

Liverpool Corporation and the origins of municipal social housing, 1842–1890

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Abstract

This article addresses the improvements made to the housing and sanitation conditions of Liverpool's working-class poor through a series of municipal initiatives between 1842 and 1890. In the vanguard of municipal social responsibility initiatives nationally, the Corporation of Liverpool rejected prevailing *laissez-faire* attitudes, setting a benchmark for sanitary improvements before clearing slums in order to construct the country's first purpose-built council housing. With regard to the latter, the Corporation initially sought to stress its role as being one of educating the private sector as to what might be achieved, rather than becoming a long-term provider of social housing. In the twenty years after 1866, that which had been conceived as a model became a stated policy objective. While laudable in intent, the existing framework of limited local governance meant that only the smallest percentage of working-class residents was directly aided. As the article concludes, further progress was only made once the issue of housing provision was allied to that of rentable values charged. This was a policy development dependent upon national legislative changes and thus one upon which Liverpool Corporation could not act alone.

Introduction

By 1851 Liverpool was often seen as England's 'second city', not only in terms of population but also because of its economic prowess, which represented 'the most outstanding feature of mercantile enterprise in the first half of the nineteenth century'.¹ From a civic perspective, this economic power resulted in 'a large proportion of the municipal revenues of Liverpool [being] devoted ... to the erection of magnificent buildings for the adornment of the town, and to the formation of other structures for the aggrandisement of its commerce'.² This spending on the creation of great Victorian municipal edifices was justified at the time because, as Beckett remarks, 'civic pride and civic status went together in a pecking

¹ S. Chapman, *Merchant enterprise in Britain* (Cambridge, 1992) 82.

² *Second report of the Commissioners on the state of large towns and populous districts*, Dr L. Playfair, 'Large towns in Lancashire: Report on their sanitary condition', Appendix Part II, BPP 1845 [610] 31. Dr Lyon Playfair (later Baron Playfair) was a Scottish scientist, who was appointed as Special Commissioner and served as a Liberal MP (1868–1892).

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order ... reflecting where a town stood in the hierarchy' of the nation as a whole. Indeed, he further suggests that, with reference to rivalry between towns, Liverpool in particular 'understood the importance of grand civic gestures', St George's Hall, for instance, being far more imposing than Birmingham's new town hall of the same period.³

As this article demonstrates, however, Liverpool's status as a centre of commerce, culture, and civilisation was not achieved without substantial human cost. By the 1840s, Liverpool's child mortality was higher than that for many other large towns; for every 1000 deaths, 528 were of children aged less than five, whereas the figure for London was 408, and for Birmingham, Leeds, and Manchester the mortality rates were 487, 480, and 510 respectively.⁴ The 'evil[s] of the narrow streets and the overcrowding',⁵ noted by contemporaries, were exacerbated by the widespread occupation of 'court dwellings' and cellars:⁶ in 1843 one quarter of the town's population lived in the former (55,534 people), with a further 20,168 inhabiting the latter.⁷

The use of cellars for housing, though not exclusive to Liverpool, was significantly more prevalent in the town than in comparable urban areas. It may thus have become an accepted form of regional accommodation, as a consequence of the nature of the town's commerce as well as local practice.⁸ For example, Liverpool's mercantile economy, unlike Manchester's factory-based growth, meant that 'large and extensive cellaring [was] built to afford warehouse room for merchandise ... the houses of mediocrity have also cellars which give residence to families [which] is certainly injurious to the health of the inhabitants'.⁹

In contrast, court dwellings were a common feature of a majority of England's early industrial centres, as evidenced by the *First report of the Commissioners for inquiring into the state of large towns and populous districts* and its accompanying map of such accommodation in Nottingham.¹⁰ In Liverpool, as elsewhere, court dwellings were initially fashioned

³ J. Beckett, *City status in the British Isles, 1830–2002* (Aldershot, 2005) 5, 33.

⁴ University Liverpool Special Collections [ULSC] G35.9(7), W.H. Duncan, 'On the physical causes of the high rate of mortality in Liverpool', paper read before the Literary and Philosophical Society in February and March 1843 (Liverpool, 1843) 13. Dr William Henry Duncan was, through the provisions of the Improvement of the Sewerage and Drainage of Liverpool Act 1846 (9 & 10 Victoria c. cxxvii) [known as the Liverpool Sanitary Act 1846] appointed as the medical officer of health for the Borough of Liverpool from 1 January 1847, the first such appointment in the United Kingdom. He remained in the post until his unexpected death in May 1863.

⁵ J. Newlands, *Liverpool, past & present, in relation to sanitary operations* (Liverpool, 1859) 7; appointed, like Duncan, under the provisions of the Liverpool Sanitary Act 1846, James Newlands was the first borough engineer in the country.

⁶ Liverpool Record Office [LRO] H352 4 HEA, W.H. Duncan, *Report to the Health Committee of the Borough of Liverpool, 1847* (1848) 5.

⁷ ULSC G35.9(7), Duncan, 'Mortality in Liverpool', 13.

⁸ ULSC G35.9(7), Duncan, 'Mortality in Liverpool', 36.

⁹ J. Wallace, *A general and descriptive history of the ancient and present state of the town of Liverpool* (Liverpool, 1790) 81.

¹⁰ *First report of the Commissioners for inquiring into the state of large towns and populous districts*, BPP 1844 [572] Appendix, 143.

through a process by which additional houses were constructed in the backyards of existing properties, often three or four storeys high and containing dozens of families; the original lobbies were converted into communal passageways, and the buildings occupied a footprint no more than 15 feet wide and 30 feet long.¹¹ As Dr Duncan noted, it was not uncommon for 50 or 60 people to live in three or four rooms, 10 or 12 feet square, with numerous cases of more than 40 sleeping in a single cellar.¹² However, this type of 'in-fill' housing, with narrow access passages only three feet wide, 'terminated by the ash pit, common to all the miserable dwellings', was eventually purpose-built.¹³

The overcrowding that was the inevitable consequence of such construction led to further negative comparisons being made between the 'second city of the Empire', and municipal rivals such as Leeds, Birmingham, Manchester, and even London. This was because, while the latter four cities had population densities per square mile of 20,892, 33,669, 83,224, and 27,423 respectively, in the mid-1840s Liverpool's population density was 100,899 per square mile, and in certain areas, in excess of 1200 per acre (equivalent to 768,000 people per square mile).¹⁴ Armed with this evidence, in 1846 the *Liverpool Health of Towns Advocate* vehemently condemned the actions of both the Corporation and the town's elite, bemoaning that:

