Housing for Rural Workers

Chudleigh

Helen Turnbull

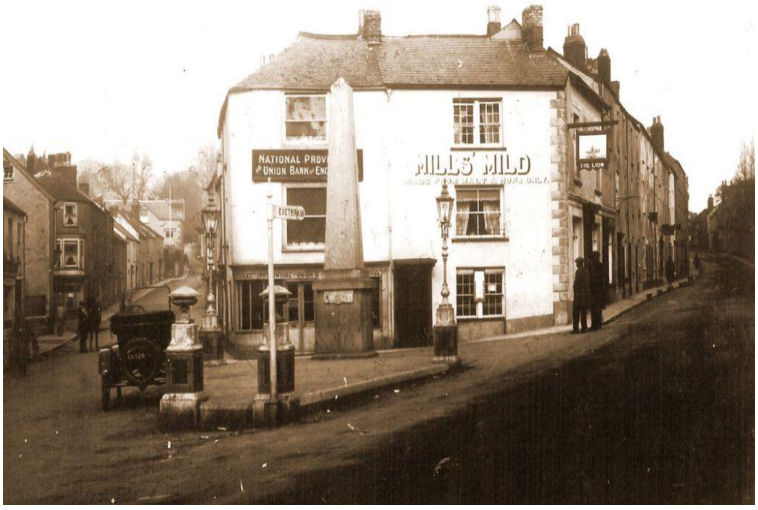

Figure 1: Conduit Square, courtesy of Chudleigh Amenity Society.

The population of Chudleigh in 1921 was 1,869. The working classes lived mainly in the central part of the town leading from Conduit Square. They were employed in agriculture, in trade, as servants or in the quarries, concrete works or tile factory situated in the Teign Valley, Chudleigh Knighton or Kingsteignton.

Housing conditions

The poorer wage earners lived either in dilapidated (often thatched) cottages, which were subsequently demolished, or in rooms within three-storey houses. Often these houses had no cupboards, nowhere to store food, nowhere to dry clothes and they didn't always have the luxury of a water supply. Many residents fetched water from one of the dipping places (known as the pot water places) situated at regular intervals along the principal streets.

Figure 2: Pot water place, courtesy of Andrew Turnbull.

Two examples of the shared housing are shown below. The first shows The Ship Hotel, in which one family rented a room on the top floor:

Figure 3: The Ship Hotel, courtesy of Chudleigh History Group.

The second shows three-storey houses in Old Exeter Street in which families lived in either two, three or four rooms, with no cupboards for food storage. Not all had outdoor areas for drying clothes.

Figure 4: Three-storey houses Old Exeter Street, courtesy of Chudleigh Amenity Society.

Some of the worst housing conditions were to be found in Woodway Street:

Figure 5: Woodway Street, Courtesy of Chudleigh Amenity Society.

Some housing had been closed under order of the Newton Abbot Rural District Council (NARDC), while others had been repaired under the NARDC's order and passed, but the cottages were very basic. While some cottages contained a living room and one bedroom, others were a combination of two cottages containing three bedrooms, two attics, a parlour, a large living room and a garden at the rear. The rent for the former cottage was 2s per week and the latter cost 10s per week (both with the landlord paying the rates). Some tenants 'farmed out' rooms in the larger cottages. Some of the houses in Old Exeter Street were also in bad repair. However, they had a kitchen with a range and a scullery and a common yard at

the rear, with outbuildings approached through double doors. The rental was 3s per week (with the landlord paying water rates only).[1]

The common complaints over housing accommodation were overcrowding, dilapidated conditions and lack of areas in which to store food or to air washing. [2] (Further details can be found in the Appendix.)

Housing supply in Chudleigh in the 1910s

Housing was in short supply even before the First World War. In May 1913, a discussion took place at a meeting of the Chudleigh Sanitary Committee (CSC) on the need for housing. The topic was in response to a request from the NARDC, who wished to ascertain if there was a housing shortage and if so, how many houses would be required and the availability of suitable building land for purchase. The CSC issued bills asking for the names of those interested in new housing and the rent they were prepared to pay. At this time, it was thought that new houses would be erected by private enterprise rather than by state building.[3] In June the same year, the Chudleigh Parochial Committee (CPC) reported to NARDC that it did not consider a housing scheme necessary but enclosed five applications from persons wishing to obtain homes.[4]

One year later, a Local Government Board enquiry was held at Chudleigh to consider a scheme proposed by the NARDC to borrow the sum of £3,000 to purchase land and erect dwellinghouses under Part III of the Housing of the Working Classes Act, 1890.[5] It was proposed to erect twelve council houses at £200 each with rents at 4s, 6d a week. The houses would contain a living room besides a scullery and outbuildings and three bedrooms.

