

1 Charity Never Faileth: Defining Neighbourhood

The Crisis of Neighbourhood?

Sometimes, social values are only fully transparent when they seem most under threat. For all the significance that the people of Tudor and early Stuart England invested in neighbourhood, throughout the period with which we are dealing, many believed it to be a social virtue that was vanishing from the world. As one ballad of 1571 lamented:

Wee know wee should forgeve, as wee would be forgeven,
 Yet styll in yre wee live, as though our hartes were reeven,
 Revengements we do keepe, for light occasions geven,
 Our Neighboures greefe we seeke, both every Morne and Even,
 The more wee spie in space, the lesse yet our entraunce,
 Our knowledge without grace, is worse than ignoraunce,
 All falshood and deceite, wee should also abhorre,
 Yet use wee more that sleight, than ever wee did before
 Lingryng still to view, to hurte our Neighbour sore,
 So wee may them pursue, wee care not for no more
 Repression beares the Mace, and Lucre leads the Daunce.¹

Underlying contemporary discussions of social relations lay a profound melancholy, a yearning for a lost time informed by good neighbourhood and warm communal relations. In 1581, the godly Essex preacher George Gifford reported the opinion amongst his parishioners that whereas their forefathers and mothers had ‘lived in friendshippe, and made merrie together, nowe there is no good neighbourhoode: nowe every man for himself, and are readie to pull one another by the throate’. As Gifford glumly concluded, there was ‘nowe . . . no love’.² Nine years later, Thomas Nashe wailed: ‘Ah, neighbourhood, neighbourhood, dead and buried art thou with Robin Hood.’³ Similarly, the Essex minister John Gore wrote, in 1636, that ‘the world have changed from good

¹ Anon., *A New Yeres Gyft* (London, 1571).

² G. Gifford, *A Briefe Discourse of Certaine Points* (London, 1582), fol. 5r.

³ R. B. McKerrow (ed.), *The Works of Thomas Nashe* (Oxford, 1966), I, 293–4.

2 1 Charity Never Faileth: Defining Neighbourhood

neighbourhood and good hospitalitie to all manner of basenesse and miserie'.⁴ For Robert Greene, writing in 1592, the decline of hospitality was related to the aggressive demands made by landlords upon their tenants. He lamented how 'Hospitality was left off, Neighbourhood was exciled, Conscience was skoft at, and charitie lay frozen in the streets: how upstart Gentlemen for the maintainance of that their fathers never lookt after, raised rents, rackte their tenants, and imposed greate fines'.⁵ Phillip Stubbes felt that the emotional economy of social relations had undergone a profound alteration, writing: 'Loove is exiled amongst us, neighbourhood nothing regarded, pittie utterly subverted, and remorse of conscience nothing esteemed, what shall become of us?'⁶ In particular, it was felt that hospitality had died. As George Gascoigne put it in 1573:

The scriptures say the Lord hath need, & therefore blame the[m] not.
 Then come a litle lower, unto the countrey knight,
 The squier and the gentleman, they leave the countrey quite,
 Their halles were all to[o] large, their tables were to[o] long,
 The clouted shoes came in so fast, they kepte to[o] great a throng,
 And at the porters lodge, where lubbers wont to feede
 The porter learnes to answere now, hence the Lorde hath the neede.⁷

Past times, many believed, were warmer and simpler. Walter Carey observed: 'Our Fathers in apparel were very plaine . . . but living quietly and neighbourly with that they had, they were ever rich, able to give and lend freely.' He noted the widespread conviction that long-gone 'fore-fathers . . . [had] lived bountifully, quietly, pleasantly and (as I may say) like Kings in their little kingdoms: They seldome or never went to London, they did not strive for greatnesse, they did not long for their neighbor[']s land, neither sold of their owne, but (keeping good hospitalitie, and plainely ever attained), were very rich.'⁸

The gentry's commitment to the provision of hospitality was seen as one of their great contributions to the values of neighbourhood. Even at the start of our period, this was seen as in decline, if not actually dead. A poem written around 1500 complained:

Somtyme nobyll men levyd in [the]er Contre
 And kepte grete howsoldis, pore men to socowur
 But now in the Cowrte they desire to be;
 With ladys to daly, thy sys [th]er pleasure

⁴ J. Gore, *Certaine Sermons Preached upon Severall Occasions* (London, 1636), 46.

