

**Letter published in the *Guardian* newspaper's 'Mainly for Women' on 19 February 1960:
by Betty Jerman and entitled 'Squeezed in like sardines in Suburbia'**

'The decision was for a new house, i.e. post-war not pre-war. The vision was architect designed, detached in a large garden. The reality was semi-detached, designed by a speculative builder and a garden smaller than my mother's lawn. The problem is general when the bread-winner works in Central London and a house is wanted within reasonable travelling distance. It is not necessarily a problem of money.

'We could have had our architect-designed house with a large garden at an uncomfortable distance from station and shops.

'The alternative was a house built on someone else's garden. In long-developed areas with good communications land is scarce and people lucky enough to own a large garden with "frontage" can command some very fancy prices.

'I have seen plots that would do nicely for a three-bedroom house. In no time three houses are built on it and occupied. Our house stands in a short road. The owner of a large garden with a lot of frontage easily sold the plots on which three bungalows were built. Beyond these a section of wooded garden was left. From the road it dipped sharply into a valley and then rose as sharply to the back gardens of other houses. It was such a different land that many builders turned it down but an enterprising firm got to work with mechanical equipment and managed to squeeze in six semi-detached houses. One of the firm admitted it would have been nicer to build four but they only just cleared a profit as it was.

'So we have the advantages of an already settled area with the shops within easy walking distance, a private nursery class round the corner, schools, churches, pubs, doctors, a hospital, and other necessities.

'Our house has more in it than we could have hoped for if we had built it ourselves. The front rather resembles a mews cottage, being made up entirely of garage and front door downstairs and the two large windows of one bedroom and the landing upstairs. Living rooms and the other bedrooms face south and the whole house is full of light.

' We have full central heating with a boiler in the cellar which also houses indoor fuel bunkers, served through the garage, and leaves plenty of space for indoor drying. There are cupboards everywhere. There is ample floor and wall tiling where needed. The whole house is designed for minimum housework and minimum maintenance. Where then are the flaws?

'First the garden. It is about as private as a field. If we replace our open fences with solid fencing, it would block out the sun and light on half the garden and our trailing plants seem to be taking a long time to supply us with privacy.

'Then the noise. The houses were really crammed into the plot. Our living room is on the attached side. The next door living-room is on the other side of the wall and they have an immensely powerful television set. One evening I asked my husband to turn down our radio; it was not on!

'I was driven to write a note asking if the television could be toned down. The effect was odd. The entire family affected not to see us and the son, about eight, literally stopped dead in his tracks and retreated at speed if he saw me walking along the road. This behaviour stopped after a couple of weeks and now we just put up with the noise.

'On the detached side there is a space which allows easy manoeuvring of two large wheelbarrows, one on their side of the fence (a high and solid one near the house) and one on ours. Their "dining" side is nearest to us and there they keep their radio. They use it for background and sometimes I wonder if Mrs Dale goes on all day. One warm night about eighteen months ago we actually identified the play on the radio, and we heard clearly the eleven o'clock news. Next morning I had a friendly word with the wife (no more notes) but the effect was even more drastic. They have not "seen" us since and we just put up with their noise too.

'Polite notes and polite words have no effect. Neither does shouting. One hot night last summer, around 10.45, the man who sold his garden for development and who still lived in the large house, could stand no longer the bellow of rock 'n' roll coming from the open windows of one of the bungalows. He did not swear but he shouted things like "You selfish lot" at the top of his voice. People heard him streets away; it was the big topic of conversation next day, but not with the occupants of the bungalow. Finally he telephoned them. He has moved. I do not blame him.

'But while foliage will rise in time on our fences and custom tends to deaden one's consciousness of noise, acceptance of the third flaw seems a dreary prospect. Whatever happens to people when they retire to the outer suburbs to raise families? Were they always like this? By comparison the inner suburbs, now with the exception of small fashionable pockets, largely decaying houses or blocks of flats, seem to bubble with vitality.

'The setting is attractive enough with open fields and forest and a few large old houses with sufficient land to lend for local fetes. There is a farm so that our children can see real cows. There are three local stables and while you can still hear schoolgirls pounding out their piano lessons you are more likely to see them clad in jodhpurs and velvet cap on the way to riding lessons.

'The prospect is pleasing, especially if you have only to see it at weekends and evenings, but I have to stay here all day too, and the whole thing falls down on two counts, food and thought. Asking in a local grocers for Patna rice I was told "We only sell rice"; and I hear women order half a pound of "cheese". Maybe the hailed post-war revival in English cooking has been somewhat exaggerated.

'And does no one read? There is no proper bookshop. I can get a well-reviewed book from the public library almost at once. And it is a waste of time starting to discuss some writer's viewpoint on an interesting topic. Unless he or she has appeared on television no one will have heard of them or their ideas. I generalise, of course. There are the odd exceptions.

And they tend to be women who regret they were never fully trained and educated for a profession.

'It is not lack of money that causes the stagnation. Some local households have got to the stage of a second car and a private school for the children is the norm. True the argument does not apply that a child can benefit as much from a fine State school as from a private school since the primary school looks like one of the first ever built, but I am not convinced that sending children to the private schools is entirely based on getting them a better education. This is "keeping up with the Joneses" country.

'No, this example of suburbia is an incredibly dull place to live in and I blame the women. They stay here all day. They set the tone. Many of them look back with regret to the days when they worked in an office. Their work kept them alert. Home and child-minding can have a blunting effect on a woman's mind. But only she can sharpen it. If only once in this suburb I could go to a house where a dinner would be served comparable to one an unmarried girl friend would "throw together" after a day at the office and hear such conversation across the table, then I would think there was hope.

'The fresh air. The comparatively open country make this a good place to bring up children. But I cannot help wondering what effect the mental atmosphere will have on our children.'

Letter published in the Guardian newspaper's 'Mainly for Women' on 26 February 1960

(From Maureen Nichol)

Sir,

Since having my first baby I have been constantly surprised how women seem to go into voluntary exile in the home once they leave their outside work.

Before moving to this district recently we lived in the suburbs of Wolverhampton, and it took me two years to find a *kindred spirit* who was willing to do exchange baby minding during the day.

Indeed most couples rarely left their homes for a night out together, even with offers of baby-sitting. Now I have to start all over again, and here the women seem if anything even more reluctant to prize themselves away from their children for a few hours.

Perhaps *housebound wives with liberal interests and a desire to remain individuals could form a national register, so that whenever one moves one can contact like-minded friends*. There must be many women like myself whose husbands' work necessitates moving house every few years. Or perhaps someone has a better suggestion?

Yours &c., Maureen Nicol, Eastham, Wirral