Our corporate bodies, as well as private individuals, have been accessory to [the] cutting up of ground by square inches in order to make money by packing human beings together as if they were cotton bales ... We have crowded our population together into courts so small, it would take no fewer than *twelve* of them to make such a court as labouring classes inhabit in Birmingham. But even this is not the worst; for in some parts of the town the poor people have been placed so close, for fear of *sacrificing* land, as it is called, that if London were equally crowded, it would hold *twenty-five millions* of people.¹⁵

Commenting on this period, Dyos contended that slums were 'necessary so as to not to dissipate too many resources in housing and that while labour was abundant, cheap,

¹¹ *Report from the Select Committee on the health of towns; Together with the minutes of evidence taken before them, and an appendix, and index*, BPP 1840 [384] evidence given by Duncan pertaining to Liverpool, 141–51.

¹² LRO H352 4 HEA, Duncan, *Report to the Health Committee, 1847*, 5.

¹³ Newlands, *Liverpool, past & present*, 9.

¹⁴ ULSC G35.9(13), *Liverpool Health of Towns' Advocate* [LHTA] 4 (1 December 1845) 26–7.

¹⁵ ULSC G35.9(13), LHTA 10 (1 June 1846) 86–7 (italics in original). Formed in 1844, the Health of Towns Association was 'an avowed propagandist body', according to S.E. Finer, *The life and times of Sir Edwin Chadwick* (London, 1952) 237. The association sought to educate the public as to the living conditions of the poor, and petitioned for the passing of public health legislation. The Liverpool branch of the association was established in September 1845 and published a monthly newsletter: the *Liverpool Health of Towns' Advocate* (1845–7). For a brief history of the association in Liverpool, see J. Ashton and J. Ubido, 'The Healthy City and the Ecological Idea', *Journal of the Society of Social History of Medicine* 4 (1991) 173–81, 175–6.

and docile this was economically justifiable [and] tacitly accepted at the time [for] the slums helped to underpin Victorian prosperity'.¹⁶ However, the present study rejects that the notion the civic elite, at least in Liverpool, *did* tolerate the existence of ever-worsening slums. Instead, it suggests that because the condition of the accommodation of the labouring poor in Liverpool had become so dire by the mid-1840s, leading to adverse effects upon the health, productivity, and life-expectancy of *all* classes, the civic leaders realised that it was imperative to improve the overall health of the town. This greater awareness occurred as a result of two primary factors. First, as Tarn observes, referring to the difficulties faced by the port cities of Liverpool and Glasgow, 'the stream of Irish rural peasants to these great unprepared urban centres of an industrialised nation brought a pressure on accommodation which could not be ignored'.¹⁷ Second, through the rise of so-called 'zymotic diseases'—such as typhus, typhoid, smallpox, scarlet fever, erysipelas, cholera, tuberculosis, and diphtheria—the health of the prosperous and privileged was imperilled. As the *Advocate* remarked in its bulletin of October 1845, the gentry of Liverpool not only had a worse mortality rate than their counterparts in Leeds and London, but the differential between their life expectancy and that of the gentry of the other two towns was greater than for labourers.¹⁸ Thus, in its pursuit of parliamentary permission to embark upon acts of improvement, the Corporation of Liverpool was not only motivated by civic pride and humanitarian concerns, but also by 'enlightened' self-interest: not merely for the preservation of the health of the elite, but for the preservation of the workforce that facilitated the smooth running of commerce.

The Liverpool Building and Sanitary Acts of 1842, 1846, and 1864

Challenging contemporary *laissez-faire* attitudes as to the scope and reach of local governance, the Liverpool Building Act 1842 and the Liverpool Sanitary Act 1846 were the first of several municipal interventions into arenas that had hitherto been regarded as 'area[s] of private liberty'.¹⁹ Initially setting minimum standards for the width of streets, the 1842 Act also required that any newly constructed courts (and their entrance ways) had to have a minimum width of 15 feet. The attempt to reduce overcrowding and its associated ill effects—not only through contagion because of close proximity but also the spread of disease by lice, fleas, rats, flies, and contaminated food and water—was somewhat compromised, as the width of the entrance could be reduced to six feet in instances where the communal privy or ash pit of a court was

¹⁶ H.J. Dyos, 'The slums of Victorian London', *Victorian Studies* 11: 1 (1967) 5–40, 27.

¹⁷ J.N. Tarn, 'Housing in Liverpool and Glasgow: The growth of civic responsibility', *Town Planning Review* 39: 4 (1969) 319–34, 334; see also F. Neal, 'Liverpool, the Irish steamship companies and the Famine Irish', *Immigrants & Minorities* 5: 1 (1986) 28–61.

¹⁸ ULSC G35.9(13), *LHTA* 2 (1 October 1845) 12.

¹⁹ An Act for the Promotion of the Health of the Inhabitants of the Borough of Liverpool and the Better Regulation of Buildings in the Said Borough 1842 (5 & 6 Victoria c. xlv) [known as the Liverpool Building Act 1842]; Improvement of the Sewerage and Drainage of Liverpool Act 1846 (9 & 10 Victoria c. cxxvii) [known as the Liverpool Sanitary Act 1846]; Tarn, 'Housing in Liverpool and Glasgow', 319–20.

sited next to the entrance.²⁰ The location of privies was not the only problem, as the Reverend Henry Hampton lamented at the inaugural meeting of the Liverpool Health of the Towns' Association in September 1845. He reported that, upon his recent visit 'into what might be inferred from its title, a lovely spot, namely Peaceable-Place, near the end of Gore Street ... he found [a court of] 15 houses and one privy for the use of the whole, which was quite unapproachable the seat being covered with filth to the depth of about 18 inches, and running out in all directions'.²¹

In addition to the imposition of more stringent regulations upon the construction of new courts, the occupation of cellars within courts was prohibited two years after the date of the passing of the 1842 Act. In front streets, cellar dwelling remained permissible (even if in areas of the town that were a mere 20 feet above sea level), but here, too, the Council sought to improve basic living conditions, raising the minimum legal height of ceilings to seven feet, and with the proviso that the ceiling could be no lower than two feet above footpath level. To improve the living conditions of townfolk further, the Act specified that 'above ground' rooms were to have a ceiling height of eight or more feet (seven feet six inches within attics) and that at least one room must have an area of 100 square feet. It was also stipulated that all rooms, except cellars and attics, must have a window of at least three feet by five feet.²² Such increased standards, though laudable, were not wholly effective in the short term; of some 7325 cellars inspected in 1846, only 488 complied with the requirements of the 1842 Act.²³