⁵ R. Greene, *A Quip for an Upstart Courtier* (London, 1592), preface.

⁶ P. Stubbes, *Two Wunderfull and Rare Examples, of the Undeferred and Present Approaching Judgement of the Lord Our God* (London, 1581), introduction.

⁷ G. Gascoigne, *A Hundredth Sundrie Flowres* (London, 1573), 367.

⁸ W. Carey, *The Present State of England* (London, 1626), sigs. A3r, B3r.

The Crisis of Neighbourhood?

3

So pore men dayly may famyshe for hunger
 Or they com home . . . on monyth to remain
 Thy sys the trowth, as I here Certeyne.⁹

A ballad of 1528 expanded on this theme:

I have hearde saye of myne elders
 That in Englonde many fermers
 Kept gaye housholdes in tymes passed
 Ye, that they did with liberalitie
 Shewayng to poure people charit[i]e
 But nowe all together is dashed.¹⁰
 Of ryche farme places and halles
 Thoue seist nothyng but bare walles[.]

These anxieties generated a pervasive sense that society had become cold and conflictual. Throughout the period from 1500 to 1640, people worried over that observation from Proverbs 19:4: ‘Wealth maketh many friends; but the poor is separated from his neighbor.’ One anonymous tract from c.1548 asked of its reader: ‘How do we love our neyghbour as our selves when we put them out of their houses and lay our goods in the stretes?’¹¹ A ballad of 1561 declared:

What is the cause, neighbourhed is gone,
 Which here hath reigned many a daye,
 I heare the poore men make great mo[a]ne,
 And say[e]th his is falne in decaye[.]

The ballad concluded:

Graunt[,] oh God, for thy mercyes sake
 That neighbourhed, and dealing trewe
 May once agayne, our spirites awake,
 That we our lyves may change a new.¹²

We are dealing, of course, with social stereotypes; but stereotypes matter – they tell us something powerful about the societies that sustain them. The ballad of *The Old and New Courtier* told of an ‘old worshipful gentleman’ who maintained an ‘old house at a bountiful rate’, sustained the poor who gathered at his gate, who at Christmas time would feast his poorer neighbours, who hunted regularly ‘but in his grand-father’s old grounds’. He instructed his son ‘to be good to his old Tenants, and to hold old neighbours kinde’, but when his son inherited the estate, driven by the

⁹ F. J. Furnivall (ed.), *Ballads from Manuscripts* (London, 1868–72), 159. ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 17.

¹¹ Anon., *The Prayse and Commendacion of Suche as Sought Comenwelthes* (London, 1548?).

¹² Anon., *A Balade Declaring How Neybourhed, Love and Trew Dealing Is Gone* (London, 1561).

4 1 Charity Never Faileth: Defining Neighbourhood

expensive demands of his wife, he established a wholly new regime – a new hall, a new minister, the habit at Christmas of heading for London – and so ‘housekeeping is grown . . . cold’.¹³ The distance that many people sensed was coming to separate the gentry from the commons was something that was greatly regretted. A pamphlet of 1621 exclaimed:

[H]ow may I complaine . . . of the decay of Hospitality in our Land, whereby many poore soules are deprived of that releefe which they have had heretofore. The time hath bene, that men have hunted after Worshippe and Credite by good House-keeping, and therein spent great part of their Revenewes: but now commonly, the greater part of their Livings, is too little to maintaine us and our Children in the pompe of pride.¹⁴

Even where lords continued to feast their tenants, it was felt that this contrasted to their merciless exploitation of their estates, racking rents, enclosing common land and increasing fines. Writing in 1632, Donald Lupton provides us with the tenants’ view of gentry hospitality: ‘[M]any [lords] fill their Tenants[?] bodies once, but empty their purses all the yeare long . . . [.] They dare not dislike any meate, nor scarce enter upon a dish that hath not lost the best face or piece before it come thither, many of them suppe better at home then they Dine here.’¹⁵ The apparent decline of hospitality amongst the yeomanry and the gentry was seen as a litmus test for the wider collapse of neighbourly relations. In 1602, Nicholas Breton looked back to the days when

