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Features: NEWS REVIEW ON SATURDAY:

SAVE OUR SUBURBS More than 80 per cent of us live in the suburbs, but for centuries they have been sneered at. Now, a report warns they are being abandoned by government in favour of inner-city regeneration. Here, Michael Leapman, a proud suburbanite, makes a plea for their preservation

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Gaily into Ruislip Gardens

Runs the red electric train,

With a thousand Ta's and Pardon's

Daintily alights Elaine;

Hurries down the concrete station

With a frown of concentration,

Out into the outskirt's edges

Where a few surviving hedges

Keep alive our lost Elysium - rural Middlesex again.

That is the first verse of Middlesex, written in 1954 by John Betjeman, the undisputed laureate of the suburbs. No doubt the concrete station is still there, and latter-day Elaines continue to display the studied courtesy to strangers that is one of the many comforting features of suburban life. Yet the only hedges she would see now would be the neat privets dividing the gardens of the red-brick or mock Tudor houses; the last traces of rural Middlesex having been subsumed in the intervening 50 years by the relentless spread of Ruislip towards Pinner to the east and Uxbridge to the west.

The same has happened around London and our other cities. What were once distinct communities, have sprawled into the single physical and cultural entity we dismissively term suburbia. The unremitting demand for houses, shops and other amenities, and for the broad arterial roads to cope with the traffic they generate, means that the only remaining open spaces are municipal parks and functional playing fields. Around London, the Green Belt interrupts the spread but its survival is under continuing threat.

So extensive are the suburbs that, according to a report this week, 84 per cent of British people now live in them. The thrust of the report, *State of the Suburbs*, is that, despite this astonishing statistic, the interests of the suburbs are systematically neglected by Whitehall, as money is diverted towards fashionable inner-city regeneration and the well-articulated special interests of the countryside.

One of the report's principal sponsors is the London borough of Barnet, which, as well as feeling starved of government cash, has an extra reason for being sensitive about its suburban status. The most recent edition of the north London volume of *The Buildings of England*, the authoritative series inaugurated by the redoubtable Nikolaus Pevsner, is dismissive in its references to the borough, as to suburbia in general: "Barnet has little immediate appeal for the architectural traveller. Modern routes pass through seemingly interminable middle-class suburbs, which mushroomed between the wars, transforming a landscape of scattered settlements among undulating farmland and woodland."

Paradoxically, although the suburbs are where most Britons choose to live, they have invariably had a bad press. The word "suburban" is more often than not a term of scorn or abuse, as confirmed by its definition in the *Oxford English Dictionary*: "Having the inferior manners, the narrowness of view, etc, attributed to residents in the suburbs."

One of the earliest references to them is in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, written in the 14th century, and even then the word had negative connotations. In the prologue to the Canon Yeoman's tale, in Nevill

Coghill's modern translation, the host asks the storyteller where he lives:

"In slums," he answered, "suburbs are our dwelling;

We lurk in holes and corners and blind alleys,

Places where every thief and robber rallies

By nature, fear-stricken and secret places,

Where those reside who dare not show their faces."

That sinister view of suburbia has to some extent endured. The concept of something unspeakable going on behind apparently respectable façades is one of its perennial fascinations. The Wimbledon Poisoner might have been a figment of Nigel Williams's imagination but consider how often you have read in the newspapers of a gruesome murder or other atrocity committed in leafy streets (every journalist knows that suburban streets are by definition leafy) or, best of all, tales of bored housewives who take up the world's oldest profession, plying their wicked trade behind closely drawn chintz curtains.

But the most common myth about the suburbs, promulgated by those who do not live there, is that they are culturally and socially sterile, to be avoided - along with their inhabitants - if at all possible. The Victorian novelist and historian Sir Walter Besant spoke for many when he characterised suburban existence thus "as dull a life as mankind ever tolerated" - a view that persists among superior townies and country folk. Shakespeare was more tolerant than Chaucer of London's abused outer fringes. In *Twelfth Night*, Antonio advises Sebastian that "in the south suburbs, at the Elephant, is best to lodge". Today, though, the Elephant (i.e. Elephant and Castle) is no longer a welcoming suburb but an archetypal inner city hell-hole, where traffic swirls constantly around some of London's most notorious housing estates, with not a respectable façade in sight. Lodge there at your peril.