The Liverpool Sanitary Act 1846 augmented the Liverpool Building Act 1842 by strengthening the building regulations pertaining to the construction of new courts, and prohibiting overall building heights in excess of 30 feet. Furthermore, courts of the most rudimentary quality—with an internal court width of 15 feet—could contain a maximum of only eight houses; for each additional house constructed thereafter another foot had to be added to the overall width of the court, and all entrances were to be the full width of the court. This was a provision that not only enhanced ventilation to the courts but also meant that privies and ash pits could no longer be placed at the entrance. The 1846 Act also allowed for privies to be joined to the public sewer, thereby removing the anomaly created by the Liverpool Paving and Sewerage Act 1842,²⁴ which had, despite the concurrent concerns of the Liverpool Building Act, forbidden private builders from attaching their sewers and drains to those in the public domain.

²⁰ In 1847 Duncan, for instance, noted that cellar dwellers bore a 35 per cent greater liability to fever than the rest of the working population: LRO H352 4 HEA, Duncan, *Report to the Health Committee, 1847*, 98.

²¹ ULSC G35.9(9), *Report of the proceedings at a public meeting of the Friends of the Liverpool Health of Towns' Association Held at the Music-Hall on Monday evening, September 29th 1845 for the purpose of adopting measures towards the establishment of a Working-Men's Society for promoting the health of the town*, 11.

²² For attics and cellars the windows were required to be at least three feet square.

²³ LRO 352 MIN HEA I/1/2, Health of Town Committee Minute Book, 2 June 1846, 108.

²⁴ Liverpool Paving and Sewerage Act 1842 (5 & 6 Victoria c. xxvi).

While such measures promised progress for newly built accommodation, these pioneering Acts were not only insufficient to improve working-class living conditions markedly in the short term, but may actually have worsened the situation. Although their adoption made the courts lighter, enhanced ventilation, and facilitated rudimentary sanitation, they limited the number of dwellings that each court could contain—but not the number of occupants—and prohibited habitation of the very worst type of dwellings (cellars within courts). As a blunt legislative instrument, the prohibition of cellar dwelling within courts led directly to some 25,000 people being removed from such dwellings between 1844 and 1851, yet the Act made no provision as to how those thus displaced should be accommodated.²⁵ This shortfall was exacerbated by mass influxes of Irish immigrants; for example, of the 300,000 Irish immigrants who had landed in Liverpool by June 1847, some 60–80,000 settled permanently within the poorer quarters of the town.²⁶

Together with the shortage of housing, Liverpool's working class faced irregular earnings, as the over-supply of labour and nature of dock work meant that many workers were employed casually for only two or three days a week, in contrast to those in industrial cities such as Manchester, Birmingham and Leeds, whose factory systems resulted in more regular and full-time employment.²⁷ Given this, those who comprised the 'swarming population' of the very poorest had no option except to be evermore tightly crammed into 'the warren of alleys and courts which lay behind the facades presented to the main streets'.²⁸ Accordingly, Liverpool was not only 'converted for a time into a 'City of the Plague' but,²⁹ some 21 years after the passing of the initial Act, retained some '3173 courts, containing 18,610 houses'.³⁰ As Dr W.S. Trench, Duncan's successor as medical officer of health, noted, at least 17,000 of these houses—'inhabited by one or several separate families'—were so overcrowded as to be 'verging on indecency'.³¹ Thus, despite considerable municipal intervention, it remained, as had been suggested in 1846, 'very questionable whether the measures hitherto have been productive of good or evil'.³²

Though having undeniably mixed results in the short-term, the two Acts of the 1840s laid the foundations of the Corporation's subsequent interventions into the arena of working-class housing. The Liverpool Sanitary Amendment Act 1864 'effected

²⁵ LRO 352 MIN HEA II/1, *Report on the sanitary operations of the Nuisance Department from June 1847 to March 1851*, 102.

²⁶ LRO H352 4 HEA, Duncan, *Report to the Health Committee, 1847*, 5. By 1851, approximately one quarter of the population of Liverpool had been born in Ireland; Census of England and Wales, 1851.

²⁷ LRO H352 4 HEA, W.S. Trench, *Report to the Health Committee of the Borough of Liverpool, 1864* (Liverpool, 1865) 20.

²⁸ D. Caradog Jones, *The social survey of Merseyside, volumes I–III* (Liverpool, 1934) vol.I, 32. See also *LHTA* 16 (1 December 1846).

²⁹ LRO H352 4 HEA, Trench, *Health of Liverpool, 1864*, 18.

³⁰ J. Newlands, *Report to the Health Committee of the Borough of Liverpool on the sewerage, paving, cleansing and other works under the Sanitary Act, from 1856 to 1862 Inclusive* (Liverpool, 1863) 26.

³¹ LRO H352 4 HEA, Trench, *Health of Liverpool, 1864*, 33–4. Trench succeeded Duncan in 1863.

³² ULSC G35.9(13), *LHTA* 16 (1 December 1846) 145.

an enormous increase in the powers of the Corporation at the time unparalleled' in England,³³ 'confer[ring] upon the Corporation completely new powers to repair or demolish houses which it considered ... to be unfit for human habitation',³⁴ and prohibiting the construction of back-to-back houses within the town. The 1864 Act also sounded the effective death knell of court building, since although it did not bar their further construction it required all new courts to be open to a public highway at both ends, unless they had a minimum width of 25 feet throughout their whole length including the entrance. Thus, as Daunton suggests, when 'an enclosed court with a maximum width of 25 feet could contain no more than 18 houses [and] it was possible to erect 23 houses in a street with a width of 30 feet', it was inevitable that landlords would view courts as a disagreeable prospect.³⁵

The Liverpool Sanitary Amendment Act 1864 was a clear policy intervention that sought to improve the future housing conditions of the poor, as well as to alter the nature of that accommodation. Liverpool Corporation did not merely foreshadow central government guidelines, but set a socio-political agenda that was a model which other local authorities would eventually emulate. For example, its 1865 building bye-laws required each new house to have its own individual backyard, with a privy as the only permitted outbuilding.³⁶ These were provisions that were not replicated at a national level until presented as model bye-laws some ten years later in the Public Health Act 1875 and,³⁷ as Tarn notes, they were not adopted by many local authorities—those in London included—until 'many years after'.³⁸

The improvements to the physical state of Liverpool's housing stock were welcomed from a health viewpoint, with Trench remarking in 1864 that the reforms brought to cellar and court dwellings was such that 'it would now be impossible to detect, even in the lowest neighbourhoods, any instances [of the density of overcrowding] approaching those described by Dr Duncan [in 1847]'.³⁹ It would be wrong, however, to suggest that the declining stock of affordable housing for the working poor was solely a consequence of the Council's actions to introduce higher building standards.

