
Larkin's Rented World

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When Philip Larkin bought his first home at the age of fifty-one, he had never felt so out of sorts. 'I have blindly, deafly, & dumbly,' he told his friend Judy Egerton, 'said I will buy an utterly undistinguished little modern house in Newland Park.'¹ Turfed out of his university-owned flat at Pearson Park in Hull, where he had lived for eighteen years, the move was to destabilise him in a manner from which he would never fully recover: 'it's a time when one is easily affected, and finding little things wrong with the house, or missing things the removers have almost certainly taken, produced a kind of disproportionate depression.'² Hard though he tried to 'be a contented creature and count my blessings', he complained endlessly about becoming 'The Man of Property', dealing with jammed doors, lost keys, ill-fitting carpets, washing machines, gas leaks, and waste disposal that was now exclusively his responsibility: 'I am piling up an awful lot of rubbish at the end of the garden: I only hope it sort of decays and disappears. Surely it must.'³

¹ Letter from Philip Larkin to Judy Egerton (17 February 1974), in *Selected Letters 1940-1985*, ed. by Anthony Thwaite (London: Faber & Faber, 1992), p. 502.

² Letter from Philip Larkin to Eva Larkin (30 June 1974), in *Letters Home 1936-1977*, ed. by James Booth (London: Faber & Faber, 2018), p. 525.

³ Letters from Philip Larkin to Eva Larkin (20 August 1975; 1 December 1974), *ibid.*, p. 528; p. 533.

Until that point, Larkin had been an inveterate and passionate renter. Between 1943 and 1974, he lived in at least fifteen different properties, often finding himself in small attic rooms whose vantage points inspired the observations for some of his most memorable poems. But the act of renting proved fundamental to many aspects of Larkin's life beyond where he lived. His career as a librarian meant the enforcement of rental contracts, the inevitable departing and – not so inevitable – returning of books. 'Fines are never charged,' he complained at his first job in Wellington, 'I can imagine the outraged stares when I start charging them.'⁴ His romantic life was similarly characterised by a refusal to commit to just one object. Relationships with Ruth Bowman, Monica Jones, Maeve Brennan, and Betty Mackereth overlapped – often without each other's knowledge – and were dropped, picked up, and exchanged over the course of four decades. If there were a writer who lived his life according to the principles of rental economics, it would be Larkin.

And yet, despite his tenant identity being at the core of his philosophy of life, it sat awkwardly alongside his political beliefs. By the time Margaret Thatcher hailed the

⁴ Letter from Philip Larkin to Eva and Sydney Larkin (5 December 1943), *ibid.*, p. 84.

coming of a ‘property-owning democracy’ in the 1979 Conservative manifesto, Larkin had been a fan of hers for some time.⁵ In an interview with the *Observer* that year, he declared: ‘I adore Mrs Thatcher. At last politics makes sense to me, which it hasn’t done since Stafford Cripps (I was very fond of him too). Recognizing that if you haven’t got the money for something you can’t have it – this is a concept that’s vanished for many years.’⁶ Larkin’s instinct to discuss notions of ownership is telling; the possession of an object, to his mind, had nothing to do with entitlement, but with transaction. However, despite the simplicity of his assertion, Larkin spent much of his life complicating the expectation – relied upon by Thatcher in her electoral campaign – that people should *want* to own their own property, whether or not they had the money.

In Larkin’s lifetime, tenants living in rented accommodation had a very different experience to those inhabiting the same properties today. When his first collection, *The North Ship*, was published in 1945, wartime rent controls ensured landlords did not exploit the loss of hundreds of thousands of homes during the Blitz for their own gain, at a time when the private rented sector accounted for more than fifty per cent of all households. Over the following decade, security of tenure was largely assured, as rent tribunals were bolstered to resolve disputes between

⁵ See Conservative General Election Manifesto 1979 <margaretthatcher.org/document/110858>.

