

The Plumstead Subsidence: The Individual, Local Government and the Management of an Environmental Hazard

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Historians have generally focused on issues that affect large numbers of people and extensive areas of land. Besides their obvious significance, such issues were likely to present the greatest challenge to government and society at large. But what happened when situations arose of crucial importance to the individual householder or neighbourhood, but which left the greater part of the community unaffected? How far were local politics and administrative practice able to cope, particularly with a phenomenon, whether physical or social, that was not only unexpected but unprecedented? Was there sufficient resilience and resources within 'the local state' to inspire confidence in individual homes and streets that, in the hour of crisis, their predicament would be addressed?

Such insights into how communities sought to provide reassurance beyond the hurly-burly of everyday life may be found in their response to the disruption caused by environmental hazards. Even in a part of the world so comparatively free from them, such natural disasters as the East Coast Floods of 1953, might particularly test the perceived competence of government, however defined. In Britain, such dislocation is usually very local in its effect, and induced to a large degree by human activity. Even where the 'trigger' may be some natural event, the 'root' cause is generally found to be some former use of the local environment. Many of the larger towns and cities are situated on former coalfields. The underground working of the salt deposits of Cheshire has caused much surface subsidence and damage to properties. If the problems were exacerbated by the uncontrolled way in which the deposits were originally excavated, their economic and social impacts may be mitigated by such institutional devices as a Brine Subsidence Compensation Board.¹

In such cases, the individual property-holder may have been unprepared, but there was local precedent for coping with such subsidence. The present paper takes the even more extreme case of subsidence that was both unexpected and unprecedented, namely what came to be known as 'the Plumstead subsidences' in South-east London, that occurred over the 20-year period, 1939–59. Drawing on local authority files, the present paper describes how the physical and institutional ramifications of local subsidence came to be identified, the protracted endeavour to enact adequate safeguards against further loss of life, and the eventual implementation of works to eliminate the source of the danger.

The urbanisation process might not only increase the potential for 'disruption' through its great concentration of people and wealth, but it also offers unrivalled incentive and resources for minimising it. The consequences of such environmental hazards following the kind of large-scale urban development that took place in the Home Counties may therefore be especially instructive. The extent and rapidity of London's suburban growth caught the imagination of the inter-war generation. A third of the total increase in population in England and Wales occurred in Greater London between the wars.² Where Woolwich had been on the eastern edge of the built-up area in 1914, the view from the top of Shooters Hill, some thirty years later, was one of 'continuous building development'. In his volume, *London Marches on*, Clunn wrote of 'the stupendous growth of the metropolis' to the south-east.³ The increasing scale and range of London's local government was especially celebrated in 1939, the Jubilee Year of the London County Council. Besides the Council's annual General Powers Bill, legislation might also be promoted for more specific reasons.⁴ The present paper concentrates on one such measure, the London County Council (Woolwich Subsidences) Act of 1950, the origins of which can be traced back to the Jubilee Year. Its significance arose not from any general applicability even to the Metropolitan Borough of Woolwich, let alone suburban London. Rather, the importance of such parliamentary measures, in both their drafting and implementation, stemmed from the uniqueness of the set of circumstances they were intended to address. In its endeavour to accommodate the insistent demands of the comparatively few streets affected, the Local Bill of 1950 severely tested the robustness of both local and central government in protecting the interests of individual property holders.

'Hollow Ground'

It was every householder's worst nightmare. The leader column of the *Woolwich Gazette* carried the headline 'Hollow ground'. Another in the

Daily Mail exclaimed, 'Our homes may collapse: our savings will go'.⁵ The alarm was first raised on 20 March 1938, when a cavity of 35 feet deep and ten feet wide suddenly appeared in the backgarden of 27 Alliance Road, East Plumstead (Figure 1). The two maisonettes were part of a terrace of fourteen, built around 1915, by the South-east London Development Company.