Commercial and infrastructural developments also played a significant part throughout the period. Hence, in a manner almost identical to that recorded by Duncan, Trench noted that the ongoing 'erection of warehouses, offices, railway stations and public improvements' had resulted in 'a vast population, independently of those removed from cellars [being]

³³ Liverpool Sanitary Amendment Act 1864 (27 & 28 Victoria c.lxxiii); B.D. White, *A history of the Corporation of Liverpool: 1835–1914* (Liverpool, 1951) 63.

³⁴ A. Errazurez, 'Some types of housing in Liverpool, 1785–1890', *Town Planning Review* 9: 2 (1946) 57–68.

³⁵ M.J. Daunton, *House and home in the Victorian city: Working class housing 1850–1914* (London, 1983) 24–5.

³⁶ Errazurez, 'Some types of housing', 62, 64.

³⁷ Public Health Act 1875 (38 & 39 Victoria c. lv).

³⁸ Tarn, 'Housing in Liverpool and Glasgow', 322.

³⁹ LRO H352 4 HEA, Trench, *Health of Liverpool, 1864*, 22–3.

displaced from the neighbourhood of the marts of labour—the Docks and Exchange'.⁴⁰ Such difficulties might, as Duncan suggested in 1851, have been offset by increased private sector housing provision, but this was not a given. Thus, whereas in 1851–2 commercial redevelopment had been accompanied by the private-sector construction of 323 working-class houses, no such provision occurred in 1865.⁴¹

The redevelopment of slum areas for commercial purposes commanded a higher return, which made investment by private residential builders less economically attractive or viable. Indeed, given that a £12 per annum rent (deemed to be a fair rent for working-class housing) equated to some 4s 8d a week, the rent commanded for a whole house therefore encouraged sub-letting, with consequences for housing densities. As Trench remarked, with regard to a specific tenant, Michael Gilmour, although in 'constant employment under the Corporation, of the seven people crammed into a room of 1,057 cubic feet, two were himself and wife, three his children, and two men lodgers'.⁴² While some external factors (such as the expansion of the railways) were beyond the control of the Council, and the social cost of progress was neither a new phenomenon nor unique to Liverpool, the Council was nevertheless able to induce localised change through elements such as building regulations.

Table 1 illustrates that, while the initial reaction of private building speculators to the enhanced building standards demanded by the 1842 and 1846 Acts resulted in a slight decline in the construction of working-class houses (those rented for less than £12 per annum), construction levels thereafter quickly returned to 'pre-legislative' rates. In contrast, following the legislation of 1864 and 1865, there was no such restorative bounce. This suggests that, while builders had been able to absorb the higher costs incurred as a result of the 1842 and 1846 Acts, those contained within the Act of 1864 were, financially, a 'step too far' for the private speculator. Indeed, that the private sector constructed only one house with a rental value of less than £12 per annum in the three years after the passing of the 1864 Act suggests that builders were not only unwilling to work within the parameters of the new regulations placed upon them, but also that they simply could not afford to do so.

The development of St Martin's Cottages

Faced with chronic pauperism, an increasing death rate, and a depleting stock of affordable working-class housing, the Corporation agreed the purchase of 'five pieces of land belonging to Alderman Houghton in the vicinity of St Martin's Church, with a view to secure the erection thereon of Labourers' Dwellings' on 9 May 1866.⁴³

⁴⁰ Liverpool Town Council [LTC], *Liverpool Council Proceedings 1863–1864*, 518.

⁴¹ LRO H352 4 HEA, W.H. Duncan, *Report to the Health Committee of the Borough of Liverpool on the health of the town during the years 1847–8–9–50 and on other matters within his department* (1851) 89; White, *Corporation of Liverpool*, 204.

⁴² LRO H352 4 HEA, Trench, *Health of Liverpool, 1864*, 31–2.

⁴³ *Liverpool Mercury [LM]*, 'Town Council: The Corporation and dwellings for the working classes', 10 May 1866. The property comprised a total of 22,500 square yards.

Table 1: Number of new houses constructed in Liverpool by private enterprise after the passing of various improvement Acts

	<i>year</i>	<i>total number of houses built (all classes)</i>	<i>total built at a rent under £12 p/a</i>	<i>£12 houses as a percentage of the total</i>
Liverpool Building Act 1842	1842	2,027	773	38
	1843	1,390	440	32
	1844	2,450	1,040	42
Liverpool Sanitary Act 1846	1846	3,460	680	20
	1847	1,220	59	5
	1848	656	79	11
	1849	446	90	20
Liverpool Sanitary Amendment Act 1864 and Housing Bye-laws 1865	1864	2,400	123	5
	1865	1,496	0	0
	1866	1,098	0	0
	1867	1,227	1	0.1

Adapted from B.D. White, *A history of the Corporation of Liverpool: 1835–1914* (Liverpool, 1951) 204.

However, this action should not be interpreted as evidence of a municipal desire to become a tenant landlord for the town's poorest. Councillor Robinson, the seconder of the resolution, assured Council members that there was 'no idea of suggesting that the Corporation should undertake the erection of the dwellings themselves'.⁴⁴ Rather, it was motivated by a shrewd understanding of *realpolitik* based upon three core contentions. First, there was a civic and humanitarian desire to address the death rate; as Councillor J.R. Jeffrey proclaimed, councillors 'could no longer stand still and see their fellow creatures die around them without ... making the experiment and seeing whether the course ... suggested would succeed'.⁴⁵ Second, and typical of the competitive spirit of the Victorian period, councillors worried whether a failure to motivate the private sector to build working-class housing would result in Liverpool falling behind urban rivals such as Glasgow, London, and Leeds.⁴⁶ Finally, in motivating the working class to strive for better accommodation, the Corporation hoped that increased business opportunities would ultimately arise for private builders.⁴⁷

⁴⁴ *LM*, 'Town Council: The Corporation and dwellings for the working classes', 10 May 1866.