⁶ Philip Larkin and Miriam Gross, ‘An Interview with the *Observer*’, in *Required Writing: Miscellaneous Pieces 1955-1982* (London: Faber & Faber, 1983), p. 52.

tenants and landlords. However, by 1957, just after the publication of Larkin’s *The Less Deceived*, the demand for homes had reached a fever pitch, and the Conservative government felt the solution lay in giving a shot in the arm to landlords. Hoping to incentivise them to make their properties available, the Rent Act of 1957 removed the majority of rent controls. This move has been seen as stoking antagonism between landlords and tenants, as cases of harassment and bullying – most notoriously in properties owned by Peter Rachman – became increasingly widespread.⁷ With a new Labour government in 1964, the pendulum swung back in the favour of tenants. Protections for unlawful eviction appeared, as did ‘rent regulation’, where fair rents were defined by market levels, with the possibility that tenants and landlords could appeal to a third party for arbitration. The sector continued to decline over the next two decades, so that by 1986, less than nine per cent of households were living in private rented accommodation. Thatcher’s government sought to turn the tide through a number of measures designed, once again, to incentivise landlords. The 1988 Housing Act removed rent regulation, allowing landlords to determine what they charged, and also giving them the power to evict tenants in certain contracts without a reason by serving them a Section 21 order.

In 2025, Thatcher’s reforms are the foundation of what many consider to be a different kind of crisis in the private rented sector. Every month new records are

⁷ See, for instance, Alan G. V. Simmonds, ‘Raising Rachman: The Origins of the Rent Act, 1957’, *The Historical Journal* 45.4 (2002), 843-68.

broken in average advertised rents, the number of evictions, the number of homeless people and children in temporary accommodation. Promising to support England's 4.6 million households who currently rent privately, the Labour government's Renters Rights' Bill makes a number of proposals. Among the measures offered are the abolition of Section 21 'no-fault' evictions, the replacement of fixed-term contracts with periodic tenancies, a new appeals procedure to protest above-market rent increases, a national database of landlords, a new Decent Homes Standard and extension of 'Awaab's Law' to the private rented sector, and a ban on 'bidding wars' by prohibiting letting agents from soliciting or accepting offers above the asking price. The measures aim to provide an antidote to some of the issues concerning the security of rented living and the quality of accommodation. In doing so, however, they have the potential to uproot a series of behaviours which have come to define the tenant experience in modern Britain.

There are some habits which have become so ingrained that it seems impossible to imagine rented life without them. There is the hesitation to complain about even small issues lest the landlord brand you a fussy tenant and seek to evict you. There are the time-stamped albums on our phones dedicated to photographs of every scuff mark, every spot of Blu Tack residue, every splintered section of skirting board, ready in case the landlord seeks to claim back the deposit for refurbishments that will never happen anyway. But there are other, deep-seated attitudes which are also due a welcome change. An adversarial atmosphere has long reigned over the rental process,

causing knock-on effects on the wider social dynamics of the country. Intergenerational resentment between younger tenants and their typically older landlords has been bubbling beneath the surface for the last decade, but so too has there been growing antagonism within 'Generation Rent' itself. Renters are encouraged to face off against each other in mass viewings, as letting agents – often with salary details of prospective tenants in hand – seek to turn passive-aggressive glares into competition for offers. Similarly, housemate interviews have become a key part of spare room applications, as solo renters look to join an HMO licence by convincing the current tenants that they are cleaner, nicer, more reliable, and more sociable than the person who came before. The measures in the government bill promise to make some of these experiences ancient history, but as this broader cultural shift comes to pass, we might wonder what exactly will change about the way our inner lives are shaped by the structure of the rented world.

Philip Larkin has much more in common with millennial and Gen Z tenants than he does with the homeowners of his own generation. The act of renting was not just an administrative reality for Larkin, it also formed the foundation of his creative imagination. But how might his poems – written during the relative comforts of mid-century renting – speak to the inflection point we face in 2025? His poems are fascinated by the possibilities of dislocation, of transience, of possession and circumscription. While the ownership of just one object seemed anathema to Larkin the man, the assumption that he should want to buy his own home haunts much of his writing. The speaker of

‘Poetry of Departures’ discusses a rumour of a man who ‘*chucked up everything / And just cleared off,*’ an action we’re expected to find ‘audacious, purifying, / Elemental’. And, apparently, we do:

We all hate home
And having to be there:
I detest my room,
Its specially-chosen junk,
The good books, the good bed,
And my life, in perfect order [...]