As the authority 'closest' to the stricken neighbourhood, the Borough Council of Woolwich was immediately implicated. The District Surveyor was required to serve Dangerous Structure Notices which meant the two families had to leave immediately. They and the four families who voluntarily left the adjacent maisonettes (making 35 persons in all) took advantage of the Council's offer of accommodation. The loss of the backgarden confirmed the seriousness of a hole, some 85 feet long and 22 feet deep, that had also suddenly appeared in the Council's own property of Rockcliff Gardens, some 220 yards from Alliance Road. It had occurred only two days before the recently-purchased Gardens were due to be re-opened as a children's playground.⁶

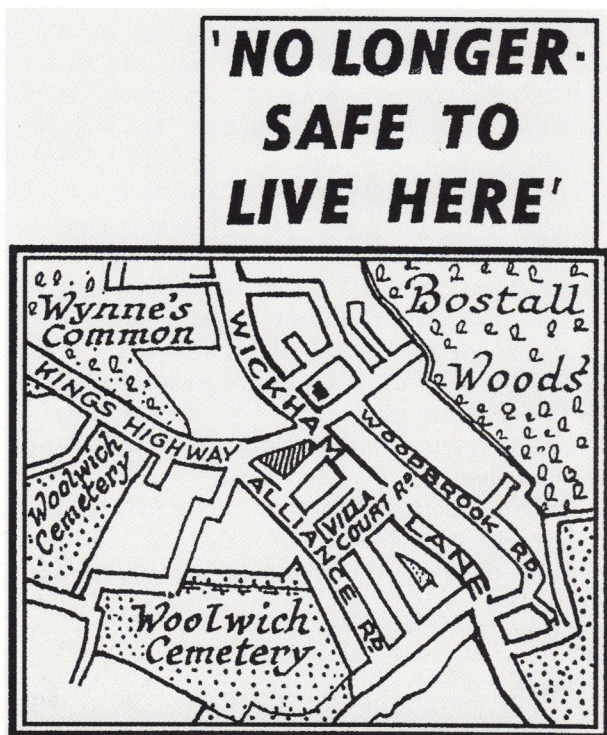


Figure 1: The location map and headline, as published by the *Daily Mail*, 3 July 1939.



Plates 1a and 1b: Numbers 15–27 Alliance Road from the street and rear gardens, February 1951 (Copyright: London Metropolitan Archives).



Perhaps most seriously for the Council, it soon became clear that local residents saw their only hope of securing recompense for their actual or potential losses was that of holding the Council publicly accountable for their predicament. Having formed an East Plumstead Residents Association as a means of voicing their demands, a meeting of nearly two hundred people called upon the Ministry of Health to convene a public inquiry to establish why the Borough Council had not prevented building, despite knowing of the presence of extensive underground workings, from which chalk had been excavated in the nineteenth century.⁷ The first houses had been erected only a few years after the last workings were closed in 1912. Not only did the minutes of the Borough Council reveal that members and officers recognised the danger but, the Residents' Association alleged, there had been a conspiracy to withhold such knowledge from prospective purchasers. Two early rent books revealed that a member of the Council had also been a director of the Development Company. Whatever the reason for concealment, the Residents' Association believed the Council should accept liability for both compensating owners for remedial action and meeting the full cost of any preventative works required.⁸



Plate 2: Numbers 11 and 13 Alliance Road and the adjacent derelict property of 15 Alliance Road, August 1952 (Copyright: London Metropolitan Archives)

The Borough Council vigorously denied that it was guilty of any oversight or impropriety and, therefore, had any responsibility in the matter. Whilst the Borough Engineer had been aware of underground workings, there were no drawings or plans to indicate their precise location. In giving building consents and advancing loans to individual purchasers, there had never been any question of guaranteeing the safety of the properties. Assured that it had no powers of its own to address the issue, the Council believed the most effective way of demonstrating a concern for local residents was to press the London County Council [LCC] to exercise its responsibilities under the London Building Acts. The response of the Town Planning and Building Regulations Committee of the LCC was similarly to deny any liability. The County Architect wrote of how there had been no statutory requirement to carry out underground surveys. Even if the potential danger had been recognised, there would have been no powers to prevent houses from being built above the abandoned workings.⁹

Establishing The Facts

Both Councils sought publicly to demonstrate their concern, without risking any substantive commitment. A series of surveys and trial borings would not only be valuable in itself, but keep options open as to whether to become more heavily involved, or simply to withdraw from further search for ways of mitigation. The Borough Council commissioned a specialist survey of the underground workings, starting with Rockcliff Gardens, with the LCC eventually contributing, after much hard bargaining, £2,000 towards the cost of £4,836. The need for such knowledge of the extent of the workings and imminence of further subsidence was emphasised when a further part of the Gardens collapsed, and a Council workman was killed. In the words of a witness, 'the hole seemed to come all at once'. The body was found 35 feet below ground.¹⁰ A year later, and after what the *Woolwich Gazette* described as 'much probing, exploring and investigation', the worst fears were confirmed. Arthur L. Handley, the District Surveyor for North Woolwich, submitted a report that described the ground as honeycombed with galleries at a depth of between twenty and fifty feet. All were in a bad state. Most alarming was the discovery of piles of sand, suggesting that there must be hollow pockets within the overlying Thanet Sands. In Handley's judgement, owners and occupiers of some forty houses should be warned of 'the possibility of further subsidence at any time'.¹¹