Every Farmer kept good hous[e]hold fare
 And not a rich man would a beggar rate
 But he would give him almes at his gate
 . . . When Ale and Beere was once olde English wine,
 And Beefe, and Mutton was good Countrie cheere,
 And bread and cheese would make the Miller dine
 When that an honest neighbour might come neere
 And welcome: Hoh, maide, fill a pot of Beere
 And drinke it soundly in a wooden dish,
 When waggés were merrie as their harts could wish.¹⁶

There were material shifts in the economy that were driving harsh social changes. The most powerful intervention of recent years in the economic history of early modern England has been Craig Muldrew’s

¹³ V. de Sola Pinto and A. E. Rodway (eds.), *The Common Muse: Popular British Ballad Poetry from the 15th to the 20th Century* (London, 1957), 162–5.

¹⁴ M. S., *Greevous Groines for the Poore* (London, 1621), 13–14.

¹⁵ D. Lupton, *London and the Country Carbonadoed and Quartred into Severall Characters* (London, 1632), 110.

¹⁶ N. Breton, *Olde Mad-cappes New Gally-mawsrey* (London, 1602), sigs. C3v, Dr.

work on credit. Muldrew argues persuasively that, from around the third decade of the sixteenth century, a ‘culture of credit’ emerged.¹⁷ As consumption expanded, marketing became more complex. But there was only a limited amount of hard cash in circulation and so many financial transactions were conducted on the basis of credit. Because, as Muldrew puts it, ‘[c]redit relations were interpersonal and emotive’; where people were unable to live up to their obligations, litigation resulted, helping to drive the substantial increase in the use of civil courts observable between the middle years of the sixteenth century and the outbreak of the English civil wars. The experience of increased civil litigation – charted in an influential book by Christopher Brooks – was reflected in the ballad literature of the time.¹⁸ In one such ballad printed around 1630, for example, the old times of neighbourhood and friendship had been replaced with a sharply conflictual and litigious society:

You that for nothing
 Will goe to Law,
 Vexing your neighbours,
 For a sticke or a straw,
 Because of your lawing,
 Your purse will grow low:
 You’l prove your selves Cox-combs
 I tell you but so.¹⁹

In 1615, John Day asked his audience: ‘Witnesse those many Quarrels now a foot between Neighbour & Neighbour, especially in the Country. Witnesse that multiplying of Lawyers in our Age more than ever in former times. Witnesse that Thyrving of them in our dayes, and those superlative Purchases which they make in Lands, and Lordships.’²⁰ The character of Bottom in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* – so often portrayed as an ill-educated idiot – had this to say of neighbourliness: ‘[T]o say the truth, reason and love keep little company now-a-days; the more the pity that some honest neighbours will not make them friends.’²¹ This was a sharply perceptive observation for a play that was performed in the hard years of the mid-1590s. The anonymous author of *Pasquil’s Palinodia* (1619) harks back to distant days when

¹⁷ C. Muldrew, *The Economy of Obligation: The Culture of Credit and Social Relations in Early Modern England* (Basingstoke, 1998), 3. This periodization is probably wrong; doctoral work by Hannah Robb points to the vitality of the credit market in the fifteenth century.

¹⁸ C. Brooks, *Pettyfoggers and Vipers of the Commonwealth: The ‘Lower Branch’ of the Legal Profession in Early Modern England* (Cambridge, 1986).

¹⁹ Anon., *A Merry New Ballad I Have Here to Shew* (London, c.1630).

²⁰ J. Day, *Day’s Festivals* (Oxford, 1615), 346.

²¹ W. Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, act III, scene 1, lines 964–8.

