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WORKING-CLASS HOUSING IN PLYMOUTH 1870-1914

by

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## **Abstract**

### Working-Class Housing in Plymouth 1870-1914

This thesis sets out to explore the development of working-class housing in Plymouth, East Stonehouse and Devonport in the period between 1870 and 1914. Housing reform has been well documented with particular reference to London and other large urban areas, but has been little explored in the context of the greater Plymouth area – the Three Towns. These three towns with their similarities and variances have demonstrated that a London-centric study of housing will fail to capture the full range of complex challenges faced by provincial towns and cities in effecting improvements to the living conditions of the labouring and artizan classes. The Victorian housing problem is outlined in order to set the context within which housing reformers and political activists campaigned. Associated notions of moral improvement, which informed much of the discursive narrative of housing reform, are also considered. Also discussed are Victorian philosophies of self-help and woman's separate sphere in relation to their influence on housing reform.

Three types of housing providers are given particular attention – philanthropic individuals and organizations, which constructed mostly tenement blocks; working-class organizations which constructed terraced housing for sale to artizans, mostly their own members; and borough councils which provided a mix of accommodation for their working-class citizens. The activities of the working classes themselves have been considered notably through the activities of the Social Democratic Federation, and the role of women as homemakers and as political activists is given due prominence.

The research carried out has demonstrated the difficulties experienced in bringing about reform, due to the inadequacy of the legislative framework within which improvements were required to be made, and that substantial improvements would not be achieved until after the First World War.

Ann Bond

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## **Author's Declaration**

At no time during the registration for the degree of Master of Research has the author been registered for any other University award without prior agreement of the Faculty of Arts and Humanities.

I certify that the work in this thesis is wholly my own except where acknowledgement of other sources is clearly made.

In preparing this thesis a programme of advanced study was undertaken, which included a postgraduate course on research in the arts and humanities and a subject-specific module entitled Key Debates and Research Methods in History.

Relevant seminars and workshops were regularly attended at which work was presented.

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## Introduction

The study of the social history of working-class housing had its genesis in the early 1970s with the interest of social historians of the working-classes. Earlier works had been primarily concerned with housing as an economic issue, investigating housing as an investment alternative to industrial production, but from the early 1970s onwards, partly in response to the standard-of-living controversy, historians began to consider the social history of housing. Interest focused on changes in housing standards and the effects on their occupants. The existing historiography now affords a range of approaches and methodologies.

S.D. Chapman's edited collection of essays, *The History of Working-Class Housing; A Symposium* (1971) was the first major work to concentrate solely on the development of workers' housing during the nineteenth century.<sup>1</sup> Chapman encouraged his contributors to develop their own individual approaches to the questions posed, resulting in a series of local studies. Each of these studies demonstrated different approaches to the study of the subject, some placing more emphasis on the economic or architectural aspects, whilst others considered the social issues. To an extent the range and focus of these local studies was determined by the sources available to their respective authors. One common theme which emerged from these investigations is the difficulties encountered in bringing about improvements in the standards of working-class housing during the second half of the nineteenth century. This collection of essays served to focus attention on the social problems of working class-housing conditions and acted as a catalyst in generating a body of research over the following decade and a half.

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<sup>1</sup> S. D. Chapman, ed., *The History of Working Class Housing: A Symposium* (Newton Abbot: David and Charles, 1971).

The earliest, and in some ways still most useful of these, were J. N. Tarn's monographs *Working-class housing in 19<sup>th</sup>-century Britain* (1971)<sup>2</sup> and *Five Per Cent Philanthropy: An Account of Housing in Urban Areas between 1840 and 1914* (1973).<sup>3</sup> In these Tarn discusses the relations between public health and housing conditions and traces the social, political and moral arguments which, in his view, eventually produced a public policy on housing and the provision of state housing for workers.

Another work of particular importance is Enid Gauldie's *Cruel Habitations: a history of working class housing, 1780-1910* (1974).<sup>4</sup> Gauldie's work, like Tarn's, deals with the pre-industrial background from which housing problems emerged, and unsuccessful attempts to improve conditions by public health and housing reforms in Parliament, by the actions of charitable agencies, and by the eventual intervention of local authorities as providers. Gauldie's work stemmed from her research into housing conditions in Dundee which had shown a need for a general history of housing against which local findings could be assessed, and she called for many more local studies to complete the overall picture.

Taking a different approach, John Burnett, in *A Social History of Housing, 1815-1985* (1986) is less concerned with the social policy of housing than with the type of housing which was available to the majority of people and attempts to measure and evaluate changes in housing quality over time.<sup>5</sup>

The majority of the literature dates from the 1970s and 1980s. Since the mid-1980s little of significance has been contributed as the subject has fallen out of favour with academics. The lack of significant secondary literature during the last thirty years has

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<sup>2</sup> J. N. Tarn, *Working-class housing in 19<sup>th</sup>-century Britain* (London: Lund Humphries for the Architectural Association, 1971).

<sup>3</sup> J. N. Tarn, *Five Per Cent Philanthropy: An Account of Housing in Urban Areas between 1840 and 1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973).

<sup>4</sup> E. Gauldie, *Cruel Habitations: a history of working class housing, 1780-1910* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1974).

<sup>5</sup> J. Burnett, *A social history of housing, 1815-1970* (London: Methuen, 1980).

resulted in a gap in the available historiography with no works on housing history applying, for instance, a gendered analysis. Whilst some attention has been paid to the role of exceptional women philanthropists and their activities in housing provision, the role of ordinary women has not so far received much attention. There are some indications that this may now start to be addressed. Caroline Morrell has conducted a study into the housing needs of single working women and in her thesis *Housing and the Women's Movement 1860-1914* she has discussed the housing needs of single working-class women and the role of organisations such as the Girls' Friendly Society and the National Association for Women's Lodging Houses.<sup>6</sup> Further, with a contemporary housing crisis<sup>7</sup> the subject appears to be regaining historical interest. In June 2013, the Institute of Historical Research held a conference on the topic, described as a 'conference examining the history of housing provision in London, and how historical research may be mobilised to address the contemporary housing crisis.'

This thesis is an investigation into the development of working-class housing in the three towns of Plymouth, Devonport and Stonehouse in the period between 1870 and 1914. These towns, known collectively as the Three Towns by contemporaries, had their distinctions and differences in character, and the variation of their experience and responses to the housing crises of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries has the potential to illuminate and supplement national studies. This study discusses the development of, and changing attitudes to, provision of housing for the artisan and labouring classes. In addition it will investigate the under-researched area of the role of women in this field, as political activists, as social reformers and as homemakers, and

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<sup>6</sup> C. Morrell, 'Housing and the Women's Movement 1860-1914' (unpublished Ph.D thesis, Oxford Brookes University, 1999).

<sup>7</sup> See for example K. Murray 'The housing crisis hits home', *The Guardian* <http://www.theguardian.com/housing-network/2014/jan/08/housing-crisis-hits-home> [accessed 1 July 2014];

D. Hipwell. 'Target for new homes can't be met, builders say', *The Times* <http://www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/business/industries/construction-property/article4101583.ece> [accessed 1 July 2014].

aims to recover the actions and influences of ordinary women within a local study. However the role of women will not be treated as a separate topic but will be included alongside the actions of men within the various chapters. The thesis is primarily concerned with the provision of homes for working-class men and women and their families. It does not attempt to investigate areas such as common lodging houses, or the various types of lodgings available to single working people such as living-in arrangements for domestic staff, shop workers, or military personnel. The period of study from 1870 coincides with the beginning of serious legislative attempts by central government to tackle the crises in housing provision with the Artizans' and Labourers' Dwellings Act of 1868 and the Artizans' and Labourers' Dwellings Improvement Act of 1875. The end date of 1914 marks a natural break in activity and policy with the impetus after the Great War towards the provision of 'homes fit for heroes to live in.' 1914 is also the year in which the three towns of Plymouth, Devonport and Stonehouse were amalgamated as the Borough of Plymouth under one combined local administration.

This period also coincides with the era of classic social investigation into poverty, which informed much of the discourse about the housing question. Englander and O'Day suggest that three studies lay at the heart of social inquiry in the Victorian period – those of Henry Mayhew and Charles Booth of London and B. Seebohm Rowntree of York.<sup>8</sup> To these perhaps should be added the early-twentieth century study by Maud Pember Reeves. Many consider the most influential of these to be that of Booth. Booth, a Liverpool shipowner with a Liberal non-conformist background had initially challenged the findings of a report published by Henry Hyndman and the Social Democratic Federation in which it was claimed that more than 25 per cent of the population of London were living below the subsistence line. His own subsequent

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<sup>8</sup> D. Englander and R. O'Day, *Retrieved Riches: Social Investigation in Britain 1840-1914* (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1995), p.2.

investigations finally concluded that the figure was actually in excess of thirty per cent. Booth coined the term 'poverty line' which he tied to qualitative factors of food, clothing, shelter and relative deprivation. The Booth inquiry was 'grounded in the class anxieties in Victorian Britain' and was 'as much concerned with the values, beliefs and interests of the proletariat as with the enumeration of its privations.'<sup>9</sup> Its influence lay in Booth's interest in the institutions which might be the agents of change and reform. He was to serve as a member of the Royal Commission on the Poor Laws and argued for the introduction of old age pensions and free school meals. Rowntree conducted similar investigations into conditions in York and concluded that over 27 per cent of the total population there lived below the poverty line. This corresponded with that from Booth's study of poverty in London and so challenged the view, commonly held at the time, that abject poverty was a problem particular to London and was not widespread in the rest of Britain. Pember Reeves's study, conducted under the auspices of the Fabian Women's Group, was concerned with the daily lives of working-class families in the London borough of Lambeth. Conducted entirely by women it unusually focused on the wives and mothers of the families. It argued for government reforms, including child benefit, school dinners, and free health clinics and also noted the role of poor housing conditions in child mortality. These social investigations were to inform much of the debate of the late-Victorian and Edwardian periods on poverty and housing.

In order to produce this study of working-class housing a range of sources have been drawn on. The Plymouth and West Devon Record Office (PWDRO) holds much little explored material which relates to the research study. Material of relevance to housing includes formal minutes of relevant committees of the borough councils of both Plymouth and Devonport and the annual reports of the respective Medical Officers of Health.

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<sup>9</sup> Englander and O'Day, *Retrieved Riches*, p.33.

It is, of course, recognised that formal records of this nature will only give a part of the overall picture so these records have been supplemented by other sources including newspaper reports of the time of the discussions held at the various council and committee meetings, as these give more information on the range of issues discussed and the views of individual members of the committees. Newspapers have also provided valuable insights into the reactions and responses of the public to the formal decisions and discussions, especially in the correspondence sections.

Two particularly valuable sources have provided insights into the activities of working-class people – the recently deposited records of the Plymouth Co-operative Society and those relating to the Social Democratic Federation. Only a small amount of SDF material has survived, but this does include a number of pamphlets and some campaigning material. These sources have been of particular value in applying both a gendered analysis to this case study and to recovering the testimony of working-class people themselves. These are both groups whose roles have been largely missing from the current historiography.

The first chapter of this thesis considers both national and local housing conditions in the middle of the nineteenth century and discusses in particular the moral concerns raised as a result of overcrowding and insanitary conditions. Chapter 2 is concerned with philanthropic activity in the provision of housing. The most prominent of the philanthropic housing in the form of tenement blocks is discussed with some space given to discussing the motivations of their providers and financiers. Chapter 3 explores the aspirations and moral standards of the working classes themselves. It investigates the role of self-help and the activities of working people in seeking to provide improved living conditions for themselves through two working-class organizations, the

Devonport Dockyard and District Workmen's Dwelling Company and the Plymouth Co-operative Society.

In Chapter 4 the theme of working-class activity continues but discussion turns to political activism and socialist politics. Particular prominence is given to the role of the Social Democratic Federation and its most ardent campaigner, Arthur Grindley. The Federation's tactics are considered and its eventual effectiveness is assessed. The final chapter is concerned with the Borough Councils and questions the effectiveness of the legislation that was at their disposal. The thesis concludes with an assessment of the relative position of housing conditions at the end of the period of study with those prevailing in 1870.





Site of Devonport Dockyard Workmen's Dwellings Co. houses

Braggs Alley, Francis Alley and Doidge's Well

Bates's Buildings



Site of Plymouth Co-operative Society houses

Prince Rock Housing Estate

Clare Buildings

Figure 1

Map of Plymouth, Stonehouse and Devonport c1870



# Chapter 1

## Housing conditions in the mid-nineteenth century:

### national and local perspectives

By the middle of the nineteenth century Britain was already a largely urban society and at the time of the 1851 census there were seven English towns and cities, in addition to London, which had populations of more than 100,000 inhabitants – Liverpool with 395,000, Manchester with 338,000, Birmingham with 265,000, Leeds with 172,000, Bristol 137,000, Sheffield 135,000 and Bradford 104,000.<sup>1</sup> The three towns of Plymouth, Devonport and East Stonehouse had also grown significantly during the first half of the century. Mid-century Plymouth's population stood at 52,211, Devonport's was 38,180 and Stonehouse's was 11,979. Had the population figures for the greater Plymouth area been treated as one conurbation, albeit with separate administrations, the towns would have joined the ranks of those towns where the populations had already exceeded 100,000 by 1851 and ranked as the eighth most populous town in England at that time.

Despite the population increases, house building failed to keep pace. In Glasgow, for instance, whilst the population of the Blackfriars parish increased by forty per cent in the decade between 1831 and 1841 the number of houses did not increase at all,<sup>2</sup> whilst in Liverpool the number of families increased at twice the rate at which the number of houses did.<sup>3</sup> Plymouth's population increased by more than thirty-six thousand in the first half of the century and yet the number of houses increased by less than one tenth of that figure. The General Board of Health's enquiry into the sanitary condition of Plymouth published in 1853 reported that there had been 1782 houses in 1801 and that

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<sup>1</sup> Burnett, *A Social History of Housing*, p.57.

<sup>2</sup> Gauldie, *Cruel Habitations*, p.83.

<sup>3</sup> D. R. Green and A. G. Parton, 'Slums and slum life in Victorian England: London and Birmingham at mid-century' in *Slums*, ed. by Martin Gaskell (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1990), pp.17-91.

by the time of the 1851 census there were 5178, giving an increase of 3396.<sup>4</sup> The figures for Stonehouse showed a similar pattern, with the population increasing during the same period by 8564 whilst the number of houses increased by 820<sup>5</sup>. The number of houses in Devonport for 1851 was apparently not recorded, so it is not possible to make a similar comparison for that town. However the figure for 1841 shows sufficient similarity to indicate that the situation was comparable across all three towns. Here the population increased between 1801 and 1841 by 10,075, whilst the number of houses increased by 1053.<sup>6</sup> Across all three towns, therefore, the number of houses increased at a rate close to just one for every ten persons increase in population.

However as Gauldie has pointed out, it is especially difficult to verify the extent of house building during this period, due to the lack of any definition of 'house' in the census forms. Where large middle class houses, occupied by one family and counted as one dwelling in 1801, had been subdivided into flats or single rooms for working class tenants, each room would have appeared as a 'house' in later censuses if separately occupied.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, this is also the conclusion drawn by Chadwick in his *Sanitary Report*.<sup>8</sup> Neither did censuses, during this period, attempt to collect data on the number of rooms per house or the size of rooms. Working-class people were naturally drawn to districts where they might also find employment and these were the very areas where overcrowding was most severe. As a consequence they crowded into large properties which had been abandoned by their original occupants making homes in cellars and attics, dividing up once grand living rooms and halls, and even on occasion on stairways, creating what became known as rookeries. Robert Rawlinson described

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<sup>4</sup> R. Rawlinson, *Public Health Act (11 and 12 Vict cap 63) Report to the General Board of Health on a Preliminary Inquiry into the Sewerage, Drainage, and Supply of Water, and the Sanitary Condition of the Inhabitants of the Borough of Plymouth in the County of Devon* (London: HMSO, 1854), p.33.

<sup>5</sup> Rawlinson, *Sanitary Report*, p.33.

<sup>6</sup> Rawlinson, *Sanitary Report*, p.33.

<sup>7</sup> Gauldie, *Cruel Habitations*, p.82.

<sup>8</sup> E. Chadwick, *Report on the Sanitary Condition of the Labouring Population of Great Britain* (1842, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1965 edition), p.188-9.

similar properties in Plymouth where rooms on every floor had been divided and subdivided and how makeshift doors led into small spaces let off as separate tenements. The walls and gables were shattered, the stairs and handrails were rickety and dangerous, plastering had fallen away leaving dusty and rotten laths, and window openings had neither frame nor glass. Referring to the occupants he commented

Originally, many houses now in ruins were erected as residences for the nobility and gentry of the town; but far from being the abodes of those possessing wealth, they now give partial shelter to the improvident, the vagrant, the vicious, and the unfortunate<sup>9</sup>

His assessment of the characters of the inhabitants reflects the views of many others that those who lived in poor conditions were responsible, at least to some extent, for their own misfortune. They were thought to be negligent, irresponsible and semi-criminal. Rawlinson was not alone in this perception. For much of the early Victorian period, it was the moral aspects of slums which received most attention. As Wohl has suggested, not only were the effects of slum life on moral character stressed, but also ‘the slums themselves were often thought to be the product of bad character.’<sup>10</sup> However Rawlinson also gives the lie to his assessment of the inhabitants by commenting that ‘the narrow space of street betwixt is further contracted by rude looking poles rigged out of windows on either side, story above story, on which clothes are hung to dry’<sup>11</sup> clearly demonstrating that the occupants made what efforts they could to maintain some standard of cleanliness. In the properties that Rawlinson was describing there was no piped water supply and no washhouses, and yet working-class women found ways to wash and dry clothes and bedding to the best of their ability. That middle-class commentators, even those who campaigned for better housing conditions, would perceive this as worthy of negative comment, and complain that the practice of hanging

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<sup>9</sup> Rawlinson, *Sanitary Report*, p.16.

<sup>10</sup> A. Wohl, *The eternal slum: housing and social policy in Victorian London* (London: Edward Arnold, 1977), p.8.

<sup>11</sup> Rawlinson, *Sanitary Report*, p.16.

washing out on poles impeded a free flow of air, shows how most failed to understand the realities of life as it was experienced by those who had no choice but to live in such conditions. Rather it was seen as yet another way in which the working-classes contributed to their own bad living conditions by making the atmosphere even more damp than it need be.

Equally important as the number of occupants to each house was housing density. In the most overcrowded areas, where land prices were high, every available plot of land was built over by property owners and speculative builders. Areas which had once been the gardens of large properties were covered with poor quality, densely packed and expensively rented hovels which often could gain access to the street only through the existing house. Front gardens of properties were also built over, sometimes encroaching onto the highway and impeding traffic in the process leaving but narrow pedestrian access. Open courtyards were enclosed, corner plots built over and eventually every available space was occupied. Speculative builders who erected property in this way were not motivated by any social or philanthropic considerations; rather they were concerned to make a profit by building as cheaply as possible and renting for the maximum that could be obtained. Their aim was to economize on land to achieve the greatest possible densities per acre. One cul-de-sac in Leeds consisting of thirty-four houses regularly contained 340 people although that number could double when itinerant workers came into the town looking for work.<sup>12</sup>

Such developments were, of course, unplanned. In the mid-nineteenth century there were no legal controls over land, land use or building or indeed a common will which would have made planning in such situations a possibility. Exceptional examples of consciously planned urban development came about only where a single landowner had both control and the will to stipulate and enforce regulations for laying out streets and

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<sup>12</sup> Burnett, *A social history of housing*, p.11.

specifying road widths, and for ensuring building standards, sewers and water supplies were all complied with. Examples of this early type of town planning occurred in places such as Ashton-under-Lyme and Huddersfield but these model developments were rare.<sup>13</sup>

By the middle years of the Victorian era, the poor housing conditions which prevailed in Plymouth were already well known. The first of a series of investigations had taken place as early as 1846 at the instigation of the Plymouth branch of the Health of Towns Association (HTA). This investigation was led by the secretary of the newly formed local HTA branch, the Reverend William Odgers, minister of the Treville Street Unitarian Church. The investigation revealed the true extent to which the old central part of the town had become overcrowded and also made clear the squalid and dilapidated condition of the housing stock itself. Affluent middle class occupants who had now moved to the suburbs had left behind houses which had become sub-divided and multi-occupied. In the twenty-three houses in New Street there were a total of 598 occupants. One house contained seventy-five residents and was also the location of a dame school with an average attendance of twenty children, whilst another provided accommodation for ninety-one people.<sup>14</sup> The average number of occupants to each house throughout the town was found to be in excess of nine, which was greater than that in London, Liverpool or Manchester.<sup>15</sup> Water supplies, sewerage and privies were all lacking. In some houses there was 'neither drain, water, nor privy, an open gutter running through the house.'<sup>16</sup> It was a damning indictment of the local urban environment and exposed the failings of the town's Improvement Commissioners. Although some improvements had been carried out during the preceding twenty years

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<sup>13</sup> Burnett, *A social history of housing*, p.11.

<sup>14</sup> W. J. Odgers, *Report on the sanitary condition of Plymouth* (Plymouth: Health of Towns Association, 1847), p.19.

<sup>15</sup> Odgers, *Report*, p.29.

<sup>16</sup> Odgers, *Report*, p19.

this was generally in relation to the principal streets where some old houses had been taken down to widen the main thoroughfare through the town and erect new shops.<sup>17</sup> This perhaps suggests that improvements might have been instigated mainly in order to benefit the trading interests of the ratepayers rather than benefitting the majority of the population. Some streets had been paved and drains constructed but work had been done on an ad hoc basis. Improvements were usually carried out in response to memorials from local residents so were more likely to have taken place in the better parts of the town. The unplanned way in which improvements had been carried out also meant that they were inefficiently completed and costly, and the Commissioners had borrowed heavily against the rates.<sup>18</sup>

Moral concerns were evident from the start and figured prominently in the report, with Odgers stressing that ‘proper delicacy of feeling’ was eroded by having insufficient sleeping accommodation and a lack of proper conveniences, which in turn led to degradation, vice and crime. In his view ‘comfortable homes do not people prisons’.<sup>19</sup> Whilst, like Chadwick in his infamous *Report on the sanitary condition of the labouring population of Great Britain*, Odgers detailed the economic costs of failing to address sanitary reform, he also made much of ‘other considerations of unspeakably higher importance than mere pecuniary saving.’<sup>20</sup> For him sanitary reform was a moral and religious cause, couched in terms of the ‘sacred sanctions of religion’<sup>21</sup> and he expressed the view that ‘religious instruction and education of the people’ was in vain while living conditions meant that ‘common decency cannot be complied with’.<sup>22</sup> As with many reformers of the time, Odgers did not go so far as to specify his moral fears saying instead

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<sup>17</sup> Rawlinson, *Sanitary Report*, p.15.

