

C & G interviewing Laura Blake about Sheffield's Harcourt Road

Interview Date: 6th August, 2024

C: Clara Cheung, G: Gum Cheng, L: Laura Blake

Summary Keywords:

Sheffield, Harcourt Road, students, house, neighbours, party, green spaces, community

Clara (C): So I think we began with our emotional attachment to Harcourt Road, and then we discovered more and more after talking to more people here, on this street.

Laura (L): So it's evolved.

C: It is interesting for us. Laura, today is August 13th ... so we are visiting Laura in her house on Harcourt Road, and we wonder how long have you lived on this street?

L: We've only lived here for pretty much two years. We moved in three days before her due date. So very last minute. Yeah, it was a rushed move, but it's been a very nice two years so far.

C: So previously when we talked to you, you also mentioned, there's a feeling that this street is a bit different from the other streets you lived on before. Can you tell us a bit more about it?

L: Yeah, sure. So we've been in the UK for about six and a half years now, and before we moved here, we lived in Greystones, which is a really lovely area as well. And we had quite a nice neighbourhood there too, some nice neighbours as well, local pubs and things like that. But one thing that we were very pleasantly surprised with here was that people very much want to foster the community here. So as soon as we moved in, we had loads of neighbours come and introduce themselves. As soon as they saw us out on the street and came over and said, Hello. And the fact that we have, you know, annual little get togethers and street parties and things like that that are purely for the community is really nice. So yeah, that that was a new thing that didn't happen in our old neighbourhood.

C: Do you think... because, when we talked to another neighbour of yours, Yonatan, we had this discussion about maybe the geographical... that this is a street with not a lot of slopes, and is this physical appearance of the street different from the ones you lived in before? I wonder, like, why this is a bit different? Would it be related to the geography as well?

L: I'm not sure. I'm not sure. I never thought about the geography. The road we lived on before was fairly similar. The road I'd lived on before was very similar, also just like a long uphill road with terraced houses. But I actually wouldn't be surprised that it has something to do with the fact that we're so close to the university and there's so many students that live here. Our old neighbourhood had a few students, but not nearly as many, and most of the people there owned their houses, and were long term residents. And here it's very much like, yeah, I think it's slightly more residents, but there's a lot of students. Probably at least 40% of the houses are student houses, and I think it has something to do with that, because the local residents want to make sure that they still have that feeling of community and of the neighbourhood, even though you have changing students every year or every two years...

Gum (G): When you first moved here, do remember the first people who approached you first?

L: Two people... One had sadly moved away the week after, so I don't remember her name, but she lived right across from us, and they just sold their house and went to France after living here for, I think, about 34 years. And then the second person was Hope who lived just across the road. I mean, pretty

much everyone was very lovely. As soon as we were invited to the street party, which was where... in October, was it 2022? So just a couple of months after she was born, and yeah, everyone came over and introduced themselves, and we quickly met our neighbours but one more and Alex as well.

C: Does your daughter also play with the other kids who are a similar age on this street?

L: Not that much she yet because she's very much younger, but the four boys, Laura and Alex's boys, came to her birthday party a couple of weeks ago, and that was quite nice. Yeah, and we are planning to get them together a little bit more often, and so you can play with everyone. But she often enjoys playing with them every time we do have the street party, then all the little ones get together.

C: Can you describe a bit about what you like about the street party? I mean there are a couple different activities and events. What would be more memorable to you?

L: I really like the, what is it called, the rope pulling the, oh, what is it called in English?

C: The tug of war?

L: Oh, yeah, exactly. I really like that. I like that they do it every year. And that there's, it's quite competitive, but in a friendly way. And there's a history of, you know, we always have the odd sides and the even numbered houses against each other and men versus women. And I think so far, the women have won every year, and I think it's because we very much want to beat the men. And there's always way more women that partake in it as well, and then have the kids against the adults. It's quite fun. I like that. So it's an enjoyable competition. Yeah, all this is really quite nice. I like that. We try to get the students involved in it as well. So then, while they're here they feel like they're just as part of the community as someone who lives here for a long time.

C: It is interesting about this point you bring up because it seems like for another street with more like long term residents there's not, you know, so much an urge to really foster, to do many things to foster the community spirit. But here maybe because some people come and go sooner, like annually, or for a couple years after students graduate, then there seems to be a need to do something together, and it works...