The question now arose of whether local residents should be informed and, if so, how this should be done. The Clerk to the County Council,

Sir George Gater, believed a warning letter should be sent to residents, particularly in view of the allegations of earlier concealment on the part of the Borough Council. There was acute concern, however, lest this should induce panic. Although Handley claimed the Residents' Association had exaggerated the anxiety felt by local people, Gater was sure there would be 'a blue funk'. As Leader of the Council, Herbert Morrison agreed 'the people must be told'. A joint letter was accordingly drafted with the Borough Council, that took close note of both the legal position and the psychological effect on recipients. It was distributed on a Saturday morning in June 1939 to 78 premises, of which 21 were owner-occupied and fifty comprised the three blocks of maisonettes owned by a single landlord, Louis and Ada Krendal of Kensington. The letter warned of 'a grave danger' of further subsidence at any time. Whilst 'disclaiming any legal responsibility whatsoever in the matter', it described how the Councils

thought it right that you as the owner (occupier) of property which is situate in the vicinity of such underground workings should be acquainted with the conclusion so arrived at, so that you make take such steps in regard thereto as you may consider necessary.¹²

Local newspapers described how, on the next day, a meeting of 'bewildered residents' passed two resolutions. One demanded re-housing and compensation. The other asserted that none should leave their homes, or make payments on their rent or mortgages until the Borough Council accepted liability. An official insisted the Council's responsibility had ended with the advice given.¹³ A deputation from the Residents' Association met the Parliamentary Private Secretary to the Minister of Health in early July 1939. It came away empty-handed. The Ministry could offer nothing more than encouragement to the local authorities in rendering every possible assistance. It was not within the Minister's power to hold a public inquiry into the Borough Council's responsibility for the subsidences.¹⁴

A Sense of Abandonment

It was not only residents who felt abandoned. The Borough Council became increasingly frustrated. Not only was it resentful of how the LCC and Government seemed content to divest responsibility, but the problem seemed no closer to resolution. None of the initiatives open to the Council had allayed its sense of vulnerability to 'moral' criticism.

More was required than offering alternative accommodation. Although the displaced tenants might voluntarily leave for the Council's new

housing-estate at Eltham, most owner-occupiers were unable, or refused, to move. As the leader-writer of the *Woolwich Gazette* remarked, those who had bought, or were buying, their homes, 'haven't a chance in a million of selling them'. They could not possibly afford both the continued outgoings on their existing properties, and the rent that they would have to pay for alternative accommodation. The *Daily Mail* cited the case of a civil servant who, on the point of retirement, now found his life's investment of £650 in a house to be worthless.¹⁵ To add to the frustration, the agent for the Krendals found no difficulty re-letting the empty maisonettes, particularly following the outbreak of bombing in the autumn of 1940 and even greater shortage of housing. The Councils had no powers to prevent this happening where the maisonettes had been vacated voluntarily. The Borough Council became even more disillusioned, following further subsidence in June 1942 and issue of seven Dangerous Structure Notices. With so little alternative accommodation available, the Borough resorted to powers intended for persons made homeless by the blitz. Furious at the reprimand received from the Ministry of Health, the Clerk to the Council, protested at the 'vicious circle' that had been allowed to develop. As memories faded, a further set of tenants would move into the adjacent vacant-properties. They too would demand alternative accommodation when the next subsidence occurred.¹⁶

It was now the turn of the Borough Council to attempt an ultimatum. A special committee resolved that no further families should be rehoused until closure orders had been obtained on all potentially dangerous properties. The County Solicitor and Architect again pointed that, even under the most recent London Building Acts (Amendment) Act of 1939, the LCC could only apply for a Dangerous Structure Order on the initiative of the District Surveyor. Whilst Handley readily agreed that there was 'a very real danger to anyone living' in the relevant 66 properties, none could be defined as a 'dangerous structure' until visible danger caused by subsidence actually appeared in their superstructure or foundations.