<sup>18</sup> Rawlinson, *Sanitary Report*, pp.17; 26; 28.

<sup>19</sup> Odgers, *Report*, p.49.

<sup>20</sup> Odgers, *Report*, p.vii.

<sup>21</sup> Odgers, *Report*, p.viii.

<sup>22</sup> Odgers, *Report*, p.2.



We dare not defile these pages by the recital of crimes, which are the result of temptations peculiarly the lot of the poorest and most neglected classes, and with the miserable consequences of which those alone are familiar who have paid attention to the subject. A great proportion of these can be traced to the gradual weakening and final destruction of every feeling of delicacy and virtue, flowing, as almost necessary consequence from the construction of dwellings in which the claims of common decency cannot be complied with.<sup>23</sup>

However, it is clear that the crime to which he refers is incest. It was the accepted view that in homes where there was insufficient separate sleeping accommodation for parents and for children of each gender incest would be the inevitable result. Odgers calculated that nearly a third of the town's population lived in single rooms, with some rooms containing ten or more occupants.<sup>24</sup> Average rents for a single room were 1s 8d per week or £4 5s a year.<sup>25</sup>

In addition to this greatest of moral fears was the professed certainty that overcrowded conditions led to other 'moral evils' caused by the 'immoral influence' of filth and discomfort. A working man, on his return from a day's labour, would spend his money on 'selfish and corrupting gratifications' in order to escape the 'wretched state of his home'; his sons would wander the streets or resort to the 'abodes of crime'; whilst daughters were exposed to 'evil influences' and easily lured into prostitution.<sup>26</sup> To the Victorians there was thought to be an obvious correlation between poor sanitary conditions and prostitution. Indeed throughout the nineteenth century and beyond the juxtaposition of prostitution and filth was common place, from Odgers' report which, for instance, said of Catte Street that the residents 'had very bad health which they attributed to want of means of cleanliness. Pigs and prostitutes constitute no small portion of the inhabitants'<sup>27</sup> through to Henry Whitfield's 1900 history of Plymouth

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<sup>23</sup> Odgers, *Report*, p.2.

<sup>24</sup> Odgers, *Report*, p.31.

<sup>25</sup> Odgers, *Report*, p.56.

<sup>26</sup> Odgers, *Report*, p.49.

<sup>27</sup> Odgers, *Report*, p.40.

which, in describing the squalor of Castle Street, suggested that every house had been an inn and every inn a brothel.<sup>28</sup>

Working men and their sons and daughters were all identified as being at particular risk of falling prey to moral evils as a direct result of living in slum conditions. Unusually though, Odgers does not focus on the particular risks which working-class women, the wives and mothers, were perceived to face. Many considered that there was a risk to the supposed moral superiority of women which could be contaminated by the need to leave the private sphere of the home for the public realm of the street.<sup>29</sup> But for working-class women the daily needs of water collection from pumps and shared taps, visits to public washhouses (where they existed) and the purchase of food meant that regular incursions into the public space were essential and inevitable. The shared tap and water pump were a particular concern as it provided an opportunity for women to mingle and socialize, and furthermore working-class women of all types, the respectable hardworking poor and the criminal and prostitute, all mingled in the same space, posing a risk of corruption. Women were not just responsible for maintaining their own moral standards but were also the protectors of their families' morals and if a woman became tainted then her entire family would become tainted. Although the ideals later personified by Coventry Patmore in *The Angel in the House* were essentially a middle-class construct, nevertheless they were ideals to which all women were encouraged to aspire. Patmore's ideal wife and mother was expected to be submissive to her husband, but also charming, graceful, self-sacrificing, pious and above all, pure.

An additional concern was expressed about those who occupied a single room and that was the need for the recently deceased to share the same space occupied by the living during the interval between death occurring and burial taking place. With high death

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<sup>28</sup> H. Whitfield, *Plymouth and Devonport in Times of War and Peace* (Plymouth: Chapple, 1900), p.405.

<sup>29</sup> Green and Parton, *Slums and slum life*, p.28.

rates generally but even higher death rates amongst those living in overcrowded conditions, this was a situation which arose all too frequently. Apart from the obvious risk to the health of the living where death had been the result of infectious disease, this situation did not accord with the Victorian feelings of awe and reverence for death and was considered in some unspecified way to represent yet another moral risk.<sup>30</sup>

Rawlinson's *Report* does, however, make reference to the case of a child who had died from typhus, and whose body was kept at home for eight days 'in order to excite charity.'<sup>31</sup> The implication here of Rawlinson's comment was that the longer a dead child were kept in the home, the greater the opportunities would be to elicit generosity from the Guardians and other middle-class visitors. Again this fails to understand the realities of poverty and supposes that the poor and destitute did not feel the same grief over the loss of a child as those who were more fortunate. The death of a child posed a significant financial burden on a family already living in poverty as they struggled to avoid the stigma of a pauper's burial for their child.

During the cholera epidemic of 1849, Quarry Court, on the Plymouth and East Stonehouse boundary, was singled out for particular condemnation as a place where the 'dregs of society' lived and whose 'slovenly, overcrowded and filthy way of life' had provided a breeding ground for the disease which was then threatening the entire population.<sup>32</sup> It was an 'abode of misery, calculated to sicken the heart and create abhorrence, disgust and misery.'<sup>33</sup> Newspaper reports at the start of the outbreak also linked the disease with moral behaviour, initially reporting that 'The progress made by the cholera [...] has not been such as need cause much apprehension amongst those who

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<sup>30</sup> J. Hole, *The homes of the working classes: with suggestions for their improvement* (1860, London: Garland, 1985 edition), p.13.

<sup>31</sup> Rawlinson, *Report*, p.91.

<sup>32</sup> D. McLean, *Public Health and Politics in the Age of Reform: Cholera, the State and the Royal Navy in Victorian Britain* (London: I. B. Taurus, (2006), p.81.

<sup>33</sup> Whitfield, *Plymouth and Devonport*, p.403.

live with discretion and harbour no fright.’<sup>34</sup> Further, although there had been numerous cases of the disease they had been chiefly confined to the ‘abode of a multitude steeped in sin, squalor and shame.’<sup>35</sup> The suggestion that disease was linked with moral behaviour was, of course, a common theme amongst the middle classes generally.

Of course, Odgers was also concerned with the physical effects of poor and overcrowded living conditions and from a humanitarian standpoint he stressed the claims of ‘social duty [and] the dictates of benevolence.’<sup>36</sup> The publication of the results of Odgers’ investigation and the detail contained within it appears to have caused shock amongst the better off sections of society. The middle classes no longer lived within the confines of the old town having moved to developing suburbs. The resulting social polarization and spatial segregation led many to claim they had been unaware of the extent to which the urban areas had deteriorated. Local newspapers widely reported the findings, which triggered an immediate memorial to the Improvement Commissioners demanding action.<sup>37</sup>

The Odgers report may have been the first to expose and document the conditions in the town but it was by no means the last. Despite the concern caused by the Odgers’ report, only limited action was taken to improve the situation such that when the General Board of Health conducted an enquiry in 1852 it was demonstrated that conditions had actually worsened. The subsequent report also showed quite clearly that in the streets and courts identified in the first report as the worst in the town there had been both more cases of cholera in 1849 and a greater fatality rate from the disease.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> *Plymouth, Devonport and Stonehouse Herald*, 21 July 1849, p.5.

<sup>35</sup> *Plymouth, Devonport and Stonehouse Herald*, 28 July 1849, p.5.

<sup>36</sup> Odgers, *Report*, p.vii.

<sup>37</sup> *Plymouth, Devonport and Stonehouse Herald*, 5 December 1846, p.4: *Plymouth and Devonport Weekly Journal*, 5 December 1846, p.5.

<sup>38</sup> M. Brayshay and V. Pointon ‘Local politics and public health in mid-nineteenth century Plymouth’, *Medical History* 27, (1983) pp.162-178 (p.174).

The Superintending Inspector, Robert Rawlinson, published his report the following year and included an updated version of Odgers' survey. It details page after page of descriptions of overcrowded tenements, overflowing privies and cesspools, blocked drains, dung heaps and ash pits and makes free use of terminology clearly intended to shock. Words such as 'beastly', 'disgusting', 'wretched', 'sickening', 'squalid' and 'abhorrent' are much in evidence in relation to the slum areas of the town. Rawlinson also went to inspect the slum areas of the town personally but what he saw was apparently too dreadful to be described in the newspapers.<sup>39</sup> However, as Hamlin suggests, most reports were couched in such terms, since the purpose of the reports was to suggest to municipal authorities that their own town was much worse than others in order to effect change by appealing to a sense of civic pride.<sup>40</sup>

The following year Rawlinson was to lead a similar inquiry into sanitary conditions in Devonport. This was the first systematic review of housing provision in Devonport and it exposed similar conditions to those which had been documented in parts of Plymouth. Morice Town was said to be 'the haunt of every vice and misery of which human nature is capable' where every third house was an inn and children 'swarmed' the lanes in 'absolutely heathen ignorance.'<sup>41</sup> Rawlinson reported that, like Plymouth, Devonport ranked alongside Warsaw – the most insanitary town on the continent.<sup>42</sup> The abandoned workhouse in Duke Street, which had been replaced by a new workhouse on the outskirts of the town in 1854, was later reported to have been taken over and occupied by some 227 people.<sup>43</sup>

Brayshay and Pointon have discussed the campaigns in Plymouth for the adoption of the Public Health Act of 1848 and its eventual application in 1854 after the Rawlinson

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<sup>39</sup> Brayshay and Pointon 'Local politics and public health', p.174.

<sup>40</sup> C. Hamlin, *Public Health and Social Justice in the Age of Chadwick: Britain 1800-1854* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp.280-1.

<sup>41</sup> Whitfield, *Plymouth and Devonport*, pp.403-4.

<sup>42</sup> Whitfield, *Plymouth and Devonport*, p.404.

<sup>43</sup> Whitfield, *Plymouth and Devonport*, p.404.

inquiry.<sup>44</sup> There has been no similar research on the results of the Rawlinson inquiry into Devonport, but it is clear that although conditions were exposed to be just as poor as they were in Plymouth, the inquiry did not result in the adoption of the Public Health Act. Although a Provisional Order was granted after the inquiry it never came into force as a result of ‘the impossibility of procuring a numbered copy of the Commissioners’ Act.’<sup>45</sup> It would appear that, in common with many other towns across Britain, delaying tactics and obfuscation by the town council resulted in the General Board of Health failing to impose the setting up of a local health board. The General Board of Health was frequently reluctant to force adoption of the Public Health Act on unwilling communities and often withdrew in the face of concerted opposition since the permissive nature of the legislation meant that even after its imposition local boards could be largely ineffective.<sup>46</sup> Further attempts to adopt a local health act also failed in 1863 and 1864 and it was not until 1866 that a Local Health Board was established. Devonport Council finally adopted the Act in January 1866 but even then an appeal by ratepayers against its adoption served to delay yet again the setting up of the Local Board. A further General Board of Health inquiry was held as a result of the appeal and finally the appeal was dismissed and the Local Board of Health for Devonport came into force in May of the same year.<sup>47</sup> Perhaps this may be explained by the local political environments in operation in Plymouth and Devonport. Plymouth’s dominant liberal tendencies and its evangelical and non-conformist traditions all made the local electors more willing to embrace reformist legislation, whereas in Devonport, which was considered to be more of a Government town, the political elite were mainly ex naval and admiralty figures and the political milieu, more closely tied with the old

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<sup>44</sup> Brayshay and Pointon ‘Local politics and public health’, pp.162-178.

<sup>45</sup> R. N. Worth, *History of the Town and Borough of Devonport*, (Plymouth: Brendon, 1870), p.41.

<sup>46</sup> A. Wohl, *Endangered Lives* (London: Methuen, 1984), pp.151-2.

<sup>47</sup> Plymouth and West Devon Record Office (PWDRO), 1813/1, *Devonport Borough Sanitary Committee Minutes*.

manorial system resulted in a less reformist background.<sup>48</sup> Although further investigation into this is outside the scope of this thesis it is clearly an area which would benefit from much more detailed research.

Writing in 1866, James Hole published what is probably the first general overview of working-class housing. He identified the causes of the crisis as including the rapid growth of towns; immigration; increased land costs and rental values; public improvements and commercial developments; the exodus of the better-off to the suburbs; inferior building standards; and the need of working-class people to live close to their work and pay as low a rent as possible.<sup>49</sup> All these factors can be seen to have been in evidence across the Three Towns. Hole further identified a number of reasons why housing reform was proving difficult to implement and why progress had been so slow. The reasons he gave here included the inefficiency and reluctance of local authorities; ignorance amongst ratepayers; objections to centralization; and resultant inadequacy of permissive legislation.<sup>50</sup> These themes will be further explored in the following chapters.

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<sup>48</sup> In 1855 there were only three freehold plots of land in the Borough of Devonport. All other land and property was let on a three life leasehold system. It was not until 1885 that the first freeholder was created when Surgeon-General Elliott purchased the land on which No 1 Albermarle Villas, Stoke stood, from the Lord of the Manor, Sir John St Aubyn.

<sup>49</sup> Hole, *The homes of the working classes*, pp.2-9.

<sup>50</sup> Hole, *The homes of the working classes*, pp.23-35.





## Chapter 2

### Philanthropic activity

By the time that James Hole was writing in 1866 the model dwellings movement was already well established. Hole particularly praised the developments by Titus Salt at Saltaire and that by Edward Akroyd at Copley.<sup>1</sup> These were both schemes for the provision of better dwellings by enlightened employers for their own employees. The first of the model dwellings companies was the Metropolitan Association for Improving the Dwellings of the Industrious Classes, established in 1841. Its original charter prohibited paying more than five per cent interest but it was not until 1873 that it was financially able to pay that rate.<sup>2</sup> The movement gained its greatest boost, however, when Prince Albert began to take an interest. In 1844 he accepted the presidency of the Society for Improving the Condition of the Labouring Classes, visiting some of the slum areas of London at St Giles. This was to launch his interest in practical solutions to poor housing conditions and resulted in his constructing a small block of dwellings as part of the Great Exhibition. Although many model dwellings companies eventually followed they were mainly confined to the metropolis and a few other urban areas. A few were established almost entirely on philanthropic lines although most aimed to adopt a policy of five per cent philanthropy, whereby the company sought investors who would be prepared to accept a relatively low return on their capital.

The reasons why individuals or groups of individuals came to philanthropy, especially philanthropic housing provision, were varied, but for the majority moral improvement provided the prime motivation. For those concerned with improving the moral condition of the working classes, vice, crime and drunkenness were all a concern. For others the motivation may have been enlightened self-interest or even simple expediency.

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<sup>1</sup> Hole, *The homes of the working classes*, pp.65-75.

<sup>2</sup> Wohl, *The Eternal Slum*, p.147.

Philanthropy could be seen as a way of maintaining the social order and the capitalist system, and thus the interests of the monied classes. On a more practical day-to-day level, James Hole for example asserted that ‘the middle and upper classes suffer for their neglect of those beneath them’ because domestic staff had acquired dirty or dishonest habits and nursemaids impressed on the children in their care their own ‘passion or ignorance.’<sup>3</sup> In reality it was probably a combination of factors and, for some, compassion or humanitarianism will have played a role. Compassion was, however, rarely the primary motivation. Others, of course, abstained from philanthropic activity, apprehensive perhaps like Walter Bagehot about ‘whether the benevolence of mankind does most harm or good.’<sup>4</sup> Charity could be seen as a disincentive to the self-improvement deemed necessary by the working-classes in order to improve their own condition.

Women’s nature and mission, it was believed, made them ideally suited to philanthropic activity, particularly in relation to the family and the home. The custom of the wealthy and of comfortable women of the middling sort visiting the homes of the poor to dispense charity and comfort had a long tradition in England, but the nineteenth century was ‘the heyday of the visiting society.’<sup>5</sup> From the 1840s onwards visiting societies sent women district visitors into the urban slums carrying out what one woman described as ‘the arduous task of the national housekeeping.’<sup>6</sup> Philanthropy was considered to be a woman’s profession, allowing her to extend her home influence beyond her own home. It required ‘tact and moral taste, an attention to detail and a sympathy with the domestic scene, for which men had neither the time nor the aptitude.’<sup>7</sup> Some, however, believed

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<sup>3</sup> Hole, *The homes of the working classes*, p.21.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in F. K. Prochaska, *Women and Philanthropy in Nineteenth Century England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), p.21.

<sup>5</sup> Prochaska, *Women and Philanthropy*, p.97.

<sup>6</sup> P. Hollis, *Ladies Elect: Women in English Local Government, 1865-1914* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), p.13.

<sup>7</sup> Hollis, *Ladies Elect*, p.11.

that the conditions in the slum areas presented a significant barrier to middle class women engaging in philanthropic work. Lieutenant Carew, the Government Emigration Agent in Plymouth, giving evidence to the Rawlinson Inquiry, was to describe the 'high-minded and religious females' who visited the families awaiting departure at the emigration depot, 'giving up their time and purse to the wants of the poor emigrants.' However, he was quite certain that ladies would not have been able to visit the emigrants had they been lodged in the courts, alleys and lanes.<sup>8</sup> On the other hand, as no women were invited to provide evidence to the inquiry this probably represents a male view of women's capabilities and under-estimates the determination of women to take on these philanthropic activities. Other women were known to have been actively visiting the slum areas of the Three Towns to engage in evangelical and philanthropic work. The Society of the Sisters of Mercy for instance which had been set up to relieve the 'spiritual and moral destitution' of the Three Towns provided soup kitchens, operated ragged schools and homes for homeless women and nursed the sick amongst many other activities.<sup>9</sup> Working-class women also became involved in visiting slum areas, as paid employees of such organisations as the city and town missions. Plymouth Town Mission had been established in 1836 following a visit to Plymouth by David Naismith and was modelled on the principles of the London City Mission. The mission's methods of house-to-house visiting soon led to the appointment of 'lady missionaries' whose job it was to visit within an allocated district to engage in religious conversation, read the scriptures and dispense religious tracts. Each missionary was allocated a district and was expected to visit regularly every house or room in their district. The lady missionaries, though, also became involved in practical matters such as

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<sup>8</sup> Rawlinson, *Report*, p.74.

<sup>9</sup> G. Fleming, *Hidden Fire: Plymouth, Its Christian Heritage* (Published by the author, 1986), p.73.

obtaining tickets for medicines or coal.<sup>10</sup> By 1880, the Town Mission was employing ten missionaries, half of whom were working-class women.<sup>11</sup>

It is also the case that women were more directly affected by poor living conditions than men, as for many women their home was also their workplace. Whilst many workplaces were also unpleasant places to be, men were able to leave their homes for their places of employment, providing some relief from the overcrowding and insanitary conditions.

Women's work was in the home and all attempts at cleanliness involved not only the arduous chore of collecting water for every task and the disposal of waste, but the constant fight against dirt and grime from crumbling plasterwork and rotting woodwork, mud and sewage. Unlike men, women rarely had the opportunity for relief from their conditions in the public house or beer shop. One often neglected aspect of how women were disproportionately affected by their living conditions is the way in which functions related to menstruation and childbirth had to be managed in conditions which lacked any privacy or running water and sanitation. In such circumstances, 'lady' visitors were less likely to be considered an intrusion and viewed with suspicion than, for example, male visitors from Boards of Guardians or sanitary inspectors. Consequently women's attempts at providing charity or comfort were less likely to be rejected. Members of the Ladies' Sanitary Association, for instance, distributed pamphlets and advice on health and cleanliness, whilst others provided advice on childcare, visited the sick or dispensed religious tracts amongst many other activities.<sup>12</sup> However, women's philanthropy rarely extended to the provision of housing itself. Notable exceptions to this of course included Angela Burdett-Coutts and Octavia Hill, but these were independent women who were of independent means or had influential friends. For the majority of philanthropic women, such provision would have been beyond their means. If women

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<sup>10</sup> PWDRO, 2102/11, *Diary of Miss Venn*, 7 January 1876.

<sup>11</sup> *Western Daily Mercury*, 9 November 1880, p.3.

<sup>12</sup> Prochaska, *Women and Philanthropy*, pp. 97-137.

were inclined to offer their support to the provision of improved living conditions, they might have needed to do so by influencing their husbands or other male relatives, and hence are less likely to appear as owners or shareholders in their own right.

Another group who might have been expected to become involved in local philanthropy was the local aristocracy, especially those who still maintained manorial control.

Aristocratic landlords, especially those whose property adjoined the expanding provincial and industrial towns, frequently became involved in the development of suburbs, new towns and holiday resorts.<sup>13</sup> This, of course, allowed them to substantially increase their rental incomes, but could also be motivated by a concern for the welfare of their tenants. In the Three Towns, Devonport stands out as the town where manorial control had been maintained and where land ownership was concentrated into one dominant freeholder. The tithe apportionment for Stoke Damerel, the ancient parish in which Devonport sits, shows this quite clearly. Of all the land subject to tithes in the parish of Stoke Damerel almost eighty per cent was owned by the lords of the manor, the St Aubyn family. Of the remainder another ten per cent was owned by ‘Her Majesty’ and on lease to the Admiralty and to the Ordnance, with a further ten per cent shared between three small freeholders.<sup>14</sup> Other land within the parish, which is not detailed on the tithe apportionment, includes that on which there were buildings. The majority of this land was also owned by the St Aubyns and mainly let on a three life lease system with no prospect of renewal. The consequences of this concentration of land ownership and pattern of land tenure will be discussed in more detail later in this thesis.

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<sup>13</sup> D. Cannadine, *Lords and landlords: the aristocracy and the towns, 1774-1967*, (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1980), pp. 41-77.

<sup>14</sup> Information taken from Devon County Council, <http://files.devon.gov.uk/tithe/plymouthstokedamerel.pdf> [Accessed 31 March 2014].