The speaker is ‘flushed and stirred’ by the prospect of doing the same – ‘I’d go today, // Yes, swagger the nut-strewn roads, / Crouch in the fo’c’sle / Stubby with goodness’ – but withdraws for a curious reason: ‘if / It weren’t so artificial’. To *chuck up everything*, to take ‘a deliberate step backwards’, is ‘To create an object: / Books; china; a life / Reprehensibly perfect.’ It is not just home, but the consumable ideal of living life ‘in perfect order’ which troubles Larkin’s speaker. The precarity of modern renting may well have been something which appealed to his sensibility.

For most modern renters, though, the idea of building a permanent home is what makes life in rented accommodation so frustrating. They are anxious not only to stop spending up to half of their salaries on rent, but to start filling their own space with objects and memories. The average age of a first-time buyer in 1960, just after Larkin’s poem was published, was twenty-three. In 2024, that number is closer to thirty-four, and there is evidence that the age at which Britons are starting families is being delayed by the desire to raise

children in a property that they own.⁸ For Larkin, home had rather different connotations; it constituted not the place that he currently lived, but wherever his family was, a place he had long sought to leave behind. James Booth’s edition of *Letters Home*, published in 2018, provides an anchor for Larkin’s own wanderings through temporary lodgings across the British Isles. But that does not make his family home a place of comfort. ‘Home is so Sad’, a poem published in *The Whitsun Weddings*, pities the place which ‘stays as it was left, / Shaped to the comfort of the last to go / As if to win them back.’ Abandoned and taken for granted, its contents become vessels of memories long since forgotten: ‘You can see how it was: / Look at the pictures and the cutlery.’ The poem concludes with one of the most pregnant demonstrative pronouns ever written, saying so much with only one word: ‘The music in the piano stool. That vase.’ Larkin denies us a description of all that qualifies the vase to be ‘*That*’, but his silence does more than a list of memories ever could; he shuts us out, keeping the memories – good or bad – just for himself.

The relationship between memories and a sense of belonging defines another of Larkin’s poems that explores the geography of the home. ‘I Remember, I Remember’ sends its speaker on a train journey through Coventry: ‘I leant far out, and squinnied for a sign / That this was still the town that had been “mine”’. Upon arrival, however, he doesn’t recognise the station: ‘I wasn’t even clear / Which side was which. From where those cycle-crates

⁸ See English Housing Survey 2023 to 2024 <[gov.uk/government/collections/english-housing-survey](https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/english-housing-survey)>.

/ Were standing, had we annually departed
// For all those family hols?’ When asked if this was ‘where you “have your roots”?’ the speaker thinks of replying with more than just the affirmative: ‘No, only where my childhood was unspent’. As with ‘Home is so Sad’, memories shape the poem, but Larkin introduces a distance between the present and the past by negating the retrospective impulse: ‘Our garden, first: where I did not invent / Blinding theologies of flowers and fruits, / And wasn’t spoken to by an old hat.’ Although a sense of regret may be driving this attitude, the brittleness of Larkin’s sense of home may have another explanation. He had paid a visit to Coventry in 1940, just after he had started at Oxford. The city had been bombed in the Blitz, and Larkin joined a friend to view the devastation: ‘We couldn’t go within a mile of the City Centre because they were dynamiting it. We heard the blasting all afternoon.’⁹ It seemed pure luck whether a house was left standing or not, and families were almost certainly not to be found in their homes: ‘No one seemed in at Barnes’, Williams’, or Snape’s, & the maid at Bass’s didn’t know where you were’. Home did not seem so reliable a place, after all, and it made sense to want to leave it behind.

Modern renters are no strangers to disaster-induced housing volatility. During the Covid-19 pandemic, rents in London fell dramatically, at almost fourteen per cent between 2020 and 2021. Then, as the country emerged from total lockdown in 2021 and workers returned to the cities, they rose at record rates, with a maximum

⁹ Letter from Philip Larkin to Eva and Sydney Larkin (18 November 1940), in *Letters Home*, p. 26.