6 1 Charity Never Faileth: Defining Neighbourhood

... raignd plaine honest meaning, and good will,
 And neighbours tooke up points of difference,
 In Common Lawes the Commons had no skill,
 And publique feasts were Courts of Conscience.²²

Moreover, as debt increased, downward social mobility occurred, with the consequence that, as Craig Muldrew puts it,

the culture of credit was generated through a process whereby the nature of the community was redefined as a conglomeration of competing but interdependent households which had to trust one another . . . [T]he idea of the community was interpreted as something problematic, which could only be maintained through trust in the credit of others in the face of increased competition and disputes.²³

As community became increasingly contested, following the Muldrew thesis, neighbourly relations were strained. Importantly, many reactions to the economic shifts of the period related to movements in the relationship between people and capital, especially what many saw as the growing importance of merchants within local society. This was connected to anxieties about social mobility. An evangelical tract of the mid-1530s, for example, complained: Every pore manes sone borne in labour is suffered to be a merchaunt, bier and seller, which never workith to help his neybores nor never stonidith for a comon weale but for his owne singulare weale. Alle suche cane never lyff in charit[i]e, for charit[i]e never seketh his owne thinges.²⁴

One driver for the decay of neighbourliness, it was felt, was the enmeshing of social relations in the cash nexus, especially the practice of usury. As the author of a ballad published around the accession of Charles I put it:

When such a good world was here in this Land
 Neighbour and neighbour did fall at no strife,
 Then needlesse were bonds and wills of their hands,
 Mens words were not broken but kept as their life.
 But now in these dayes,
 All credit decayes,
 Truth is not used,
 We see any ways.²⁵

Usury, it was felt, ‘quencheth faith and all neighbourhoode’.²⁶

Thinking of usurers, the Ipswich preacher Samuel Bird observed in 1598: ‘Men commonly are wont to certifie their neighbours of the estate

²² Anon., *Pasquils Palonidia* (London, 1619), sig. B3r.

²³ Muldrew, *Economy of Obligation*, 4. ²⁴ *TED*, III, 117.

²⁵ Anon., *Pitties Lamentation for the Cruelty of This Age* (London, c.1625).

²⁶ P. Caesar, *A General Discourse against the Damnable Sect of Usurers Grounded uppon the Worde of God* (London, 1578), 10.

of those that purchase and grow in wealth: but this is a meanes to worke envie in them, and to move them to the like worldliness.²⁷ Accusations of usury cut into a person's reputation. In 1588, for example, the Yorkshire gentleman John Cracroft sued his neighbour Roger Ringrose, for saying to him, '[T]how art an usurer, a scurvie usurer, & miserable usurer, & a cutter of mens throats.'²⁸ Similarly, in 1601, two Hull citizens fell out over accusations of usury: John Lister accused Suzannah Dalton, wife of a fellow alderman, of saying that he was 'an usurer and tooke usurie of her husbände above the rate of ten pounds for the hundred for one yere'.²⁹ The same sense that the love of money drove growing conflict in local communities fed into the language of litigation. Hence, Robert Teasdale was said, in a legal complaint, to be 'a yeoman that liveth by usurie . . . and love of money and by gripinge of poore men by usurious contracts'.³⁰ Similarly, in 1593, the Star Chamber heard from the Cambridgeshire labourer Christopher Stephenson that, owing to 'the great & outrageous prises of corne & other victualles[,] havinge a wiffe & many poore children [, he] was enforced for the supportinge of his charge to selle that catell he had and that not suffisinge was driven to borowe to relive his want & necessitye' and so had become indebted to his 'uncharitable' neighbour Nicolas Shore, who had used the opportunity to dominate Stephenson.³¹ Such real-life cases suggest that the laments of the ballad literature had some grounding in economic fact.

Keith Wrightson has emphasized the enduring importance of neighbourliness in underwriting economic transactions.³² For all that the early modern economy was built upon market relations, aggressive economic individualism could attract criticism as unneighbourly. This mattered. The dealings of Robert Wheeler of Tamworth (Warwickshire) were felt to be so 'vile' and 'base' that his 'neighbours . . . did in course of common humanity reprove . . . Wheeler for his . . . dealing, telling him that he might be ashamed thereof'. In answer, Wheeler said 'that if all that he had done in that behalf were to do again, he would do it'. His neighbours concluded that he was 'past shame and void of all feeling of Christianity'.³³ Neighbourliness could provide the basis of trust that was essential to

²⁷ S. Bird, *Lectures* (London, 1598), sig. B2r. ²⁸ BIA, CP.G.2375.