Philanthropic housing, or the provision of model dwellings, differed from other forms of philanthropy in that it was not dependent on soliciting gifts or donations, but rather was based on seeking investment capital. Even the most generous minded of philanthropists expected model dwellings to provide a return on capital at a rate of around five per cent. By doing so it hoped to appeal not just to charitable individuals but also to those who were concerned about the risk of pauperizing working-class families. Even before the model dwellings movement had been given its boost by Prince Albert, the Reverend Odgers was writing in his 1847 report on conditions in Plymouth that ‘cottages might be built comprising all that is essential to cleanliness and comfort, with two rooms in each [...] and paying the capitalist at least 6 per cent for his outlay.’<sup>15</sup> James Hole considered that whilst philanthropy might provide the impetus, ‘the work must be conducted by wise organisation and on ordinary commercial principles.’<sup>16</sup> Henry Whitfield, however, was of the opinion that philanthropy was unnecessary and that returns on investment were sufficient for model dwellings to be considered as a purely commercial enterprise. He commented that ‘It is a matter of great thankfulness ... to feel we have not to stimulate philanthropy to a sense of what it owes the poor in this respect.’ and added ‘As a mere question of profitable speculation it would pay to erect decent dwellings and let them out at a fair rent.’<sup>17</sup> The choice of language is interesting as he does not, as many at the time did, view the provision of decent homes as an act of charity but rather writes about the debt owed to the poor by the wealthy. The need to pay investors a return on their capital led to suggestions that the necessary rents charged on these five per cent dwellings put them out of the reach of many of the working classes and that only the artizan class was able to take advantage of them. Wohl suggests that even the Improved Industrial Dwellings Company, the largest of the

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<sup>15</sup> Odgers, *Sanitary report*, p.56.

<sup>16</sup> Hole, *The homes of the working classes*, p.91.

<sup>17</sup> *Western Daily Mercury*, 15 November 1880, p.2.

central London model dwellings companies, was unable to provide rooms at rents which labourers could afford.<sup>18</sup> However this company tended to build, as a matter of policy, entirely self-contained flats eschewing the possibility of reducing costs by providing shared facilities as many model dwellings companies did. There was also a restriction on sub-letting which further reduced the possibility of making the dwellings affordable to the poorer sections of the working classes. Miss Burdett-Coutts, however, welcomed the poorest of London's working classes including costermongers. Not only were they not discriminated against in applications for tenancy, but the Columbia Square Buildings provided them with accommodation for their carts and their donkeys. Miss Burdett-Coutts's enterprise only ever yielded a return of 2½ per cent and was therefore of a different order to the more numerous model dwellings companies, as such a low return can only be viewed as pure philanthropy.<sup>19</sup>

Although a few Shaftesbury Cottages had been built, neither Plymouth nor Devonport saw any major activity in the style of the philanthropic individuals such as Miss Burdett-Coutts or the charitable housing foundations such as the Peabody Trust. It would, however, be fair to say that the majority of such organisations operated mainly in much larger urban areas such as London and Glasgow. Nearby Exeter took its first steps in this direction in 1873, when a meeting at the Guildhall formed the City of Exeter Improved Industrial Dwellings Company, with a share capital of £15,000 and the object of providing 'commodious and healthy dwellings for the poorer classes.' The company intended to construct tenements of two to four rooms each which could be rented out at a rate ranging from 1s to 1s 3d per week but as happened elsewhere the rents were higher than intended at 2s 6d to 4s 6d per week.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Wohl, *The Eternal Slum*, p.150.

<sup>19</sup> D. Owen, *English philanthropy, 1660-1960* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965), p.378.

<sup>20</sup> R. Newton, *Victorian Exeter, 1837-1914* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1968), p.256.

The first indication that philanthropy was to play any significant part in the provision of homes for working-class or artizan families within any of the Three Towns did not occur until 1880. The situation in Plymouth continued to be vilified in the local press which began campaigning for improvements in living conditions. The Town Mission also took up the cause and its annual meeting of 1880 was devoted to ‘The Overcrowding Question.’ The Mission’s ten district visitors were arguably best placed of all the concerned citizens to know about the problems since they saw first-hand every day of their working lives the living conditions of the poor. As might be expected, the Mission’s primary motivation in calling for a solution to the problems of overcrowding was associated with perceived immorality and lack of religious awareness amongst the poor. It was their view that their missionaries ‘found it impossible to make an impression.’<sup>21</sup> Their suggestion that either by individual effort or by means of a joint stock company ‘better habitations for the poor’ could be erected met with much support at the meeting. In their own view it was the Mission which had awakened interest in the subject throughout the town, but considered that the poor themselves ‘were not alive to ill-effects of the crowded state of their dwellings’ and that it was part of their own role to ‘educate the poor of their plight by showing them the privations they were suffering.’<sup>22</sup> The Town Mission appears to have had the judgment that the slums were inhabited by heathen masses who lived in as much ignorance of their own condition as did animals and consequently needed to be missionized in order to bring about their conversion and enlightenment. Of course many of those who lived in slums would have been fully aware of what better housing was like from their own experience in domestic service. Such sentiments hark back to those expressed earlier in the century when the slums were being rediscovered as a *terra incognita* and thought to be as unknown as

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<sup>21</sup> *Western Daily Mercury*, 9 November 1880, p.3.

<sup>22</sup> *Western Daily Mercury*, 9 November 1880, p.3.



‘the wilds of Australia or the islands of the South Seas.’<sup>23</sup> Once again the reality of the everyday lived experience of the slums appears to have been misunderstood by their middle-class benefactors.

When Henry Whitfield was appointed chief reporter of the *Western Daily Mercury* he took up the cause of housing reform, and continued to be an influential activist in this cause for the rest of his life. Whitfield was born and educated in Plymouth, and had been District Reporter for the newspaper in Exeter before returning to Plymouth as chief reporter. Although the *Western Morning News* often highlighted the town’s housing crisis, it was not until Whitfield began a series of articles in the *Western Daily Mercury* in November 1880 that a campaign was triggered for the adoption of the 1868 Artizans’ Dwellings Act. Whitfield’s articles were compiled into a pamphlet and published under the title *Overcrowded Plymouth* which was widely circulated throughout the town. The accompanying editorials in the paper called for a new town of workmen’s dwellings to be erected in the open country but on the outskirts of the town which could be serviced by workmen’s trains running morning and evening. In his view there was ‘not the excuse which obtains in London’ as the open country was ‘not so very far distant.’<sup>24</sup> He further suggested that as it would take some time to bring such a plan to fruition, the Corporation of Plymouth should join with another body such as the Charity Organisation Society to achieve a change in the law on the subject during the next Parliamentary session. In his opinion, Sir Richard Cross’s Artizans’ Dwellings Act had ‘shared the fate of the Agricultural Holdings and other Acts in being useless.’<sup>25</sup> Indeed, the Artizans’ and Labourers’ Dwellings Improvement Act of 1875 had quickly run into trouble due to problems in agreeing rates of compensation to be paid to landlords and the delays between demolition and rebuilding on the same site. In fact by 1879 only a

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<sup>23</sup> Wohl, *The Eternal Slum*, p.5.

<sup>24</sup> *Western Daily Mercury*, 15 November 1880, p.2.

<sup>25</sup> *Western Daily Mercury*, 15 November 1880, P.2.

few towns had adopted the act and none had actually erected new dwellings although Devonport appears to have been one of those rare examples.<sup>26</sup> Devonport's experiences will be discussed further in Chapter Five. Plymouth's Mayor, William Derry, was to comment that he had investigated the possibility of adopting the Act but had found it to be impracticable.<sup>27</sup>

Although Whitfield had intended originally to include investigations into the conditions in Devonport and Stonehouse in his series of articles, he drew the series to a close without doing so. The reasons he gave for this were that he did not believe that overcrowding in either was as severe as it was in Plymouth. He was nevertheless scathing about the conditions in both. Stonehouse's overcrowding was said to be general but not gross. The authorities in Stonehouse were said to hold the view that although seventy per cent of the population was living at one room to one family, since no case of two families sharing a room had been discovered, the town 'holds high the head and indulges in a strain of supreme commiseration for its neighbours'.<sup>28</sup> The houses were, however, said to be clean, because the accommodation of marines who formed the vast bulk of the population was regularly inspected by an officer. Whitfield further posited that the reason that overcrowding was not more severe was that the marines were so poorly paid that they were unable to provide their children with the sustenance required to raise them to adulthood. He described the town authorities as conceited and Pharaical. Devonport was said to be better off than Plymouth although also overcrowded.

In response to the appeal by the Town Mission and by Whitfield for immediate action by individuals or by companies formed for the purpose, during the next two years a number of artisans' tenement blocks and working-class lodgings were created in

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<sup>26</sup> Tarn, *Five Per Cent Philanthropy*, p.79.

<sup>27</sup> *Western Daily Mercury*, 28 October 1881, p.3.

<sup>28</sup> *Western Daily Mercury*, 26 November 1880, p.3.

Plymouth. The first to take positive steps were Messrs Harris, Bulteel and Co. of the Naval Bank. Within less than six weeks of the publication of the first of the articles, plans were submitted and approval received for the conversion of existing malt and store houses in Hoegate Street into artizans' dwellings. Although described as such in the plans these were not conventional artizans' dwellings of the kind previously described but were closer to a lodging house, with dormitories and day rooms. Also provided were a water supply and a sink to each floor, separate men's and women's water closets and a washhouse with eight washing troughs and a drying room.<sup>29</sup> Two years later Harris, Bulteel and Co. went on to construct more conventional tenement blocks in Notte Street. These blocks consisted of shops on the ground floor to the street frontage with living rooms and bedrooms behind, and on the upper floors two- and four-roomed tenements.<sup>30</sup> A further block of three-roomed tenements was later constructed fronting Hoe Street. The three roomed tenements commanded a rent of 3s 6d per week, whilst the four-roomed ones were let at 6s per week, perhaps reflecting the additional facilities provided to the occupiers of four rooms, including individually allocated WCs which were capable of being kept locked.<sup>31</sup>

One of the more interesting enterprises for understanding the range of motivations for individuals to become involved in five per cent philanthropy was the partnership entered into between John Pethick and Sir Edward Bates. Pethick, well-known local builder and member of the Borough Council, and Bates, Conservative MP for the town and wealthy ship owner, constructed two blocks of tenement dwellings on sites purchased from the Sanitary Authority, which had been acquired under the terms of the Public Health Act of 1875.<sup>32</sup> The first block consisted of four floors of fourteen rooms each arranged as sixteen two-roomed tenements and eight three-roomed tenements. On

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<sup>29</sup> PWDRO, PCC/60/1/3667, *Workmen's Dwelling Houses, Hoegate Street*.

<sup>30</sup> PWDRO, PCC/60/1/3916, *Artizans, 's Dwellings, Notte Street*.

<sup>31</sup> J. T. Bond, *The Dwellings of our Poorer Neighbours* (Plymouth: 1891), pp. 50-51.

<sup>32</sup> PWDRO, PCC/45/1/597, *Workmen's Dwellings and Bates' Buildings, St Andrew Street*.

each floor were shared offices of a washhouse and covered drying area, two WCs for women and children and a WC and urinal for men. The second block had similar shared offices and comprised sixteen two-roomed tenements. When construction of the second block was beginning it was stated that the tenements were to be let at 1s or 1s 1d per room per week as was the case with the first block which was already fully occupied.<sup>33</sup> Such rents may in fact have been lower than those paid by the poorest of those living in the slum areas of the town. It was suggested that rooms were being let in overcrowded parts of the town such as Edgumbe Place for as much as 3s 6d or 4s each per week.<sup>34</sup> The buildings were situated in the central core of the town making them both affordable and conveniently located for the working population. Pethick claimed to be achieving a five per cent return. As a very wealthy man, however, Bates probably had no need to secure a sustainable return on his investment and there is a strong possibility that he saw this not as an investment but as a donation. Although Bates and Pethick appear to have been in a partnership of some kind for the purpose of erecting their workmen's dwellings, Bates seems to have been the sole financial investor.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> *Western Daily Mercury*, 31 October 1881, p.3.

<sup>34</sup> *Western Daily Mercury*, 28 October 1881, p.3.

<sup>35</sup> *Western Daily Mercury*, 31 October 1881, p.3.



Figure 2

Edward Bates, by Leslie Ward, *Vanity Fair*, 12 May 1888<sup>36</sup>

In Liverpool, where he had his main home and his shipping business, Sir Edward was widely known as ‘Bully’ Bates. His reputation there was very different from his reputation in the town where he had no home but was dependant on the voters. In Liverpool he was reported to take no part in local affairs and had shown no interest in any benevolent enterprise.<sup>37</sup> He had a reputation for parsimony and cost cutting. His ships were reported on several occasions as having cases of scurvy amongst the crew members due to the poor quality of the victuals and there were allegations of brutality

<sup>36</sup> Digitised version from: University of Virginia Fine Arts Library. Licensed under Public domain via Wikimedia Commons - [http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Edward\\_Bates,\\_Vanity\\_Fair,\\_1888-05-12.jpg#mediaviewer/File:Edward\\_Bates,\\_Vanity\\_Fair,\\_1888-05-12.jpg](http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Edward_Bates,_Vanity_Fair,_1888-05-12.jpg#mediaviewer/File:Edward_Bates,_Vanity_Fair,_1888-05-12.jpg)

<sup>37</sup> N. Jones, *The Plimsoll Sensation: The great campaign to save lives at sea* (London: Abacus, 2007), p.198.

and intimidation.<sup>38</sup> His habitual overloading of his ships resulted in the loss of many vessels. In 1874, Bates lost three ships due to overloading resulting in the loss of eighty-seven lives. A further two ships were abandoned at sea and a collier caught fire.<sup>39</sup> He was named in Parliament by Samuel Plimsoll as one of the ship owners who put profits before the safety of his crew by overloading and failing to secure loads and the scandals contributed to the introduction of the load, or Plimsoll, line.

Although he had no home or business interests in Plymouth, he was dependant on the voters and as MP for the town, Sir Edward was known to be a generous benefactor. His charitable contributions were described in *Vanity Fair* as 'lavish rather than discreet.'<sup>40</sup> At one time there was even an attempt to expel him from Parliament for attempting to bribe the electorate. It would therefore seem that Bates' motivation for his involvement in working-class housing was a direct result of his need to maintain his electoral interests. In the speech he made at a ceremony to lay the foundation stone of the workmen's dwellings, Pethick gave further clues to the motivation of both parties to the scheme. He postulated that if 'half-a-dozen other gentlemen would equal Sir Edward Bates in his generosity ... they would have no occasion to adopt the Artizans' Dwellings Act.' He went on to criticize the Act as being expensive to implement and claimed that 'Houses of this kind, carried out by Act of Parliament, or by Town Council, or by Poor Law Guardians must be more costly than private enterprise.'<sup>41</sup> He also referred to forthcoming elections to the School Board and compared the costs of the expensive buildings recently erected by the Board and the 'spendthrifts' on the School Board to the costs of his own buildings. The reference to the imminent elections and the open hostility to the Artizans' Dwellings Act can leave little doubt that the

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<sup>38</sup> G. H. Peters, *The Plimsoll Line: The story of Samuel Plimsoll, Member of Parliament for Derby from 1868 to 1880* (London: Barry Rose, 1975), p.125.

<sup>39</sup> Peters, *The Plimsoll Line*, p.107; Jones, *The Plimsoll Sensation*, p.201.

<sup>40</sup> Quoted in Jones, *The Plimsoll Sensation*, p.196.

<sup>41</sup> *Western Daily Mercury*, 31 October 1881, p.3.

motivation behind both Bates' and his own involvement in working-class housing were not solely the living conditions of the poor. Rather they were a direct result of Bates' need to be seen as a generous and compassionate man by the electors of the town and antipathy towards legislation which interfered with the free market economy.

Nevertheless, it is undoubtedly true that their future tenants would have had better housing provision than might otherwise have been the case. The contrast between Bates' actions in Plymouth, and in Liverpool and his own business practices are, though, striking and extreme.

The other major contributor to the artisans' dwellings movement in Plymouth was the Plymouth Workmen's Dwellings Company Limited. Set up in 1881 by members of the town's elite, the company's first chairman was Mr Charles Burnard who was to become mayor for 1881-82. Also on the Board of Directors were Mr Francis Morrish, the then mayor, and local worthies including magistrates, surgeons and John Pethick. Although it would clearly have been unthinkable for the borough council itself to become involved directly in providing housing for the town's working population, this company was almost certainly viewed as an instrument of the town council. The foundation stone of the company's first block of dwellings was laid by the mayor, Mr Morrish, at a ceremony attended by an influential group, which as well as the usual worthies included the borough surveyor and the medical officer of health.<sup>42</sup> In his annual report for 1881, the Medical Officer of Health for Stonehouse reported that 'Plymouth has formed a company for the erection of dwellings for the working classes.'<sup>43</sup> The use of the term 'Plymouth' rather than the name of the company, together with the lack of reference to the others within the town by then providing working-class housing is significant as is the list of attendees at the ceremony. Neither the Borough Surveyor nor the Medical Officer of Health attended similar ceremonies at the laying of the foundation stone for

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<sup>42</sup> *Western Daily Mercury*, 28 October 1881, p.3.

<sup>43</sup> PWDRO, 1363/62, *Annual Report of the Medical Officer of Health, East Stonehouse 1881*, p.6.

the Bates' Buildings, although they would have had a similar interest in the success of that project. All of this gives credence to the pseudo-municipal nature of the company. This is however similar to the actions taken in other locations including in Exeter, where the chairman of the City of Exeter Improved Industrial Dwellings Company was also the mayor, Charles J. Follett, and after whom the first of their blocks was named as Follett's Buildings.

The Plymouth Workmen's Dwellings Company constructed four blocks of dwellings at Coxside, to house ninety-six families, and became known as Clare Buildings. All the usual shared facilities were provided including WCs, washhouses, drying areas, drinking-water taps, sinks and dust shoots. The south-facing blocks would face and have a good view of the Sound, and the northern blocks would face onto garden land. There were also plans to lay out some surplus land as allotments, so that the tenants would be able to supplement their incomes by growing a few vegetables and afford the opportunity for healthy outdoor exercise away from the grime of the town centre. Landings with strong iron railings were to 'afford a long stretch of playing ground for the children, a resting place for the aged in sunny weather, and a place for a quiet smoke after work is done.'<sup>44</sup> Although the intended rents were not specified, it was thought that the apartments could be 'let at a profit at about the same weekly rental that the poor are now paying for their present miserable tenements.'<sup>45</sup> Later evidence suggests that the rents charged were in fact 2s 8d for two rooms and between 3s 3d and 3s 6d for three rooms.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> *Western Daily Mercury*, 27 October 1881, p.3.

<sup>45</sup> *Western Daily Mercury*, 27 October 1881, p.3.

<sup>46</sup> Bond, *The Dwellings of our Poorer Neighbours*, p.47.





Figure 3

Clare Buildings, Coxside photographed in 1965<sup>47</sup>

In his speech at the laying of the foundation stone, the company chairman again stressed that commercial success was to be the end and aim of the enterprise, but also ‘there was at the bottom of their undertaking a noble principle.’<sup>48</sup> The mayor then went on to lay the foundation stone, whilst paying tribute to the late Prince Consort’s interest in model dwellings dating back to the Great Exhibition of 1851 and to the campaign by the *Western Daily Mercury* of the previous year which ‘he had hardly any doubt led to the active promotion of the scheme.’ Underneath the foundation stone he placed copies of the *Western Daily Mercury*, the *Western Morning News*, the pamphlet on ‘Overcrowded Plymouth’ and a list of the company’s shareholders.<sup>49</sup>

The company issued a prospectus to raise capital of £50,000 in ten thousand shares of £5 each.<sup>50</sup> At the share value intended it would seem that the company was not just to

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<sup>47</sup> PWDRO, 1479/34.

<sup>48</sup> *Western Daily Mercury*, 27 October 1881, p.3.

<sup>49</sup> *Western Daily Mercury*, 27 October 1881, p.3.

<sup>50</sup> PWDRO, Accession 3724, *Foot Anstey Collection*.

be seen as an investment for the very wealthy and it may have provided an opportunity for smaller investors to become involved, including perhaps a few women of philanthropic mind. Regrettably no list of the company's shareholders has survived and no women are recorded as either attending or speaking at shareholder meetings, although not all those who attended the meetings were listed in the newspaper reports.

Much of the £50,000 capital was never spent. In 1887, Mr Morrish commented at the annual shareholders' meeting on his disappointment that only one fifth of the capital had been spent and expressed his concern that the company had been unable to secure a site so that similar accommodation could be provided for the dock labourers and artisans in the west end of the town. He was assured that efforts were continuing to do so.<sup>51</sup> However, the company never managed to acquire a suitable site in the western part of the town. Land values were much higher in the area around the docks and it was felt that unless a site could be procured at similarly favourable terms to the site at Coxside such a scheme would put the company in jeopardy.

Perhaps in an attempt to counter criticisms of the barrack-like appearance of the dwellings the company always referred to the tenements as 'houses.'<sup>52</sup> This was a common criticism of many artisans' dwellings wherever they were built. Tenants were encouraged to make their 'houses' as homely as possible and were praised for the standards of cleanliness they maintained on the common staircases and verandas. They were also commended for the pride they took in their individual homes as was demonstrated by the many flower tubs and boxes on the verandas and even a 'pretty little greenhouse' erected by one tenant and a 'bijou garden' by another.<sup>53</sup> Such actions were generally attributed to the female occupants.

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<sup>51</sup> *Western Daily Mercury*, 4 March 1887, p.5.

<sup>52</sup> *Western Daily Mercury*, 8 March 1889, p.6.

<sup>53</sup> Bond, *The Dwellings of our Poorer Neighbours*, p.48.

The Workmen's Dwellings Company would seem constantly to have found difficulty in balancing the views of the various shareholders. Those who had invested expecting the company to always be a commercial success were often in disagreement with the shareholders who were predominantly interested in the philanthropic aspects of the enterprise. Whilst one shareholder complained about the ongoing expense of replacing the glass in broken windows, which he blamed on the children living in the tenements as well as boys living in the neighbourhood, another was to say that although the children were no doubt a nuisance he would look on the scheme as a failure if they were not there, adding 'Private landlords objected to let their houses to people with long families and it was to provide dwellings suitable for the families of the poorer class that the company was formed.'<sup>54</sup> The company did not discriminate against prospective tenants with 'long families' provided they were judged to be respectable, and overcrowding was said to be prevented by not letting two-roomed houses to people with many children.<sup>55</sup>

There was also disagreement about whether the company should provide a hall for the use of the residents. Some of the directors thought that they were responsible for the moral and spiritual well-being of the five hundred people in their dwellings and that building a hall in which meetings could be held for their educational and moral improvement should be a priority. It was thought in March 1888 that this would 'bind the people together' and serve to 'elevate their tastes and habits.'<sup>56</sup> The then chairman, Dr Square, supported the suggestion and pointed out that the company had been formed on philanthropic lines and as it was now a successful company, paying a dividend of four per cent and with a reserve fund of more than £2000 it was time to devote some attention to the philanthropic part of their work. No resolution was reached on the

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<sup>54</sup> *Western Daily Mercury*, 4 March 1887, p.7.