Mr Horner, clerk to the NARDC, reported that the council had considered both the letter from the CPC stating that no further houses were needed together with the report of the Medical Officer of Health, Dr Mapleton, in which the doctor had stated that there were several cases of overcrowding and most of the houses had only two bedrooms with no accommodation for washing up or for storing food. He also reported that there were eight houses that he would like to close as unfit for habitation – and many others were on the margin. Details of the report had been given to the CPC. After deliberation, the NARDC instructed Mr Horner to advise the CPC that there was indeed a necessity to provide houses.[6]

There was a clear divergence of opinion between NARDC and CPC. Members of the NARDC were concerned on the grounds of public health, whereas the CPC was focused on the financial impact of the scheme, both upon the ability of future occupiers to pay the rents and the burden upon ratepayers. A member of the CPC argued that a list provided by the overseer showed that of the 216 manual labourers who occupied houses in Chudleigh, 63

[1] Devon Heritage Centre, Ref 547B/P/Box 90/3146, Sale Particulars, Chudleigh.
[2] Devon Heritage Centre, Ref R7365A/O/C/112, Housing File 1919–1931.
[3] *Exeter & Plymouth Gazette*, 6 May 1913, p. 10.
[4] *Western Times*, 29 May 1914, p. 7.
[5] *Western Times*, 24 July 1914, p. 9.
[6] *Exeter & Plymouth Gazette*, 29 May 1914, p. 7.

worked outside the town, and although he was not opposed to the housing scheme, he thought it was the duty of the other parishes to provide their workers with accommodation.[7]

Ten sites were considered by CPC and five were recommended for further investigation. There was one in Pottery Lane, two in Woodway Street, one in The Parade and one in Old Exeter Street. After deliberation and some dissent, a plot of land at the head of Woodway Street was purchased. The cost of the purchase of three-and-a-half acres of land was £600. It was proposed that two blocks of six houses be erected.[8]

The housing problem was again discussed at the monthly meeting of the CSC held in February 1915. There was little support for the new housing scheme. Mr Hunt did not think the time was right to turn people out of houses costing a rental of between £2 10s and £3 a year to make them live in houses at a rental of £12 a year. Mr Rogers, sanitary inspector, said the main industry was two or three miles away – concrete brickmaking. The wage of these men was 25–26s per week.[9]

Finally, it was agreed that a resolution be passed to the effect that it was not necessary at that time to proceed with the building scheme. The principal reasons given were the scarcity of skilled and unskilled labour, the increased cost of building materials, the greater charges for borrowed money, the number of vacant houses in the parish and the general increased financial burden placed on all classes.[10]

Housing supply after the First World War

The housing situation was even worse after the war. The causes for the shortage of labourer's cottages appeared to be threefold:

1) Many houses in existence were in such a bad state of repair that owners preferred to take them down rather than modernise and repair them because, as they were unable to raise the rents, the income would not cover the costs.

A case in point was a house in Old Exeter Street. The rain poured through the roof into the bedrooms, flowed down the stairs and left via the back door. The sanitary inspector informed the Chudleigh Parish Council that he had seen the owner who refused to do anything. The latter wrote a letter to the committee stating that the walls would not bear a new roof and the woodwork under the thatch was completely rotten. He asked that the council issue a closing order. Mr Whiteway, chairman of the CPC, moved that a closing order be issued since the council was the local health authority and it was its responsibility to ensure that 'people lived like human beings and not beasts'.