⁴⁵ *LM*, 'Town Council: The Corporation and dwellings for the working classes', 10 May 1866.

⁴⁶ *LM*, 'Town Council', 10 May 1866.

⁴⁷ *LM*, 'Town Council: Health Committee', 10 May 1866. The second son of William Rathbone V, Samuel Greg Rathbone followed his father into local politics and was a Liberal councillor 1862–1877.

Over the next two years, the Corporation failed to secure a private developer willing to finance the project; then accepted a tender to build based on the Corporation paying for the development; reneged on that; and initiated an open competition for the design of the dwellings. In December 1867 J.E. Reeve was awarded the prize for his ‘modest and carefully planned’ dwellings, but the Council remained ever-mindful of the need to maximise profits. The building contract for St Martin’s Cottages was awarded to Messrs Redman and Hesketh,⁴⁸ and finally, in October 1869, the Corporation became not only the commissioning body but also the landlord, having paid off the total amount that it had borrowed to construct the dwellings.⁴⁹ The development became part of the real estate of the Corporation, rather than being managed by the private sector.

The eventual full adoption of the St Martin’s Cottages development by the Council was not, however, an indication of future building intent. The extent to which it truly answered working-class needs or represented a successful experiment that might subsequently be emulated by either the private sector or philanthropic and voluntary societies is debatable. The scheme was opened between February and April 1869, but the final number of dwellings constructed was substantially lower than originally intended, and by 1871 was further reduced, largely as a consequence of damp.⁵⁰ Even the name of the development was a misnomer: St Martin’s Cottages comprised tenements arranged in six blocks over five storeys (including basements), effectively in a closed court formation—thereby breaching the Council’s own bye-laws.⁵¹

Cumulatively, this was a comedy of errors that, in the opinion of the borough engineer James Newlands, was a consequence of the Corporation’s over-riding desire in awarding the contract to ensure that it obtained the ‘greatest amount of work, for the least amount of money’.⁵² Commenting upon the debacle, *The Builder* pleaded that in the future those ‘who undertake to provide for the labouring population in our towns, dwellings where life may be in some degree an enjoyment, and not a mere fact of existence, must be content for the present to mix a little philanthropy with their percentage calculations. Political economy is a great science, but it does not abrogate the claims of humanity’.⁵³ Indeed, Councillor S.G. Rathbone’s report to Council on 6 October 1869 that the ‘houses [were] tenanted by ... the most provident and respectable portion of the

⁴⁸ A synopsis of the various machinations of the Council was provided by *The Builder* in three consecutive editions: 7, 14, and 21 December 1867, vol.xxx, 883–4, 902–3, 921.

⁴⁹ The final cost of construction was £17,225 12s 4d: *Liverpool Daily Post* [LDP], ‘The proposed dwellings of artisans’, 8 May 1868.

⁵⁰ See LDP, ‘The proposed dwellings for artisans’, 15 May 1868; LDP, ‘The Labourers’ Dwellings’, 9 July 1869.

⁵¹ With access from a central traversing passage rather than, as required by the 1864 Liverpool Sanitary Amendment Act, open access at each end to a public highway.

⁵² Newlands’s statement to the Council 13 October 1869, reproduced in LDP, ‘Town Council: The Imputations by Mr SG Rathbone on the Borough Engineer—Mr Newlands’ Reply’, 14 October 1869. The statement followed a sustained attack on Newlands by Councillor S.G. Rathbone; see LDP, ‘Town Council: Borough Engineer’, 7 October 1869.

⁵³ *The Builder*, 6 February 1869, vol.xxvii, 98–9.

working classes',⁵⁴ provided further credence to *The Builder's* previously voiced opinion that such developments overlooked 'the very lowest class of labourers and others, who can only afford to pay 1s. or at most 1s. 6d. a week for their lodgings'.⁵⁵ These comments highlighted the difficulties of addressing the needs of this sub-class for, as 'every tenant ha[d] to pay a deposit of five shillings, besides paying a week's rent in advance' and produce references from both their last landlord and present employer, those engaged as casual labourers were effectively barred from tenancy.⁵⁶ Therefore, although the Corporation had provided the country's first purpose-built municipal houses for the working classes, such was the limited scope of both their construction and the sum of rent charged that *The Porcupine* declared that the cottages 'had failed ... in any form or degree [to] accomplish any practical solution of the great question of how best to house the poor'.⁵⁷

Only when there was either a change in the political willingness to offer rent subsidies to the very poorest and to sanction greater municipal and/or national intervention in housing issues (including rent), or a willingness on the part of the poor themselves to take control of their own 'sanitary, social, and moral elevation', would substantial progress would be made.⁵⁸ The 1871 *Report of Drs Parkes and Sanderson on the Sanitary Condition of Liverpool* noted, however, that the former course of action was politically impossible, for it would mean that the Corporation 'would be simply offering a premium to pauperism',⁵⁹ while with regard to the latter, progress seemed unlikely.⁶⁰ As Trench lamented, without education to the contrary the poorest saw no 'necessity of taking decent houses',⁶¹ with many instead choosing to squat rather than pay rent and, in fact, systematically destroying the property in which they were living.⁶² This was a class of potential tenant that the Corporation was not prepared to accept.

Though St Martin's Cottages were the nation's first municipally-built houses for the working class, not only were they an experiment—a model for private builders to emulate—but the provisions of the Liverpool Sanitary Amendment Act 1864 under which they were constructed were not intended to enable the authority to purchase swathes of insanitary houses in order to create building plots of a suitable size to undertake rebuilding. Neither did it place any requirement upon the Corporation to rehouse those whom it displaced. In the last quarter of the nineteenth century, the legitimacy of such

⁵⁴ LDP, 'Town Council: The Labourers' Dwellings', 7 October 1869.

⁵⁵ *The Builder*, 26 June 1869, vol. xxvii, 500.

⁵⁶ *The Porcupine*, 'The Corporation Barracks', 18 September 1869, 236.

⁵⁷ *The Porcupine*, 'The Corporation Barracks', 18 September 1869, 237.

⁵⁸ *The Builder*, 26 June 1869, vol. xxvii, 500.