<sup>55</sup> Bond, *The Dwellings of our Poorer Neighbours*, p.48.

<sup>56</sup> *Western Daily Mercury*, 2 March 1888, p.3.

subject, but it was understood that the directors would give the matter their early and serious attention, before calling a special meeting when they had some plans to discuss.<sup>57</sup> However, by the following year no action had been taken and when Mr Morrish again raised the matter, the new chairman said that the reserve fund should be kept for repairs and the shareholders should not lose their four per cent dividend. In fact he added that only when the company was able to pay a five per cent dividend might they ‘think about laying out a little money in a hall, and other matters of that kind.’<sup>58</sup>

Throughout the nineteenth century, the working classes depended on the subletting of their flats in order to meet their rents. Some improved dwellings companies forbade the practice the result of which was that the rent was unaffordable to many of the poorer workers.<sup>59</sup> The Plymouth Workmen’s Dwellings Company does not appear to have placed any such restrictions on their tenants. Although this made the tenements affordable to a wider range of working-class occupants it did result in some being overcrowded. Although in the main they were occupied by single families there were exceptions and in one flat occupied by a labourer there were fourteen people, including three lodgers and three visitors.<sup>60</sup> Even if this labourer were occupying one of the three-roomed homes this must have resulted in adults and children of both sexes sharing sleeping accommodation. These were the very conditions most deplored by the reformers about overcrowded slums and the conditions which had motivated many to campaign for the construction of these and other artisans’ dwellings. At the time of the 1891 census there was an average of over six people in each of the tenements. The affordability of the flats was a concern to the shareholders as well. The discussion had at the shareholders’ meeting in 1887 suggested that the rents of the three-roomed flats were difficult to afford, as these had a higher unoccupancy rate than the two-roomed

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<sup>57</sup> *Western Daily Mercury*, 2 March 1888, p.3.

<sup>58</sup> *Western Daily Mercury*, 8 March 1889, p.6.

<sup>59</sup> Wohl, *The Eternal Slum*, p.149.

<sup>60</sup> 1891 Census of England and Wales, RG12/1730 Folio: 41 Page: 22 Schedule: 134

flats. In part this was attributed to the depression in trade. The Workmen's Dwellings Company was said to be a considerate landlord, which did not press hard for rents during severe winters.<sup>61</sup> The depression was also blamed for the amount of rent arrears which had built up. At times up to fourteen of the ninety-six flats were unoccupied although the situation later improved and there was full occupancy.

The company and its directors often took a paternalistic view of their tenants, believing that they needed to be educated, elevated, improved and also controlled. A caretaker was always on site, although as was pointed out, he could not be everywhere and so children often caused damage. It was not just the children who caused damage however. The drains were frequently choked by all manner of things and there were frequent changes of tenants when it was necessary to carry our repairs to the rooms at almost every change to put them in order.<sup>62</sup> The chairman had regretted that 'it was impossible in rack-rented tenements to have perfect control over the occupiers, but he assured the directors that they were considering 'certain arrangements which he hoped would enable the caretaker to have better control.'<sup>63</sup> The arrangement he had in mind was to offer one of the flats rent-free to the Town Mission to be occupied by one of the missionaries. The directors were of the opinion that having a missionary living in buildings would go some way to address the 'immorality and disorder which prevailed among the youngsters especially.'<sup>64</sup> The offer was rejected by the Town Mission, which understandably thought that as the missionaries' work was so demanding that at the end of the day they required rest and peace. The directors then approached the Watch Committee and made a similar offer of rent-free accommodation for a constable to reside on the premises. This time the offer was accepted and it was believed that there had been a great improvement in the behaviour of the tenants since. A later report

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<sup>61</sup> Bond, *The Dwellings of our Poorer Neighbours*, p.48.

<sup>62</sup> *Western Daily Mercury*, 4 March 1887, p.7.

<sup>63</sup> *Western Daily Mercury*, 4 March 1887, p.7.

<sup>64</sup> *Western Daily Mercury*, 8 March 1889, p.6.

suggested that ‘there had been little but praise for the conduct of the tenants’ and that not a single person from the buildings had appeared before the magistrates for eighteen months or two years.<sup>65</sup>

Of the providers of philanthropic housing in Plymouth, the Workmen’s Dwellings Company is the one about which most can now be known. Although few original records have survived, as a company with shareholders, it was required to hold annual shareholders’ meetings. The newspaper reports of the discussions held at these meetings are invaluable in understanding the range of issues faced by such a company, the internal conflicts it faced, and the problems it had to grapple with. The company struggled to reconcile the views of all the diverse shareholders and to be both a commercial success and a paternalistic and considerate landlord.

In Devonport and Stonehouse there is no evidence of similar model dwellings companies becoming involved in the working-class or artizans’ dwellings movement. Although in Stonehouse there were suggestions that a company modelled on similar lines to the Plymouth Workmen’s Dwellings Company might be set up, nothing came of the proposal. It had been hoped that a similar company might be floated which as elsewhere would pay investors a reasonable interest on the capital invested. It had also been hoped that Lord Mount Edgcumbe might be persuaded to support such a company as an investor and as a landowner who was said to ‘aid any proposal which appears feasible and is for the good of this township.’<sup>66</sup> It was intimated that a site at Millbay quarry was already earmarked for such a scheme. This site was the same location which was alluded to as the site being anticipated for the west-end dock workers by the Plymouth Workmen’s Dwellings Company suggesting this company was prepared to extend its operations into other parts of the Three Towns should suitable opportunities

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<sup>65</sup> Bond, *The Dwellings of our Poorer Neighbours*, p.48.

<sup>66</sup> PWDRO, 1363/62, *Annual Report of the Medical Officer of Health, East Stonehouse, 1881*, p.6.

arise.<sup>67</sup> Despite the feeling of a ‘great want which exists in this direction’<sup>68</sup> no further actions were ever taken to set up such a company.

Similarly no philanthropic housing company was ever set up in Devonport although one specific philanthropic activity is worth noting. In 1876 Miss Agnes Weston and her colleague, Miss Sophia Wintz, opened the first Sailors’ Rest at Devonport to provide temperance lodgings for sailors. Although lodgings of this nature are not part of this study, it is undoubtedly the case that without this facility the overcrowding within Devonport would have been even greater as sailors looking for temporary accommodation would have lodged within the tenements and common lodgings of the town.

Perhaps there was a belief that there was no need for philanthropic housing for the working-class population of the town as Henry Whitfield’s editorial and commentary on his series of articles related to ‘Overcrowded Plymouth’ may have encouraged such a lack of action.<sup>69</sup> However it is inconceivable that the conditions Whitfield was to describe a mere fifteen years later in a series of investigative articles for the *Western Independent* under the by-line of ‘The Boy from the Back of Morice Square’ did not already exist when he was suggesting that there was no need to extend his investigation from Plymouth to Devonport. The reasons why Whitfield drew back from Devonport at that time can now only be speculated upon, but some possibilities may become evident later in this thesis.

Owen has pointed out that it is a matter of debate whether private philanthropy hastened or delayed the state and public authorities in becoming involved in the direct provision

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<sup>67</sup> *Western Daily Mercury*, 4 March 1887, p.7.

<sup>68</sup> PWDRO, 1363/62, *Annual Report of the Medical Officer of Health, East Stonehouse, 1881*, p.7.

<sup>69</sup> *Western Daily Mercury*, 26 November 1880, p.2.

of housing.<sup>70</sup> By becoming involved in philanthropic housing schemes, many hoped that they would be demonstrating how the problems of insanitation and overcrowding could be solved. If an enlightened borough council, willing and able to take on the challenge could be shown what could be achieved, and if ratepayers could see that the provision of decent housing resulted in neither the pauperization of the poor, nor a challenge to the capitalist system, then philanthropic housing would have shown how municipal housing could be compatible with the political and moral concerns of the day. It could be argued that this pathfinding role facilitated municipal housing provision. However, Owen has argued that philanthropic providers had misjudged the scale of the problem and by raising expectations ‘that were quite impossible of fulfilment’ private agencies were delaying rather than contributing to the ultimate solution.<sup>71</sup> Certainly the debates within the Plymouth Workmen’s Dwellings Company illustrate this very clearly. At one time they expressed the view that the need for an extension of their activities was no longer so great, as others such as Bates and Pethick, had already filled the need, whilst later coming to the view that municipal involvement would be the solution and putting their faith in the Housing of the Working Classes Act of 1890.

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<sup>70</sup> Owen, *English philanthropy*, p.373.

<sup>71</sup> Owen, *English philanthropy*, p.393.



## Chapter 3

### Self-reliance and independence

In contrast with the philanthropic activities which had taken place in Plymouth, the response in Devonport was marked by a greater reliance on self-help, especially among the Dockyard artizans. Samuel Smiles' *Self Help*, first published in 1859, remained an influential text throughout the Victorian era. Its doctrine of self-reliance, duty, thrift, hard work and self-improvement and the emphasis placed on personal moral and religious responsibility were much admired and emulated by middle-class commentators. It was a text central to the discourses of many of the nineteenth-century organizations that promoted the intellectual progress and moral improvement of the working classes including mechanics' institutes, public libraries and reading rooms.<sup>1</sup> Towards the end of the century many socialist and working-class activists also came to be influenced by the work, although the prominence it gave to individualism did not always sit easily with the collectivist nature of social democracy.

It has further been argued that a tradition of self-reliance and independence was fostered by dockyard work, especially amongst the shipwrights, and that this tradition conditioned their political outlook.<sup>2</sup> These traditions also affected their responses to the crisis in housing provision both of quantity and of quality. Shipwrights in particular had maintained their status amongst dockyard workers, and a shipwright apprenticeship was highly desirable, awarded only to those boys who achieved the highest marks in the dockyard school entrance examinations. Second ranking amongst the trades were the engine fitters drawn from the boys with the next highest set of marks. Schools in the area built their reputations on their success in coaching their pupils for the

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<sup>1</sup> P. W. Sinnema, 'Introduction', in *Self-Help*, by Samuel Smiles (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002) p.vii.

<sup>2</sup> M. Hilson, *Political change and the rise of labour in comparative perspective: Britain and Sweden 1890-1920* (Lund: Nordic Academic Press, 2006), pp.93-94.

examinations.<sup>3</sup> Once admitted to the dockyard school formal classroom-based education continued, sometimes for the length of the six-year apprenticeship and could also include training in marine engineering and draughtsmanship. The resultant workplace culture was individualistic and semi-autonomous.<sup>4</sup> With such a selection process, high standard of education both in preparation for the entrance examinations and in the dockyard school itself, and status awarded to the qualified skilled workers, it is unsurprising that these well-educated and highly skilled artisans were able to develop a significant degree of self-reliance.

One of the factors mentioned by Whitfield for Devonport's advantage over Plymouth was that it had no fishing community dependent on the vagaries of a good catch, but had instead what he described as an 'immense population of well-to-do dockyard artisans.'<sup>5</sup> However he argued that whilst in that respect Devonport was more favoured than Plymouth, in other respects there was a 'great evil' which was the cause of the disrepair of the housing stock. Whilst Plymouth was overcrowded in its 'rookeries' Devonport's 'Cribs' were 'not to be surpassed for dilapidation.'<sup>6</sup> The manorial authorities had previously only allowed houses to be built on leasehold land and had continued their three-life lease system with no renewals. The consequences of this pattern of tenure had been significant. Firstly landlords and principal leaseholders had little incentive to keep their property in good order since they had no prospect of being able to retain the property as a long-term asset. Secondly speculative builders, unable to acquire freehold land, were inclined to build cheaply and use poor quality materials in the knowledge that the buildings they were constructing would not be expected to have a significant lifespan. As slum conditions became more widely understood the leasehold system and

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<sup>3</sup> Hilson, *Political change*, p.91.

<sup>4</sup> Hilson, *Political change*, p.91.

<sup>5</sup> *Western Daily Mercury*, 26 November 1880, p.3.

<sup>6</sup> *Western Daily Mercury*, 26 November 1880, p.3.

the rigid constraints it imposed on development, together with the lack of any realistic alternative, was to become a significant factor in the housing campaigns in the town.

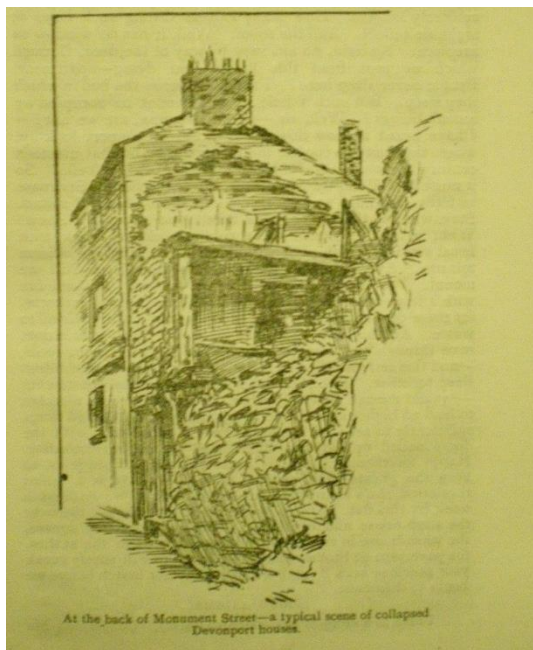


Figure 4

#### The Back of Monument Street<sup>7</sup>

Unlike some private sector employers, the Admiralty's paternalism did not extend to the provision of housing for its employees, the only exception to this being the provision of barrack accommodation for naval ratings. Many dockyard artisans unwilling to accept the housing standards available in Devonport itself travelled some distance from their employment in the search for a better standard of accommodation and were scattered across the Three Towns and further afield. The great distance that many travelled into the country in order to find suitable dwellings was well known.<sup>8</sup> Some lived on the west side of the river Tamar, in Torpoint or Saltash, travelling to work by ferry whilst others used the tramway to travel some distance.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> PWDRO, 1308/9, *The Curse of Devonport*, p.17.

<sup>8</sup> *Western Daily Mercury*, 12 August 1893, p.1.

<sup>9</sup> Hilson, *Political change*, p.93.

The origins of the Devonport Dockyard and District Workmen's Dwellings Company are now unclear and details of its operation are limited. By the time it was incorporated in 1893, it was already in the process of building on land acquired from Lord St Levan and the St Aubyn Estate at Ford. The land was freehold and this seems to mark the beginnings of a loosening of the grip of the manorial authorities on land ownership. The company's prospectus, advertised in August 1893, lists seven directors, all of whom were dockyard artizans.<sup>10</sup> The first chairman, John Mayne, was a rigger and other directors included shipwrights, a boilermaker and an engine fitter. The prospectus was explicit that the intention was for the company to be a working-class organisation. Not only was it 'promoted by the men themselves' but also it was said that it should be supported by all 'working men.'<sup>11</sup> Shares were offered at £1 each in order to make them affordable to the working population. Later records show that the majority of shares were, indeed, purchased by working men, most of whom purchased just one share each.<sup>12</sup> The shareholders were also the prospective tenants or owner-occupiers of the new homes, suggesting that the company may have been conceived as an organisation for the mutual benefit of the shareholders, although it does not appear to have been registered as a friendly society.<sup>13</sup> It managed to pay a dividend of five per cent to its shareholders<sup>14</sup> whilst charging a rent of just £12 per annum<sup>15</sup> on houses which had been valued at £18 per year or were sold for £260.<sup>16</sup> In this it seems that there was certainly an element of altruism in its own activities. The aim of the company was to 'address the enormous want that has been felt' in the provision of suitable houses for the working

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<sup>10</sup> *Western Daily Mercury*, 12 August 1893, p.1.

<sup>11</sup> *Western Daily Mercury*, 12 August 1893, p.1.

<sup>12</sup> PWDRO, 1472/1, *Devonport Dockyard and District Workmen's Dwellings Company Limited, Directors' Minute Book*.

<sup>13</sup> M. Hilson, 'Working-class politics in Plymouth c1890-1920' (unpublished Ph.D thesis, University of Exeter, 1998) p.242.

<sup>14</sup> PWDRO, 1472/6 and 1472/7, *Devonport Dockyard and District Workmen's Dwellings Company Limited, Annual General Meeting Notices 26 October 1903 and 24 October 1904*.

<sup>15</sup> PWDRO, 1472/1, *Devonport Dockyard and District Workmen's Dwellings Company Limited*, 30 June 1893.

<sup>16</sup> PWDRO, 1472/2, *Devonport Dockyard and District Workmen's Dwellings Company Limited, Secretary's Notes*, 7 November 1893.

classes.<sup>17</sup> When applying to Lord St Levan to purchase a further parcel of land to extend the building programme the company pointed out to him the desirability of aiding any movement the object of which was to ‘improve the dwelling accommodation of some of the working classes of the Borough, the state of which has so painfully been brought before the public.’<sup>18</sup> Nevertheless, the company did not dispense with the principle that shareholders, however small their investment was, should be guaranteed a return on that investment and stated the intention of still paying a good dividend after due provision had been made for a reserve fund for contingencies.<sup>19</sup>

Although all the land acquired by the company for its estate was, of necessity, purchased from the manorial authorities, the relationship between the two parties was not always harmonious. The cost of the first plot of land, on which the first fifty-seven houses were built was said to be 6d per foot.<sup>20</sup> However later parcels of land were offered for 1s per foot and the company was to minute their regrets that ‘his Lordship has been unable to reduce the price.’<sup>21</sup> The next parcel of land was purchased at 11d per foot. With the manorial authorities having a monopoly of suitable building land the company had no alternative to accepting the land at the prices offered. It may be that the first land acquisition was at a favourable rate which led the company to the belief that further land would be available at similarly advantageous rates. However this was not to be the case and it clearly caused friction between the parties. There were also difficulties resolving disagreements over the attached conditions.<sup>22</sup> Some prospective purchasers were concerned that there might be some residual restrictions imposed by

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<sup>17</sup> *Western Daily Mercury*, 12 August 1893, p.1.

<sup>18</sup> PWDRO, 1472/2, *Devonport Dockyard and District Workmen’s Dwellings Company Limited Secretary’s Notes*, 7 November 1893.

<sup>19</sup> *Western Daily Mercury*, 12 August 1893, p.1.

<sup>20</sup> A. T. Grindley, *The Warrens of the Poor: A review of housing conditions in Plymouth, Stonehouse and Devonport with suggested reforms* (Plymouth, Three Towns Housing Association, 1906), p.25.

<sup>21</sup> PWDRO, 1472/1, *Devonport Dockyard and District Workmen’s Dwellings Company Limited*, 7 July 1895.

<sup>22</sup> PWDRO, 1472/1, *Devonport Dockyard and District Workmen’s Dwellings Company Limited*, 11 April 1894.

Lord St Levan as a result of the legacy of the leasehold system and one wrote to enquire whether, should he purchase the property he was already renting, the manor would have any rights over the ground when the purchase had been completed.<sup>23</sup>

As discussed in Chapter 2, middle-class philanthropists seeking to provide a better standard of housing for the artizan and working classes concentrated their efforts on lodging houses and tenement blocks. However, when the working classes themselves were able to become involved in their own housing provision they sought a different style of accommodation not unlike the homes that the middle classes provided for themselves – smaller and less well-appointed, but self-contained, private, low-density and with outside space. Such schemes were often more closely related to the model villages than the high-density urban philanthropic housing model. Such was the case with the Dockyard Dwellings Company. The houses were described as being substantially built on the most approved plans,<sup>24</sup> and as they were built on a greenfield site they were of a relatively low density. There was such a high demand for the houses that they had to be allocated by ballot.<sup>25</sup> The first fifty-seven houses were said to have been taken by mechanics and their families.<sup>26</sup> As further parcels of land were purchased more houses were built and the area formed a distinct neighbourhood, almost entirely occupied by the skilled artizan class of dockyard worker. Restrictive covenants prohibiting the taking in of lodgers or occupation by two families maintained the nature of the residential area as the restrictions would have made the houses unaffordable to the poorer sections of the working classes. There was no theoretical restriction on other groups of workers taking up tenancies or purchasing homes, but the implied minimum

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<sup>23</sup> PWDRO, 1472/1, *Devonport Dockyard and District Workmen's Dwellings Company Limited*, 29 May 1895.

<sup>24</sup> *Western Daily Mercury*, 12 August 1893, p.1.

<sup>25</sup> PWDRO, 1472/1, *Devonport Dockyard and District Workmen's Dwellings Company Limited*, 22 June 1893.

<sup>26</sup> PWDRO, 1472/2, *Devonport Dockyard and District Workmen's Dwellings Company Limited*, 7 November 1893.

income level and the proximity to Devonport Dockyard largely achieved this result. The 1901 census shows that the occupants of Lorrimore Avenue, the first of the streets to be completed, were very largely composed of skilled artizan Dockyard employees. The few exceptions included a Metropolitan Police Sergeant, presumably with the Dockyard Police, and a few military personnel.<sup>27</sup> The ban on lodgers and multiple occupation was strictly enforced and whenever breaches of this covenant came to the company's attention enforcement action was taken.<sup>28</sup> The rule continued to apply even if the property was resold on the open market. In 1901, the residents themselves formed an Estate Protection Association with the object of 'watch[ing] over and protect[ing] the best interests of the residents and to see that the covenants contained in the deeds ... are duly observed.'<sup>29</sup> At the Association's annual meeting in January 1909 residents discussed the single family regulation but there was a unanimous decision that the clause was an absolute necessity. Nevertheless one female resident was concerned about women who had been widowed and had been 'left to the tender mercies of an unsympathetic world.'<sup>30</sup> Presumably the speaker felt that it would not be unreasonable, in such circumstances, for a widow to take in a lodger as a means of earning a living for herself and for her family or to share with another family. Although not indifferent to the problem, the meeting concluded that the rule should be maintained in all cases and that there were other widows on the estate who were observing the covenant.<sup>31</sup> Eventually the Estate Protection Association was to take on more of the flavour of a ratepayers' association and started to concern itself with additional matters which were of concern to the residents, such as the condition of the paths and rear lanes, the

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<sup>27</sup> 1901 census of England and Wales, RG/13 Piece 2110 Folio 49.

