

OXFORD VIGILANCE COMMITTEE.

Report on Moral Conditions of Oxford.

November, 1916.

The following Report is divided into four heads:—(1) Facts; (2) Results; (3) Causes; and (4) Remedies.

I.—FACTS.

In dealing with the facts it is important to distinguish between prostitution as a permanent social disease, connected with the presence of certain women who are known to the police, and special or temporary outbreaks of immorality due to causes not generally at work. Under the first head come the facts as to known prostitutes belonging to the city: under the second come the facts as to women who have come to Oxford from outside; or women and girls who, without being known prostitutes, have drifted or are drifting into an immoral life.

(1.) **Regular prostitutes.** Not less than *twenty prostitutes are known to the Police.* Late in the evening (about 10 p.m.) eight to ten of such women may be seen hanging about Carfax, the Cornmarket, the theatre, and the centre of the town generally. After they have made their appointments they retire to the Hythe Bridge Towing path, or to certain houses.

Several cases of officers and members of the University being solicited have been reported lately. Girls under sixteen have been found soliciting in the streets. There is some good evidence that the Cinemas, and some of the bars, are used by women and girls for making the acquaintance of officers and others. Three well-known girls of bad character have been seen recently at a Cinema theatre in the afternoon with three cadets. The importation of new women has sometimes been suspected, especially during the summer of 1916; but the Police could get no definite evidence of this, and it is said that there has been no increase recently. It is therefore likely that these women represent the permanent extent of the evil in Oxford. This prostitution is of a low class, and generally unorganised. But two recent cases to the contrary may be quoted: (1) E. F., a known prostitute, who had been on the streets and before the City Court for some years, was seen by Women Patrols on the Hythe Bridge Towing Path with several younger women, and with men to keep a look out on the Canal Bridge. She made arrangements with other men, who came on to the path, and took them among the bushes, where the women were hidden. (2) A. B., a well-known prostitute, whom the doctors have declared to be a "moral imbecile," but cannot at present certify as feeble-minded, is known to have three or four girls under her influence, all of whom appeared in the City Court with her recently on the charge of being concerned in the keeping of a disorderly house. C. D., a girl only 17½ years old, has become a professional prostitute during the last two years, largely owing to A. B.'s influence.

Six houses suspected of being disorderly are being watched by the Police. The dark state of the streets, and the fact that the women move so often, make it difficult to get enough evidence for conviction. There has, however, been no increase in the number of these houses since the war: and they may therefore be regarded, like the known prostitutes, as part of the permanent problem.

(2.) **Irregular prostitution** is of two kinds, imported and local.

(i.) In the first place there is a certain amount of evidence, upon the best authority, that lodging-house keepers have in several cases found it necessary to refuse rooms to *women of bad character who came to Oxford representing themselves as the wives or friends of officers or cadets.* This is an evil very difficult to calculate or to check. Something of the kind happens in many Garrison towns. Perhaps the nearness of Oxford to London makes it more dangerous here than in some other places. In spite of the opinion of the Police, quoted above, many observers are agreed that there is a type of women about the streets at present which used not to be familiar here.

(ii.) Again it is feared that a large number of soldiers' wives encourage soldiers to visit them in their homes for immoral purposes. In one parish the Vicar called the attention of the Police to five such houses in one street, and the Military Authorities put the street out of bounds. A Rescue Worker has reported two houses in another parish to the Police during the last fortnight (November, 1916).

Between forty and fifty cases of drunkenness and unfaithfulness among such women have come under the notice of the Police: the two things generally go together, and most of the cases are very bad; e.g. (a), a soldier came home after an absence of more than a year to find that his wife had been practically living with another man, and was expecting a child by him. The home has been broken up, the wife sent to a workhouse, and the children to homes away from Oxford. (b) A wife with nine children has just given birth to a tenth (illegitimate). The husband had been in France about eighteen months. The wife's separation allowance has been stopped.

(iii.) More serious, perhaps, than either of these, is the spread of immorality among *young girls*. Women Patrols, as the result of long experience, report that Carfax and the corner of George Street are used as regular meeting-places between girls and men. Quite young girls (12—15) loiter about there, and every night between 6 and 10, Cornmarket, Queen Street, Broad Street, and to a less degree High Street and St. Aldates, are crowded with young girls, whose dress, and frivolous, not to say impertinent, behaviour show that they are deliberately laying themselves out to attract men. If they succeed, they go further afield. If not, they spend the whole evening walking up and down in twos and threes. The darkness is now such that shop doorways even in the principal streets are much used by couples. The more remote streets and roads, such as South Parks Road and Benson's Place, are used by couples whose behaviour is often disorderly, or worse. Most of the Towing paths are still more frequented, and there is much evidence to show that they are used more or less for immoral purposes. The Patrols have been witnesses on several occasions both of indecent behaviour and of actual immorality.