With prompting from the Borough Council, the MP for Woolwich East, George Hicks (the Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry of Works and Buildings), intervened by forwarding a further petition from local residents to the Ministry of Health in September 1942. It met with a further rebuff. The Parliamentary Secretary, Florence Horsbrugh, conceded that it was wrong for any premises subject to subsidence to be let for human habitation, but the Ministry could only action on the law as it stood. The Minister had no power to intervene.

The Search for Precedent

Although believing progress had been made in the Ministry's formal admission of its impotence in the matter, it was crucial that the two Councils should retain its continued involvement in the search for a solution. At the very least, the Ministry should share responsibility for whatever fell to the Councils to expedite. It was a further reason why a joint deputation should meet the Minister for guidance on two questions. How might life and property be protected, prior to a Dangerous Structure Notice being served? Secondly, how might owner-occupiers be helped in meeting the additional costs of leaving their homes? An Assistant Secretary, A. N. C. Shelley, strongly advised that, before meeting the Minister, they should fortify themselves with a legal opinion that nothing was possible under existing law. Although that 'expert' opinion, obtained in December 1942, believed some assistance might be found in Public Health legislation, Handley dismissed such a view as conflicting with his own experience.

It was now the turn of the Clerk of the County Council, Sir Eric Salmon, to lose patience, writing in January 1943 of how the District Surveyor seemed to think he knew more about the law than learned Counsel. On the other hand, 'that inveterate amateur lawyer, Shelley, at the Ministry of Health (I know him of old)' had caused the Councils to waste time and money 'chasing hares which need never have been started'. As Salmon contended, Counsel's opinion had merely confirmed what was already known, namely that 'the surest way of dealing with the question' was through a Local Bill, whereby a local authority might obtain powers not otherwise available under 'Public and General' legislation. There were two precedents for such a course being considered in respect of mining subsidence affecting homes and streets. The Salford Corporation in Lancashire had become so concerned as to threat posed by a deep-lying fault to houses above the river in The Cliff district of Higher Broughton that, in 1933, it obtained a Local Act, which prohibited the use of a building for human habitation where there was imminent danger of collapse through subsidence. The powers had never been used.¹⁷

The second precedent arose from the collapse of houses and death of two persons in Norwich in May 1936, caused by subsidence into earlier underground chalk-workings. Where the Clerk of the Norwich City Council had learnt of the Salford precedent through a meeting with the Parliamentary Secretary of the Ministry of Health, it was from correspondence with the Clerk that Salmon obtained detail of the Norwich precedent in considering what course of action the LCC might take.¹⁸ As the relevant files of the Norwich Corporation make clear, the response

of that Council had been strikingly similar to that of the LCC. The City Council had neither the statutory responsibility to prevent building in the first place, nor to deal with their subsequent collapse. There was however a general feeling within the City that the Corporation should do something. The Coroner's Inquest on the two deceased persons added a further moral obligation. In returning a verdict of accidental death, a rider was added

that strong representation should be made to those concerned to take what steps may be possible to prevent a recurrence of the subsidences in order to allay the fears of the present residents.¹⁹

Some £2,000 were spent on excavations to assess the extent of the long-abandoned adit mines. A Local Bill was drafted in July 1937, that would prohibit residence in the area, on the premise that if parliament rejected the power, or made it conditional on compensation being paid, the Corporation believed it would be fully justified in dropping the whole matter. In the event, the Bill failed by a single vote to obtain the absolute majority required of the Council itself. Conservative members believed that the Corporation had done enough by making it 'perfectly clear that everyone resided in the area as their own peril'. It was neither necessary nor just for the Corporation to be given 'the terrible power' of evicting families and ordering the demolition of their homes, without offer of recompense.²⁰ The crucial point for the LCC was the knowledge that the Ministry of Health had regarded a Local Bill as the only *practical* way of removing existing residents and preventing further occupation.

