

<http://scotlandonsunday.scotsman.com/sos-news-columnists/Peter-Ross-Sound-in-the.5764144.jp>

## **Peter Ross: Sound in the suburbs**

**Published Date:** 25 October 2009

TO some, this easily mocked – or ignored – space that is neither city nor countryside is the centre of claustrophobic conformity, a byword for dullness. But for those who live there, the suburbs offer safety, friendliness and belonging

"WOULD you like a suburban scone?" asks Liz Beevers. A friendly woman of 61 with an intelligent and mischievous air, she offers what appears to be a plate of home-baking. "To be honest, they are from Tesco."

Liz and her husband Cliff, a retired professor of mathematics, have lived in Juniper Green since 1973. If you have never heard of Juniper Green, you might imagine from the name that it is a pretty village in the Home Counties, all streams wending and larks ascending. But in fact it is a suburb of Edinburgh, five or so miles south-west of the city centre, near the foot of the Pentlands. On a sunlit autumn morning, the air echoes with the thick muesli crunch of fallen leaves and the cursing rasp of magpies strutting over gardens like mobsters in spats.

The Beevers love the natural beauty and local history of Juniper Green. They rubbish the notion that suburbia is a place where conformity, like a prowler, creeps up unnoticed from behind the hydrangeas. A number of arty types have homes here, they say, and even though the politics of locals are generally conservative, there are exceptions. One family is reputed to have a "Ban Trident" sticker in their front window, but I can't find it. "No salesmen or hawkers" is much more apparent. I also spot plenty of sun-bleached garden gnomes and, of all things, a small front lawn made of Astroturf. The magpies don't go near it.

Suburbia is easy to mock. It has become a byword for dullness, even mindlessness, as ripe for satire as the rosehips in the woods around Juniper Green are for picking.

The house next to the Beevers is called Orwell Lodge, which is ironic as George Orwell loathed the suburbs. In *Coming Up For Air*, he described "a prison with the cells all in a row. A line of semi-detached torture-chambers where the poor little five-to-ten-pound-a-weekers quake and shiver, every one of them with the boss twisting his tail and the wife riding him like the nightmare and the kids sucking his blood like leeches."

More common than this derision is a tendency among the literati and media to ignore the suburbs altogether. In Britain, it's estimated that four out of five people live there. Yet the focus, particularly in Scotland, is usually on metropolis or wilderness. These, we are told, is where the fascinating lives are being led. But going by the law of averages, that can't be true. The suburbs of unsung towns have a magical, unexplored quality that I personally find very intriguing. There are more things in Irvine and Perth than are dreamt of in our philosophy.

I can think of two examples near my home just outside Glasgow. A man up the road has a model railway laid out in his back garden. You'd never know from the unremarkable facade that behind his semi is a complex locomotive Neverland. But there it is. One day each summer he invites locals to visit. I remember seeing him and his grandson wearing matching railway caps and operating the many trains from the control room within the garden shed. They looked very happy.

And again, not far from my home, there is a bungalow which would be the very epitome of suburbia – loft conversion, paved driveway, neatly pruned roses – were it not for the ten-foot T-Rex made of holly. This cheery example of the topiarist's art was created in 1982 by Bill Crowther, a master butcher with magic hands. He passed away two years ago and the T-Rex in the front garden is now maintained by his daughter, Anne, who has lived in the house all her 64 years, and her brother. Her father, she says, originally intended it to look like a bird, but she is delighted that passing children refer to her home as "the dinosaur house". It is a local landmark and proof that a life in suburbia need not mean a withered imagination.

People buy in the suburbs for a combination of reasons that will certainly include at least one of these three: the schools are good, they fancy a bit of garden, they need extra bedrooms for the kids. That's why I decided to move out of the city. Also, in a single weekend, two incidents put me off the urban life for good: a stone thrown from a tenement window one evening struck me just below the left eye, and the following morning I saw a girl dressed as a medieval wench pleasuring her young man in the street. That was enough for my wife and me; we packed up our toddler and crossed the Clyde. Say what you will about living in East Renfrewshire, but it doesn't have much in the way of public sex and violence. It

does, however, have a pretty good Homebase.