The State of the Suburbs report is the latest symptom of a growing concern about the future development of this fundamental element of the British landscape. English Heritage has published a document, *Suburbs and the Historic Environment*, whose cover illustrates a street of Tudor-bethan houses, one almost obliterated by a tall stand of pampas grass in the front garden - the very features that provoke the sneers of sophisticates. It begins usefully by trying to arrive at a definition of suburbs: "outgrowths or dependencies of larger settlements - somewhere with a clear relationship with a city or town, but with its own distinct character". It goes on to argue that the Government's policy of encouraging house-building on brownfield sites - a category that includes domestic gardens - has left suburbs vulnerable to infill development, with the danger that "local distinctiveness and historically significant features" could be lost.

The suburbs that we recognise as such today began to be constructed in the middle of the nineteenth century. In her book *Victorian London*, Liza Picard pinpoints the time with precision, noting that in a map published in 1843 the built-up area is still quite small - ending, for instance, at Regent's Park to the north. Yet, just 19 years later, Stanford's map of the metropolis embraced such former self-contained villages as Clapton, Sydenham, Wandsworth, Tooting, Hammersmith and Crouch End. An author of the period wrote of "suburb clinging to suburb, like onions fifty on a rope". Stephen Inwood, in his *History of London*, makes the point that, by 1900, starting from any edge of the metropolis, walking through the centre and carrying straight on, you would have had to cover at least 14 miles before you reached the countryside again.

George and Weedon Grossmith captured the essence of late Victorian suburbia in *The Diary of a Nobody*, published in 1894. Their anti-hero, Charles Pooter, begins his diary thus: "My dear wife Carrie and I have just been a week in our new house, The Laurels, Brickfield Terrace, Holloway - a nice six-roomed residence, not counting basement, with a front breakfast-parlour. We have a little front garden; and there is a flight of ten steps up to the front door, which, by-the-by, we keep locked with the chain up... We have a nice little back garden which runs down to the railway."

The railway is a key detail here. It was what opened up the suburbs to 19th-century commuters, allowing them to escape the increasingly congested and polluted city centres and enjoy some of the fabled delights of rural living. As the author Henry James saw it, they sought "the mingling of density and rurality... where the charm of rural seclusion seems to merge itself in that of proximity to the city market".

Railway companies and property developers encouraged people with idealised posters promoting the bosky virtues of the countryside that could now be on their doorstep. Yet critics of the new suburbanites argued - and still do - that, in seeking to combine the best parts of the urban and rural lifestyles, they risked ending up with neither one thing nor the other.

For present-day passengers, the train still offers a revealing back-door view of how the dream plays out in real life. Some gardens have patios with timber decking and elaborate barbecues, others are chiefly given over to children's play equipment. Nearly all make some attempt at horticulture, typically with a small area of lawn where you might spot the family's black Labrador sniffing around borders planted with geraniums, hydrangeas, petunias, busy lizzies and, of course, roses. At weekends look out for the suburbanites themselves, walking behind the lawnmower or chatting over the fence to a neighbour.

As we learned from *The Good Life*, television's homage to suburbia, gardening has always been among its guiding passions. From the train window you see not only the gardens behind the houses but also occasional expanses of allotments, with their ramshackle sheds and idiosyncratic plant support systems, now comparatively rare in inner cities, but still thriving on their fringes. Local horticultural societies still organise annual shows where growers confirm their prowess in - usually - friendly competition.

No doubt because of the word's negative associations, very few of the newly constructed communities chose to have "suburb" in their name. One that did is Hampstead Garden Suburb in north London; although this is not really a suburb as most of us understand it, since it has few cafés, pubs or cinemas and not many shops. Conceived in the first decade of the 20th century as a utopian social housing scheme for the needy, it was quickly colonised by the middle class. Pevsner wrote in 1951 that "the population is on the whole comfortably off and ranges from true sensibility to amateur arty-craftiness". One of its most famous residents was Harold Wilson, the former prime minister.

After the railway, the next big extension of suburbia came with the development of the London Underground in the early 20th century. In the mid-1920s the Northern Line was extended north from Golders Green - at ground level rather than in a tunnel - allowing the development of villages such as Hendon and Edgware. Whatever you thought of their architecture, the new houses were eminently practical, equipped with electricity, bathrooms and inside toilets, unlike the inner-city Victorian terraces from which many of the new homesteaders came: the good life indeed.