<sup>28</sup> PWRDO, 1472/1, *Devonport Dockyard and District Workmen's Dwellings Company Limited*, 19 March 1896 and 23 January 1897.

<sup>29</sup> PWDRO, 1472/3, *Devonport Dockyard and District Workmen's Dwellings Company Limited, Estate Protection Association Minute Book*, 15 November 1901.

<sup>30</sup> PWDRO, 1472/3, *Devonport Dockyard and District Workmen's Dwellings Company Limited, Estate Protection Association Minute Book*, 23 January 1909.

<sup>31</sup> PWDRO, 1472/3, *Devonport Dockyard and District Workmen's Dwellings Company Limited, Estate Protection Association Minute Book*, 23 January 1909.

provision of street lighting, rubbish collection and the frequency of the tram service.

The committee lobbied the local councillors and the mayor on these matters.<sup>32</sup> There was a proposal to change the name of the association to reflect the changing emphasis, although the enforcement of the covenants never ceased to be of primary importance and threats of legal action against those who failed to comply were not unusual.<sup>33</sup>

The recording of ‘a lady present’ who spoke at the annual meeting indicates that although the Dockyard Dwellings Company had been conceived as an organisation by and for working men, women were attempting to become involved in the management of the estate to ensure that it reflected their own distinct needs. This also becomes clear as women become more evident as purchasers of the £1 shares in the company. The initial list of investors in company shares contains just one woman, Elizabeth Ann Clark of London, one of the few to purchase more than one share, with five shares. Nothing more is known of Clark and she appears to have taken no active part in the company. In later share issues, however, not only are there more women investing, but these are working-class women investing in their own right. The first was a single woman, Emma F. Young, a dressmaker and the daughter of a naval pensioner, who was to later live with her father in one of the company’s properties. Other women who invested in their own names included the wives of dockyard artisans who also lived on the estate.<sup>34</sup> The indication here is that not only were single women concerned enough to invest in their own future housing prospects but also women who were married to the self-reliant and independent class of dockyard artisan, were themselves self-reliant and independent, and had sufficient means to make investments of their own. Although small in number their presence in the records is of importance as it clearly demonstrates that some

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<sup>32</sup> PWDRO, 1472/3, *Devonport Dockyard and District Workmen’s Dwellings Company Limited, Estate Protection Association Minute Book*, 9 May 1910.

<sup>33</sup> PWDRO, 1472/3, *Devonport Dockyard and District Workmen’s Dwellings Company Limited, Estate Protection Association Minute Book*, 3 February 1908 and 15 April 1914 for example.

<sup>34</sup> PWDRO, 1472/1, *Devonport Dockyard and District Workmen’s Dwellings Company Limited*.



women at least were not content to allow their husbands and other male relatives to take sole responsibility for their welfare. They became involved financially; through speaking out at residents meetings specifically about women's issues; and as will be seen later in political activism.

The houses were commended by Arthur Grindley of the Three Towns Association for the Better Housing of the Working Classes as a good example of a well planned development. He praised their strict adherence to the one family per house rule and for the fact that they were almost exclusively owned by their occupiers.<sup>35</sup> Also worthy of praise, in Grindley's view, was the development built by the Plymouth Co-operative Society on estates it had purchased at Laira and at Peverell although his praise here was not unconditional.<sup>36</sup> The Society had purchased the twenty-three acre Little Efford Estate at Laira in 1898 at a cost in excess of £17,000 for the purpose of erecting its own working-class houses. Two years later, when approval of the plans was still delayed after numerous revisions, the Society's frustrations were to result in a petition to Plymouth's Mayor, Aldermen and Council for a speedy resolution and sanction of the plans.<sup>37</sup> Despite these delays the Society was not deterred and even before they had been able to commence building at Laira the Pounds Estate at Peverell was also purchased in 1901.<sup>38</sup> However once the necessary permissions had been received, work went ahead quickly. The first houses at Pounds were ready for occupation within twelve months and those at Laira in 1904.<sup>39</sup> The new estates had many similar characteristics to those of the Dockyard Company's estate at Ford. Built on greenfield sites, they were of relatively low density and formed discrete neighbourhoods where the occupiers, although not united by occupation, would have similar standards of income. The Laira

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<sup>35</sup> Grindley, *Warrens of the Poor*, p.25.

<sup>36</sup> Grindley, *Warrens of the Poor*, p.25.

<sup>37</sup> *Plymouth Co-operative Record*, No 132 November 1900, p.124.

<sup>38</sup> *Plymouth Co-operative Record*, No 166 September 1903, p.276.

<sup>39</sup> *Plymouth Co-operative Record*, No 176 July 1904, p.76.

development had smaller houses than those at Peverell, with four-roomed dwellings suitable for one family, while Peverell's were larger and they too were said to be suitable for one or two families. Although the Laira development was advertised as being suitable for single family occupation the Society, unlike the Dockyard Company, made no attempt to enforce this with restrictive covenants or by any other means, whilst the Peverell houses were actively marketed as being suitable for multiple occupation. However, there is no evidence for believing that additional sanitary facilities were provided in order to support multiple occupation,



Figure 5

Rosslyn Park Road, Peverell<sup>40</sup>

The open unbuilt nature of the Pounds estate is indicated in the decision to name all of the new streets in the surrounding area as 'Park Road' the first of which was Rosslyn Park Road. The houses on the Peverell estate in particular, as well as being larger and more expensive, were intended to appeal to the better off of the working classes and it was proudly claimed, that 'the Committee have secured the land on the opposite side of the road, so that Members may rest assured that undesirable neighbours will not be

<sup>40</sup> *Plymouth Co-operative Record*, No 166, September 1903, p.275.

permitted in Co-op. Avenue.’<sup>41</sup> The Society, as well as building and selling the new houses offered its members mortgages amounting to 97½ per cent of the purchase price spread over a period of twenty-six years.

The Three Towns Housing Association’s criticisms of the Co-operative Society centred on the decision to sell all of the houses they had constructed rather than retain them and act as a model landlord. This was a decision that had caused considerable controversy within the Co-operative movement with members fiercely debating the relative merits. The arguments which were put forward both for and against this decision are informative of the debates within the wider co-operative movement and amongst housing reformers. Arguments for retaining the houses alluded to the possibility of the Society acting as a model landlord and renting good quality homes at low rents. In addition refusing to sell the houses would prevent them from falling into undesirable hands. In one member’s view building and selling on was ‘simply carrying out the scheme of the jerry builder.’<sup>42</sup> Others pointed out that there would be no possibility of preventing the houses being bought by those with a purely commercial interest and subsequently being rack-rented as happened elsewhere within the town. As the Society subsequently went on to advertise at least some of the houses as being suitable for two families, it would appear that this was not actually of major concern to them. However, it is conceivable that a distinction was made between those who let part of their own home whilst remaining an owner-occupier and those who were absentee landlords. Rack-renting in this manner was a problem already highlighted by the Plymouth Medical Officer of Health who had written in his annual report for 1895 that ‘The population live in tenement houses, many of them newly built, designed for one family but occupied by several and totally unfit for rack-renting.’<sup>43</sup> Dr Williams went on to

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<sup>41</sup> *Plymouth Co-operative Record*, No 166, September 1903, p.276.

<sup>42</sup> *Plymouth Co-operative Record*, No 152, July 1902, p.78.

<sup>43</sup> PWDRO, 1363/3, *Medical Officer of Health for Plymouth Annual Report 1895*, p.30.

single out Grenville Road as having a high mortality rate which he attributed to this phenomenon. An inspection of twenty houses in the road with a total of one hundred and fifty rooms had revealed them to be let to fifty-nine tenants and occupied by 235 people. 'The rooms are small, the houses unsuited for the purpose of letting in tenements, they are now practically new but it will not be difficult to foretell the condition of this class of house in a few years' time.'<sup>44</sup> It was this effect that some co-operators wished to avoid by retaining ownership and control of their own properties. There were also those who expressed a view that the Society should 'cater for the thousands who would never be in a position to purchase a house.' This was felt to be an opportunity to assist the poorer members of the Society, of whom there were hundreds waiting for an opportunity to 'get a decent house.'<sup>45</sup>

The case for selling the houses centred once again around ideas of self-reliance and independence. These views found expression at a special meeting called to discuss the issue in July 1902. One speaker voiced his wish that others should be able to enjoy the security that he himself enjoyed from owning his own home and also that he thought that home ownership would 'do something towards solving the old age question.' He wished to extend to others the privilege he had himself had of 'buying a house by means of the Society's capital.'<sup>46</sup> The advertisement for the Peverell houses printed in the *Plymouth Co-operative Record* echoed this view, extolling them as 'an excellent investment for old age',<sup>47</sup> whilst the announcement for the cheaper houses at Laira, declared that it was 'undoubtedly cheaper to buy your house than to rent.'<sup>48</sup> Linked to this discourse of self-reliance was the unease that many within the society felt with actions which could be considered as charitable. One member commented that the

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<sup>44</sup> PWDRO, 1363/3, *Medical Officer of Health for Plymouth Annual Report 1895*, p.30.

<sup>45</sup> *Plymouth Co-operative Record*, No 152, July 1902, p.79.

<sup>46</sup> *Plymouth Co-operative Record*, No 152, July 1902, p.79.

<sup>47</sup> *Plymouth Co-operative Record*, No 166, September 1903, p.276.

<sup>48</sup> *Plymouth Co-operative Record*, No 176, July 1904, p.76.

Society was not a philanthropic one and that it was expected to make a profit. 'If flour was bought it was expected there would be a profit on the bread. The same thing applied to houses.'<sup>49</sup>

The final decision in favour of selling all the houses was taken at a special members' meeting in June 1902. This decision was regretted by Grindley and the Three Towns Housing Association, Grindley was to write in his exposé *The Warrens of the Poor* that 'the people who can afford to buy a house, even on easy terms, are well able to look after themselves.' He went on to comment that if the houses had been retained the Society could have made itself a model landlord and been 'of great service in that respect to the less fortunate amongst its members.'<sup>50</sup>

Between them the Dockyard Dwellings Company and the Plymouth Co-operative Society made a substantial contribution to the provision of working-class housing across the Three Towns during this period. Both organizations were concerned to improve the conditions of their own members and whilst they attempted to make available homes that were affordable both recognized that they were not able to meet the needs of the poor. Certainly it is true that even the least expensive of Co-operative Society homes were beyond the means of many people. The Laira houses which were the smaller of the Society's houses were advertised for sale at £310 freehold. With a full loan from the Society of £300 it was calculated to work out at 8s 3d a week including rates, whilst the first of the municipal flats at Prince Rock were rented at 4s 6d or 4s 9d per week. It is therefore apparent that whilst going a considerable way to increase the supply of good quality housing for those of the artizan class, neither organisation was able to contribute to the needs of the labouring class.

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<sup>49</sup> *Plymouth Co-operative Record*, No 152, July 1902, p.79.

<sup>50</sup> Grindley, *Warrens of the Poor*, p.26.



## Chapter 4

### Socialist politics and the housing question

In his study of London, Wohl has commented that it was not until the late-Victorian period that the working man himself, who had previously been a shadowy figure spoken for rather than speaking on his own behalf, ‘emerged to take a leading part in the agitation for better housing’.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore Gauldie has suggested that even whilst politicians and social reformers were attempting to improve conditions, amongst those who were badly housed there was no strong pressure until the twentieth century for housing reform.<sup>2</sup> Working class protest was confined to campaigns for other issues such as shorter working hours, the right to combine in unions and the right to vote. Gauldie contended that the working classes shared the view of the political elites that self-help was the way in which conditions would be improved, and that given a working day which would leave some time for self-improvement they would be able to house themselves respectably. As has been seen in the previous chapter, the discourses of self-help and moral improvement were indeed the instigators of efforts by dockyard artisans and co-operators to provide better living conditions for themselves and their families. The goal of these ‘respectable’ working classes was to be in a position to become the owners of their own homes. Once that goal had been attained this new class of owner-occupier was fiercely protective of its achievements, seeking to keep out ‘undesirables,’ setting up estate protection associations, and enforcing standards of behaviour.

Supporting Gauldie’s view that there was no pressure from amongst the working classes themselves for housing reform, Hilson has found no evidence within Plymouth of unofficial or ephemeral resistance by tenants in the form of rent strikes, violence against

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<sup>1</sup> Wohl, *The Eternal Slum*, p.317.

<sup>2</sup> E Gauldie, *Cruel Habitations*, p.17.

landlords or rent collectors, or absconding without paying the rent,<sup>3</sup> and yet the rents in Plymouth and Devonport were found by a Board of Trade inquiry in 1908 to be the highest in the country outside London.<sup>4</sup> The first signs of organised or political working-class campaigning in the Three Towns came in 1900 and, as elsewhere, originated with the newly revived branch of the Social Democratic Federation. The SDF had taken up the issue of fair rents in London during the 1880s and 1890s, and had campaigned on the basis that rent strikes could be used as a way of radicalising the working classes in poorer areas. SDF policies in relation to housing included not just the demolition of unsanitary properties and their replacement with artisans' dwellings and lodging houses by municipal corporations, but also the municipal ownership of all housing.<sup>5</sup> For the SDF, however, it was land reform which was the major thrust of its policy. The ultimate goal for the Federation was nationalization of all land which would, it was believed, provide the solution to the housing problem. In 1898 a prominent member, Fred Knee, together with two fellow SDF members, was instrumental in forming the politically broadly-based Workmen's National Housing Council, which was essentially a pressure group campaigning for housing reform. Whilst it worked with and through the labour movement, it identified the need for housing reform as a class but non party-political issue.<sup>6</sup> The WNHC, unlike the SDF, located the problems of housing not in a lack of progress towards land nationalization or the taxation of land values, but in the financial arrangements governing municipal housing. Its founding policy was to persuade working people themselves to agitate for better housing conditions and in its first manifesto of 1900 it called for cheaper government loans and longer repayment periods as well as the municipal building of

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<sup>3</sup> Hilson, 'Working-class politics in Plymouth', p.249.

<sup>4</sup> Three Towns Housing Association, *Eighth Annual Report for year ended 31 March 1908*, p.3.

<sup>5</sup> G. Johnson, *Social Democratic Politics in Britain 1881-1911* (Lampeter: Edwin Mellen Press, 2002), p.190.

<sup>6</sup> D. Englander, 'Introduction' in *The Diary of Fred Knee*, ed. by D. Englander (Manchester: The Society for the Study of Labour History, 1977), p.14.



houses, taxation of land at full commercial value, fair rents courts and better workmen's trains facilities.<sup>7</sup> The WNHC saw its role as operating at a national level lobbying parliament for legislative reform and also as a London-wide organization putting pressure on the London County Council. Operating alongside were local pressure groups seeking to improve local housing conditions. These operated mainly at borough level and included the Tottenham Housing League, the Willesden Housing Council and the Marylebone Housing Council.<sup>8</sup>

A local branch of the SDF had been formed in Plymouth sometime before 1898 although it was very small and not very active, but in 1899 the branch was reinvigorated when around thirty new members joined. One of the new members, Arthur T. Grindley, quickly became Branch Secretary and its most active member. Grindley was a civil servant working as an Inland Revenue officer. The son of a shopkeeper in a small mining village in north Wales, he left school at thirteen and was largely self-taught to the point where he was able to pass the rigorous Civil Service entrance examinations. Brought up in traditional non-conformist liberal politics, by the time he was posted to Plymouth he was a committed socialist seeking an outlet for his conviction politics. His conversion to socialism had followed a path not dissimilar to that of other socialist housing reformers and shows a marked resemblance to that taken by Knee. Grindley had been 'in turn missionary collector, Sunday-school teacher, chapel organist, Band-of-Hope secretary Methodist local preacher, then unattached socialist and finally a Social Democrat.'<sup>9</sup> Grindley embraced the SDF's policies particularly in relation to education and housing and was elected to the Plymouth School Board in 1900. His main focus, though, was housing reform.<sup>10</sup> Early in 1900 Plymouth Borough Council planned to sell off some of the land between How Street and Looe Street on which it

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<sup>7</sup> Wohl, *The Eternal Slum*, p.325.

<sup>8</sup> Wohl, *The Eternal Slum*, p.324.

<sup>9</sup> Englander, 'Introduction', pp.1-20; *The Social Democrat Vol. V No3*, March 1901, p.67.

<sup>10</sup> *The Social Democrat*, Vol. V No3, March 1901, p.67.

had been intended to build houses for the working classes. As a result in March of the same year the SDF convened a conference to which they invited people known within the town to be interested in housing problems including town councillors and clergymen. Also present were representatives of trades union branches and other working class organisations. As a result, those present formed the Three Towns Association for the Better Housing of the Working Classes as a non-political, non-sectarian association.<sup>11</sup> As with Knee's WNHC, the new association was to rise above divisions of party politics or religious division. All who supported the cause of housing reform were welcome to join, regardless of political allegiance, religious belief or, indeed, lack of belief. Although the association's lengthy title was shortened after a few years to the Three Towns Housing Association, its original name is significant as it unequivocally asserts the organization's concerns with the quality of the housing available to working-class people, not just with the quantitative aspects.

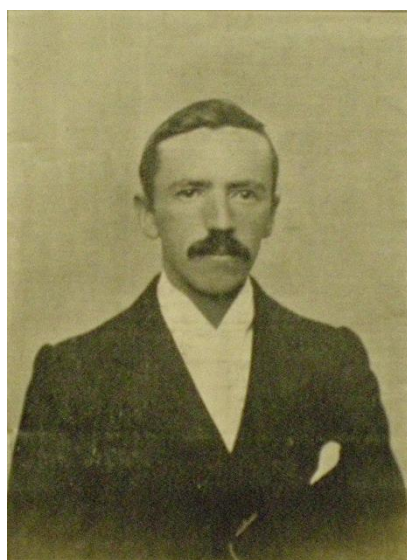


Figure 6

Arthur T Grindley<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> *The Social Democrat*, Vol. V No3, March 1901, p.69.

<sup>12</sup> PWDRO, 3642/3256, *Plymouth School Board Election Leaflet*.

The Association considered its main business to be educating public opinion on the housing question. Tactics to raise public awareness involved holding public meetings, especially open-air meetings, distributing literature and pamphlets, and giving talks to trade union branches and other organizations.<sup>13</sup> In Grindley's view, the most effective means of bringing about reform was an enlightened public opinion.<sup>14</sup> Speaking to the Devonport branch of the Women's Co-operative Guild in February 1901 he urged those present to 'educate the people of Devonport up to the point of demanding municipal house-building ... Public opinion is an all important factor in bringing about reforms. Educate, educate.'<sup>15</sup> A campaign launched by the Association in Stonehouse in early 1906 also revolved around the aim of educating slum dwellers that they were entitled to expect to live in better homes than were currently available to them. Speeches delivered at weekly open-air meetings concentrated on educating working-class electors on the use of their votes to bring about changes in the composition of councils. The campaign had been triggered by a unanimous resolution by the Urban District Council to take no action when they were offered the possibility of leasing land at Millbay Barracks from the Admiralty for the purpose of building workmen's dwellings within the town of Stonehouse.<sup>16</sup>

Public meetings were often well-attended as in November 1902, when a meeting was organised jointly by the Three Towns Housing Association, the Three Towns Trades and Labour Council, and the Educational Committee of the Plymouth Co-operative Society. Fred Knee had been invited to address the meeting and his visit attracted a large audience. He spoke on the Housing of the Working Classes and Rating Bill which had been drafted by the Workmen's National Housing Council. This was a bill intended to amend the law on working class housing, to introduce fair rents courts and to amend

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<sup>13</sup> Grindley, *Warrens of the Poor*, p.39.

<sup>14</sup> A. T. Grindley, *The Housing Question* (Plymouth: Three Towns Housing Association, 1903), p.1.

<sup>15</sup> *Plymouth Co-operative Record*, No 141, August 1901, p.234.

<sup>16</sup> Grindley, *Warrens of the Poor*, p.29.

the law on rating, all in line with the WHNC's policies. Having been briefed by Grindley, Knee was able to relate the Bill to the situation in the Three Towns. Whilst condemning the overcrowding in all three towns, Knee expressed sympathy for the authorities in Plymouth which were prevented from taking any further action as they had already reached the limit of their borrowing powers on the sanitary account and were therefore prohibited from borrowing further funds through the Local Government Board for housing purposes. Stonehouse too was acknowledged to be in a very difficult position as there was no land on which it could expand. Devonport, however, was said to have taken insufficient action on account of the 'disinclination of the governing authority to move in the matter' and that 'In Devonport one could not fail to see "government" written all over the place. If a government had a conscience ... it would have done something to provide housing accommodation for the people whom it attracted to the district.'<sup>17</sup> This was, in fact, a tactic often deployed by the Housing Association in its campaigning. Rather than condemn the actions of the local authorities, blame was frequently placed with national government and with inadequate legislation. In particular the level of interest required on loans through the Local Government Board was heavily criticized, as too were the complex nature of permissive legislation and lengthy appeals processes.<sup>18</sup> Knee's speech was warmly received and a motion expressing general approval of the Bill and urging all labour organizations in the district to support the efforts of the WNHC to secure better homes for the people of the country was carried unanimously.<sup>19</sup>

Over a period of around ten years the Housing Association was indefatigable in its efforts to keep housing at the forefront of public attention. In addition to the talks, debates and public meetings, there were frequent letters to the press and other journals

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<sup>17</sup> *Western Daily Mercury*, 28 November 1902, p.6.

<sup>18</sup> Grindley, *Warrens of the Poor*, p.41.

<sup>19</sup> *Western Daily Mercury*, 28 November 1902, p.6.

such as the *Plymouth Co-operative Record*, lobbying of local M.P.s and government ministers. Candidates for local elections were questioned about their willingness to promote action by the borough councils and to support the subsidization of municipal housing from the rates. The replies received were publicized in the local press in an effort to influence the electorate. However, Grindley was to complain that although many candidates provided assurances and what he described as ‘on the whole favourable’ answers to the questions posed, when elected to office candidates failed to support municipal housing schemes causing him to regret that ‘many of the promises made at election time are not of much value’.<sup>20</sup> More than this, though, the Association regretted that working-class voters failed to use their votes in a way which would advance the cause of municipal housing. Housing reformers were often perplexed that electors who had an opportunity to vote for, in particular, socialist candidates who were committed to reform, did not do so.<sup>21</sup> The SDF’s journal *Justice* considered the working men of London to be a lumpenproletariat and asserted that ‘the slum dweller, in nine cases out of ten loves his slum.’<sup>22</sup> Whilst not as contemptuous of working people, in the Association’s eighth Annual Report for 1908, it is possible to detect the frustrations felt by the reformers when a member of Plymouth Borough Council who had been a supporter of municipal provision was defeated at the elections by a candidate from the Ratepayers’ Association which advocated a policy of opposing all new expenditure on housing. The Housing Association commented ‘The pity of it all is that working men by their votes have approved of this policy.’<sup>23</sup> It is, perhaps, for this reason that so much of the Association’s efforts were directed, as at Stonehouse, towards educating working-class voters in their ability to effect change by voting for sympathetic candidates.