The basic reason, then, that so many people live in the suburbs is that it is nice to live in the suburbs. As Paul Barker puts it in his forthcoming book, *The Freedoms Of Suburbia*: "Its vociferous enemies fail to see that it is an essential ingredient of city life. Such critics are outnumbered many, many times by the millions for whom suburbia is a land of pleasantness, friendship and hope."

That's certainly how people feel about Juniper Green. Like many suburbs, living there is a constant balancing act between a desire to be neighbourly and a love of privacy. The ubiquitous privet hedge is emblematic of this. It's neighbourly to keep it trimmed and tidy, but it also functions as a territorial boundary. Gardening looms large in the suburbs (Liz Beevers is "majoring in parsnips") and recycling bins for garden waste are a status symbol. The more you have, the bigger your patch must be. Recycling bins are what the suburbs have instead of bling.

Keeping an eye out is also key. On Baberton Crescent, lying on the road outside his pebble-dash semi, Walter Robertson, 72, is scrubbing the alloys of his black Ford Focus. "The neighbourhood watch look for the oddbods going about," he says, getting up with a smile. "Folk that we don't know, like yourself."

Though Robertson is making a joke, there is a touch of Big Brother about the suburbs, albeit a fairly benign curtain-twitching variety. And Orwell does have a point in *Coming Up For Air*, however sneerily put – there is angst in the suburbs. Where I live, property is expensive, and I get the sense that quite a lot of worrying goes on about paying the mortgage, about keeping your job, and especially about whether you even want to keep your job given that it means you don't see enough of your children. These concerns can be dampened by a glass of whatever decent is on offer at Sainsbury's but, honestly, I don't know why we bother insulating our houses. We should just stack our overheated neuroses in the loft and keep ourselves cosy that way.

But you'll look long and hard in Juniper Green for anyone to echo those feelings. The whole point about the place seems to be the lack of anxiety. Just down from the local primary school, Lisa Newall, 39, is walking with her daughter, Beth, who is six. They moved from Slateford two years ago, and Lisa feels she doesn't have to worry about the kids as much here. She can let them out to play and be confident that the neighbours will be looking out for them. "What I like is that everyone knows each other," she says, holding a hula-hoop. "This is a real family place."

It's often said that suburbs are not-places. They are not-the-city. They are not-the-countryside. But saying what they are is difficult. That's especially true of the housing springing up all over brownfield sites in central Scotland. These are often large clusters of pleasant and roomy houses within easy driving distance of a school and a motorway, but they lack that sense of rootedness in a particular place that acts as an invisible foundation for a home.

Juniper Green is different. It does its best to forget that it is part of Edinburgh, the golf club, for instance, having large trees blocking what would be stunning views of the city. But it also has a real identity of its own, and that filters down to the people who live there – being known to their neighbours makes them feel more real than if they were simply part of the urban mass. It's the Cheers effect – a place where everybody knows your name.

"The usual please," says Jim Gray, walking into the Juniper Green Inn. He's a neat man of 69 wearing a pink shirt and yellow tie. Cathy the barmaid serves him a lager and I ask how he is. "Still alive," he says. "That's pretty good at my age."

It's half-four in the afternoon, but the clock behind the bar says otherwise. It has been kept five minutes fast since the days when there was a railway station in Juniper Green. That was to prevent travellers missing their train. The railway has been gone for decades but the clock still warns drinkers to sup up. It seems emblematic, too, of a suburb where time sometimes seems to have stopped.

"I've lived in the area since 1966 and have only experienced one incident of vandalism," says Jim Gray. "In 1971, I planted a wee tree and somebody tore it up. To me, this place means total safety."

He takes a pull at his pint. "I wouldn't shift if I won the Lottery."