⁵⁹ E.A. Parkes and J. Burdon Sanderson, *Report of Drs Parkes and Sanderson on the sanitary condition of Liverpool* (Liverpool, 1871) 76.

⁶⁰ *The Builder*, 26 June 1869, vol. xxvii, 500.

⁶¹ LDP, 'Overcrowding and occupation of unhealthy cellars and dwellings', 4 December 1868.

⁶² *First report of the Royal Commission to inquire into the operation of sanitary laws in England and Wales, with the exception of the City of London and Metropolitan Board of Works District*, BPP 1869 [4218], evidence given by Dr W.S. Trench, 408–17.

a policy position was increasingly challenged at both local and national levels. Therefore, while the policy may still have reflected dominant Gladstonian *laissez-faire* political beliefs and ensured that the expenses incurred by ratepayers were minimised, the period from the mid-1870s onwards demonstrated a growing expectation that councils would not only demolish insanitary properties, but would also take an active part in ensuring that those displaced were rehoused in suitable accommodation.

From singular experiment to policy

The passing of the Artisans' and Labourers' Dwellings Improvement Act 1875 reinvigorated both public and municipal opinion in Liverpool as to the need for urgent action to improve the living conditions of the town's poor. In parliament the home secretary, Richard Cross, repeatedly criticised the sanitary conditions of housing in Liverpool, suggesting that inaction promoted a situation in which the working class were 'condemned to see their children die like flies before them'.⁶³ This was a public rebuke that stung, for within such comments was an implicit criticism that the Corporation's previous innovations had not been sufficient.

Liverpool's problems were not merely depicted in health terms. Dr Lyon Playfair declared in the Commons that failing to resolve the fundamental issues had not only cost the town £370,000 in 'preventable and wholly unnecessary sickness', but that remedial measures would also safeguard its prosperity through increased taxation.⁶⁴ In the face of such public scrutiny and with a predicted loss of wealth for the town, the *Liverpool Courier* called on the Corporation to embark upon a sustained programme of civic improvement so that 'the ground [would be] covered with dwellings after the model of St Martin's Cottages'.⁶⁵

The 1875 Act enabled large areas of condemned property to be purchased and demolished by councils in a single transaction. It also provided for those displaced to be rehoused within their original neighbourhood. Furthermore, demolished slum areas were not to be rezoned as commercial development areas but were to be retained for the construction of replacement working-class dwellings that were to house at least the same number as those displaced, unless special dispensation was obtained from the Local Government Board. This dual compulsion to rehouse and to do so *in situ* did not, however, place a 'requirement to build' upon individual authorities, as Cross clarified:

It is not the duty of the Government to provide any class of citizens with any of the necessaries of life, and among the necessaries of life we must include ... good and habitable dwellings. That is not the duty of the State, because if it did so, it

⁶³ Mr Richard Cross, 15 February 1875, *Hansard*, Commons, 3rd series, vol.222, col.335–87.

⁶⁴ Dr Lyon Playfair, 15 February 1875, *Hansard*, Commons, 3rd series, vol.222, col.382.

⁶⁵ *Liverpool Courier* [LC], 17 February 1875. Called the *Daily Courier* 1863–82 and 1922–9, it is referred to as the *Liverpool Courier* throughout this paper.

would inevitably tend to make that class depend, not on themselves, but upon what was done for them elsewhere, and it would not be possible to teach a worse lesson.⁶⁶

In accordance with the mechanism and provisions of the Act, the Council determined on 27 October 1875 that four acres of slums known as 'The Grove', with a population of 1100, should be cleared for the construction of working-class dwellings by the private sector.⁶⁷ Initially proposing to accommodate some 1700 people in this scheme, the Council subsequently amended its proposals and in August 1876 a Local Government Board Order granted permission for the construction of a minimum of 1100 working-class homes and a small number of shops.⁶⁸

As had been the case with the Corporation's first foray into social housing, no tenders to undertake the Nash Grove tenements were received, as Councillor A.B. Forwood, the Conservative leader of the Corporation, reported at the end of March 1879.⁶⁹ Protracted discussions within the Council about what to do with the site centred upon two options. The first was to leave the site barren and undeveloped until such a time as a private developer might be found to build the housing, while the second, proposed by the 'fervid Orangeman and municipal reformer' Councillor Joseph Ball,⁷⁰ was to obtain a dispensation from the Local Government Board to sell the land 'free from the conditions that buildings shall be erected thereon suitable for dwellings of persons of the working class' and thereafter encourage private sector construction of replacement housing nearby.⁷¹

Endorsing the second course of action in May 1879, the Corporation was unchastened both by the Local Government Board's refusal and its concurrent suggestion that in the event of failure to secure private development of the land, it would be 'competent for [the Council], with the consent of the Board, to erect dwellings on the site'.⁷² Notwithstanding this statement, in January 1880, Liverpool sought a further relaxation of its obligations under the 1875 Act and permission was obtained at the end of May 1880. This was a consequence of the passing of the 1879 Artisans' and Labourers' Dwellings Improvement Act,⁷³ which permitted authorities to rehouse those displaced on alternative sites in the vicinity,

⁶⁶ Mr Richard Cross, 8 February 1875, *Hansard*, Commons, 3rd series, vol.222, col.100.

⁶⁷ LTC, *Liverpool Council Proceedings, 1874–1875*, 167; see also LRO 352 MIN/HEA II/1/21 Liverpool Council Health Committee, Minute Book May–December 1875, 21 October 1875, 624–7.

⁶⁸ LRO 352 MIN/HEA II/1/23 Liverpool Council Health Committee, Minute Book May–October 1876, 104–5, 170–4.

⁶⁹ LC, 'Town Council: The Nash Grove scheme', 3 April 1879.

⁷⁰ P.J. Waller, *Democracy and sectarianism: A political and social history of Liverpool 1868–1939* (Liverpool, 1981) 113. First elected in 1878 for the South Toxteth ward, Ball was an advocate of financial retrenchment; he served as lord mayor in 1905–6.

⁷¹ This was a course of action particularly favoured by Councillor Ball: LC] 'Town Council: The Nash-Grove scheme', 3 April 1879.

⁷² Letter of refusal from the Local Government Board dated 18 July 1879, reproduced in full, LC, 'The Nash-Grove scheme', 7 August 1879. The nineteenth-century use of the word 'competent' means 'acceptable and satisfactory'.