A meeting of senior LCC officials, in April 1943, reaffirmed the need for a Local Bill to cover the Plumstead subsidences. The County Solicitor recommended that the District Surveyor should make a Dangerous Structure Order where, in his judgement, a test case was entirely warranted on *technical* grounds. If that failed, the Council would have considerably strengthened its position in applying to parliament for a Local Bill. Handley believed the case would be further reinforced by a report commissioned from 'an expert mining-engineer' confirming the scale and imminence of further subsidence.²¹ Such a report was received from Professor J. A. S. Ritson of the Royal School of Mines, London, describing how there were four active brickyards at the turn of the century, that mixed the overlying brickearth with excavated chalk to produce the distinctive 'Plumstead brick'. As a result of so much drift cover being removed, surface water had been able to penetrate the underlying Thanet Sands and Upper Chalk, thereby increasing the risk of subsidence above the underground workings. Whilst confirming the very high risk to life and property, it was Ritson's further finding that brought 'a very radical

change in the situation'. He believed there would be no insuperable difficulties to using the technique of hydraulic stowage to infill the underground galleries, and thereby minimise further subsidence. As officials of the LCC were quick to point out, only a comprehensive Local Bill would give a local authority the powers required to undertake such large-scale remediation.²²

With the legal opinion and Ritson's reports to hand, an application was made to the Ministry for its support in promoting a Bill. Shelley gave that assurance, but made it conditional upon the Bill containing 'such clauses in respect of compensation as would satisfy Parliament' that property owners were treated justly. In as much as that called for political judgement, both Councils persisted in their request to meet the Minister himself. Despite many 'chasers', officials insisted that the Minister was simply too busy. Although conceding 'wartime pre-occupations' might be a good enough reason for doing nothing, the LCC Town Planning Committee found the position increasingly untenable once the war had ended. A joint deputation eventually met the Parliamentary Secretary of the Ministry of Health, Lewis J. Edwards, in May 1948. Its leader emphasised the need for powers to combat the *potential* risk of subsidence. The Leader of the Woolwich Council described the plight of owner-occupiers who feared for their lives, yet could not afford to leave. A representative of the Residents' Association sought assurance that compensation would be given. In his response, Edwards conceded it was one of the most difficult cases he had ever encountered. Although the problem could have been avoided if proper measures had been taken, no blame could be attached to any of the present parties. The Minister would support a Local Bill. As for compensation, Edwards sympathised very deeply with owner-occupiers, but warned of how any admission of a public liability would have the most far-reaching consequences. It would set a precedent for enormous demands on the Exchequer.²³

The London County Council (Woolwich Subsidence) Bill

Although the two Councils had presented a united front in making the case for a Bill, discussions as to its precise purpose, responsibility for administering it, and provision for compensation, threatened to drive them apart. For the LCC, the Bill was simply required to save lives. Residents should be required to leave the properties, with re-occupation prohibited. The question of compensation did not arise in as much as any benefit of occupation or income from rent had already been removed by the threat of subsidence. The Borough Council expressed outrage at the LCC's lack of humanity. Not only was there little prospect of

parliament passing a Bill so vigorously opposed by the Borough, but there were deep divisions within the County Council. As the Clerk warned, some local Councillors also felt strongly on the compensation issue. At a further meeting with the Borough Council in July 1948, the Chairman of the Town Planning Committee conceded only a few houses were currently involved, but ultimately there might be hundreds. The cost of compensation might be very high. The obvious course was to establish an Appeal or Mayor's Fund, to which the Councils might contribute. The Leader of the Borough Council believed the better course would be for the LCC to establish a discretionary fund.²⁴

The full Council considered a resolution, in October 1949, that a London County Council (Woolwich Subsidence) Bill should be promoted to enforce the permanent vacation of potentially dangerous properties. The LCC would be the administrative body. Whilst the Finance Committee had continued to oppose any obligation being placed on the Council, it conceded, in February, that *ex gratia* payments might be made to relieve hardship among owner-occupiers affected by a Prohibition Order. The continued misgivings of senior political figures, including Ernest Bevin, the Foreign Secretary and MP for Woolwich East, had left it with little choice. The Bill was scrutinised over three days in April 1950 by a Select Committee of the House of Lords. In a petition opposing the Bill, the Residents' Association recited how its 191 members comprised seventeen owner-occupiers from the 'inner' area, 127 from the 'outer' area, and 47 who lived nearby. They would face considerable difficulty, if compelled to leave without full compensation. In a separate petition, the Krendals demanded, as landlords, the same entitlements as accorded to owner-occupiers.²⁵

As the Chairman of the Select Committee conceded, it was absolutely necessary that the Council should have powers to deal with 'this very serious state of affairs'. Members were, however, very struck by 'the unfortunate position' of the petitioners. As well as interpreting the compensation clause in 'the most liberal fashion possible', the Committee pressed the LCC to investigate the possibility of infilling the workings. As 'a matter of broader national policy', it would be 'a very serious thing' to leave the area permanently sterilised. Only the Krendals petitioned against the Bill, when it came before the Commons' Select Committee in June. With considerable reluctance, the Borough Council agreed to their being awarded similar entitlements as owner-occupiers. The Act became operative a month after the Royal Assent of July 1950.²⁶

