old age of the head of the family. The national evidence bears out the picture (Aldcroft 1970, 364).

The working class population of Winchester was probably rather worse off than even Southampton's, in terms of earnings, and certainly than that of Reading. The lack of major industrial concerns, and an environment which was still very rural, probably depressed Winchester's standards. Adult female farm workers earned 30s. per week for a 51 hours week (48 hours in winter) and 8d. per hour overtime. Earnings in a one earner household were unlikely to exceed 40s. per week, though rents of houses might be lower and some perks available. The local newspapers indicated that there were few available jobs, reflecting the deflated and depressed state of the economy: an occasional vacancy for a tractor driver, chauffeur, or electrician/mechanic. Tempting offers to farm workers appear frequently, involving training and work in California or Canada at £4 10s. per week. The large number of women in employment would depress average earnings, but might improve household earnings.

For women, there were long lists of domestic jobs, for which there was a City Registry, and one at Alresford: good plain cooks were offered £36 8s. per annum; 'cook/generals' about £50 per annum; 'good cooks' (usually where other servants were kept) £50-£80 per annum, and lower wages for the rest of the domestic hierarchy. Various dressmaking jobs - again the low wages were not stated, were available and very occasional typists' jobs. A senior nurse in the workhouse was wanted, in March 1926, for £40-£50, with board and lodgings and a uniform allowance of £5.

Unemployment in Winchester was recorded as 320, including 254 men, on the live Register of the Labour Exchanges in February 1926. This probably represented about 10% of the insured unemployed males, the category on which all contemporary unemployment figures were based. The national figures for unemployment in the U.K. in 1926 was 12.5% (Key Statistics

1970, Table E).

It has been long established that poverty is a relative term. Undoubtedly, compared with pre-war Winchester, real wages were higher, working hours fewer, social service payments more generous and comprehensive. Bowley concluded that the proportion of people in poverty had been halved compared with the position in 1913 (Bowley and Hogg 1925, 16). Compared with the present day, many Wintonians were poor, and lived always near the edge of poverty, to be tipped over it by misfortune, bad management, idleness, or bad habits. Bowley's human needs standards of 37s. 6d. for a household of four made no allowance for amusement, newspapers, tram fares, beer, tobacco or betting (Bowley and Hogg 1925, 16); and even his assumptions about the foods needed to maintain health were to be considered inadequate by later investigators (Townsend 1979, 34-36).

Eye witness evidence supports the view that poverty in the broader sense was the lot of many families. Ernest Woolford attests the difficulty experienced by his mother in making ends meet out of the wages even of a particularly skilled bricklayer (WM 1974, tape), and the many photographs show the hand-me-down, unsuitable clothes, the drab caps and clumsy footwear.

Sufficient of the apparatus of the welfare state had been erected, in 1926, to reduce the numbers of people compelled to seek the aid of the Poor Law, the last resort of the destitute: war pensions; insurance against sickness and unemployment; non-contributory and insurance old age pensions. Nevertheless, in Winchester in the week ending 1 May, on the eve of the General Strike, the Board of Guardians, under P E Wells the Chairman, received its fortnightly report (HO 8 May 1926): 228 people were receiving institutional relief in the workhouse, 238 casual relief, 25 in the Children's Home, and outdoor relief was given to 278 people at a cost of £64; additionally, 37 people were boarded out - it is a surprisingly large total, and rather larger than the figure of 1921 (Census 1921, Table 12), although the area includes the Rural District, as well as Winchester (Census 1921, Table 4). The Board of Guardians was made up of 20 representatives from the various

wards in Winchester, and representatives from 25 neighbouring villages, its work covering an area with a total population of 38,281 people.

WORKING CLASS WINCHESTER: HOUSING

In one important matter, the working class people of Winchester did well, in 1926, by the standards of the day – housing. An impression of the spaciousness of the town's layout can be gained by considering the large scale maps available in the County Record Office. The inner, ancient city area within its walls had quite dense housing; although even in the areas of the Brooks Streets, most houses had some kind of gardens, and there was space between the lines of houses which followed the North-South line of the streets. There were no 'tenement blocks'. Beyond the line of the city walls, houses had quite large gardens. This was true of a working class area like Fulflood, for instance, as well as a wealthier street such as Christchurch Road. Persons per acre at 12.3 compared well with Southampton's 17.5, and Portsmouth 31 (*Census* 1921, Table IX).

Factual evidence is not lacking in this matter. The Great War had turned housing into a major political issue because returning warriors sought 'a land fit for heroes to live in' and because the slowing down of housebuilding during the hostilities had increased the need. The Lloyd-George Coalition government's Housing Act of 1919, the Addison Act, required local authorities, for the first time, formally to consider the housing needs of their area, to report, and then to act, with the help of a government subsidy. The result, in Winchester, was a splendid housing estate, at Stanmore; the plans were subsequently displayed by invitation as a model at the Wembley Exhibition of 1922.

The general situation was clearly set out in the Report, made to the Minister of Health in response to the 1919 Act (CCHC 1919). Of 4,744 existing houses, 3,633, or 76½% were 'working class'; in five years preceding the war, an average of 33 houses had been built, and none during the war.

Typically, working class houses had a living

room in which the meals were cooked on a large stove, a scullery with a copper boiler, for preparation of food, washing up, washing and bathing in a moveable tin bath, and two or three bedrooms. Winchester rents varied between 5s. and 6s. per week, exclusive of rates, and water rates. The fall in the size of families had greatly eased problems of overcrowding, and the difficulties arising in families with two or more children of different sexes in two-bedroom houses, but they must have been still acute. There were only four 'tenements' with people living at the rate of more than two adults per room, which conventionally and nationally denoted overcrowding. The total number of overcrowded people was 556 or 2.7% of the total.

