

The man living in the last house standing

Audio script of the BBC video report

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Charlie: 'Well I've lived here sixty two years. I was born in this house. Me mam got it just after the war'. Me mam brought ten of us up in here, and I'm the last one, and I'm staying here. This was one of the best estates ever. We had everything, and now we've got nothing, not a thing. Not even neighbours.'

Narrator: 'Once Charlie Wright had hundreds of neighbours, now he owns the last house standing, bookended by the remains of two partially demolished buildings.'

Charlie: 'There, oh you love a scratch don't you? Don't you love a scratch?'

Narrator: 'Charlie's house now stands isolated and alone, but not long ago it was surrounded by six hundred council properties all making up what were known as Birkenhead's 'River Streets'. There was Tees, Avon, Tyne, Solway, Tweed and Ribble; post-war houses for thousands of workers who sustained the economy of a manufacturing and ship-building town.'

Newsreel: 'The Queen Mother was at Cammell Laird's shipyard, Birkenhead, to launch the biggest liner built in Britain since the 'Queen Elizabeth', which she herself named twenty one years ago. Her majesty christened this ship 'Windsor Castle'. The fifty thousand onlookers cheered the vessel down the slipway'.

Charlie: 'The steel mill went, Champion Spark Plugs went, the flour mills went, the coal wharf went, the iron ore berth at the penny bridge...all gone. Where I am now, this is where we used to play as kids and this part here, this grid here used to be the wickets when we used to play cricket. If the ball went over the grid, we were out.'

Narrator: 'It was a working class community, where local industry once employed fourteen thousand people; by the mid-eighties, only thirteen hundred had jobs, and the north end of Birkenhead began a slide towards poverty. Charlie, a boilerman by trade, was made redundant, and his days as a shop steward, were over. Even so, his community still provided a sense of place for families.'

Charlie: 'The kids grew up, got married, got a house on the estate, so their kids would go and see their gran, and that's how it was, I mean I'd three uncles in Chester Square, and aunties, one in Brennick street, me uncle Freddie round the corner here, me uncle Willis at the back of us, so all our family was brought up on this estate, and I'm the last one out of the lot.'

Friend: 'The only thing you ever see him doing, is feeding the foxes, come out washing his car, making sure his flag's at high mast and doing his garden, or coming over and saying "can you tighten this up, can you put a bit of air in that'.

Charlie: 'It's what you're there for, you're a neighbour, if something breaks down with my car, I'll go over to Gilly, that's what neighbours are for isn't it?'

Friend: 'We'd have been the two last standing at the Alamo'.