⁷³ Artisans' and Labourers' Dwellings Improvement Act 1879 (42 & 43 Victoria c. 63).

and further enabled the cleared sites to be sold for commercial purposes.⁷⁴ Indeed, given the length of time that had passed since demolition, the Local Government Board concluded that Liverpool need undertake no ‘replacement’ construction, for those who had been displaced had surely already moved elsewhere.⁷⁵

Underlining individual personality dynamics within the policy-shaping process, only weeks later, on 24 June 1880, the Council instructed the borough engineer, Clement Dunscombe, to prepare plans for the building of workmen’s accommodation upon the site while retaining a substantial portion of the plot as open space.⁷⁶ The *Liberal Review* portrayed this change of policy ‘after five years of inglorious inactivity’ as a remarkable *volte face* inspired by Forwood’s ‘jealousy of Mr McDougall’, for the latter, as chairman of the Market Committee, had sought the ‘freed site’ for a new wholesale fish market.⁷⁷ Forwood’s actions, however, as well as the vacillation of the Health Committee, can instead be interpreted as evidence of the wider ideological battle within the Conservative Party and of the personal commitment of Forwood to better the living conditions of the town’s most marginalised. Thus, while Tory traditionalists opposed to ‘compulsion, centralisation, and confiscation’⁷⁸ helped to defeat Forwood’s motion by favouring the amendment brought by the Whig councillor J.A. Picton,⁷⁹ it was ultimately the one-nation view that triumphed with regard to the need for greater municipal involvement in the provision of working-class housing.

Picton’s motion, supported in full Council by a majority of 24–14 (despite the Tory domination of both the Council and the Health Committee), resulted in no further action being undertaken at Nash Grove, for the motion called for the land to be levelled and made available for general public use.⁸⁰ Eighteen months later, the question as to how to proceed with the development of the Nash Grove site remained unanswered. Subsequent protracted discussions in both the Health and Finance Committees ensued, centring upon three propositions: to turn the land into recreation ground, which would realise no revenue; to continue to attempt to sell the land to a private developer, which might lead to the Council holding the plot indefinitely; or for the Council to construct artisans’ dwellings and thereby not only to recoup some of the revenue hitherto expended, but also to ‘get rid of a dispute on which a great deal of time ha[d] been expended to little advantage’.⁸¹ Council decided on 7 June 1882 to build, a decision that the *Liverpool*

⁷⁴ TNA MH 12/5991, Letter from the Local Government Board to the Liverpool Corporation, 31 May 1880.

⁷⁵ TNA MH 12/5991, Letter from the Local Government Board to the Liverpool Corporation, 31 May 1880.

⁷⁶ *LC*, ‘The Health Committee: The Nash Grove site’, 25 June 1880.

⁷⁷ *Liberal Review*, ‘What I thought in Council’, 2 October 1880. From 1883 onwards, the *Liberal Review* was known as the *Liverpool Review*.

⁷⁸ T.E. Kebbel, *A history of Toryism* (London, 1886) 405.

⁷⁹ James Allanson Picton was a Whig councillor from 1849 until his death in 1889.

⁸⁰ Liverpool Council Proceedings, 1879–1880, 253–4. See also *LC*, ‘Town Council’, 30 September 1880.

⁸¹ *LC*, 8 June 1882.

Courier declared would make the public 'glad—if they could think that the decision arrived at ... will be really carried out'.⁸² With the appointment in November 1882 of an Insanitary Property and Artisans' Dwelling Committee chaired by Forwood, progress was swift: within ten months permission was sought from the Local Government Board to construct a series of tenements.⁸³ Tenders were duly received and contracts awarded, and the dwellings at Nash Grove were finally opened on 20 October 1885 by Cross, and christened 'Victoria Square'.⁸⁴

Consisting of 272 tenements constructed in five, five-storey blocks, a caretaker's house and 12 ground floor shops, Victoria Square cannot be employed as clear proof of the success of the 1875 Act. This is because, even though Liverpool was the only town outside the capital in which working-class houses were erected on a site cleared under the 1875 Act,⁸⁵ such was the lapse in time between its passage, and their opening (a little over ten years), that their construction can neither be viewed as a direct consequence of central government legislation, nor as having answered the rehousing needs of those originally displaced.⁸⁶ As Mr Jones, the building's superintendent, confirmed in his report to the Corporation in March 1886, his 'careful ... selection of tenants' resulted in Victoria Square being overwhelmingly tenanted by tradesmen such as bricklayers, fitters, cabinet makers, printers, permanent labourers (by definition therefore, not dock workers), warehouse porters, retired widowers, widows with children, young childless couples, and 'good respectable people'.⁸⁷ Indeed, this process of vetting, when combined with weekly rentals of between 2s and 5s 6d, the interior design of each individual tenement, and the external finishes afforded each block, provides significant evidence in support of the contention that the dwellings were never truly destined for those members of the working class most in need of residential assistance. Victoria Square also suffered from the same problem that had been apparent with St Martin's Cottages: the rents charged were simply too high for the most indigent. As the *Liverpool Mercury* noted, each individual tenement featured a 'cast-iron mantelpiece decorated with the Liverpool coat of arms, and window sills ... with ornate iron railings [upon which] tenants are expected to place pots of flowers [and] ferns with the view of cultivating a taste for horticulture for their own and the public's pleasure'.⁸⁸ The external finishes afforded each block were similarly smart, with 'handsomely decorated entrance doorway[s] of terra cotta [and] ornate balconies [to] give quite a continental aspect to the daily life of [tenants and] remind the imaginative visitor of the gay scenes still to be witnessed in Italian and Spanish cities during religious

⁸² *LC*, 8 June 1882.

⁸³ TNA MH 12/5994, Letter from Liverpool Corporation Insanitary and Artisans' Property Committee to the Local Government Board, 11 May 1883.

⁸⁴ *Liverpool Daily Post*, 'Report of the Opening', 21 October 1885.

⁸⁵ J.N. Tarn, *Working-class housing in 19th century Britain* (London, 1971) 25.

⁸⁶ LRO 352 MIN/INS/1/2 Minutes of the Insanitary Property and Artisans' Dwelling Committee, May 1883–October 1885, 26 May 1884, 328.

⁸⁷ LRO 352 MIN/INS/1/3 Minutes of the Insanitary Property and Artisans' Dwelling Committee, November 1885–October 1888, 178–80. Superintendent's Report, 26 March 1886.