There were some 'unhealthy areas' as defined in an Act of 1890: they included houses in Colebrook Street, Lower Wolvesey Terrace and North Walls. The remedy proposed was demolition and removal to Stanmore, the Airlie Road site. Seventy three houses were seriously insanitary and were listed as fit to be demolished, while another 374 could be brought up to standard. The Report concluded that 560 new or renovated houses were desirable, sub-divided as follows:

to meet unsatisfied demands	262 houses
to replace below standard	208
to rehouse unhealthy areas	44

The Council hired two Lincoln Inn's Field's architects, Dunn Watson and Curtis Green, bought a 50-acre site from the Ecclesiastical Commissioners for £10,774 11s 6d including costs, and borrowed the money from the Public Loan Commissioners at 6% repayable over 80 years, a rather high rate of interest.

In 1924 the Housing Committee reported the completion of the whole Stanmore scheme, including eight shops, and most of it had been achieved by June 1922, by which time 298 'cottages' had been let, the earliest by March 1921. Some shortages of cement, and of roofing tiles, occurred in 1920, but the main work was done swiftly and well; with the co-operation of the Trades Unions, and in particular of Ernest Woolford (WM 1974, tape), card steward of the

site. Density was ten per acre, and the estate was imaginatively laid out in the tradition of Garden cities, with a large recreation ground, spacious gardens, and many trees, supplied by Hilliers Nursery. The majority of houses were spacious by pre-war standards: a parlour, living room, scullery and three bedrooms. There was a national argument, whether working class houses needed a parlour, or more than two bedrooms – some were built without a parlour, some had only two bedrooms, some four. All had bathrooms, with a fixed bath, a remarkable improvement. Rents, originally fixed as exclusive of rates, taxes and water rates, ranged from 8s. to 15s. (four bedroom houses). After 1922 inclusive rents were fixed ranging from 12s. 3d. to 16s. 5d. and these came down, for instance in 1924, as the rates and prices generally fell.

The whole enterprise was a model of swift effective municipal action, undertaken in a period of marked social change, locally, deriving its impetus from national changes in attitude, and the initiative and financial assistance of the state. Thirty nine acres remained available for development, and in 1926 plans were being prepared for the erection of private houses between Stanmore Lane and Battery Hill. In fact, the thirties were to see an even greater building enterprise in this part of Winchester. The demand was not entirely satisfied by 1926, and in 1924 the Housing Committee had reported 300 applications for houses of which 80 were local people. There appears to be a shortfall of perhaps 150 houses on the original estimates of needs, but some of this was doubtless met by renovation of older houses, and by the 300 houses added to Highcliffe, 1926–1927 (Carpenter Turner 1980, 204).

Even before the major improvements at Stanmore and elsewhere, Winchester was rather better off than the county at large (the figures in brackets) in all the major tests (*Census* 1921, Table IX):

rooms per dwelling	5.82	(5.69)
families per dwelling	1.09	(1.13)
persons per family	3.96	(3.99)
rooms per person	1.35	(1.25)
overcrowding	2.7%	(5.5)%

The Winchester RDC showed a similar picture, though the average family size there was 4.06, and rooms per person 1.33.

The austerity of these standards has to be stressed to modern readers, as is the case with the other social definitions in this paper, such as the 'poverty line', while recognising the enormous improvement which had occurred since the mid-nineteenth century.

WINCHESTER APPROACHES THE GENERAL STRIKE

Winchester was a cathedral city as well as a county town. Such places typically enjoyed great stability, a strong community sense, considerable intellectual resources and leadership within some narrow limits and close relationships with the surrounding districts. The classes were often well mixed geographically, but differences in income and status were substantial and sharply defined. In the nineteen twenties, the social fabric of Edwardian society had largely survived the impact of the World War, although there had been over 400 dead from the city and its surrounding villages. The military, the church, Winchester College, and the county bureaucracy formed overlapping but distinct social circles. London was too far away, before the diesel train, to attract the large commuter population who now dominate the social life of the city.

The small, historic town formed part of a very conservative county: six county MPs and the five members of the two County Boroughs, Southampton and Portsmouth, were, after the 1924 election, all Conservatives. The County Council was dominated by the aristocracy and the squirearchy, and the power of state was sharply present in the military establishments. The nearest industrial town, and that small, was Eastleigh, where 1,700 hands, a characteristic word, worked at the South Western carriage works of the Southern Railway, and another 1,900 at the locomotive factory.

Nevertheless, this picture of solid contentment in Winchester was not quite the whole truth. Below the surface of the lovely city, ran some unrest about the social and economic

order. A small Labour movement sought to change it, though it did not seek a revolution, and was uncertain of what was meant by change and how it might be achieved. The General Strike, in Winchester, is interesting because during it some of the tensions came to the surface, in a national context, and the two sides took up positions for a set-piece contest which, was, in the event, broken off after nine days.

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Note on currencies

Sums of money are expressed in pounds, shillings and pence. Translation into the present decimal coinage is unlikely to be helpful, but the older currency was as follows: £1 = 20 shillings (s)

12 pence (d) = 1 shilling

Abbreviations and Original Sources (see also p4)

CCHC 1919 City Council Housing minutes, 1919, HRO.

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HC *Hampshire Chronicle*, Winchester Public Library.

HO *Hampshire Observer*, Winchester Public Library.

WD *Warren's Winchester Directory*, Winchester Public Library.

WM tape Winchester City Museum: taped conversation between Ernest Woolford and Austin Whitaker, 1974.

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