The problem was there was no alternative accommodation for the tenants. A discussion followed as to the viability of repairing the dilapidated house in question, but the sanitary

[7] Ibid.
[8] Devon Heritage Centre, Ref R7365A/O/C/92 Chudleigh Parochial Committee Minutes, 1912–1927.
[9] *Mid Devon Times*, 30 May 1914.
[10] *Exeter & Plymouth Gazette*, 8 February 1915, p. 4.

inspector stated that the cost to put the cottage and that next door (the roof of which had collapsed) in repair would be £500.[11]

2) CPC continued to argue that tenants of the dilapidated cottages could simply not afford the rents and rates payable on the new council houses. There can be some justification for this belief. Extracts from the *Journal of the National Union of Agricultural Workers* in 1922 describe the case of an agricultural worker living with his wife and four children. His wages were £2 8s a week, and his cost of living amounted to £2 6s 11d. He spent 5s 6d on rent, 3s on coal, £1 16s on groceries, 8d on insurance and 1s 9d on sundry items. The cost of clothes would be in addition.[12]

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3) CPC considered that the revised plans for the proposed new housing scheme, which it termed 'extravagant', would be costly and therefore an encumbrance on the parish rates.[13]

Discussions took place at various CPC meetings during 1919. In January 1919 it was suggested that the time was inopportune to build the houses as the cost of materials had more than doubled since the question was first proposed. The high costs involved would mean that rents would be so high that no one would want to live in the houses. It was therefore agreed that the building works be deferred.[14]

At the following meeting, Mr A Stooke advised the committee that the scheme was quite different from the one first suggested and that the cost in no case would be more than one penny in the pound per year on the rates. He suggested that sixteen houses rather than twelve should be built; eight at a time to give local contractors a chance to tender.[15] Mr Segar, the architect provided revised plans and it was then decided that the gardens be limited to fifteen yards.[16] In June 1919 a letter was sent from the CPC to the NARDC stating that it approved the revised plans submitted by the architect as a whole, but members were still of the opinion that the bathroom was not a necessity and would be a source of danger if not properly looked after, as well as the additional expense to the cost of the houses and the upkeep thereafter.[17]

The scheme stalled again in 1920 as a result of the high tenders submitted, which the CSC considered to be excessive and a burden on the parish.[18] In the following year, the CPC agreed that the commencement of the building project should be deferred. Because the housing scheme would not be carried out – or at any rate not for an indefinite period – the field purchased for the purpose would be sold at public auction. This was sanctioned by the Ministry of Health in May 1922.[19] The field was, in fact, sold at a loss of £150, which again caused criticism of the scheme, but the chairman of the CPC, writing in the *South Devon Weekly Express* in 1922 advised readers that the loss was borne by the Ministry of Health, not the ratepayers.

[11] *Western Times*, 29 October 1920, p. 2.
[12] The Land Worker, May 1922, p.5 to be found at <https:// mrc-catalogue.warwick.ac.uk/records/AAW/4/1/1/4/5 [accessed 29 January 2023].
[13] *Exeter & Plymouth Gazette*, 7 May 1920, p. 16.
[14] Devon Heritage Centre, Ref R7365A/O/C/92, Chudleigh Parochial Committee Minutes, 1912–1927.
[15] Ibid.
[16] Ibid.
[17] *Western Times*, 27 June 1919, p. 7.
[18] *Exeter & Plymouth Gazette*, 7 May 1920, p. 16.
[19] *Western Times*, 26 May 1922, p. 8.

The matter stagnated until 1925 when the scheme for eighteen houses was approved by the NARDC Housing Accommodation Committee. It was resolved that application be made to the Ministry of Health for the approval as eligible for subsidies under the Housing (Financial Provisions) Act 1924, at the rate fixed by the Act in an agricultural parish. A site was chosen for the new scheme at Pullin's Orchard on Old Exeter Street (see below). The Ministry of Health sanctioned the borrowing of £480 for the purchase of the land.[20]

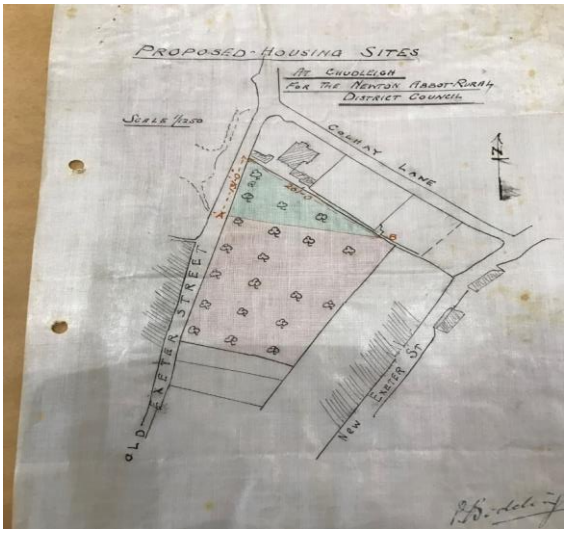

Figure 6: Pullin's Orchard site.