⁸⁸ *Liverpool Mercury [LM]*, 'The Nash Grove Artisans' Dwellings', 11 March 1885.

and other festivals'.⁸⁹ This, and weekly rentals of between 2s and 5s 6d, suggest that the dwellings were never intended for those most in need of assistance. Thus, while the Corporation may be applauded for the fact that it erected a second set of working-class tenements and was the only local authority to have done so under the terms of the 1875 Act, it remained the case that even the state (in the form of a local authority) could not afford to construct housing for rents at a price that the poor could afford.

It was not merely the construction of this second set of tenements that provides evidence of a substantial change of attitude within the Conservative-controlled Liverpool Corporation. During the course of their construction, Forwood stated in an address to the diocese of Liverpool that the council would be compelled to replace at least 12–15,000 insanitary dwellings if the town were to be rid of decrepit properties.⁹⁰ The scale of the problem was considerable. In that year, as Dr J.S. Taylor reported, Liverpool contained 2684 'fever nests', 984 more than in 1875, and whole districts were 'as plagued as the cholera-smitten cities of India'.⁹¹ In light of this, Forwood noted, only tenements could provide sufficient dwellings upon the limited space available within walking distance of the area in which the labouring poor were most likely to find employment: near the docks and the warehouses that served them. Finally, Forwood petitioned that at least two-thirds of the accommodation needed to be affordably priced, at a rent of one shilling per room for a three-roomed tenement for, 'much as [he] deprecate[d] over legislation or State interference with private enterprise ... in the matter of sanitary houses I feel an obligation does lie upon the public authority, more particularly upon a city situated like Liverpool'.⁹²

This, therefore, was an acceptance of a plethora of economic realities. In addition, the Corporation not only acknowledged that the plight of the city's most indigent working class had deteriorated, but that 'demolition and house-building had to harmonise, otherwise overcrowding was exacerbated'.⁹³ This was, once more, a national first for a municipal authority, though there was movement within national policy guidelines that further linked the eradication of slums with the need for the authority responsible to construct replacement accommodation for those displaced. It may be noted that the Corporation's loan of £200,000 from the Local Government Board in January 1884 was contingent upon the its ensuring that there were erected, on such cleared sites, 'dwellings suitable for the class of labourers who have been displaced ... to be let at rentals very similar to those given for the existing dwellings *viz.* about one shilling per room'.⁹⁴

⁸⁹ *LM*, 'The Nash Grove Artisans' Dwellings', 11 March 1885.

⁹⁰ A.B. Forwood, *The dwellings of the industrial classes in the Diocese of Liverpool and how to improve them* (1883) 19–20.

⁹¹ *LDP*, 5 November 1883. Dr John Stopford Taylor succeeded Dr Trench as Medical Officer of Health in 1877 and held this position until 1893.

⁹² Forwood, *Dwellings of the industrial classes*, 19–20.

⁹³ Waller, *Democracy and sectarianism*, 87–8.

⁹⁴ TNA MH 12/5995 Local Government Board Inspector Harrison, Letter to the Corporation 18 January 1884.

As before, the call to construct further working-class housing at a rentable level which the poorest could afford went unanswered by the private sector. Undeterred, the council decided on 15 April 1885 to commission a further set of tenements.⁹⁵ Located, like Victoria Square, upon the Nash Grove site, the first set of 50 tenements, 'Juvenal Dwellings', was opened in March 1888, with a further 51 tenements following two years later, in December 1890. While weekly rentals originally averaged 1s 3d, this was 25 per cent higher than the level which had previously been seen as an absolute maximum for the type of tenant to which Forwood alluded.⁹⁶ By 1894, rents for one- and two-bedroomed tenements in Juvenal Dwellings ranged from 2s and 2s 9d, to 3s 9d and 5s 3d respectively, while the two three-roomed tenements commanded rents of 5s 6d per week.

Conclusion

Despite the best intentions of the Corporation of Liverpool, slum clearance and same-site resettlement during the second half of the nineteenth century was only within the reach of the council because it was building upon land that it already owned. Even then, the levels of rent charged were above those deemed to be affordable to the most impecunious of families, whose housing plight remained unresolved except through a very limited process of indirect 'levelling up', as the artisanal working class moved from overcrowded cellars and courts into tenements such as St Martin's Cottages, Juvenal Dwellings, and Victoria Square. Accordingly, while the Corporation's actions evinced Victorian ideals that self-help and social mobility offered hope to the poor and the betterment of society,⁹⁷ its efforts did little to benefit either those tenants displaced through specific slum-demolition programmes, given the time that had elapsed betwixt clearance and construction, let alone completion, or those whose wages did not meet the threshold required to afford even council-provided housing.

It follows that the construction of such housing was merely part of the solution. If the question of how best to rehouse the town's most impecunious citizens was to be addressed adequately, one of two alternative policy positions needed to be adopted. In the clear absence of private speculative interest, the Corporation would either have to reduce the quality of the tenements it constructed, or the level of rents charged would need to be adjusted to a level at which they were more affordable, a policy that could only have been realised through some form of subsidy. The first would have made a mockery of the desire to improve the living conditions of the working classes, while the latter would not only have represented an unprecedented attack upon the workings of the housing free market, but would also have been perceived as rewarding idleness.⁹⁸ Neither course was politically realistic.

⁹⁵ See respectively LRO 352 MIN/INS/1/2 Minutes of the Insanitary Property and Artisans' Dwelling Committee, May 1883–October 1885, 517; LTC, *Liverpool Council Proceedings, 1884–1885*, 148–9; LM, 'City Council', 16 April 1885.

⁹⁶ Forwood, *Dwellings of the industrial classes*.

⁹⁷ S. Smiles, *Self-help; with illustrations of character and conduct* (London, 1859).

⁹⁸ Parkes and Sanderson, *Report of Drs Parkes and Sanderson*.



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Rather, there had to be a national political recognition that the state possessed a ‘duty of sustaining the most necessitous class of the community by public funds’, and that failure to do so imperilled the future prosperity of all.⁹⁹ The financial burden that this would impose was too great to be met by individual local authorities alone.

⁹⁹ Marquess of Salisbury, 31 July 1885, *Hansard*, Lords, 3rd series, vol.300, col.650–4, col.652. Robert Arthur Talbot Gascoyne-Cecil, 3rd Marquess of Salisbury, three times Conservative prime minister.