L: Yeah. I think it works. I think I don't recall who was saying this, but someone who usually organised the events as well described it as wanting to make sure that the students also feel ownership, which has in the past shown that they are also more respectful of the neighbourhood slightly sometimes you do get student houses that don't behave quite as respectfully and cause a little bit more chaos and trouble than maybe you would like as your next door neighbour. And I think it really helps if they feel like they are welcome, they are wanted here, they're not, you know, seen as just a noisy bunch that hopefully moves out soon. I think giving them the feeling that you know they're very much welcome helps with that a lot.

C: So it's more like an interaction, and the interactivity also brings together the people, that's nice. Oh, so you moved here two years ago, but then that's after covid.

L: Yes, that was luckily after covid.

G: And why would you choose Harcourt Road?

L: And the reason actually was necessity more than reasons. So we were told, just under two months before she was born, that the house we were in was being sold and we hadn't been told with enough notice. So we were quite in a rush to find something, and the housing prices had gone up quite significantly in the area we were in, and yeah, we tried to find something that was maybe a little bit bigger than what we lived in before, and we've ended up with something that's quite a bit bigger that

the house we were in before. But yeah, it was the house that we found that was really nice in a nice area, and that was available on short notice. So it's just kind of lucky.

G: Actually, this is quite a big house...

L: Yeah, it's bigger than what we would need. The landlord decided just before we moved in that they didn't want to rent to big student groups anymore, I think because the upheaval to have to renovate every one or two years was a little bit more trouble than it was worth for them. And so we were quite happy that they were looking at families to move in.

C: Oh, I see so before you moved in, did the rooms look different because of students living here? Did it look different?

L: No, it was pretty much the same. They had just done a renovation and painted everything, but the layout was the same.

C: So how about the parks nearby? We did see you at Western Park. Do you often go to the parks nearby?

L: Yeah, yeah. We go, if not daily, but every other day. So we like walking a little bit further and going sort of towards, what is it, Bingham Park and like, or to the Botanical Gardens as well. But when it's just like a quick walk in the morning, we'll go to Western Park quite a lot. I go to the university as well. So in a nice weather, that's where I would have, and we love feeding the ducks as well. Obviously, that's very exciting, isn't it?

C: We do find there are a lot of green spaces and also a lot of trees in Sheffield and it was nice for us to also find... we showed you last time at the Mobile Museum the BBEST neighbourhood plan they did back in 2015 the first, one of the very first things they did was to invite an independent consultant to look at the green spaces around the area, to do a survey. And I think this is, it was a great initiative to really try to understand how the green space corridor is actually really welcoming different wildlife, animals, and that's really nice.

L: Yeah, the fact that Sheffield was so green was one of the things that attracted us to moving. When we moved here from Germany, we came specifically for the university and I looked across the country and applied at quite a few universities, and at the end, Sheffield won because of its green spaces and because of the proximity to the Peak District. And we just thought that it was quite nice, you know. But it is really, it is really lovely that you just, yeah, you're surrounded by green all the time. I also quite like that you don't have so many tall buildings. You see a lot of sky all the time, very different from my hometown.

C: Do you mind telling us where?

L: Oh, my hometown is Düsseldorf.

C: I haven't been there - are there a lot of tall buildings?

L: Yeah. You know, comparatively short to some mega cities, and if you go, you know, compared to London or also Berlin, but compared to here, yeah, very much. So I think, yeah, the city centre is full of buildings the height of the arts tower or taller. So if you're in town, your view is quite quickly blocked. And it's very nice that when you walk around here, you often have these, like, really lovely, like, long views...

C: Because it goes up and down.

G: Do you think you will still keep join the street party and the other community activities?

L: Yeah, definitely, I really, really enjoy it. I think it's very lovely. I've never lived somewhere where everyone was so willing to also have a street clean every couple of months to make sure that the place we live in stays really nice and stays clean. I think it's really nice to get together, because obviously everyone who lives here has their own jobs and lives, and sometimes you just kind of pass each other. So it's nice to get together and have a chat and we'll definitely be joining it when we have time and continue hanging out with everyone. Also, the food is always very good. We have a lot of very good cooks on the road to share, to share their food from the different cultural backgrounds that we have. So it's always very nice to get a bit of everything.

C: Can I ask you a bit about comparing the community organising activities here on Harcourt Road, Sheffield with you know, like your hometown, Düsseldorf? What kind of activities would take place in Düsseldorf for community building or bonding, or are there any differences?