In September 1925, the suggested layout of Pullin's Orchard was agreed by NARDC. Twelve parlour houses and eight non-parlour houses would be built, rather than the eighteen houses originally planned. The plans were referred to the CPC for inspection. Eight houses per acre was suggested. It was resolved that the clerk apply for the sanction of the Minister of Health for the erection of the increased number of houses to be built on the grounds that most of the tenants did not require a large garden and, for those who did so, allotments were available in proximity.[21]

[20] Devon Heritage Centre, Ref R2365A/O/C/64, NARDC Housing Accommodation Committee, 1925–1929.
[21] Ibid.

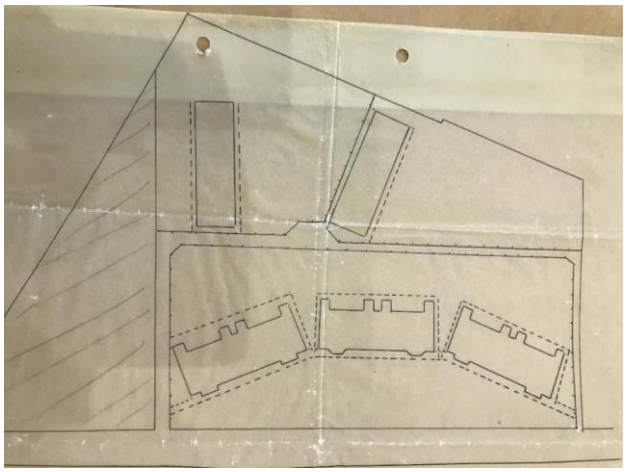

Figure 7: Site plans of Pullin's Orchard.

At a meeting of the NARDC in December 1925, a letter was read from the Ministry of Health suggesting that Mr Cox's tender for the building work to include roads and fences was a little high. It also suggested that ordinary slates be used for roofing and that porches, and bay windows on the first floor, be omitted. Also, that the bathroom in the non-parlour houses should be separated from the scullery by a partition. The CPC objected to the amended plans in relation to the bay windows and porches and the Ministry of Health subsequently complied with its request to retain them.[22] The extra cost incurred in providing separate bathrooms was also sanctioned together with the other costs involved, such as that of laying water mains and sewers.[23]

On the 13 October 1926, It was resolved that the committee of the NARDC fix the rents to be charged for the new houses as follows:

> Parlour houses, ends: 10s per week, exclusive of rates.
>
> Parlour houses, middle: 9s per week, exclusive of rates.
>
> Non-parlour houses: 8s per week, exclusive of rates.[24]

In spite of these elevated rents, there was no shortage of applicants. The rents were in fact comparable with those in Fore Street, where a small semi-detached house which contained two sitting rooms, an entrance hall, a kitchen, three bedrooms and a large attic – also with a small yard with lavatory and wash house at the rear of the property – was advertised at an estimated rental of £35 per year.

[22] Devon Heritage Centre, Ref R2365A/O/C/64, NARDC Housing Accommodation Committee, 1925–29.
[23] Devon Heritage Centre, Ref R2365A/O/C/92, Chudleigh Parochial Committee Minutes, 1912–27.
[23] Ibid.
[24] Devon Heritage Centre, Ref R2365A/O/C/64, NARDC Housing Accommodation Committee, 1925–29.