increase of twenty-one per cent in the spring of 2022.¹⁰ Without rules for moderating rent increases, forty per cent of those renting privately in London at the time admitted that they would struggle to pay their rent in the near future.¹¹ For Larkin, though, crisis provided a creative opportunity. His earliest poems written at the end of the Second World War embrace images of detachment. Throughout the poems of *The North Ship*, the wind dislodges various objects: ‘I told the wind: / It took away my words: / It is not love you will find, / Only the bright-tongued birds / Only a moon with no home’; ‘I will attend to the trees and their gracious silence, / To winds that move’; ‘And the wind climbed up the caves [...] / And broke round a house we slept in, / A drawn blind and a bed.’ These states of natural motion are occasionally combined with a curious grammatical fondness in Larkin’s poetry for gerunds. In ‘Night Music’, there are no eyes ‘To sharpen on the stars’ / Wide heaven-holding’; in ‘Arrivals, Departures’, the townspeople wave goodbye to intermittent travellers, since ‘we are nudged from comfort, never knowing / How safely we may disregard their blowing’; and in ‘Wedding Wind’, ‘All’s unravelled under the sun by the wind’s blowing.’ The wind, that significant image of transience in the *North Ship*, is unable to possess a stationary object. One gains a sense of the post-war Larkin struggling to hold onto anything solid.

¹⁰ See Julia Kollewe, ‘Private rents in London plunge by up to 34% amid Covid crisis’, *Guardian* (21 Oct 2020) <theguardian.com/money/2020/oct/21/private-rents-london-covid-crisis-cities-britain>.

¹¹ See Finnerty and Bicocchi, ‘Understanding rental trends’, *ibid.*

The ideal of putting down roots is inherited by Larkin and the modern renter in different ways, but more pressing to both is an awareness that they might be ripped up at a moment's notice. Prior to Labour's new reforms, more than 300 Londoners were served a Section 21 'no fault' eviction order by their landlord every week, forcing them to scramble for new accommodation in the two months to which they are entitled.¹² Combined with the usual mechanism of the fixed-term contract, the modern rental experience is defined by the possibility of a surprise or expected termination; as soon as a tenancy begins, it is stalked by the possibility of its end. This inability to feel entirely settled is something that underwrites Larkin's poems, too. In 'Places, Loved Ones', it is the restlessness of the speaker that makes insecurity a voluntary choice:

No, I have never found
The place where I could say
This is my proper ground,
Here I shall stay;
Nor met that special one
Who has an instant claim
On everything I own
Down to my name [...]

The legal ties of home ownership and marriage serve only to restrain the lazy: 'To find such seems to prove / You want no choice in where / To build or whom to love'. Instead, they passively accept their fate, 'so that it's not your fault / Should the town turn dreary, / The girl a dolt.' The evasion of responsibility, something we usually associate with the email arguments between landlords and tenants over faulty

¹² See <London/gov/uk/mayor-urges-government-not-delay-renters-reform-bill-almost-300-london-renters-face-no-fault>.

pipes and tumble dryers, is here a fault of the homeowner, who has become trapped in two different kinds of binding contract.

Nevertheless, the government's hope is that the introduction of periodic tenancies and the tightening of the grounds for eviction will give tenants greater security to plan for longer periods in their rented accommodation should they wish. For Larkin, there was a kind of security already built into his rental arrangements. Notwithstanding the law at the time, which made it extremely difficult to evict tenants without good reason, Larkin's long-term landlord was also his employer. His flat at Pearson Park was acquired by Hull University to house new lecturers for short stints before they had had a chance to find permanent accommodation of their own. Larkin made it his home between 1956 and 1974, longer than anywhere else, apparently attracted to the comfort of semi-permanence while refusing to own the property himself. Despite that fact, even semi-permanence grated on him. He wrote to Monica Jones after agreeing to take the flat that 'to think of myself owning furniture gives me a sort of sinking feeling. Paying rates. Practically a *householder*. I'll probably have to get all the stuff *insured*. I'm being woven into the fabric of society so fast my head is spinning.'¹³ For Andrew Motion, Pearson Park made Larkin 'a kind of grown-up student', living in 'a place filled with the idea of youth, which he feared he would lose for ever if he moved.'¹⁴

¹³ Letter from Philip Larkin to Monica Jones (18 September 1956), quoted in Andrew Motion, *Philip Larkin: A Writer's Life* (London: Faber & Faber, 1993), p. 276.

¹⁴ Motion, *A Writer's Life*, p. 439.