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<sup>20</sup> Three Towns Housing Association, *Third Annual Report for year ended 31 March 1903*, p.2.

<sup>21</sup> D. Englander, *Landlord and tenant in urban Britain: 1838-1918* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), pp.122-3.

<sup>22</sup> Wohl, *The Eternal Slum*, p.319.

<sup>23</sup> Three Towns Housing Association, *Eighth Annual Report for year ended 31 March 1908*, p.3.

Despite these misgivings, the Housing Association's attitude to those who lived in poor housing conditions was generally more understanding – compassionate, even – than that of those who still referred to 'the slum makers and slum dwellers' and who expostulated that if slum dwellers were provided with decent homes they would simply create new slums.<sup>24</sup> Having made a visit to some of the slums and overcrowded parts of Plymouth and Stonehouse, Grindley expressed the view that 'almost any vice which one-room dwellers might be guilty of under such circumstances would be excusable.'<sup>25</sup> He went on to comment that he had 'no patience with those people who speak of the vices of the poor' adding 'The charge is in the first place untrue but even if it were true we have no right to criticise them until we have at least made it possible for them to cultivate the virtues.'<sup>26</sup> Some, particularly temperance campaigners, were to claim that the housing problem could be solved by 'shut[ting] up the public houses.'<sup>27</sup> One well-known local advocate of temperance, speaking at a public meeting in 1902, asserted that that if men would sign the temperance pledge and save their money they would be able to leave the slums.<sup>28</sup> Grindley acknowledged that some men preferred the brightness and comfort of the public house to the gloominess of their own homes but asked 'And who shall blame them?'<sup>29</sup> He frequently re-iterated that drunkenness, where it existed, was the result of overcrowded living conditions and the desire of their occupants to escape the discomforts, rather than slum conditions being caused by a propensity on the part of the men to spend their money on drink instead of on improving their homes.<sup>30</sup> When discussing issues of personal cleanliness he would detail the difficulties of maintaining high standards of hygiene where the only bathing facilities available to many were to bathe in the sea. He commented that if people were all heroes or angels they would

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<sup>24</sup> See for example PWDRO, *Medical Officer of Health Annual Report 1901*, p.8.

<sup>25</sup> *Plymouth Co-operative Record*, No 137, April 1901, p.195.

<sup>26</sup> *Plymouth Co-operative Record*, No 138, May 1901, p.205.

<sup>27</sup> *Plymouth Co-operative Record*, No 139, June 1901, p.216.

<sup>28</sup> *Western Daily Mercury*, 28 November 1902, p.7.

<sup>29</sup> *Plymouth Co-operative Record*, May 1901 No 138, p.205.

<sup>30</sup> Grindley, *Warrens of the Poor*, pp.13-15.

surmount all difficulties in order to keep themselves clean but added ‘as they are only human there are some who, discouraged by the disabilities which a grinding capitalist system has imposed upon them, fall into dirty habits.’<sup>31</sup> The lack of bathing facilities was a particular issue in Devonport and one which was raised frequently by the Medical Officer of Health in his annual reports. Dr May would highlight different aspects of the problem each year, reporting in turn that with the only public baths in the town being those intended for sailors at Miss Weston’s Rests, the only option for the majority of the population was to bathe in the sea, an activity naturally confined to the summer months.<sup>32</sup> However, even this posed difficulties as the designated bathing place was next to a sewage outfall.<sup>33</sup> Many of the trades in which the population was engaged were dirty occupations and Grindley would have understood this when speaking of the need for heroism in maintaining personal cleanliness.

Grindley had a particular sympathy with the situation of the women and, perhaps for the first time, a local housing reformer can be seen to have an understanding of and empathy with the daily realities of living and working in slum housing conditions. He understood and expressed sympathy for women who, unlike their husbands, spent ‘nine-tenths of their time’ in their homes, and ‘never got half-a-mile away from their own doorsteps.’ In answering those who blamed the women themselves for not making use of the Hoe or the public parks for recreation, Grindley pointed out that it was not unreasonable for women to be reluctant when they were unable to dress as other people did and appear respectable in public, and in any case, their lives were ‘often one long round of toil’ especially where there were many children to care for, leaving little time for personal recreation.<sup>34</sup> In remarking on how dark and gloomy the courts, and especially cellar dwellings, could be even on a bright sunny afternoon Grindley did not

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<sup>31</sup> Grindley, *Warrens of the Poor*, p.17.

<sup>32</sup> PWDRO, 1363/58, *Medical Officer of Health for Devonport Annual Report 1899*, p.20.

<sup>33</sup> PWDRO, 1363/58, *Medical Officer of Health for Devonport Annual Report 1904*, p.16.

<sup>34</sup> *Plymouth Co-operative Record*, No 138, May 1901, p.205.

just empathize, but also expressed his admiration for those women who still attempted to keep their homes clean and bright. In his view such women were ‘heroines’ because the ‘visible effects of their exertions are nil’ and having washed a floor they had no option but to sit in a damp room. However, as he pointed out, most women are not heroines but ‘only ordinary individuals just like men’ and so if their homes were sometimes dirty it was understandable.<sup>35</sup>

Hilson has suggested that the implication of this was that Grindley’s main concern for women, whilst not without some sympathy, was about their ability to be effective and efficient homemakers. For them access to better quality housing would permit them to provide comfortable homes for their families and enable them to emulate the middle-class ideals of the angel in the house, whilst for men his concern was about their ability to realise their political potential. For them, better housing would be conducive to abstinence and would create an environment where self-improvement and political awareness could be cultivated.<sup>36</sup> The evidence, however, points to a wider concern for women and for their roles as political activists in their own right, not just as supporters or facilitators of their menfolk’s political aspirations. Nothing in his discourses suggests that only men would benefit from a homely environment which would encourage self-improvement and although he does not mention this potential for women, neither does he specify that men would be the main beneficiaries and his comments are gender neutral. Furthermore much of his campaigning was directed through the Co-operative Women’s Guilds, suggesting that he believed that women could be not just politically aware themselves, but could also be capable of the role he allocated to them of educating others of the case for housing reform and how it could be achieved. Women also figured as members of the Housing Association itself in their own right. Indeed the Co-operative Women’s Guilds within the Three Towns delegated their own

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<sup>35</sup> *Plymouth Co-operative Record*, No 138, May 1901, p.205.

<sup>36</sup> Hilson, ‘Working-class politics in Plymouth’, p.237.



representatives to the Association. Although it is difficult to quantify this, nevertheless their presence is in no doubt, and was clearly valued. In 1903 Grindley proposed a change to the constitution of the Housing Association, which would result in its committee being composed of representatives from the various trades unions within the Three Towns. Grindley argued cogently for this change, suggesting that the Association would then be in a position to successfully field its own candidates at municipal elections. He further added that since in his view the housing problem was largely a problem of low wages, trades unionists were vital to the success of any reform. 'So long as the people are poor, they will be poorly housed' he was to say, quoting William Morris.<sup>37</sup> His misgivings about the constitutional change he was proposing were mainly related to the potential loss of women on the committee saying that 'there are very few women trade unionists in the Three Towns, and therefore there would be very few women on the committee.'<sup>38</sup> Clearly Grindley not only empathized with the plight of working-class women but he also valued the contribution of women as ordinary members and committee members of the Housing Association, as educators and campaigners, and as members of the SDF itself where Mrs Grindley was said to be rarely absent from her seat at the weekly meetings.<sup>39</sup>

It has been suggested that the SDF, along with all other socialist parties, was ambivalent towards women.<sup>40</sup> The party had no policy on 'the woman question' relegating it to a marginal issue of conscience, alongside issues of religion or teetotalism. The result was that within the male hierarchy of the party those who were misogynistic were not censured for expressing their views even when they were detrimental to women's participation within the party. Women's roles within the party, with a few exceptions,

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<sup>37</sup> Grindley, *The Housing Question*, p.3.

<sup>38</sup> Grindley, *The Housing Question*, p.3.

<sup>39</sup> *The Social Democrat*, Vol. V No3, March 1901, p.69.

<sup>40</sup> K. Hunt, *Equivocal Feminists: The Social Democratic Federation and the woman question 1884-1911* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p.251.

therefore tended to be in the background and supportive and in Hunt's view women were rarely activists in their own right.<sup>41</sup> The party's views on women's work was also equivocal, in that 'work' was seen as an economic activity, through which the SDF's socialism could be expressed. The emphasis on paid labour meant that unpaid domestic labour was 'invisible' and did not contribute to emancipation. Some, like Grindley, were sympathetic to the drudgery of domestic labour, but usually in the context that it prevented women from taking up paid employment and contributing to the fight for socialism.<sup>42</sup> However, Grindley's support for women as political activists, if not exactly rare does seem from Hunt's research not to have been commonplace or routine amongst the SDF hierarchy.

The Housing Association's campaigning was galvanised early in 1902 when Devonport Borough Council proposed selling off some of the land which had been acquired for a new cemetery. After laying out plans for the new cemetery the Borough Council established that the whole of the land which had been acquired would not be required for the original purpose and proposals were drawn up for the land to be used for working-class housing under Part 3 of the Housing of the Working Classes Act of 1890. However, the plans were dropped and instead the Council proposed selling the surplus land. The Housing Association attributed this change of heart to the composition of the Council. In their view no action would ever be taken by Devonport Council 'as long as it remains composed of builders, houseowners and the trading classes.'<sup>43</sup> When faced by a similar situation in Plymouth, the protest campaign had consisted of public meetings, resolutions to the Council and letters to the local press. This time, however, the Association decided to co-ordinate a mass protest in the form of a petition calling on the Council to retain the land and proceed with plans for working-class housing. Perhaps

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<sup>41</sup> Hunt, *Equivocal Feminists*, p.248.

<sup>42</sup> Hunt, *Equivocal Feminists*, pp.119-120.

<sup>43</sup> Three Towns Housing Association, *Third Annual Report for year ended 31 March 1903*, p.2.

believing that as a non-resident and non-taxpayer to Devonport Council himself and therefore his involvement may be discounted in affairs not concerning him, Grindley did not take any overt part in it himself, leaving it to the Devonport Branch of the Housing Association to organise the petition. Presenting the petition to the Council meeting in May 1902, the Reverend Sealy emphasised that the branch was acting without the support of the Plymouth Section of the Association.<sup>44</sup> The deputation to the Devonport Council which attended to present the petition consisted of members of the committee of the Housing Association, including two women, Mrs Smith and Mrs Bentley. The deputation was supported by Tom Proctor, a leading local trade unionist, who attended on behalf of the local Trades Council. As he stated, the Trades Council represented several thousand workmen, who were of the opinion that it was time that something was done to alleviate the ‘wretched conditions under which so many people lived in Devonport.’ Sealy went on to add that since the Council had recently taken over the gas and water supplies to the town, they had already adopted the principle of municipal ownership and control and he urged the extension of that principle to houses.<sup>45</sup> The presentation of the petition was widely reported in the local newspapers although editorials were not universally supportive of the aims of the petition. The editorial in the *Western Morning News* was of the opinion that the matter should be left to the law of supply and demand rather than benefit ‘one section of the ratepayers at the expense of the remainder.’<sup>46</sup> Grindley himself had little sympathy with this argument pointing out later that all ratepayers contributed to the cost of education even if they had no children themselves and also suggesting that there were many similar services where ratepayers contributed even if they did not receive direct personal benefit.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> *Western Morning News*, 9 May 1902, p.8.

<sup>45</sup> *Western Morning News*, 9 May 1902, p.8.

<sup>46</sup> *Western Morning News*, 9 May 1902, p.8.

<sup>47</sup> Grindley, *Warrens of the Poor*, p.32.

The petition itself contained over 2400 signatures, mainly those of working class men and women but it was also signed by professional people and ministers of religion. The signatures were said to have been collected voluntarily through trade and friendly societies, and a few social clubs and church or chapel congregations.<sup>48</sup> Many pages of the petition contain exclusively women's signatures, all giving their occupations as housewives seeming to suggest that whilst the men were signing the petition organized by their trade union at their workplace, women were organizing their own petitions, possibly going door-to-door to collect signatures, since given addresses were often in sequence. Around twenty-five per cent of the signatures can be identified positively as being those of women either because they have given their full name, or because they have indicated their marital status or from their given occupation. Many more are almost certainly women suggesting that up to a half of the signatures are those of women. Clearly women were, once again, not prepared to be the passive supporters of their husbands' protests and campaigns but showed that they too had not just an interest in, but also a positive commitment to, activism over their living conditions. Women not only signed the petition, but they also controlled their own sections of the petition and waited on Devonport Borough Council as part of the deputation to the Council. Although clearly the Three Towns Housing Association and the local branch of the SDF were different organizations, there was sufficient overlap, particularly in the leadership, for it to be reasonable to assume that the culture of the two organizations would be similar. Therefore once again the local attitude to women as activists and as campaigners does suggest that whilst the leadership of the party nationally had an ambivalent attitude to the role of women, at the local level, and presumably encouraged and supported by Grindley, the party was more supportive of the involvement of women at an equal level with that of men. However it was not just Dockyard workmen and

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<sup>48</sup> *Western Morning News*, 9 May 1902, p.6.

their wives who were the working-class supporters of the petition. It was also supported by the poorer residents such as watermen, hammermen and charwomen, workers who would not have been part of an organized trade body. The petition was clearly a community effort as well as a trade council effort.<sup>49</sup> The campaign was ultimately unsuccessful and Devonport Council's responses to the petition will be discussed in the following chapter.

The Housing Association was to abandon its non-political and broad-based stance over time, eventually taking up a position more overtly aligned to that of the Social Democratic Federation. Initially this was seen in a move away from concentrating on attracting individual members and instead aimed at attracting other working-class organizations to affiliate. In this the Association was relatively successful. Affiliated bodies were, in the main, trades unions and similar labour representative organizations, but other organizations which allied themselves to the aims of the Association included the Co-operative Society's Education Committee and both the Plymouth and Devonport Branches of the Women's Co-operative Guild.<sup>50</sup> This change in policy can be seen most clearly however in a pamphlet written by Grindley and published by the Association in 1906 under the title *Warrens of the Poor*. The pamphlet advocated many of the policies espoused by the SDF, including that of the municipalisation of all housing.

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<sup>49</sup> PWDRO, 1814/106, *Devonport Borough Council, Petition*.

<sup>50</sup> Three Towns Housing Association, *Third Annual Report for year ended 31 March 1903*, p.2; Grindley, *Warrens of the Poor*, p.40; Three Towns Housing Association, *Eighth Annual Report for year ended 31 March 1908*, p.1.

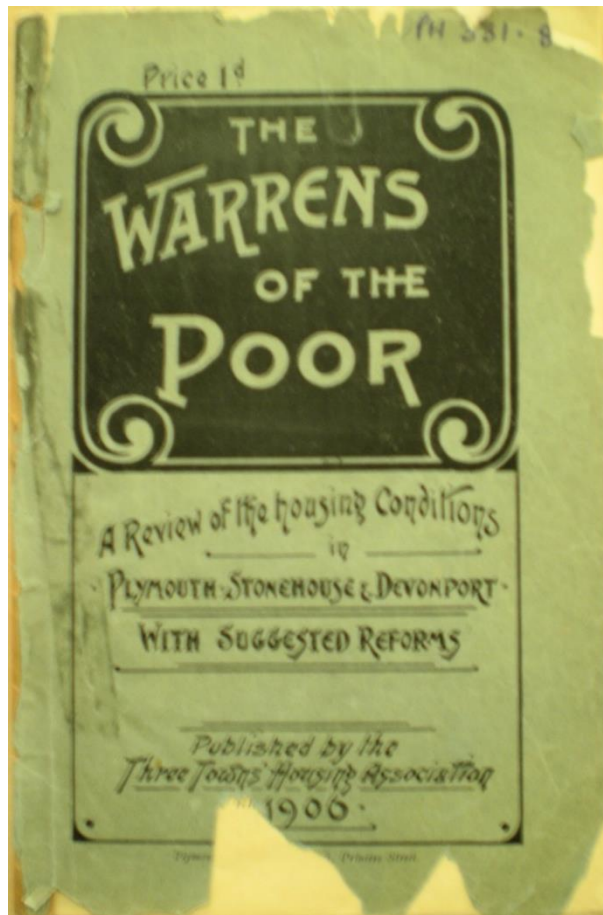


Figure 7

The Warrens of the Poor by A. T. Grindley<sup>51</sup>

The pamphlet continues a long tradition of investigations into local sanitary and housing conditions dating back at least to the Odgers' Report of 1847. However, it is the openly polemical nature of the pamphlet which marks it out as being of a different nature to previous reports. In earlier reports poor housing conditions and overcrowding are described in some detail but in order to appeal to the elite of the towns who would be in a position to influence and bring about improvements, reports generally made much of moral and religious concerns, especially in relation to overcrowding. *The Warrens of the Poor* continues this tradition. Indeed the implications of the very title would have been well understood by the educated elite, being taken from *Locksley Hall Sixty Years After* by Alfred, Lord Tennyson

<sup>51</sup> PWDRO 1642/443 *The Warrens of the Poor*.

There the smouldering fire of fever creeps across the rotted floor  
And the crowded couch of incest in the warrens of the poor.

However unlike previous reports, the language employed in the pamphlet is often accusatory and inflammatory. After describing housing conditions and overcrowding in the poorer parts of town it continues ‘After these figures a little poetry will be a pleasant change’<sup>52</sup> and goes on to quote from verse one of *The Homes of England* by Felicia Hemans

The stately homes of England,  
How beautiful they stand,  
Amidst their tall ancestral trees,  
O’er all the pleasant land!

The acerbity of this should not be overlooked as it is a tactic not previously seen. The pamphlet quotes the annual death rates for 1904 in Plymouth, Devonport and Stonehouse and makes a comparison with that in Bourneville, the model village created by the Cadbury family for their employees. Extrapolating from these figures it calculates what previous reports might have described as excess deaths or preventable deaths but uses the inflammatory description of the numbers who had been *murdered*.<sup>53</sup> This appears to represent a paradigm shift in the tactics that campaigners were prepared to employ in campaigning for the provision of decent housing for all. The pamphlet, nevertheless, continued the moral dialogue emphasising the need for better housing as a precursor to not just better health but also to moral elevation, self-improvement and educated citizenship. Grindley asserted that ‘[t]he refinement and worthy character which a love of home develops, are impracticable to large numbers of people in “the merry homes of England.”’<sup>54</sup> The aim of better housing was to produce citizens who were ‘straight in limb, sound in constitution, ruddy in complexion, strong in muscle,

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<sup>52</sup> Grindley, *Warrens of the Poor*, p.10.

<sup>53</sup> Grindley, *Warrens of the Poor*, p.20.

<sup>54</sup> Grindley, *Warrens of the Poor*, p.4.

deep-breathed, bright-eyed, clear-headed, courageous and upright in all their actions ... their homes must be such as to have a good influence on their character.<sup>55</sup>

The open promotion by the Housing Association of the SDF's policy of municipalisation of all housing was not without controversy, though, and some groups which had been affiliated later withdrew their membership as a result of the decision. The Government Labourers' Union disaffiliated calling the policy downright socialism.<sup>56</sup> The Devonport Branch of the Engineers' Society severed its connections in 1908, but the same year the Association recruited several new affiliations, so although some found the new explicitly socialist agenda unpalatable, it was not a universal difficulty for trades unionists.<sup>57</sup> The loss of the Plymouth Branch of the Women's Co-operative Guild in 1910 for similar reasons was reported with much regret and disappointment and with hopes that they would re-join, saying that no one could say the Association had been extreme or impracticable.<sup>58</sup>

Eventually membership of the Association tailed off and attendance at meetings was reported on several occasions to be very poor.<sup>59</sup> The beginning of the tailing off of activity and attendances appears to have coincided with the resignation of Grindley as Secretary and his later departure to another civil service posting. Nevertheless the Three Towns Housing Association had succeeded in keeping housing reform at the forefront of public and municipal attention during the first decade of the twentieth century. Its success, ultimately, was not in achieving substantial amounts of public housing, but in preparing the way for the post 1918 expectations of working class voters.

The existing historiography of working-class housing pressure groups such as the Three Towns Housing Association is confined to studies of the WHNC, which although

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<sup>55</sup> Grindley, *Warrens of the Poor*, pp.11-12.

<sup>56</sup> Hilson, *Political change*, p.118.

<sup>57</sup> Three Towns Housing Association, *Eighth Annual Report for year ended 31 March 1908*, p.1.

<sup>58</sup> *Western Morning News*, 28 April 1910, p.4.

<sup>59</sup> *Western Morning News*, 18 April 1912, p.6.



described as ‘National’ in its title appears to have been entirely London-centric, and the local groups based around London boroughs referred to earlier in this chapter. It is therefore difficult to tell if the Three Towns Association was exceptional in its existence and its operations. Many more detailed studies are required to understand the extent to which similar groups were operating in other parts of the country. However, it would seem likely that if similar organizations were in existence, particularly in the south west region, that Grindley and the Three Towns Housing Association would have been collaborating, sharing tactics and even holding joint conferences. None of these things appear to have happened and the only other group to which the Housing Association makes reference is the WHNC. This seems to suggest that outside the metropolitan areas formal local pressure groups with links to labour political groups whether the SDF or the Independent Labour Party were rare. In such circumstances perhaps the activities of Grindley as an individual, and the Three Towns Housing Association as an organization, are noteworthy in a wider national context.



