Ernesettle Camp, Plymouth

Homes *Not* Fit For Heroes

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On returning home from the Great War, many of Plymouth's ex-servicemen may well have had Lloyd George's famous speech in their minds when applying for a council house. On 24 November 1918, Prime Minister David Lloyd George gave a speech in Wolverhampton, promising to make Britain a fit country for heroes to live in. He called for a better standard of homes for British people, describing the state of housing in Britain as 'a national concern'.

> You cannot bring up children in slum conditions. Slums are not intended for the men who have won this Great War. I am told a good many of them after living an open-air life, do not want to return to the closer atmosphere of the workshop the factory or the counter. For those who desire to go on the land small-holdings should be provided for them, and they ought to be trained for them. Others might prefer allotments or a house and a large garden where they can earn their living in addition. There should be a special grant for the equipment of the holding and for these heroic men the cost of the scheme must be provided. Any housing schemes have to be outside of the towns, as the only chance to get land is there. Otherwise, there will be another set of slums and we do not want that.[1]

What Lloyd George was looking for was a scheme for resettling returned soldiers and sailors. Following his speech, in 1919 an act often known as the 'Addison Act' (after its author, Dr Christopher Addison, the Minister of Health) was introduced. This required local authorities to provide working-class housing with government subsidies. Although this legislation was well-meaning and quite well thought through, it was hampered by two serious problems: the lack of funds and the extreme shortage in the building industry of skilled manpower and materials.

So, how did Plymouth solve her returning ex-servicemen's housing problem? By moving them out of Plymouth borough in 1920 into the borough of Plympton Rural District Council (RDC) and using an ex-army camp at Ernesettle. This made the tenants Plympton RDC's responsibility, which meant that in future they were not eligible for Plymouth council houses.

Like other cities, Plymouth had a major housing crisis in the 1920s, when there were many slums and inadequate housing. Dr Bushnell, Plymouth's Tuberculosis Officer, writing in the *Western Morning News* in 1923 had what he believed was the perfect solution. 'It is no use demolishing slums unless you provide accommodation for the displaced families. You have had the remedy under your eyes since Armistice-day, and I have continually drawn attention to it.'[2] He was writing about the abandoned post-war army camps:

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[1] *Western Morning News,* 10 November 1926.

[2] *Western Morning News*, 12 March 1923.

> These war-time camps could have been made the nuclei of garden suburbs all round Plymouth. Ernesettle has been let to 42 families for nearly two years by the War-Office and I have visited this camp on many occasions and believe me it is appreciated by those who live there.
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> As a man said to me yesterday, "You should see what the children eat here. Your food bills are big, but your doctors' bills light. We pay £30 per annum, a little under 12s a week and this includes rates and taxes, the actual rent being 7s 6d a week."[3]

For this, Dr Bushnell wrote,

> … they get a decent five-roomed army hut and a lovely view and pure air and water. It has been going about two years and I have patients from the slums who thrive there. It has been a most successful experiment and there are many equally successful ones elsewhere.[4]

In 1920, Plymouth military authorities gave permission for Plymouth's ex-servicemen and their families to occupy the army huts at Ernesettle Camp, which were to be converted into temporary dwelling houses. In November 1920 the *Western Morning News* reporter visited the camp, interviewing the tenants giving a description of the living conditions:

> The camp had been converted into a prosperous-looking village and promises to be a veritable garden city. All the amenities of rural life are close at hand, the situation with views of river and downs is ideal, and from a health point of view it would be difficult to improve upon it. As one tenant remarked, "We are quite happy here and we hope we shall be allowed to stay. The rent is 7s 6d a week, we would never get this accommodation elsewhere for the rent."
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> Watercolours, oil paintings and framed photographs adorn the rooms of almost every household; while the walls have either been curtained, distempered, or papered according to the taste of the occupants. Linoleum or carpets cover the floor. Rooms have been partitioned with curtains or hessian. The heating is central by means of slow combustion stoves and gas has been laid on for cooking and lighting. Each hut is detached and a few of the more enterprising have already turned their attention to cultivating an allotment for which there is ample ground. [5]