L: Where I live, we didn't have anything like this. We would organise, yeah. We wouldn't really have, like, street fests or anything like that where I grew up, as much. I mean, you sometimes have in the outskirts of the bigger cities, you will have similar things where maybe you do a little flea market, or maybe a little food fest or something like that. But the communities that I kind of grew up in were had more to do with either the school community that you were at or, you know, from whatever hobbies you have, it looks like a store or something like that, so But, and I think it's where I grew up, we didn't... Most people lived in apartments. I think that it's nice because here, everyone kind of has their own house. Lots of people buy their houses here, so you know, this is where you're going to stay for a long time. So you make sure that you know your neighbours, and, you know, maybe make friendships. And I always grew up living in apartments and you're friendly with your neighbours, but because you might move out in a couple of years, it's quite different. I really enjoy all of that. I think I might have said that when we met in the park before, but compared to other places, here, it seems like people can, in the community, organise this, not just because they like having a celebration. So for example, for like, a jubilee or something like that, they do it just because they enjoy having a celebration with the community. So yeah, that's, that's the core reason why they're doing it.

G: Like us, because when we lived in Hong Kong we also lived in the apartment. And actually, we didn't know the neighbours, not very well.

L: We lived in a house before we moved to Sheffield, we lived in a house with about 20 other people, which is not very big, but 20 other houses, apartments in one house, and we would say hello to our neighbours, but I don't remember anyone's name and we wouldn't, you know, tell each other, oh, we're having a birthday party. Or, you know, come, if it's too loud, let us know, or come join us for a drink. But um yeah, we never did anything without our neighbours.

C: Do you know about Beanies, the shop?

L: Yeah, yeah, it's definitely... moving here has definitely increased the food budget, because I'm much more likely to go to the whole foods to get vegetables and and for them, than from the supermarket, and we didn't have one very close by in our old place. So, yeah, I really enjoy going there. We go there for just our weekly shop.

C: And then, do you also know about the pedestrian crossing outside of Beanies, but you didn't know about how long it took for the residents to get it built? It took more than 15 years.

L: Oh, really, wow.

C: Nic and Penny, who passed away already, I've never met Penny, and then they were among those who really advocated and persisted to really get the pedestrian crossings.

L: That's so cool. That's a long time.

C: So in this project, we hope to, because the friends and neighbors of Penny and Nic they actually, after Penny passed away, they hoped to put up a plaque at the traffic lights pole to acknowledge, you know, this effort and how Penny's persistence helped to make a change in the community.

L: That's really nice. That's a great idea.

C: So we will also try to see if, in this project, we can get something even temporary done. I think they proposed to put it up at the traffic light pole, but then, because it may be - according to the highway department, that may be a bit too dangerous, because it distracts. So maybe we'll ask Beanies if we can, for example, put it on their wall. It's private property, maybe on the fence.

L: Yeah, I bet they would be happy to do something like that. They all seem very nice and, you know, engaged in the community as well.

G: You have a garden.

L: We have a resemblance of a garden. It was, it's still, you can have a look later, if you like. It's still very much chaotic. When they redid the house, they dumped all of the debris in the garden, so it is filled with big bits of rock and some bricks and loads of glass. Yeah, and then I think at some point, previous tenants had tried to put some asphalt down that was then now by the moss completely eaten away. So everything down there is very wonky and just from like a pot, so it's a long project, but yes, we do have a garden. Hopefully we can, we can use it soon in a bit better way.

G: Do you like gardening?

L: Yes, very much so - we have less time now that we have her, but we're trying to get her to be enthusiastic about it as well. She has a little watering can so she can help.

C: What kind of animals do you encounter?

L: I see him less because I don't go to bed quite as late. But my husband has seen a badger very frequently, too. It likes to walk through the little alley here, through our garden, and then goes through all of the other gardens. Also, the badger likes to go through the students trash that they sometimes leave outside. Loads of the neighbourhood cats go out. And then we've had a fox on the back.

C: You've seen one?

L: We've seen one on the road before as well. The badger is probably the most, other than the squirrels and birds, the badger is probably the most frequent, like, nighttime visitor. It was pretty cool. I had never seen a badger in my life before, and they're so much bigger than I'd...

C: Foxes, badgers, bats, I heard owls, but they're probably not so obvious.