## Chapter 5

### The Borough Councils

Parallel with and interwoven through the narratives of the various protagonists in the housing debates – the philanthropists, the self-improvers and the political activists – were the borough and district councils, who were responsible for addressing the problems of urbanization. In attempting to do so they faced multiple challenges and competing demands. The interests of ratepayers and the prevailing discourses of economy, self-help and avoidance of pauperization had to be balanced against the reformist agenda of those who advocated intervention and investment. The interests of landowners, property owners and builders were at odds with the needs and interests of the tenants and other occupants. Perhaps most importantly the enormity and complexity of the task of housing working-class people had to be resolved against a background of an inadequate legislative framework. Hamlin's description of the efforts of local authorities in relation to sanitary improvements as 'Muddling in Bumbledom' could just as relevantly be applied to their efforts in relation to working-class housing.<sup>1</sup>

The complex nature of housing legislation, which had grown piecemeal since the early 1850s was not conducive to easy adoption by local authorities. In her account of working class housing Gauldie has documented at least fifty-two separate Acts of Parliament on housing which were enacted between 1851 and 1914.<sup>2</sup> Some were only applicable to the metropolis or to Scotland but most were relevant throughout England. Some were original acts, others were amending acts and all were permissive rather than compulsory acts. Already by 1880 when a medical officer of health decided that an insanitary area needed improvement he needed to choose between the 1855 Nuisances Act, the 1868 Torrens Act, the 1875 Cross Act or the two 1879 Amending Acts before

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<sup>1</sup> C. Hamlin, 'Muddling in Bumbledom: On the Enormity of Large sanitary Improvements in Four British Towns, 1855-1885' *Victorian Studies*, Vol. 32, No. 1, (Autumn 1988), pp. 55-83.

<sup>2</sup> Gauldie, *Cruel Habitations*, pp.13-14.

he could make an official representation to his council recommending action. Choosing between the Torrens Act and the Cross Act was particularly difficult as it was unclear when an area was too large for the Torrens Act to be appropriate or too small for the Cross Act to be applicable. The confusing nature of the acts and the lack of clarity in their drafting meant that recommendations were easily open to challenge by ratepayers, landlords and others.<sup>3</sup>

The first of the housing acts, the Lodging Houses Act, 1851, also known as the Shaftesbury Act, was not concerned solely with lodging houses as the term is now commonly understood. Gauldie asserts that from the time of this Act council-house building and the assumption of state responsibility for the housing of the poor became legislatively possible.<sup>4</sup> Indeed there are indications that Plymouth did take some measures under this Act. In a letter to the press in 1901, Thomas Bulteel, chairman of the Plymouth Improved Dwellings Company wrote that forty-nine cottages named Shaftesbury Cottages had been erected between 1860 and 1861.<sup>5</sup> Thomas Bulteel was the brother of Christopher Bulteel of the Naval Bank which was to be active in the provision of the later philanthropic housing at Hoegate Street and Notte Street. Little is now known of the Plymouth Improved Dwellings Company and its operations, or of its relationship with the Plymouth Town Council, although Board of Trade records show that a Plymouth Improved Dwellings Association Ltd. was incorporated in 1860 and was dissolved sometime after 1916.<sup>6</sup> Earlier historians of Plymouth have referred to the existence of some cottages built under this Act<sup>7</sup> and it would not be unreasonable to conclude that the name of the cottages was chosen to reflect this. However this was a rare exception in early local authority involvement in the provision of housing.

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<sup>3</sup> Gauldie, *Cruel Habitations*, p.284.

<sup>4</sup> Gauldie, *Cruel Habitations*, p.239.

<sup>5</sup> Quoted in Grindley, *Warrens of the Poor*, p.26.

<sup>6</sup> The National Archives, Catalogue reference BT 31/14312/1789.

<sup>7</sup> Gill, *Plymouth: A New History*, p.231.

The difficulty councils experienced in adopting and then utilizing housing acts is demonstrated by the small number of towns which actually succeeded in making any use of them. The Artizans' and Labourers' Dwellings Improvement Act of 1875, which together with the Artizans' and Labourers' Dwellings Act of 1868 was perhaps the first serious attempt at legislation for housing provision, had been adopted by just eleven towns by 1884 when the Royal Commission on Housing enquired into its effectiveness.<sup>8</sup> Of those eleven towns one was Devonport and Devonport's experience clearly demonstrates how difficult it could be to both adopt and to implement acts of this nature. The minutes of the General Works Committee of Devonport Borough show that the Council proposed to adopt the Improvement Act as early as 1877, although it took in excess of six years before any artizans' houses were actually built under the scheme. In June 1877 it was proposed to draw up a scheme to pull down Braggs and Francis Alleys and Doidge's Well, some of the most notorious and overcrowded slums in the district, regularly reported as being dens of crime and immorality and said to be occupied by 'persons so repellent that no citizen could enter without certainty of insult.'<sup>9</sup> It has been argued that the first and most sweeping improvement schemes were deliberately driven through the most criminal areas, with the dispersal of criminals and the suppression of crime as the first motive.<sup>10</sup> It may be coincidence that Devonport's first scheme did target such an area as the town's Medical Officer of Health, Dr Joseph May, was said to be an ardent enthusiast of the Act. However, the Medical Officer of Health could only recommend the adoption of the Act. It was for the Borough Council to take action and the fact that clearance of one of the most notorious parts of the town for criminal activity had been recommended may well have made it politically possible for the council to proceed with a scheme. Nevertheless, the Borough Council appears to have

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<sup>8</sup> Gauldie, *Cruel Habitations*, p.278.

<sup>9</sup> Whitfield, *Plymouth and Devonport*, p.407.

<sup>10</sup> Gauldie, *Cruel Habitations*, p.267.

found itself with a dilemma as the property was owned by the town's largest ratepayer other than the Government, Sir John St Aubyn. Having condemned the area Dr May expected that the Borough Council would then assume responsibility for the re-building of houses. However, in order to regain the freehold of the property the manor authorities proposed to carry out the rebuilding of the houses whilst the Sanitary Authority was to make, pave and sewer the streets and back lanes.<sup>11</sup> This compromise appears to have been to the great benefit of the property owner, whilst the costs were borne by the council, which received no benefit. Indeed, one of the effects of improvement schemes under this Act, which was much resented by towns which had adopted it and deterred others from doing so, was that expensive council clearance schemes increased the value of neighbouring properties through betterment without increasing their rateable value and so brought no profit to the council.<sup>12</sup> In the case of Devonport's scheme, not only did the St Aubyn Estate benefit in this way as owner of neighbouring properties, but they also received compensation for the value of the properties which were to be cleared. Additionally this compensation was based on the rents charged on the property rather than any assessment of the intrinsic value of the buildings. Overcrowding and high rents in the town would consequently have resulted in a high level of compensation paid to the Manor Authorities. Furthermore, by regaining the freehold of the land the Manorial Authorities would be able to lease the new properties at an increased rate as the streets were to be paved and sewered by the council, making any rebuilt houses extremely desirable. It would appear that the St Aubyn Estate would benefit in many ways and increase both income and capital stock. Even so progress on the scheme was slow. It took almost six months before the St Aubyn Estate drew up its plans, a further six months for the Local Government Board to hold a local inquiry and request modifications to the plans, before a provisional order was confirmed, but the longest

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<sup>11</sup> PWDRO, 1831/1, *Minutes of the Sanitary Committee, Devonport Borough Council*, 14 June 1877.

<sup>12</sup> Gauldie, *Cruel Habitations*, p.280.

delays were with the manorial authorities. A further eighteen months passed whilst the St Aubyn estate amended the plans and delayed action. Eventually, three years after the scheme was first proposed, work began, but the manner in which the poor tenants of Braggs Alley were turned out was criticized by at least one councillor.<sup>13</sup> Another nine months passed by until the St Aubyn estate wrote again to the Council requesting once again to alter the plans. The request was rejected but the Manor then appealed against the decision to the Local Government Board which appointed an arbitrator who made a visit to the site. In all it was nearly five years from the time of the first proposal and eighteen months after tenants had been evicted before re-building began.<sup>14</sup> By 1883 only two fifths of the area had been rebuilt although there were plans for more houses.<sup>15</sup> Medical Officers of Health were often reluctant to condemn slum housing as they understood that the poor tenants who were likely to be evicted would have little alternative other than to crowd into adjoining areas making those houses even more overcrowded. Certainly Dr May does not appear to have recommended any further schemes under the Act.

Devonport's experience in using the Artizans' and Labourers' Dwellings Improvement Act may not have been typical because of the historic land tenure issues which still prevailed but each of the few towns which did adopt the Act had their own individual complexities with which they had to deal and for which they had to find solutions.<sup>16</sup> However there will also have been many similarities between towns and it is perhaps unsurprising that the act was not more widely adopted. In the light of this experience by their close neighbour it is therefore also unsurprising that, as seen in Chapter 2, Plymouth's Mayor, William Derry, commented in 1880 that having investigated the

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<sup>13</sup> PWDRO, 1814/60, *Minutes of the General Works Committee, Devonport Borough Council*, 8 July 1880.

<sup>14</sup> PWDRO, 1814/60, *Minutes of the General Works Committee, Devonport Borough Council*, 2 February 1882.

<sup>15</sup> Gauldie, *Cruel Habitations*, p.279.

<sup>16</sup> Gauldie, *Cruel Habitations*, p.279.

possibility of adopting the Act he had found it to be impracticable, whilst Stonehouse's Medical Officer of Health remarked that

Unfortunately we are too small a town to acquire the property and pull it down under the Artizans' and Labourers' Dwellings Act the framers of which did not appear to contemplate the position of Stonehouse, which is really the core of a large town without the revenue of one to amend its evident evils<sup>17</sup>

Medical Officers of Health nevertheless continued to report houses as being unfit for human habitation, but tended to do so under the public health acts rather than under housing acts. This allowed them to require landlords to make improvements and to issue closing orders on properties where landlords failed to comply, but did not require them to make any provision for the rehousing of the tenants. It also provided scope for unscrupulous landlords to make the minimum improvements necessary for the closing order to be avoided or to ignore closing orders until they were forced to make improvements under the threat of having their property compulsorily taken over. One particularly notorious example of this occurred in Devonport in 1899. The Town Clerk, on the recommendation of the Medical Officer of Health, had issued a closing order in February of that year against the landlord of an entire area at Montpelier consisting of around eighty houses as they were deemed to be unfit for human habitation. These houses were known colloquially as 'Mud Huts' because of their poor construction and state of dilapidation. The landlord attended the Housing Committee accompanied by his solicitor to put his case as to why the closing order should not be made. Although the committee resolved that sufficient case had not been shown<sup>18</sup> the landlord then proceeded to make the minimum repairs necessary to have the closing orders lifted. As with many aspects of housing legislation there was no definition of *unfit for human habitation*. Sir John Simon had defined the term as 'places in which by common

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<sup>17</sup> PWDRO, 1363/62, *Medical Officer of Health for Stonehouse Annual Report for 1888*, p.4.

<sup>18</sup> PWDRO, 1814/69, *Devonport Borough Minutes of the Housing Committee*, 30 March 1899.



consent even moderately healthy life is impossible to human dwellers.<sup>19</sup> Clearly such definitions were problematic for those charged with protecting public health. It may have been possible to justify closing orders against the very worst conditions, but in the face of a determined landlord, when some improvements were made to a property, however minimal, closing orders were frequently rescinded.

The Housing of the Working Classes Act of 1890 marked something of a turning point both nationally and locally. Although this Act placed an obligation on Metropolitan local authorities to re-house at least half the number of those displaced by clearance schemes, it did not extend this obligation to provincial towns and cities, where, it was believed, housing needs could be more easily be met. It allowed for, although it neither required nor encouraged, local authorities to build houses themselves, as opposed to letting ground to builders to do so. In cases where local authorities did build houses it envisaged that they would be sold to private owners within ten years. Although, therefore, it would seem that this new legislation was no more compelling than previous legislation had been, its reception was different. Years of campaigning by reformers had resulted in changing attitudes to social reform, and extension of the franchise had led to more confident demands from the electorate.

The passing of the 1890 Act coincided with the appointment of a new Mayor in Plymouth, John Bond. A passionate Liberal and a Congregationalist, John Thomas Bond was 36 when he became mayor for the first time in 1890. The son of a shoemaker, he had been educated at Public Free School in Cobourg Street and on leaving school at twelve he became an office boy to a local solicitor. By the age of 27 he had qualified as a solicitor. In 1887 he was elected to Plymouth Council and accepted the role of Mayor on three occasions, 1890-91, 1895-96, and 1897-98. He was a strong advocate of temperance and founded the Woodland Bible Class at his home, at Woodland Terrace,

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<sup>19</sup> Gauldie, *Cruel Habitations*, p.138.

Greenbank. He was to take a personal interest in housing and personally conducted a tour of the Plymouth slums accompanied by journalists and religious society leaders. He was reported to be ‘profoundly impressed’ with the powers that the Housing of the Working Classes Act had conferred on corporations and believed that, at last, the many ‘abominations’ within the Borough could be removed bringing about a ‘wholesome social reform.’<sup>20</sup> He also stated that if he were to make the best and fullest use of the Act he needed to personally ascertain where and to what extent the provisions of the Act should be utilized. Bond clearly had ambitions to make as much use of the Housing of the Working Classes Act as he could, and suggested that the powers conferred on Borough Councils enabled them to become ‘Corporate Peabodys’<sup>21</sup> although he did not support the construction of more tenement blocks.<sup>22</sup> Bond was referring to the work of the Peabody Trust, established in 1862 by George Peabody, which was a significant provider of philanthropic housing in London.

Bond’s visits to different parts of the town were conducted over a number of weeks and reports of these visits were printed in the *Western Morning News* between February and May 1891. As was often the case the news articles were then collected together and published in pamphlet form under the title *The Dwellings of Our Poorer Neighbours*. Bond professed to be shocked and horrified by the conditions he discovered, although he was clearly familiar with many of the areas he visited. After all, it was his awareness of their existence which had led him to embark on his series of visits in an attempt to verify for himself the true extent of the problem, trusting to ‘his own senses of sight and smell.’<sup>23</sup> On occasions, though, he fell back on the much used analogies of exploring ‘Darkest Plymouth’<sup>24</sup> whilst of one court, Soup Kitchen Court, it was said that it had

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<sup>20</sup> Bond, *The Dwellings of our Poorer Neighbours*, p.4.

<sup>21</sup> Bond, *The Dwellings of our Poorer Neighbours*, p.37.

<sup>22</sup> Bond, *The Dwellings of our Poorer Neighbours*, p.30.

<sup>23</sup> Bond, *The Dwellings of our Poorer Neighbours*, p.4.

<sup>24</sup> Bond, *The Dwellings of our Poorer Neighbours*, p.3.

been as unknown to the Mayor as Darkest Africa<sup>25</sup> despite the fact that the Mayor was a Plymouth man and the court was in a central location in the shadow of St Andrew's Church. It is clear from reading this pamphlet that the new mayor's sympathies lay with the poor people who lived in such distressing conditions. He mentions often that the majority of places are kept as clean as it is possible to keep them;<sup>26</sup> that women take pride in their homes with window boxes and pots of flowers on window sills;<sup>27</sup> and that during their tour they met with no one who was drunk.<sup>28</sup> Bond stated that there was little for which the tenants could be criticized and that in spite of their dismal surroundings they wanted to keep their homes clean and brighten the aspect. He laid the blame for the situation he had discovered on two groups. Firstly he placed the responsibility on the shoulders of the landlords of the properties he had visited<sup>29</sup> and felt that the Corporation should influence and if necessary coerce the landlords into doing more.<sup>30</sup> He did, however acknowledge that there was some evidence of landlords who recognized that they had duties as well as rights.<sup>31</sup> Sharing culpability for the insanitary state of the properties was the Corporation, with its elected representatives and its officials. Several times he questioned how conditions had been allowed to deteriorate to such an extent without the sanitary officers intervening. He did, however, expect the Corporation to take immediate action to begin to remedy the situation and he tabled a resolution instructing the Sanitary Committee and the Medical Officer of Health to take whatever measures were necessary to enforce the new law.

This new determination to make progress in cleaning up existing houses and the provision of new houses came at the time that a new Medical Officer of Health was

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<sup>25</sup> Bond, *The Dwellings of our Poorer Neighbours*, p.32.

<sup>26</sup> Bond, *The Dwellings of our Poorer Neighbours*, p.20 and p.22 for example.

<sup>27</sup> Bond, *The Dwellings of our Poorer Neighbours*, p.7, p.25 and p.29.

<sup>28</sup> Bond, *The Dwellings of our Poorer Neighbours*, p.5.

<sup>29</sup> Bond, *The Dwellings of our Poorer Neighbours*, pp.34-35.

<sup>30</sup> Bond, *The Dwellings of our Poorer Neighbours*, p.11.

<sup>31</sup> Bond, *The Dwellings of our Poorer Neighbours*, p.18.

appointed. Although not the first Medical Officer of Health to the town, Dr Williams was the first to be a full time official rather than combining the role with private practice as had hitherto been the case. He was also the first to have a public health qualification in addition to his medical qualifications. As a result he was exceptionally well qualified and, encouraged by the Mayor, public health matters took on a new level of professionalism. Within a month of his own appointment and the Mayor's resolution that both he and the Sanitary Committee should focus their attention on improving housing conditions, Dr Williams was making official representation under the new act that houses were unfit for human habitation.<sup>32</sup> Further areas and groups of houses were similarly declared unfit at almost all Sanitary Committee meetings for the rest of the year.<sup>33</sup> However it was estimated that should all the condemned houses be closed upwards of one thousand people would be displaced. A further road widening scheme was also due to displace another 488 people and the Committee recognised that these measures would have resulted in greater suffering being caused to those who were intended to benefit and that overcrowding would, in fact, be greatly aggravated as those displaced moved into neighbouring properties.<sup>34</sup> Perhaps in an attempt by the existing landlords and property owners to prevent the compulsory purchase of their properties, a rumour began to circulate around the town to the effect that the Sanitary Committee intended to eject the tenants. The Committee felt it necessary to stress that there was no intention of doing that and, although proceedings were pending to close these houses, plans were also in hand for the construction of new working-class homes elsewhere in the town. A Sub-Committee was formed and instructed to negotiate for the purchase of suitable sites 'for the erection of four-roomed cottages to accommodate persons living

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<sup>32</sup> PWDRO, 1648/107, *Plymouth Corporation Minutes of the Sanitary Committee*, 11 June 1891.

<sup>33</sup> PWDRO, 1648/107 and 1648/108, *Plymouth Corporation Minutes of the Sanitary Committee*, 26 June 1891, 30 August 1891 and 1 October 1891 for example.

<sup>34</sup> PWDRO, 1648/108, *Plymouth Corporation Minutes of the Sanitary Committee*, 29 September 1892.

in property which has been or may be hereafter condemned or demolished by the Committee.<sup>35</sup>

However, despite the Mayor's confidence in the new Act, once again the limits of permissive legislation and the central control of the Local Government Board served to hinder progress. After much searching and several failed attempts to purchase suitable land a site was identified at the south of Laira Bridge Road extending to Prince Rock. The site was felt by Dr Williams to be a particularly healthy one, affording a ready means of disposal of refuse by rail and water. It was also considered to be conveniently located for workmen as, although outside the central area of town, the council-owned tramway could easily be extended to serve the area, giving working people a cheap and ready means of transport to the centre and other parts of the town.<sup>36</sup> The cost of the scheme was estimated at £60,000.<sup>37</sup> Having identified a suitable site and resolved to adopt the scheme, Local Government Board approval was sought but it was nine months before a Provisional Order received Royal Assent in June 1893.<sup>38</sup> However, the Corporation was soon recording its frustration that matters were still delayed and was minuting an urgent request that 'the Local Government Board [...] confirm the contract and sanction the loan without further delay and thus enable the Committee to provide work for the unemployed during the coming winter.'<sup>39</sup> Another year passed during which the Council expressed its regret that further delays were being experienced until in November 1894 the Local Government Board wrote to say that a local enquiry would be held as soon as other commitments of Inspectors allowed. Finally in February 1895 the Town Clerk was able to report that sanction had been received for a loan for the

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<sup>35</sup> PWDRO, 1648/108, *Plymouth Corporation Minutes of the Sanitary Committee*, 26 November 1891.

<sup>36</sup> PWDRO, 1648/108, *Plymouth Corporation Minutes of the Sanitary Committee*, 29 September 1892.

<sup>37</sup> PWDRO, 3642/479, *Act relating to housing of the working classes in the Urban Sanitary Authority of Plymouth*, 1893.

<sup>38</sup> PWDRO, 1648/108, *Plymouth Corporation Minutes of the Sanitary Committee*, 20 July 1893.

<sup>39</sup> PWDRO, 1648/65, *Plymouth Corporation Minutes of the Housing of the Working Classes Committee*, 23 November 1893.

purchase of the land, but the loan was only for a period of three years whilst detailed plans were being considered. The LGB then declined to sanction the design of the proposed accommodation. Some construction work was eventually started on the first two blocks and the Mayor laid the foundation stone in July 1895<sup>40</sup> whilst the Council embarked on another round of applications and correspondence in order to purchase the land in How Street and Buckwell Street which was to be cleared and rebuilt.<sup>41</sup>

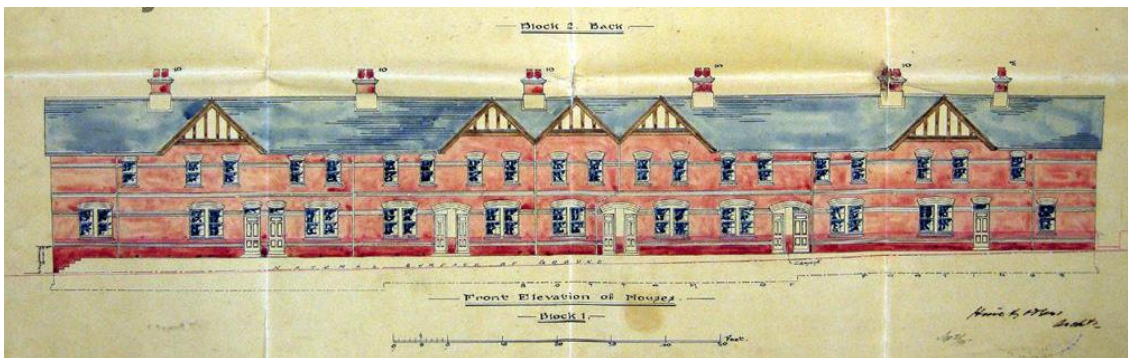


Figure 8

#### Plans for the Prince Rock Housing Scheme<sup>42</sup>

As with Devonport's adoption of the Artizans' and Labourers' Dwellings Improvement Act, the experience of Plymouth again demonstrates how frustrating councils found the process of using permissive legislation which provided a theoretical option for addressing the housing problems in their area. However in attempting to adopt the Act and make use of its provisions Plymouth, at least, appears to have been frustrated at every turn, despite a demonstrable willingness to use its provisions to the full. The newly formed London County Council did adopt and make extensive use of the 1890 Act and has been extolled for its extensive provision of working class housing in the period between 1890 and 1914<sup>43</sup> whilst other areas have been accused of being

<sup>40</sup> PWDRO, 1648/65, *Plymouth Corporation Minutes of the Housing of the Working Classes Committee*, 18 July 1895.