²⁹ BIA, CP.H.810.

³⁰ M. Campbell, *The English Yeoman under Elizabeth and the Early Stuarts* (New Haven, CT, 1942), 380.

³¹ TNA, STAC5/S53/13.

³² K. E. Wrightson, 'The "Decline of Neighbourliness" Revisited', in N. L. Jones and D. Woolf (eds.), *Local Identities in Late Medieval and Early Modern England* (Basingstoke, 2007), 24.

³³ J. Chartres, 'The Marketing of Agricultural Produce, 1640–1750', in J. Chartres (ed.), *Agricultural Markets and Trade, 1500–1750* (Cambridge, 1990), 167, 119.

8 1 Charity Never Faileth: Defining Neighbourhood

many economic transactions. Bad neighbours, it was felt, were also often bad debtors. Thomas Tusser wrote of one ‘envious and naughtie’ neighbour:

His promise to trust to as slipperie as ice,
 His credit much like to the chance of the dice.³⁴

Alan Everitt cites the example of a bargain over sheep between two farmers that resulted from neighbourly pressure: one of the neighbours ‘did much labour and entreate him’ to the bargain ‘and commended’ the other farmer ‘to be a very honest man and a good paymaster’. The matter ended in litigation, but it is indicative of the ways in which marketing and business deals depended upon reputation, credit and social networks.³⁵ Yet economic individualism, for all its apparently pernicious effects on values such as neighbourliness, found its advocates. Those who took a careful attitude to loans, covenants or other economic dealings with their neighbours found a supporter in the widely read godly author John Dod. In 1607, he maintained a

defence of them which are not flexible to serve every mans turne with bond and covenants, but will first know the person for whome they make their promise, and bee acquainted with his trueth and honestie, and with his state and habilitie; and consider also of their owne sufficiencie, whether they can without any great difficultie, discharge that which they take upon them, if their neighbour should faile. But this is want of good neighbourhood, say they. But this is a point of good wisdom, saith God, who never alloweth that neighbourhood for good, which swarueth from holy discretion. His commandement is: Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thy selfe, and therefore no man is bound to love him more then himselfe, especially when it is with hatred of himselfe, and hurt of many others. And in deede it is no worke of true love, but of fleshly friendship: for love doth never leade a man to doe any thing which God appointeth him to hate, as in this place he doth all rash suretiship.³⁶

In this way, growing entanglement in the cash nexus rendered neighbourhood a contested concept. Who is a good neighbour? What duties do they owe to one another? How circumspect should neighbours be in their dealings with one another?

Merchants, in particular, were held responsible for the commercialization of social relations, their capital-invading communities causing division and driving downward social mobility to create a new class of

³⁴ T. Tusser, *Five Hundred Points of Good Husbandry* (Oxford, 1984), 140.

³⁵ Chartres, ‘The Marketing of Agricultural Produce’, 107.

³⁶ J. Dod, *A Plaine and Familiar Exposition of the Eleventh and Twelfth Chapters of the Proverbs of Salomon* (London, 1607), 48.

permanent poor. In John Ferne's *The Blazon of Gentrie* (1586), the figure of Columell ('a plowman') complains in vernacular speech about his diminished estate:

[F]ortune . . . hath left me a begger, and yet my vather a good yeoman, and lived many a winters season in good repentation, and kept a homely house among his neighbours, and brought up his children cleanly so long as our old lease and Landlord [en]dured, but smoothly, since they ended, and that a Marchant of . . . Middlesex had dwelt among us a while, then var[i]e well all our thrift: our sheepe shearing feastes, or beeves in harvest, and the good pirrey in Christmas, been al agone, and turned another way, all is too litt[l]e for him-zelfe . . . Gentlefolkes have now small keepe, they beene so straight bent towards us poore men, that by my vathers zoule, they semen most of churles, not of gentle blood . . . Vor greater unkinde, how can they be, then to pull downe townes, put in rude beasts, and thrust out men.³⁷