L: Yeah, there's one or two that are, I think there might be tawny owls. I'm not sure. I bet there's someone on the road that will know, but you hear them quite frequently, and they go, I think, from the top of the road, anywhere along, and sometimes you can see them in a tree, in the big hole.

C: Oh, so there is a tree with a big hole around?

L: So one of the trees near the big hole at the end of the road. And you know the big university building, the red one that's at the end of Harcourt Road, yeah, it sometimes sits on the roof of that, which looks really amazing. It does look very cool. I like to try and spot it. It's very difficult.

C: Talking about students as your neighbors, like in the past two years, have you found their living style, how do you say it in a polite way, not so suitable.

G: Are they too loud? Too noisy?

L: Not really. I think we've been lucky. On both sides of us we have student houses with eight people. And I think we've been very lucky that so far they've been pretty good. We've only had, I think, in the last two years, we've had maybe two or three parties that were really loud and loud enough for us and numerous other residents to tell them to be quiet. But I think we also have quite a high tolerance for noise. We've both been students. We've both enjoyed celebrating and having parties, so they should have a good time, as long as they're being respectful.

C: So far, not no conflict with...

L: We had last year, had a group of girls next door, and they were very good at always coming with the chocolate bribe. Every time they had a party, they came, knocked and told us they're having a party, and gave us some sweets. That was really nice.

C: So this reciprocal sort of relationship, mutual understanding, is there?

L: I think it helps as well, we try to, when we meet them, introduce ourselves, let them know that, you know, they should just, like, enjoy themselves. If they need anything, they can let us know or ... and we just ask them to let us know if they're having a party. And then, so we've had some offers to have the two babysit as well, which has been great...

C: Very handy. When we talk to different people in Sheffield, we then also learned about how Harcourt Road has been really famous for student parties. Many people went to the University of Sheffield in the past and have been to one of the parties... Do you remember any particular song from any parties here or street party, or any memorable music?

L: No, not really. Okay. No, nothing. The only thing I remember in our first year, we had a group living next door, and one person that had great music taste. I couldn't tell you exactly the bands now, but you could hear the music through this door, through this wall. I think it's their kitchen there as well. And quite often in the morning, I would hold my phone next to it and shazam the music because I thought, oh, I need to have this...

C: That is really interesting.

L: So it goes to show how thin the walls are.

C: Music sharing...

L: We also had a group of people living on the other side that really liked doing karaoke. We had mixed feelings about it. Sometimes they were very good, and then sometimes, well...

C: On the 14th of September, the Hong Kong people in Sheffield will celebrate the mid autumn festival, and we will have karaoke on the first floor. There are function rooms. So if you want to sing, the theme will be about the moon or the stars, you can come and join us.

L: That sounds really fun, I'm not great at singing. I like karaoke. I'm not sure if the people listening like it... It is a fun thing to do from time to time. There will be other activities too.

G: Do you know why Harcourt Road is named?

L: Its name? No, I don't - do you?

C: Well, Simon, when we began this project we talked to a few residents, including Simon Ogden, and he actually told us about how it's named after parliament, an MP in the 19th century, Harcourt.

G: So he was from Oxford.

C: So not too much related to Sheffield. And then the Harcourt in Hong Kong was a general who also fought in World War Two and represented Hong Kong to accept the surrender and apology from Japan at the end of the war. It's related to the whole military forces in Hong Kong. I guess there's no Harcourt Road in Germany...

L: I don't think so.

C: It's more of an English name, though. We know in Canada, there's Harcourt Road, Singapore, maybe Singapore? Well, definitely Port Harcourt in Nigeria is a big city. Yeah, it's a big city. In many different cities in the UK, especially in England, there are a lot of Harcourt Roads in York, in London, Nottingham. I think Harcourt is really English.

G: Do you think you will keep living here and if you don't have any other jobs somewhere else?

33:59

L: We've debated it. We don't know how long we're going to be in the UK for, and we are thinking about maybe buying something a little bit further out, because we both quite like the countryside, but there's no immediate wish for us to leave. We very much like being here. It's perfect, a five minute walk for me to work, so that's great. I don't have a wish to move out just yet, so I think both of us will be quite happy to stay here as long as we're in Sheffield.

C: Thank you. Can you help us to describe this Harcourt Road? This street? You've lived here for two years, like in a sentence or two, or three?

L: How would I describe Harcourt road? Well, right now it's home, and it's very welcoming. It's a very welcoming home away from home.

C: Okay, that's lovely. Thank you.