By November, 1926 the applications by four residents as tenants were accepted for the first block of houses to be completed. By the end of the year, another two residents were accepted. The occupants were mainly men on low incomes such as farm labourers, general labourers, clay workers and a blacksmith. They had been recommended by the CPC and it was agreed that the estate should be known as Pullins Terrace. Within a year of the first eight people moving into the houses, an appeal was lodged by the occupants to the NARDC against the high rates payable. The reason given was that their wages were too low to pay those rates.[25] It is estimated that the general rates payable by a farm labourer earning £1 16s a week, living in a mid-terrace parlour house would have been £3 15s a year.

By the end of October 1927, all the houses were occupied. There were six end-of-terrace parlour-type houses, six mid-terrace parlour-type houses, four mid-terrace non-parlour-type houses and four non-parlour-type end-terrace houses. The total amount due to Mr J. Cox for the erection of twenty houses at Pullins Terrace was £10,980 13s 8d.[26]

Figure 8: The back of one block of non-parlour-type terrace houses in Pullins Terrace.

No plans of the houses in Pullins Terrace are available, but the accommodation would have been similar to that of the houses constructed on the outskirts of the parish by Devon County Council as roadmen's houses (see overleaf). The plans show a bathroom and WC on the ground floor together with a scullery with a copper and a pantry, and a living room. Upstairs, there are three bedrooms with a linen cupboard in one bedroom and another cupboard in another bedroom.

[25] Devon Heritage Centre, Ref R2365A/O/C/92, Chudleigh Parochial Committee Minutes, 1912–27.
[26] Ibid.

Figure 9: Devon Bridges and Main Roads Committee proposed houses for roadmen at Waddon Brakes, Chudleigh.

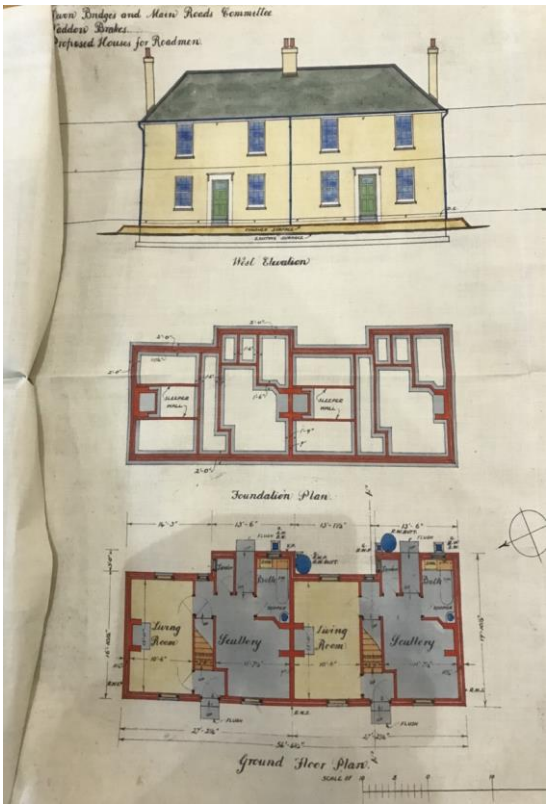

Figure 10: Plans for the proposed houses for roadmen at Waddon Brakes, Chudleigh.[27]

[27] Devon Heritage Centre, Ref 2380C/P308, Chudleigh Roadmen's Houses, 1928.

In response to the number of applicants wanting council housing, a second new housing development in Chudleigh was spawned. A letter was received by NARDC on 11 July 1928 from CPC applying for the erection of a further twenty houses and it was resolved that the Sites Committee be asked to view sites suggested by the CPC. After several sites had been considered, it was suggested that a field known as Lear's Meadow be purchased. The land was owned by Lord Clifford and CPC was informed by Sir George Hammick, agent, that the trustees of the Clifford Estate would be prepared to accept £600 for the field containing 5.586 acres. This was followed by a letter from the district valuer who fixed the value of the land at the sum of £600. It was resolved that the committee recommend NARDC to apply for the sanction of the Minister of Health to the borrowing of £620 for the purchase of the site and costs.[28] On 6 March 1929 approval was received from the Ministry of Health.

Mr Luxton, the surveyor brought forward proposals at the NARDC meeting for the construction of eighteen houses in three blocks of six.[29] Tenders were advertised. In April 1929, a contract with Messrs Williams and Bishop of Buckfastleigh in the sum of £7,200 was signed for the erection of the houses, together with the sum of £130 for fencing works.[30] Messrs Heath Brothers were awarded the contract for the construction of sewers etc. in the sum of £408.[31] The following month, Mr E Cullman agreed to undertake the extension of the Chudleigh water main for the new housing site.[32] The houses are known as Mount Pleasant.