My parents, soon after they married, bought one of the new houses in Hendon. We moved away a year after I was born so I have no real memory of living there, but I have been to see it, and it is a typical modest red-brick semi with a front and back garden. They clearly liked suburban life because when we moved to Horsham in Sussex - albeit a commuter town rather than a suburb - it was to an almost identical house.

That is why I regard myself essentially as a child of the suburbs and have retained a particular affection for Hendon: now, as it happens, part of the cash-strapped borough of Barnet. When I drive along Hendon Way, from Golders Green to the North Circular, I admire the procession of uniform red-brick houses on both sides of the wide road and try to remember what they must have been like when we lived there, before the front gardens were converted into parking spaces. Taken together with the neo-Georgian Hendon Central Tube station, it has always struck me as the essence of the suburban hub. However, a suburb is surely not worthy of the name without its gigantic Odeon, Essoldo, Granada or Astoria, most of them now multiplexes or bingo halls, but some retaining their original fantastic interiors in Moorish or medieval styles. Hendon's Art Deco ABC cinema is now a gym. A few of them, despite the pervasive attraction of television and DVDs, still provide the Saturday morning shows for children that people of my age remember with nostalgia.

Nor is a proper suburban townscape complete without its row of low-rise shops, often set back from the street with a driveway in front of them. Built for white-coated grocers and provision merchants, for haberdashers, drapers and refined tea shops, they are today mostly occupied by charity shops, betting parlours, coffee shops and burger bars. A few original pubs survive, but they are seldom picturesque or enticing.

After we moved to Horsham my grandparents continued to live in Hendon, or more specifically near Brent, the next stop on the line. I remember walking from the station to their house down a street (leafy, without a doubt) that must have been razed in the Seventies to make way for London's first large, out-of-town shopping centre at Brent Cross - a development that accelerated the long-term decline of the suburban high street and the closure of the department stores that were features of some older districts such as Brixton, Holloway, Peckham and Streatham.

In recent years, several suburbs have been settled by groups of immigrants from Asia, Africa and Europe. While this has inevitably compromised their original character, it has at least invested them with a new sense of purpose and community, spawning bustling ethnic markets and shops in West Ham, Southall, Tooting and elsewhere.

Different cities generate different kinds of suburbs, partly because of their contrasting transport patterns. Manchester supports a ring of well-heeled districts such as Didsbury, while Birmingham has Victorian Edgbaston. They have no real equivalent in the London area today except possibly Dulwich which, out of range of the Tube, carefully cultivates its village atmosphere with wooden finger-posts to direct motorists and pedestrians.

In agonising over the future of the suburbs, we risk regarding them as a peculiarly British phenomenon. Other countries have variations on the theme. Because the Paris Métro is less extensive than the London Underground, Parisian suburbs tend to be closer to the centre and thus more urban, little influenced by the surrounding countryside. In New York, the middle classes have largely given up on the outer boroughs of Brooklyn, the Bronx, Queens and Staten Island. If they cannot afford to live in Manhattan itself they flee to the lush commuter territory of New Jersey and Westchester County.

When we lived in New York in the 1970s, though, we did discover a little bit of suburbia in an unlikely place: a new development of apartment buildings on Roosevelt Island, a narrow sliver in the East River

between Manhattan and Queens, from where I commuted to work by cable car. Because it was planned with more open space than on the mainland, the residents could organise children's activities such as Scouting and Little League baseball, and I was even able to acquire a small allotment: suburban still, and proud of it.

In the verse from Betjeman's *Middlesex* quoted at the beginning of this article, we left Elaine hurrying from the Tube to her Ruislip home. What happened next?

Well cut Windsmoor flapping lightly,

Jacqmar scarf of mauve and green

Hiding hair which, Friday nightly,

Delicately drowns in Drene;

Fair Elaine the bobby-soxer,

Fresh-complexioned with Innoxia,

Gains the garden - father's hobby -

Hangs her Windsmoor in the lobby,

Settles down to sandwich supper and the television screen.

Change some of the dated brand names, substitute a takeaway pizza for the sandwich and a YouTube session for the television, and it is apparent that not much in suburbia has changed in half a century. It is still a place where people enjoy the innocent pleasures of life in an environment designed specifically to allow them to do so. It neither deserves to be dumped on, nor to be deprived of the funding and sensitive protection it needs.

So let's stop being shamefaced suburbanites. Let's sing the praises of our Acacia Avenues and Hollybush Drives. And above all let's try to persuade the editors of the OED to consign that tendentious definition to the dustbin

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