

## Octavia and Cathy

For two centuries and more, arguably the biggest of the big issues facing Britain has been the dearth of affordable housing. The solutions have been many, but the problem has never disappeared, and perhaps is more pressing today than ever it was.

It's a good time, then, to pull together two strands of history and introduce to each other two women who have drawn as much attention to the problem of homelessness as any. The women have never met; indeed, they never could have done.

One of them is Octavia Hill, who died 200 years ago this year. Much has been said of Octavia in this, her bicentenary year. As one of the three founders of the National Trust it would hardly have been otherwise. But that campaign to preserve open space in our crowded isle for everyone to enjoy went hand-in-hand with another, just as pressing, to provide affordable housing for the poor. This at a time when national and local government turned their back on such issues; housing, they said, was a matter for the private sector.

In partnership with John Ruskin, in 1865 Miss Hill set about securing leases on properties in Marylebone, and in the space of a decade had 15 housing schemes under her control, with as many as 3,000 tenants. The work of Hill and Ruskin did little more than scratch the surface of the problem, even in London, but it provided a model for what was possible.

Octavia Hill would, no doubt, have been distressed to learn that a century after her efforts, the issue was no closer to a solution. When long-term schemes do not transform the situation, sometimes it's time to turn to shock tactics instead.

That at least - shock, mixed with outrage - was the effect of a drama first aired on the BBC on the night of November 16 1966. Here was a woman truly up to her neck in the problem of homelessness. Her name was Cathy, and the play concerned was *Cathy Come Home*.

The play recounted the story of a young couple - Cathy and Reg - whose dreams of a settled family life together are shattered by unemployment, poverty and homelessness. The final scene, when Cathy has her children torn from her and taken into care, blocked the switchboard at Broadcasting House.

What made the play so immediate and moving was its style of drama documentary, adopted by the play's director, Ken Loach. The genre is old hat now, but in 1966 it was ground-breaking. This, it proclaimed, was unvarnished truth. Deal with it.

It was a sign of the play's impact that it immediately spawned a new media shorthand. From this point onwards, every single mother struggling to find a home, or cope with life in a hostel, was a Cathy. And Britain, it appeared, was full of Cathies.

The most famous TV drama of the 1960s was something of a Midlands production. Ken Loach himself hailed from Nuneaton and the producer - Tony Garnett - originated from Birmingham. Slightly less avoidable than accidents of birth was the fact that much of the actuality recording that gives the play its documentary style was done in Birmingham too. The scriptwriter - Jeremy Sandford - took his tape recorder into Ladywood.

And the back-to-back courts, which featured in the central section of the play, were in and around Hingeston Street. Elizabeth Wood, one Hingeston Street resident, showed the author the gaslight they had been using for 50 years. "We can't afford the £7 out of our pension to get electricity," she told him.

So Britain, a century after Octavia Hill, still had a housing crisis. What the drama did especially well was give voice to the victims, the poor and the (literally) dispossessed. The voiceless had unsettling tales to tell of overcrowding, endless waiting lists, insecure tenancies and slum conditions. And this was true after half a century of council housing.

The British had lived with this situation for years. There was nothing especially culpable in it because of the size of the problem. What shocked viewers in particular was the way Cathy was sent to a hostel, and then forcibly separated from her husband, when he became unable to support her and her children. In short it was the plight of the homeless mother, and the long arm of the Poor Law.

At a public meeting at the Birmingham & Midland Institute in December 1966 there were many more Cathies to voice their complaints to a platform consisting of Ken Loach and Jeremy Sandford, and council representatives.

It might have been too late to help Cathy, but there was one significant beneficiary from the Wednesday Play of November 16 1966. It was in this very month 46 years ago that the charity Shelter chose to launch itself. This might have been a difficult birth, with considerable funds spent on an awareness-raising campaign. Cathy Come Home rendered such expenditure unnecessary. It was purely a coincidence, but a happy one.

In the wake of the play, by January 1967 the charity had received £53,000 in donations, and a further 2,000 offers of help. The crisis in social housing would not be going away, but it would no longer be hidden from sight.

It's a perfect moment, then, to bring these two stories and these two women together. In an event hosted by the National Trust and the University of Birmingham, a special screening of *Cathy Come Home* will take place at the Barber Institute on Saturday November 10.

After the screening I will be in conversation with Tony Garnett, the show's producer. It's a chance to reflect on Cathy's impact and message, and to look at the play and the issues through the long lens of history.

The event takes place from 1.00 - 4.00 pm on November 10, and costs (with refreshments) £7. The booking line for tickets is 0121 414 2261.