Figure 11: An end-of-terrace house in Mount Pleasant.

[28] *Exeter & Plymouth Gazette*, 24 January 1929, p. 5.
[29] Devon Heritage Centre, Ref R7365A/O/C/92 Chudleigh Parochial Committee Minutes, 1912.
[30] Devon Heritage Centre, Ref R2365A/O/C/64, NARDC Housing Accommodation Committee, 1925–1929.
[31] *Exeter & Plymouth Gazette*, 28 March 1929, p. 16.
[32] Devon Heritage Centre, Ref R2365A/O/C/2A, Newton Abbot RDC Minutes, 1927–31.

CPC recommended eighteen applicants as tenants. The applicants were chosen on merit and those who had joined the armed forces during the war were looked upon favourably.[33] However, most of the applicants would be paying double the amount on rentals at the new properties.

The building schemes had taken a long time to materialise and certainly the main reason was because of financial constraints. The 1924 Housing Act was perhaps the catalyst for progress. These developments were to be followed over the next few years by a number of others. In the next decade, numerous thatched cottages were demolished, the dusty roads were covered with tarmac and a healthier environment began to emerge.

[33] Devon Heritage Centre, Ref R7356A/O/C/64 Newton Abbot RDC Housing Accommodation Committee Minutes, 1925–29.

Appendix 1: Examples of poor housing conditions in Chudleigh

(a) Overcrowding

The Medical Officer of Health added an attachment to a couple's application for the acquisition of a council house which read:

The present house is too small, and they have been told by the Doctor that it is not healthy for the children. The couple have a girl who is very frail, a small, one and a half year old, and a baby of six months. There are 2 rooms (one is very small and without a window), and the kitchen which is small. There is no washhouse or larder. These tenants are crowded and badly in need of better accommodation. Dated 26.11.1928.

A journeyman residing in two rooms within a house with his wife and seven children, whose ages range from two to twenty-one.

A family with only two small bedrooms and one living kitchen. There were four children sleeping in one small room, boys and girls. It was thought to be indecent to have boys sleeping in the same room as girls, as they were big boys and girls.

Another family of three were living in one room only on the top floor of a house in which to sleep, cook and do everything.

One woman, recently confined, was living with a grown-up son and daughter and five children. This family lived in a house with only two bedrooms.

One of the occupiers of the accommodation was a single brother in the Navy who had no other home to go to, so the applicant required an extra bedroom for his brother when on leave.

(b) Poor state of repair

The kitchen was very wet and in need of repair. Everything had to be done in the kitchen as there was no place outside. The home was not really fit for young children.

The cottage was in a very bad condition; in the summer there was no water supply and the family had lived there for over twenty years without a stove.

The house was very damp, it had a very bad smoky chimney in the kitchen and bad light downstairs. The wife suffered from ill health; she suffered from deafness, cataracts and had been told she needed to be where there was more air. The house was closed-in and very dark. Two tenants shared the W.C. and six tenants shared one tap.

The house was in a very bad state of repair and let the rain in, which resulted in a very wet kitchen.

The house was in bad repair with no drying area.[34]

[34] Devon Heritage Centre, Chudleigh Housing File, R2365A/O/C/112

(c) Residents under notice to quit

A war widow living in a tied cottage on the Whiteway Estate was given notice to quit. Prior to the war, her husband had been a keeper on the estate. The matter went to court and the judge ruled that although the widow had nowhere to move to, the applicant, Mr E Farquhar, was entitled to the rooms, and that he, the judge, had no jurisdiction to take hardship into consideration. He allowed the respondent (the widow) to remain in possession for six weeks.[35]

Following a 'notice to repair' issued by the local authority, the owner of cottages in Old Exeter Street wrote that he had given his tenants notice to quit and was accepting no rent from them as he did not intend keeping the cottages as dwellinghouses.[36]

[35] *Western Times*, 18 November 1921, p. 8.
[36] *Western Morning News*, 27 March 1919, p. 8.