During the summer there was much complaint about the behaviour of men and girls in the parks. Complaints were also received from many sources as to immoral behaviour on the river, and there is specific evidence as to servant-girls who first "get into trouble" in this way. The extent of these practices may be judged by the following reports made on four nights between November 15th and 21st. The cases noted are not those of couples moving about in the ordinary way, but standing close together in dark corners against walls or railings.

Nov. 13th *Brasenose Lane*.—9.20. Man and girl in lane, and corner of Bodleian till 9.35.
9.30. Man and girl in lane till 9.50.
9.50. Man and girl under tree at corner of lane till 10, when reporter left.

Queen's Lane.— 9. 5. Man and woman near West corner of St. Peter's Church till 9.25.
9.55. Man and woman at corner of New College Cloisters till 10.5.

„	15th	8.30—8.45.	South Parks Road	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	3 men with girls.
		9. 0.	Parks Road, N. of Keble	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	3 „ „ „
		8.30.	South Cross Road	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	1 „ „ „
		9.45.	Brasenose College Lane	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	3 „ „ „
„	16th.	8.30.	Parks Road	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	1 „ „ „
		8.40.	South Parks Road	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	4 „ „ „
		8.55.	Jowett's Walk	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	1 „ „ „
		8.20.	Queen's Lane	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	1 „ „ „
		8.35.	Merton Street	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	1 „ „ „
		9. 0.	Brewer Street	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	1 „ „ „
		9.15.	Queen's Lane	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	1 „ „ „
		9.55.	Turl Street	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	1 „ „ „
		9. 0.	Parks Road	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	2 „ „ „
„	21st.	8.15—9. 0.	South Parks Road	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	6 „ „ „
		9.10.	Brasenose College Lane	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	2 „ „ „
„	22nd.	8.15—9. 0.	South Parks Road	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	5 „ „ „
		9. 0—9.15.	Parks Road	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	2 „ „ „
		9.15—9.45.	Mansfield Road	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	2 „ „ „

It is not, of course, suggested that in all the cases there was impropriety, or that the girls were all of the class under discussion. But the number of cases reported—which anyone who has been about the streets at night will know to be representative of what goes on in many parts of the City—suggests that there is a considerable amount of immorality as well as of foolishness going on among the younger Oxford girls. This is probably the most serious part of the whole problem.

II.—RESULTS.

Some of the points mentioned under this head are also evidence of the seriousness of the facts above described.

(1.) *Illegitimacy.* There were fifty illegitimate births in Oxford during 1915, *i.e.*, 5.77 per cent. of the total number of births, as compared with fifty-three, or 5.81 per cent. in 1914. Health visitors and others think that, judging by reports up to date, there will be a slight increase this year. There is evidence to show that in some cases the harm had been done in villages outside, though the birth took place in Oxford.

(2.) It is known, however, that the amount of illegitimacy is no indication of the amount of immorality which goes on, owing to the prevalence of *abortion*. The evidence given before the National Birth-Rate Commission is conclusive as to the wide-spread use of drugs for abortion in some parts of the country; and there is a certain amount of good evidence that these methods are widely used and even recommended by mothers to their daughters, in Oxford. It is not necessary to enlarge on the medical or criminal aspect of this question.

(3.) A very serious danger resulting directly from such immorality as has been described, not only for those who indulge in it, but for all with whom they come in contact, and particularly for any children they may have, is the infection of *Venereal Diseases*. Some of the prostitutes are known to be centres of infection.

(4.) Among the cases investigated by the Oxford Voluntary Association for the care of the Mentally Deficient there is much evidence to show that *Feeble-mindedness* is a contributory cause of prostitution and immorality, as it certainly tends to result from these things, and from the Venereal Diseases which so often accompany them.

Two girls, E. F. and K. L., who had both been on the streets for some years, and were constantly in the City Court, were both certified as feeble-minded about two months ago (September, 1916). Another such girl, A. B., has been declared a moral imbecile. Four other women whose cases are being investigated have had seven illegitimate children between them.

(5.) A less obvious, but often in the long run a hardly less unhappy result of such immorality is the *marriages into which many couples are forced* in order to cover up its results. Of 848 cases investigated in 1914-16, in connexion with military allowances and pensions, involving the examination of marriage and birth certificates, it was very frequently found that the birth of the first child had taken place within a few months of the marriage. Most of these were civil marriages.

(6.) But the most serious factor in the situation, at once a result and a cause of immorality, is the *low moral standard* and knowledge of evil which tend to spread among Oxford girls. Most of the social workers bear witness to this, and declare it in their opinion to be the most serious feature of the present time. For instance, a girl of 14½ had got in with a set of bad companions in Oxford. People interested sent her to a Refuge in Reading. Some letters and a paper belonging to her came into the possession of one of the oldest Rescue Workers there, who said that the paper (which had been passed round among the girl's companions) revealed a knowledge of evil more appalling than anything she had come across in her previous experience. Again, a young servant, aged 15, whose mistress was trying to help her, repeated a conversation which had taken place between herself, some girl companions, and boys of their own age. It was such as could not have taken place in any decent mixed company. How far these instances are typical, it is hard to say. But they corroborate other lines of evidence in pointing to the existence of a serious state of things.