<sup>41</sup> PWDRO, 1648/65, *Plymouth Corporation Minutes of the Housing of the Working Classes Committee*, 28 November 1895.

<sup>42</sup> PWDRO, 1642/443, *Plans for the Prince Rock Housing Scheme*.

<sup>43</sup> Gaudie, *Cruel Habitations*, p.295.

‘laggards.’<sup>44</sup> It may be that London’s problems were so extensive that the Local Government Board focused all its attention to facilitating solutions to the Metropolis’s needs in the belief that problems were not so great elsewhere. It is not clear under which powers Plymouth Borough Council eventually took its action on the Prince Rock scheme, but it would seem that it did not, finally, adopt Part III of the Housing of the Working Classes Act. It is not included in the list by Gauldie of those boroughs which did adopt the Act.<sup>45</sup> Further, in his speech on the subject referred to in Chapter 4, Fred Knee had made it clear that Plymouth had been unable to do so, and continued to be unable to do so, on account of the extensive borrowing against the sanitary account.<sup>46</sup> Despite this Plymouth did construct its first council estate and the first properties were nearing completion at the end of 1895 when the Medical Officer of Health was to report that ‘The execution of this work will go far to solve a problem which is vital to the well being, morally and physically, of the great bulk of our working population.’<sup>47</sup> The estate was officially opened on 15 October 1896.<sup>48</sup> As happened in many other locations, the applications for tenancies did not come from the people who were to be displaced by the central clearance schemes. In order to encourage them to do so the Prince Rock caretaker visited the unhealthiest areas on several occasions but he was unsuccessful despite the council offering discounted rents. Those who were classed as ‘displaced persons’ were given a 6d per week reduction taking the rent for a first floor three-roomed flat to 3s. per week. Only twelve applicants, representing sixty-three persons came from this group of prospective tenants. The first wave of applications was mainly from those whose homes were not amongst those which had been listed as unfit for human habitation. It is now only possible to speculate about the reasons why those living in the condemned areas did not apply for tenancies of the new properties. In this

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<sup>44</sup> Gauldie, *Cruel Habitations*, p.293.

<sup>45</sup> Gauldie, *Cruel Habitations*, p.322-3.

<sup>46</sup> *Western Daily Mercury*, 28 November 1902, p.6.

<sup>47</sup> PWDRO, 1363/3, *Medical Officer of Health for Plymouth Annual Report 1895*, p.7.

<sup>48</sup> PWDRO, 1648/65, *Minutes of the Housing of the Working Classes Committee*, 22 October 1896.

case the rents were not excessive, nor beyond the means of those who were renting privately in the central core of the town, as private rents were known to be high. It has been suggested that this may have been because of the need for working men to be near to docks and other employers of daily casual labour. This argument fails to take account of the views and undoubted influence of women in decisions about home and family. Perhaps one reason may be that the culture of working-class women, which was centred on the water pump, the communal wash house and the proximity and mutual support of family, friends and neighbours, risked disruption by a removal to a home with independent offices and separation from local community.

The first homes constructed were, as envisioned by Bond, fully self-contained, each having its own independent offices and consisted of just two storeys. Later, in an effort to reduce costs, the blocks took on more of the flavour of tenement blocks. When, in 1907, the Housing Association was pressing for more homes to be built those who objected to further expenditure against the rates were able to point out that there were thirty vacant homes on the estate and argued that there was no need for further building as demand had been satisfied. Five members of the Housing Association were delegated to inspect the vacant homes and provided a report to the Borough Council detailing the reasons why they thought that these properties were difficult to let. In the view of the delegates they were vacant because they were undesirable. The blocks were barrack like, there was one washhouse with two coppers for each block of eight flats, there were no coal houses in the yards so all coal had to be kept in the living rooms, but even more damning was the fact that the water closets were in one block and therefore ‘people would hesitate to take up their abode in the upper part of three storey blocks ... where their visits to the WCs are in the notice of the whole block.’ However the most important reason for the flats being undesirable, in the view of the Housing Association, was the code of regulations governing the tenancies. The regulations, which forbade the



keeping of fowl, rabbits or pigeons, and the restrictions on taking lodgers, were in their view an infringement of individual rights. Where such stringent rules were imposed it was felt that 'the Englishman's love of freedom' would be likely to cause him to choose to rent from a private landlord, even at a higher rent, so that he would be free of such restrictions.<sup>49</sup> It can be seen from this discourse that the Housing Association, which better understood and empathized with the working class population, and indeed consisted to a large degree of working class members, viewed the type of housing as important as the quantity of available housing, referring back to the Association's original full name. It also reinforces the preferences for homes that were self-contained, private and not dissimilar to those of the middle classes.

The example of Plymouth perhaps demonstrates the dangers of relying on evidence from central government sources and not using local studies to understand and illuminate local responses to central diktats. Whilst the London County Council is regarded as being in the forefront of council housing provision, with the Boundary Estate frequently cited as an example of what a forward thinking council could achieve,<sup>50</sup> many provincial towns are regarded as being laggardly. Yet development of the Boundary Estate and the Prince Rock schemes were running concurrently. Perhaps Plymouth's innovative scheme, driven by a reformist agenda and led by a reformist Mayor and Medical Officer of Health, has escaped the attention of historians of the subject because of the confusion about which legislative mechanism was adopted. Gauldie's analysis has been largely based around loans sanctioned by the Local Government Board under Part III of the 1890 Act but as has been seen this is not the mechanism used in Plymouth. Others, such as Tarn and Wohl have used the LCC's in-house architecture department as the basis of their examinations, but Plymouth Council engaged an independent firm of architects, that of Hine and Odgers, for its design work.

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<sup>49</sup> PWDRO, 3642/443, *Letter to Housing of the Working Classes Act Committee*, 16 September 1907.

<sup>50</sup> Wohl, *The Eternal Slum*, p.270-3.

As may be anticipated though, the development of the Prince Rock estate was not straightforward. Work progressed in phases stopping and starting until at least 1905.

In the meantime the plans for the redevelopment of Looe Street and How Street were also placed in jeopardy when the council proposed to sell off the land for private development. It was this proposal which had led to the housing conference called by the Social Democratic Federation in Plymouth and to the formation of the Three Towns Housing Association. Under pressure as a result of the publicity generated by the conference and the formation of the Housing Association, the council did retain the land and eventually building work took place in 1905. In Dr Williams' opinion the chief obstacle which caused delays and lack of progress was the question of finance. In his annual report for 1901, and apparently prompted by the public debate which had followed the establishment of the Housing Association, he reported that approaches had been made to the Local Government Board by Corporations asking for extended periods for the repayment of loans. Although he felt that the LGB was sympathetic, the Government had taken no action, adding in a somewhat ironic tone that he had been assured that private enterprise would in the near future provide the solution.<sup>51</sup>

The Borough of Devonport, after its experience with the Artizans' and Labourers' Dwellings Improvement Act, did in fact also adopt the Housing of the Working Classes Act but not until 1897 when plans were drawn up for two slum clearance schemes for the James Street and Ordnance Street areas.<sup>52</sup> These two schemes proceeded slowly and two years later, in 1899 when the Council applied to the Local Government Board for a loan to begin work at Ordnance Street the LGB declined the request until such time as the James Street scheme was completed, prompting the Council to call for an expansion

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<sup>51</sup> PWDRO, 1363/3, *Medical Officer of Health for Plymouth Annual Report 1901*, p.7.

<sup>52</sup> PWDRO, 1814/69, *Devonport Corporation Housing Committee Minutes*, 16 September 1897.

of powers to be given to municipalities.<sup>53</sup> A stream of correspondence between Devonport Borough Council and the Local Government Board ensued regarding loans. The Council also had under consideration other sites where dwellings could be constructed which did not involve the clearance of existing slums. One scheme considered would have involved the purchase of a lease on some land owned by the War Office. This scheme appeared to be progressing well when the Treasury Solicitor inserted a clause into the draft lease regarding rights over a tunnel and again the scheme was abandoned.<sup>54</sup> The most controversial of the schemes the borough considered, though, was the building of working-class houses on part of the land which had been acquired for a new cemetery. Shortly after the Council had adopted the 1890 Act it had formed a Housing Committee for the purpose of dealing with all housing matters, rather than having housing as just one of a range of priorities that the Sanitary Committee had within its remit, and Henry Whitfield became one of its earliest chairmen. Whitfield, who had earlier written the exposé, *Overcrowded Plymouth*, had since become owner and editor of the *Western Independent* newspaper based in Devonport and which he used to highlight the slum conditions prevailing in much of the town. A series of articles in his newspaper written under the by-line of ‘The Boy from the Back of Morice Square’ and a pamphlet, *The Curse of Devonport*, had kept his reformist credentials to the fore so when he was elected to Devonport Borough Council for the Clowance Ward his priorities and support for municipal housing were well known. *The Curse of Devonport* had been published in 1895 and was a powerful attack on the leasehold system, which Whitfield had long regarded as ‘evil.’ It was written as an imagined tour of the slums of the town with the author guiding Lord St. Levan through ‘the Hades of your wealth’ and invited his lordship to ‘discover for ourselves the unloveliness of life in your lease-bound borough; realise on our own account whether there is not a system

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<sup>53</sup> PWDRO, 1814/69, *Devonport Corporation Housing Committee Minutes*, 17 April 1899.

<sup>54</sup> PWDRO, 1814/69, *Devonport Corporation Housing Committee Minutes*, 25 September 1901.

that is the *Curse of Devonport*.<sup>55</sup> The pamphlet was undoubtedly a personal attack on Lord St. Levan and had been published at the time that the Borough Council was attempting to make some progress with its proposed slum clearance scheme at James Street. One particular section of the 'tour' illustrates the personal nature of the attack and is worth quoting in full. In relation to James Street it says

Your lordship observes that some of these cribs are closed – for they have been condemned by the authorities. Yes they have been obliged to proceed to that extremity. They want to buy this group from your lordship, but you require, as usual, too much money for mere night-mares of bricks and mortar. So there you stick – your lordship and the courageous Corporation whom you conveyed to St. Michael's Mount in that famous special train and entertained at dinner. They haven't got the pluck to tackle their right noble host, so their constituents have to grovel.<sup>56</sup>

With such an outspoken attack on Lord St Levan and allegations of bribery and corruption against both him and the elected members Whitfield must have made some powerful enemies in the town.

With Whitfield at the helm the Housing Committee had already had plans drawn up by the Borough Surveyor showing how the excess cemetery land could be laid out<sup>57</sup> whilst the work at Ordnance Street continued and then proceeded to draw up more detailed plans. In February 1901 the Committee approved firm plans for seven acres of the site which was to consist of two-, three-, and four-roomed dwellings providing accommodations for 252 families. It was resolved that an application would be submitted to the Local Government Board to borrow £75,000 to pay for the scheme and also that the annual interest charges to pay for the scheme would be charged to the general rates and not to the eventual rents of the properties.<sup>58</sup> However, by this time Whitfield had been replaced as Housing Committee Chairman and the then Chairman,

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<sup>55</sup> H. Whitfield, *The Curse of Devonport as Illustrated in visits to its Slums and the Life of the Boy from the Back of Morice Square (Devonport: The Devon and Cornwall Newspaper Co., 1895)*, p.1.

<sup>56</sup> Whitfield, *The Curse of Devonport*, p.13.

<sup>57</sup> PWDRO, 1814/69, *Devonport Corporation Housing Committee Minutes*, 31 August 1899.

<sup>58</sup> PWDRO, 1814/69, *Devonport Corporation Housing Committee Minutes*, 5 February 1901.

Councillor Ford, resigned in protest. When the matter went to the Borough Council itself, the plan was voted down and Councillor Ford was invited to resume his position as Chairman of the Housing Committee, which he did.<sup>59</sup> The Council's decision not to proceed with the scheme triggered a storm of protest lasting more than a year, with resolutions from numerous open air meetings of the Three Towns Housing Association, the Devonport Government Labourers' Union, and the Oddfellows.<sup>60</sup> The public campaigning and protest at the Council's decision culminated in the presentation to the Council of the petition organized by the Devonport Branch of the Three Towns Housing Association as discussed in the previous chapter. The Committee's first response to the petition, along with another request from the Devonport Mercantile Association, was to write to Reverend Sealy explaining the Council's decision to sell the surplus land and point out that policies 'must be arrived at by decision of the Council.'<sup>61</sup> This was not the end of the matter and further resolutions and protests continued to be sent to both the Housing Committee and the Cemetery Surplus Lands Committee, including from both branches of the Associated Shipwrights' Society, and the Boilermakers' Society.<sup>62</sup> The protests appear to have caused the Borough Council to reconsider its decision and in January 1903, after nine months of concerted protest by working-class activists, resolved

That having regard to the need of housing accommodation at rentals within the means of the working classes the whole question of the disposal the Cemetery Surplus Land be reconsidered with a view to the erection on those lands by the Town Council of municipal dwellings for the working-classes ...<sup>63</sup>

Although pressure was kept up on the Council with deputations from the Three Towns Labour Representative Association, the Three Towns Housing Association and the

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<sup>59</sup> PWDRO, 1814/69, *Devonport Corporation Housing Committee Minutes*, 25 February 1901.

<sup>60</sup> PWDRO, 1814/69, *Devonport Corporation Housing Committee Minutes*, 25 September 1901; 30 October 1901; 11 November 1901.

<sup>61</sup> PWDRO, 1814/69, *Devonport Corporation Housing Committee Minutes*, 2 June 1902.

<sup>62</sup> PWDRO, 1814/43, *Devonport Corporation Housing Committee Minutes*, 24 September 1902; 1814/69, *Devonport Corporation Cemetery Surplus Lands Committee*, 21 November 1902.

<sup>63</sup> PWDRO, 1814/69, *Devonport Corporation Housing Committee Minutes*, 19 January 1903.

Three Towns Trade and Labour Council, matters drifted for some time before being dropped. All along the main sticking point appears to have been balancing the need for rents to be affordable for the working population against a determination that the costs should not become a charge against the rates.

Both Plymouth and Devonport Borough Councils, therefore, did make some progress in providing working-class housing but each was frustrated in its efforts in different ways and both had to balance conflicting demands and priorities. Even where a council had a sympathetic ruling administration, it could be difficult to make progress within the constraints of legislation and central control over the ability to borrow. Where the administration was less consistently sympathetic schemes could be abandoned in favour of economy and protecting ratepayers' interests. Even when the ruling administration was generally in favour of housing reform there were always those who objected to progress on the grounds of economy. Dr Williams was to write in 1900 'the small shop element was what he disliked'<sup>64</sup> and when measures he advocated failed to gain support, he would attempt to appeal to civic pride and to shame the Corporation into taking action, describing matters as 'a disgrace to a community of the size and importance of Plymouth.'<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Wohl, *Endangered Lives*, p.168.

<sup>65</sup> PWDRO, 1363/1, *Medical Officer of Health for Plymouth Annual Report 1893*.

## Conclusions

When the Three Towns were amalgamated as the Borough of Plymouth in 1914 it was a move long argued for by Grindley, Whitfield and others, and petitioned for by the Three Towns Housing Association and the Social Democratic Federation. It was viewed as a prerequisite to improvements in many areas of social policy, including the use of the poor laws, as well as the provision of working-class housing. It was, however, a measure which had been fiercely resisted by the Borough of Devonport which feared its interests would be subsumed by those of Plymouth. The amalgamation came, though, not as a result of any recognition that the civic administration of three towns, which had become one urban conglomeration, would be improved by a merger, but rather as an expediency caused by the outbreak of war. It was the expressed view of the Admiralty that at a time of war it was a military imperative that there was just one civil administration with which to liaise.

Throughout the period c.1870 to 1914, the Three Towns had grappled with their individual problems and each had attempted to find solutions. However, the net result was a few philanthropic tenement blocks, some houses built by the Plymouth Co-operative Society and the Devonport Dockyard Dwellings Company and a small amount of council housing. In the main house building during this period was carried out by speculative builders, and these houses were soon multi-occupied and themselves overcrowded. In 1911 Plymouth and Devonport were the two towns in England with populations of more than 50,000 where the greatest percentage of the population was living in apartments or subletting, with Plymouth at 83.4 per cent and Devonport at 90.6 per cent.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> M. J. Daunton, *House and Home in the Victorian City: Working Class Housing 1850-1914* (London: Edward Arnold, 1983), p.274.

Under the 1919 Addison Housing Act, Plymouth was recommended to clear nineteen areas of slum housing consisting of 1017 houses and home to 9685 people, which were deemed to be insanitary. After considerably protracted negotiations, the council purchased the Swilly estate from Lord St Levan and in 1921 building commenced. The Swilly housing estate was conceived as Plymouth's first garden suburb and was used to re-house both returning servicemen and those living in the condemned areas. By the end of 1924, 802 council houses had been built compared with 215 which had been constructed by private enterprise, overturning the previous situation where private building had been expected to solve the housing problem. By 1939, Plymouth City, as it was by then, had five thousand council houses and flats.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, overcrowding remained a serious problem. The Medical Officer of Health reported in 1938 that there were still almost fifteen thousand people living in overcrowded accommodation.<sup>3</sup>

This study of working-class housing has attempted to test the current understanding of the ways in which improvements were brought about in provincial towns as much previous work has a metropolitan focus. This local examination has shown that in three neighbouring towns, the variations of experiences and responses to the challenges they faced were diverse. They did not always adhere to the responses which might have been expected as a result of a reading of the London-centric historiography. It has also shown that towns could, and did, face many different challenges. Just as a metropolitan focused study will fail to understand the full range of issues and responses, so a study of one town will not be able to explore all the possible challenges, responses and outcomes. However, by examining the situation in the Three Towns this thesis has been able to make an important contribution to the current literature.

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<sup>2</sup> Gill, Plymouth, p. 245.

<sup>3</sup> PWDRO, 1363/24, *Medical Officer of Health for Plymouth Annual Report 1938*.



Local philanthropy made a contribution to housing provision in just one of the Three Towns. Nevertheless even within such a small sample, a range of motivations may be discerned. Philanthropic housing in other locations has been discussed in secondary literature previously, and issues of moral and religious improvement have been identified as they have within the Plymouth Workmen's Dwellings Company. None, however, appears to have identified motives similar to those apparently at work in the case of the Bates' Buildings in Plymouth. Philanthropy as a political expediency does not appear to have been identified in relation to the provision of workmen's or artizans' dwellings. Without more local studies of this subject it is not possible to ascertain how common such provision may have been.

The role of the landed aristocracy as manorial landlord has been considered here. This has shown that, in at least one area, manorial dominance continued into the twentieth century. The effect of this control was not just to hamper progress towards improvements but also to actively contribute to the decline in housing standards and sanitary conditions. It has also been seen that the local civic leaders found themselves unable to challenge this power in order to improve the condition of their citizens. The deference towards the manorial authorities which still prevailed was a serious impediment until beyond the Great War.

Notions of self-help in late-Victorian and Edwardian Britain have been considered and their role in the provision of housing by and for working-class people has been discussed. It has been seen that ideas of hard work, thrift, prudence and self-reliance which had been so important to the rising middle-classes were also critical to the working-class artizans as they attempted to take control of their own destiny and make provision for their own housing needs. Local voluntary societies such as mechanics' institutes, friendly societies and temperance societies which promoted improvement and

rational recreation were supplemented and complemented by housing organizations which espoused similar values. The philosophies of self-help can be seen very clearly to have been at work in the operations of both the Devonport Dockyard Dwellings Company and the Plymouth Co-operative Society. Although many similar companies are likely to have been at work in towns and cities throughout the country, their histories have as yet to be brought together to form a general study and gain an overall understanding of their influence in a national context.

Also of importance was the role of the local press. Local newspapers, sympathetic editors and, particularly, individual journalists were key to keeping housing conditions in the forefront of public attention. Space was given to reporting in great detail official reports and local moral campaigners' and civic leaders' inquiries. Whilst reports could sometimes become little more than a catalogue of insanitation and condemnation of the inhabitants' supposed moral failings, such bias became less evident towards the end of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth century. However, the 'slumming tour' which had become such a feature of urban life from the time of the first General Board of Health Enquiries continued to focus attention and receive widespread publicity.

The role of working-class women was not insignificant, although it has hitherto been little explored. As discussed in Chapter 1, women, as wives, mothers and homemakers were seen as the protector of their families' morals. This allowed them to venture into the public arena of the campaigns for better housing provision. They joined political organizations and housing associations, attended meetings, organised petitions and presented them at borough council meetings, inspected vacant borough council flats and made suggestions about why these homes were proving difficult to let. They also made recommendations about what actions could be taken to provide some remedies. Furthermore these were recommendations which were adopted by the Housing

Committee. These are all examples of the roles that women were beginning to adopt in the late-Victorian and Edwardian era, but this has usually been considered in relation to the middle classes. The Women's Co-operative Guilds also provided an opportunity for working-class women to become active in many fields which were previously closed to them. It allowed working-class women to reach beyond the purely private sphere of their own homes into the public sphere of campaigns for housing reform. Indeed their involvement in housing was actively encouraged by male co-operators. Housing, for themselves and for other working-class people, could be viewed as an extension of their domestic roles as homemakers and protectors of family life just as it was for middle-class women as philanthropists and members of visiting societies.

Importantly the inadequacy of the available legislative frameworks until the post 1919 period, which has been remarked upon in a national context, has been demonstrated at a local level in differing situations. Ultimately it has been impossible in the context of a study at a local level to determine conclusively which of the many available acts of parliament was used in every example of borough council action discussed. Perhaps the precise mechanism chosen is less important ultimately than whether councils found their 'muddling' way through, or whether they used the confusion as a reason to take no action.

Cross-cutting themes are also apparent in this study. In particular goals of moral improvement are seen throughout the discursive narratives of religious leaders, philanthropists, self-helpers, political campaigners, and municipal and social reformers. Improvements in living conditions, the elimination of overcrowding and the removal of dirt and waste were considered to be essential prerequisites to a range of objectives. Dependent on the standpoint of the campaigner these ultimate goals included moral and religious progress, the control of crime, temperance, self-improvement, better education

and political awareness. In effect the objectives were remarkably similar across a wide range of campaigners although the methods by which these objectives should be achieved were fiercely debated.

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