A Longer-term Solution

Enactment rarely marks the end of controversy. Householders and, therefore, the Borough Council became increasingly exasperated by the LCC's apparent reluctance to make use of its powers. The LCC insisted there had to be fresh surveys of the workings, before the drastic step of issuing Prohibition Orders was taken. The first Orders were not made until March 1951, with more in July and November. None doubted the significance of the precedents set by the first claims for compensation. As the County Solicitor emphasised, there was no provision for capital losses. The intention was only to cover the costs of removal and such incidentals as the replacement of carpets and fittings that could not be adapted to the new accommodation. Landlords might claim some allowance for loss of rent.²⁷

Implementation frequently requires further policy-making. Although the LCC Chief Engineer, Joseph Rawlinson, had argued before the parliamentary committees that technical difficulties and excessive cost made it impossible to carry out remedial work, the issue was soon raised as a 'policy question'. The existing situation was highly unsatisfactory. It was impossible to predict where collapses might occur. Underground inspection became increasingly hazardous. Not only might the remaining 32 dwellings of the 'inner' area have to be abandoned but, in time, the workings beneath the 'outer' area would also begin to deteriorate. Finding the Ministry 'wholly sympathetic', a sum of £10,000 was allocated for a trial using an infilling technique recommended by the National Coal Board. Pulverised fuel ash, mixed with water, was injected through boreholes into the workings. Although it proved highly effective, the cost of such treatment would far exceed what individual owners could afford for their properties. The Ministry resolutely opposed any call on Exchequer funds, lest it should become a precedent for other areas affected by subsidence. Sanction was however given for the local authorities to organise the work, meet the cost and, therefore, raise a loan. The full Council approved unanimously in October 1955 an application for the necessary statutory powers which, under part IV of the London County Council General Powers (Number 2) Bill, received the Royal Assent in August 1956. This time, the powers were immediately employed. Left till last, the most difficult 'inner' workings were infilled in the summer of 1959.²⁸

It seemed that, after some twenty years, the end was in sight. Having themselves decided the properties abandoned as a result of subsidence were too small to warrant purchase for local-authority housing, or as parkland, the two Councils were keen to discover the intentions of their

existing owners. The Krendals intimated their intention to reinstate or rebuild. Owners of two adjacent properties had been jointly offered £550 by a builder. The offer was, however, withdrawn, when he learnt that the District Surveyor would insist that any new building having strengthened foundations, costing an additional £750. One of the owners (who was also Vice-chairman of the Residents' Association) protested at how this would cause such properties to remain a 'White Elephant' until the Councils met their obligations of purchasing and developing them. The Clerk to the County Council pointed out that, even if it was too expensive to erect houses, the land might still be used for garages or some other purpose. His Council could accept no liability for the difficulties of disposing of the land. It was only through its expenditure of over £100,000 on remedial works that the property and others had been 'rescued' from the danger of subsidence and made safe for any kind of development.²⁹

A Question of Responsibility

For the leader-writer of the *Woolwich Gazette* in July 1939, 'the Plumstead subsidences' offered a further instance of the striking physical changes that had come about through suburbanisation. The 'hollow ground' had been excavated when it was possible to travel from Woolwich to Plumstead along a country lane. 'Men dug chalk to put on the land or to use for building purposes'. Then came 'the war and its aftermath, housing development, and the flood of bricks and mortar'. The underground workings were 'clean forgotten' until the bottom fell out of a garden distinguished only by its ordinariness as a 'working-class' dwelling.³⁰ Plumstead was found to be, what the *Daily Express* called, an 'undermined suburb'.³¹ It was not for a further fifty years that a systematic survey was undertaken by what had become the British Geological Survey of the underground chalk-workings of the Home Counties. Only recently have automated systems been developed that enable geological maps and texts to be rapidly interrogated for detail of individual properties.³²