III.—CAUSES.

(1.) It is necessary to distinguish between *permanent* and *temporary* causes. It is the latter with which this Report is mainly concerned. But, in order not to leave out any of the main factors of the situation, it should be remembered:—(1) that prostitution is a trade, and the supply will only cease with the demand: the ultimate factor is not the woman, but the man, and more can be done, in the long run, by facilitating happy marriages than by making immorality difficult; (2) that prostitution is closely connected with the habit of drinking, and is affected by all manner of Temperance Reform; (3) that the growing economic freedom of girls, which carries with it a break-down of home-life, is a contributory cause, and needs to be directed into more profitable outlets; (4) that much of the literature and many of the entertainments patronized by young girls directly or indirectly stimulate sexual ideas. Two girls, who had got into trouble recently, confessed to the Rescue Worker that the first suggestion of evil came to them through indecent postcards shown to them by men, and five shops in Oxford which sell such cards are being watched by the police.

(2.) Among the *Temporary Causes* may be mentioned the following:—

(i.) What may be called *war fever*, namely, a state of mind of which everyone is more or less conscious, half excitement and half melancholy, in which the ordinary interests and standards of life are obscured, and a kind of recklessness drives one to extremes of vice almost as easily as to extremes of virtue. Among girls there results a widespread extravagance of dress and manners, and a desire for excitement and “experiences” which is at the bottom of much that is going on now in Oxford.

(ii.) This war fever is of course stimulated by the presence in Oxford of 2,000—3,000 *soldiers*, physically fit, well fed, and free from the restrictions of the society in which they ordinarily live. Many of them have more money and freedom than they need, and come from a class which is not above “picking up” with the type of girl which is so common in Oxford.

(iii.) The *darkening of the streets* directly encourages immorality. Most competent observers are agreed that the state of things is worse than it has been at any time since the outbreak of the war.

IV.—REMEDIES.

Remedies may be divided into two classes:—(1) Negative or Curative; (2) Positive or Preventive. The former are the easier, and are demanded by decency. The latter are the more difficult, but are the only kind which can deal with the immorality which is at the root of the problem.

(1.) Negative Remedies.

(i.) It is hoped and believed that more use will be made of the *Military Police*, now that there is a permanent A.P.M. resident in Oxford.

(ii.) *The Women's Patrols* are much handicapped by the darkness of the streets, and by their inability to challenge or to arrest. It is thought that much more might be done by the introduction of *Women Police* into Oxford, with constabulary powers.

(iii.) *The City Police* are very much understaffed at present, and are naturally disinclined, in the presence of the Military Authorities, and after many years of non-interference with a large undergraduate population, to take a strong line. There is, however, a need for a more efficient patrolling of the streets by Special Constables or others to take the place of the lamps which have been extinguished, and on the ground that the present state of the streets is a scandal to the City.

(iv.) It should be possible, without any real risk, to provide more lights in the side streets and dark parts of the City.

(v.) Under the *Defence of the Realm Act* the “Competent Military Authority” has very wide powers to deport women who have been convicted of immoral practices, or whose presence may be considered dangerous to H.M. Forces. Hitherto supervision has been thought better than deportation.

(vi.) The regulation and patrolling of the *Parks*, the *River*, and the *Towpaths*, present special difficulties, and should be re-considered by the proper authorities before next summer. Possibly some restrictions could be put upon the hiring of boats after dark.

(2.) Positive Remedies.

These seem to fall under two heads:—(1) The provision of *counter-attractions*, principally in the form of clubs, concerts, dances, and refreshment places, not only for men and girls separately, but also for both together. A mixed Club was carried on during the winter of 1914–15 in Turl Street, but the result was disappointing, and it was given up. A lady who has run a girls' club in Oxford for many years, writes: “Our efforts to get these young girls into our club seem quite unavailing. They find the streets more attractive, I fancy.” No attempt has been made to collect information as to what is already being done under this head. But it must in any case be quite inadequate to deal with the large number of men and girls who are about the streets in the evening. This is a matter which the Vigilance Committee might very properly take up.

(2) The only thoroughly positive and permanent remedy lies in *moral and educational work* both among men and girls. This, again, is a matter that the Committee has under consideration, and might well attempt to organise, difficult and slow as the work is likely to be.

In conclusion, it seems worth while to urge that in Oxford there are more than the ordinary reasons why the present state of things should cause serious concern, and call for drastic remedies. It is one of the most visited cities in England. It contains a colony of some sixty Indian students, who are ready at all times, but particularly just now, to form and disseminate bad impressions of English life, especially with regard to women. And it includes a large number of American students, who are forming, and will form, American opinion about the way in which this country behaves during war, and the moral tone of its military and civilian population.