Again, the evidence of litigation at central courts suggests that such anxieties informed local understandings of social relations. Just as John Ferne's fictional 'Marchant of Middlesex' had penetrated local society, driving a wedge between neighbours, so the real-life corn merchant William Taylor of Burnham Deepdale (Norfolk) was represented in similar terms in a complaint to Chancery in 1617. The local gentleman Thomas Goword described Taylor as

a man of very covetous mynde & desire and huntinge exceedingly after gayne and Bargaynes in Buyinge and ingrossinge of Corne . . . who ys and longe tyme hath bene both hasty and gredy to buye upp and ingrosse into his handes greate somes and quantities of Corne aswell when it was deare as when yt was and ys cheape, and the same beinge so bought and injoyed he hath and doth usually transporte the same beyonde the Seas, one shippe after another, w[i]th as much haste and speede as he canne loade them and send them awaye thirstinge and gredely desiringe to inrich himselfe therby by reason whereof he hath gained w[i]thin thes[e] Fewe yeres the some of Tenne Thousand pounds att the leaste, Albeyt many poore people in the sayd County aswell heretofore as lately doe indewer wante and Fare much the worse.³⁸

In this way, mercantile activity – hunting after bargains, sending 'one ship after another' – was presented as socially irresponsible, covetous and oppressive of the poor.

Again, these representations fed into popular literature. The Jacobean ballad *A Dialogue between Master Guesright and Poor Neighbour Needy* has Master Guesright explaining how 'the world is hard' because every occupation and social group seeks only profit. In the end, Neighbour Needy draws the following pessimistic conclusion:

³⁷ J. Ferne, *The Blazon of Gentrie* (London, 1586), 22. ³⁸ TNA, C2/JamesI/G13/50.

10 1 Charity Never Faileth: Defining Neighbourhood

Well neighbour Guesright if this same be true,
 Then home we will straight without more adoe
 And what we intend to none we will tell
 But keepe to our selves and so fare-you well[.]

So, Neighbour Needy opts for social atomization.³⁹ One of the drivers for that atomization, many felt, was the attack by Puritans upon traditional popular festivities and pastimes. Rituals such as wassailing and maypole dancing were felt by many people to provide means by which community could be both celebrated and renewed. One anonymous author of 1619 therefore drew attention to a maypole in his district, which he called

... a signe
 Of harmelesse mirth and honest neighborhood,
 Where all the Parish did in one combine,
 To mount the rod of peace, and none withstood:
 Where no capritious Constables disturbe them,
 Nor [J]ustice of the peace did seeke to curbe them,
 Noor peevish Puritan in rayling sort,
 Nor over-wise Church-warden spoyl'd the sport
 Happy the age, and harmelesse were the dayes,
 (For then true love and amity was found)
 When every village did a May-pole raise,
 And Whitson-ales and May-games did abound
 And all the lusty Yonkers in a rout
 With merry Lasses danc'd the rod about,
 Then friendship to their banquets, bid the guests,
 And poore men far'd the better for their feasts.⁴⁰

The end of the wassail-cup was especially painful. In this folk ritual, inhabitants bore cups full of ale around their locality, offering a sip in return for a gift. Often practised during the Christmas season, wassailing was, like rush-bearing, mumming, maypole dancing and a host of other folk customs, something that many contemporaries saw as a source of social unity. It was therefore significant that, once again, Puritans were criticized for their attacks on the wassail-cup:

And thou my native towne, which was of old,
 (When as thy Bon-fiers burn'd, and May-poles [s]tood
 And when thy Wassall-cups were uncontrol'd,)
 The sommer-Bower of peace and neighborhood,
 Although since these went down, thou ly'st forlorn
 By factious schismes, and humours over-borne.⁴¹

³⁹ Anon., *A Dialogue between Master Guesright and Poor Neighbour Needy* (London, c.1624).

⁴⁰ Anon., *Pasquils Palonidia*, sig. B3r. ⁴¹ *Ibid.*, sig. B4r.