If archival sources, together with fieldwork, help assess the nature and significance of subsidence as a physical construct, they might similarly highlight how, through a long series of institutional manoeuvres, a physical hazard might become something of a 'social' construct. Even when the scale of the physical danger has been more precisely assessed, there remains the more crucial second stage of eliciting a response commensurate with the scale of the anticipated danger. Here, in terms of the inter-war commentaries on local government, the omens seemed good. A volume celebrating a hundred years of municipal government

was published in 1935. Its distinguished editors, all leading academic figures in the University of London, wrote of how the health, happiness and progress of 'the average English citizen' depended on 'his local government more than any other factor in his environment'. The greater danger seemed to be that of people taking such benefits for granted.³³ Perhaps it was with that risk in mind that Herbert Morrison, when Leader of the LCC, published a book, *How Greater London is Governed*, in which a chapter was devoted to 'John Citizen and County Hall'. Its purpose was to 'bring home' the importance of the Council in the everyday life of a family. Among the mass of illustrative material, Morrison cited how John Citizen could set out to work in the knowledge that inspections by the Council would have ensued such safety measures as fire escapes were in place.³⁴ Given such awareness of the importance of public perception, particularly in the light of economies inflicted on local government in the early 1930s, the plight of those affected by 'the Plumstead subsidences' might seem an obvious opportunity for the Council to demonstrate further its indispensability in safeguarding individual welfare.

In assessing what government in its widest sense might wish, or be able, to deliver, a distinction has to be drawn between what was already perceived to be in the wider public interest and the circumstances that might suddenly and without precedent afflict individual households or a neighbourhood. There was simply no history of subsidence caused by underground workings in that part of London. As one commentator wrote in another context, governments could not simply swing into action whenever something unusual happened. They were not designed to run 'a private clinic for people's difficulties'.³⁵ Even where it was acknowledged that some form of intervention would be in the public interest, there might still be no means of doing so. As the LCC Town Planning Committee continued to insist, the risk of a building becoming dangerous did not constitute a sufficient basis for a Dangerous Structure Order. The files of the Clerk's Department contain numerous memoranda from the County Solicitor warning of how an otherwise ingenious proposal of a Member or official might open the authority to charges of using its powers and resources in a way that was *ultra vires*. As the Parliamentary Secretary told the joint deputation in May 1948, Ministers were similarly constrained – 'they were not a law unto themselves'.³⁶

If a recitation of such constraints might seem to conflict with the most basic function of local government, namely of experimentation in the provision of services deemed by the authorities to be necessary,³⁷ it was important not to lose sight of the supervisory powers conferred on central government. In practice, such complementary roles locked both into a

system of interdependence, the smooth working of which called for considerable managerial skill.³⁸ Far from encouraging radicalism, there was every reason for caution. Where, as in the case of 'the Plumstead subsidences', there was little precedent for assuming responsibility or committing resources, officials of both local and central government had all the more reason for avoiding uncertainties and criticisms. Given the context, it was remarkable how a comparatively few householders were able to attract such publicity for their cause. It provided further demonstration of how such acrimony and conflict is required within such systems to induce further exploration of policy options. A draft brief prepared for the Leader of the LCC, in 1942, readily acknowledged that, whatever the legal position, 'in equity a case exists for at least a contribution to the losses of any individual owner' affected by the subsidences. Ultimately, the two Local Acts enabled the Council to spend over £100,000 on survey and infilling of the underground workings. Within the parameters set by its own legislation, and permitted by Government, the Council achieved what the Clerk described as 'a great service to owners of property in the area by removing the blight'. It had given 'generous' allowances in respect of the Prohibition Orders.³⁹

It was here, perhaps that the deficiencies of local government from an individual perspective were seen to be most glaring. The principal actors might congratulate themselves for the ingenuity shown in ameliorating hardship in Plumstead, whilst preserving the principle that, where individuals chose to invest in the ownership of property, they must be allowed to enjoy the rewards but also suffer any losses that might accrue. Far from government being in a position to make exceptions and show indulgence to those in exceptional difficulty, the immediacy and directness of the application for help prevented any deviation from the assumption that no assistance could be given in meeting capital losses, however much they might afflict 'working-class' owner-occupiers. The obligation was on the individual property-owner to secure protection from the consequences of actions taken by previous generations, or that might stem from any shortcomings in contemporary administrative practice. It was paradoxically through recourse to the apparent flexibility available in local legislation and administrative practice that the response to such phenomena as environmental hazards revealed most starkly the limits of what individual citizens might expect by way of protection for what constituted their most closely-cherished possession. Whatever the wider pretensions of local government, they were found at the most local scale to be wanting when most desperately needed.

Acknowledgements

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Notes

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