For Larkin, this attitude towards the future is misguided. In ‘Next, Please’, a poem from his first mature collection, he speaks of the impulse of expectation: ‘Something is always approaching; every day / *Till then* we say // Watching from a bluff the tiny, clear, / Sparkling armada of promises draw near.’ Our anticipation is merely concealed impatience: ‘How slow they are! And how much time they waste, / Refusing to make haste!’ We assume that deferral will realise itself in value through a kind of emotional inflation: ‘We think each one will heave to and unload / All good into our lives, all we are owed / For waiting so devoutly and so long’, but Larkin’s speaker disagrees: ‘we are wrong’. No matter how long we spend waiting, there is one promise that is certain: ‘Only one ship is seeking us, a black- / Sailed unfamiliar, towing at her back / A huge and birdless silence. In her wake / No waters breed or break.’

It was not until February 1974 that Larkin would finally be forced to buy his own home. Within a few days of moving into Newland Park, however, he was already noticing the loss of the kind of environment that fed his poetry: ‘The house is in a very quiet residential district – virtually no traffic – and really isn’t on the way to anywhere, so there are very few people about.’¹⁷ Within a year, he was itching for another move: ‘I really don’t think I can end my days here: too much work. I’m not really happy in the house – can’t write.’¹⁸ Nevertheless, Number 105 was to remain Larkin’s home until he died in 1985 of throat cancer, and would

become the home of his partner, Monica Jones, for fifteen years after that. Given all that has been noticed about the importance of renting to Larkin’s poetic imagination, we might suggest that it was not just the house’s location, but also the nature of his ownership that played a role in his discomfort.

In the eleven years between his moving date in 1974 and his death in 1985 – a period in which Larkin was the nation’s favourite poet, thought to be at the height of his powers – he wrote only ten poems for publication. Of these, six were commissioned. He seems to have appreciated the stimulation of a specific brief on which to expand his thoughts. His best-known poem from this final decade is ‘Aubade’, which was begun in April 1974, just as Larkin completed the paperwork to buy his first home. By the time moving day arrived on 27 June, he had abandoned the poem, bereft of inspiration. The opening is tinged with the awareness of having finally decided to put down roots, appropriating the image of death which haunted the certainty of the future in ‘Next, Please’:

I work all day, and get half-drunk at night.
 Waking at four to soundless dark, I stare.
 In time the curtain-edges will grow light.
 Till then I see what’s really always there:
 Unresting death, a whole day nearer now,
 Making all thought impossible but how
 And where and when I shall myself die.

After a three-year interlude in which he settled into his new home, he picked up the poem once more, reworking drafts of the final three stanzas, and completed it in the days after his mother’s death in

¹⁷ Letter from Philip Larkin to Eva (30 June 1974), in *Letters Home*, p. 525.

¹⁸ Letter from Philip Larkin to Norman Iles (28 April 1975), in *Selected Letters*, p. 524.

stones taken away.’²⁰ Even ‘Skin’, the organ which we may consider our only truly permanent home, is little more than ‘Obedient daily dress’ to Larkin, hopelessly subject to change: ‘Those few forbidding signs / Of the continuous coarse / Sand-laden wind, time’.

Obsessed by ideas of time, the questions that Larkin might have asked about his living arrangements are the questions that trouble his poems for other, more profound reasons. How much time is left? When is it time to settle down? Isn’t it time to move on? His poems remind us that there is something freeing about *chucking up*, something exciting about trading the old for the new, and something self-nourishing about not knowing what the next step is. But Larkin’s application of this sensibility to his own life was a conscious act of rebellion; this was not how other people lived their lives, and was not how others wanted him to live his. He also did so at a time when the major drawbacks of renting – unaffordability, insecurity, poor quality – were not nearly as stark as they are today. For the tenants of 2025, their ‘rented world’ is about to change, many hope for the better. Whether more households decide to stay for longer in their rented accommodation, however, will depend not only on their legal right to remain, but on their ability to shed the behaviours which have for so long defined living in a space that they cannot call their own. ‘Mr Bleaney’ struggles to abandon the thought ‘That how we live measures our own nature’. While the act of renting certainly shaped the life and art of his

creator, it remains to be seen how Generation Rent respond to measures which – at least in intention – encourage them to put down firmer roots.

²⁰ Letter from Philip Larkin to Winifred Bradshaw (13 December 1977), *Selected Letters*, p. 573.

