



## The Oxford Vigilance Committee Report of November 1916 and fears over declining moral values in the city

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In 1888, an *Oxford Vigilance Committee* was formed to monitor and support the enforcement of the recently passed *Criminal Law Amendment Act* of 1885. The Act made further provision for the *Protection of Women and Girls, the suppression of brothels, and other related purposes*. In November 1916, the committee was reformed in response to concerns about falling moral standards. Self-appointed 'women patrols', working in pairs and wearing armbands, patrolled the streets to record and deter acts of immorality, though having no official status or powers of arrest. The committee commissioned a report which ran to four pages and was based partially on the patrols' findings. The Report was divided into four sections- *Facts, Results, Causes and Remedies*-which are discussed in more detail here.

### Facts

A distinction was drawn between those who practised prostitution as a '*...permanent social disease*' and what were described as '*...temporary outbreaks of immorality...*' caused by the unusual conditions created by the war. The latter phenomenon was of greater concern to the committee. A further distinction was drawn between those women of 'bad character' arriving in the city, and serving soldiers' wives who encouraged members of the military into their homes for '*immoral purposes?*'. '*Drunkness and unfaithfulness?*' were also considered to be underlying problems.

Interestingly, the report mentions men only in relation to generating demand for prostitution and their need for greater education 'creating the impression that they played a comparatively passive role in matters of morality compared to women. By contrast and implication, women were seen as its main custodians. Of most concern to the committee was the behaviour of young girls:

*?Quite young girls (12-15) loiter about...whose dress and frivolous, not to say impertinent behaviour show that they are deliberately laying themselves out to attract men.?*

The report listed examples of immoral behaviour reported by women patrols. It acknowledged that not all cases were necessarily of an immoral nature, but that there was enough evidence to suggest 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.?*

### Results

The report described a very small rise in cases of illegitimacy in Oxford and surrounding villages, though it made clear that the degree of illegitimacy was no indication of immorality owing to the prevalence of abortion and 'forced' marriages.

*?Feeble-mindedness?*, though not defined in the report, was judged to result in an increased prevalence of Venereal Disease, prostitution and immorality. In addition, an examination of 848 wartime marriage and birth certificates was used to indicate that the birth of a first child had *often* (my emphasis) taken place in the first few months of marriage and that the resulting hasty nuptials led only to long unhappy relationships. No figures were given to support these increased incidences however.

## Causes

The report distinguished between *permanent* and *temporary* causes of immorality, though it was particularly with the latter that the committee was concerned. Of these, drinking and prostitution were closely linked. So too were *?new economic freedoms?* enjoyed by women, connected in the minds of the committee with family breakdown. Literature and other entertainments which *'stimulate sexual ideas?'* were considered to be damaging. A significant *'temporary'* cause was judged to be *?War Fever?*, defined as:

*'...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 extremes of virtue.'*

It was alleged that this mood was created by the presence in the city of 2-3,000 soldiers living away from home and the *'normal restrictions in their lives'*. The darkening of the streets of Oxford under the terms of the Defence of the Realm Act was also identified as a cause of immorality.

## Remedies

Solutions to the causes of immorality were presented under two headings: *Negative or Curative* and *Positive or Preventative*. The latter were considered to represent the better approach towards a long term solution to immorality.

### *Negative or Curative Remedies*

The report gave a number of suggestions which included:

- the presence of an Assistant Provost Marshal to direct the work of the Military Police
- boosting the powers of women patrols
- an increased use of Special Constables from the Oxford Constabulary
- additional street lighting to expose unsociable activity
- deporting women convicted of immoral acts out of the city
- greater patrolling of parks, rivers and towpaths.

### *Positive or Preventative*

This centred on the provision of counter attractions ' clubs, concerts, dances and refreshment places. Efforts in this direction during 1915 had proved disappointing however ' *?They find the streets more attractive...?* It was believed that the only permanent solution lay in moral and educational instruction for both men and women. The report concluded with one final reason for action to be taken in Oxford:

*?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.'*

American students were also believed to be gaining a poor impression of Oxford. By implication Britons were expected to live up to high standards of behaviour, setting an example to members of the Empire and a youthful and impressionable democracy.

This report demands further interpretation and analysis in terms of the wider context of the study of Britain's social morality during the First World War and more specifically in comparison with analyses of Vigilance Committees, women patrols and social demographics in other parts of the UK.

## **References:**

The report was made available courtesy of The Oxford History Centre, Oxfordshire County Council. It can be viewed as part of the [Oxford at War collection](#).

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