The *Western Morning News* reporter interviewed Mr Frank Hazael, a retired Metropolitan Police sergeant and a squadron quartermaster sergeant during the war. He was living in the huts with his wife and nine of his twelve children and had spent between £70 and £80 in what he called 'necessary alterations':

> Immediately inside Mr Hazel's kitchen, larger than that of the average workman's dwelling he has fitted it with many conveniences. Behind is the sitting-room comfortably furnished. A feature is an imitation fireplace, with over-mantel. In the centre of the room is the stove, around which Mr Hazael has built a substantial fireguard. The remainder of the hut is divided into three bedrooms, with a lumber-room at the extreme end. The whole of the interior, walls, ceilings and rafters have been white-washed and distempered. [6]

The final paragraph described:

> … the camp cookhouse, a central laundry, each hut being allotted a particular wash-day. Butchers, bakers and other tradesmen visit the camp daily and it is seldom necessary to go

[3] *Western Morning News*, 12 March 1923.
[4] Ibid.
[5] *Western Morning News*, 13 November 1920.
[6] Ibid.

> outside to make purchases. The general arrangements are made by a caretaker, Mr J. Carrigan, a disabled soldier, who with hisw wife and two children find life at Ernesettle very agreeable. There is a total of 41 huts, and at present 39 are occupied.[7]

This would have been just what Lloyd George ordered:

> By 1922, Dr Addison's Housing Act – although a highly significant step forward in housing provision – was seen in the Western Morning News 'Notes of the Day' as artificial and unnatural, being inspired by that impossible idealism of making England 'a home fit for heroes.'[8]

There were no council houses for many working-class families. The Ernesettle Camp, which was supposed to be a short-term measure, still had their 41 huts and families had not been given alternative accommodation.

During 1926 and 1927 there were letters in the newspapers criticising Plympton District Council for not rehoming these families. The huts were past their pristine condition as the Admiralty had never done any repairs or maintained the huts.

In July 1926, Plymouth Housing Committee declined to receive a deputation from Ernesettle Camp, St Budeaux, regarding the provision of housing accommodation in the borough. Their reasoning was that these families were no longer their responsibility as they had crossed the borough to Plympton RDC in 1920 and so were Plympton RDC's responsibility.

Meanwhile, the Plympton RDC had acquired a building site at Honicknowle and was proceeding with a housing scheme there. The council was asked that if Ernesettle tenants were dispossessed, they would presumably have an opportunity of transferring to Honicknowle.

On 1 March 1927, the *Western Morning News* reported that 200 people (30 large families – when the tenants were originally selected, those with large families were given preference but this factor now handicapped them in their search for other houses) were living at the Ernesettle Camp in twelve-year-old army huts, which were rotting over their heads.

One of their reporters who investigated the camp:

> … found that the wood of many of the huts is rotten. Through the ill-constructed windows and the corrugated iron roofs, water trickles upon the tenants' scanty furniture. Rafters have been covered with newspapers, canvas and broken match-boarding, anything to counteract the effects of twelve years' exposure to the weather in one of the bleakest parts of the Plymouth district.[9]

Originally 380 people moved from Plymouth in 1920 and the army huts then were in good weather-defying condition. Year by year, the huts had fallen falling into disrepair. The tenants believed it was useless to patch them and all the tenants had been given notice to quit by 31 March, but couldn't go as they had been unable to find suitable alternative accommodation.

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[7] *Western Morning News*, 13 November 1920.
[8] *Western Morning News*, 14 March 1922.
[9] *Western Morning News*, 1 March 1927.

Because the camp was outside the borough boundary, they were not eligible as applicants for Corporation houses and Plympton RDC would not give them any assistance:

> Our weekly rent is 5s 6d but 3d is payable for water, 3d for the removal of refuse, and 1s for a caretaker, making a total of 7s per week for a hut, the superficial area of which is 1,200 square feet. Our complaint is against our treatment by Plympton Rural Council who have done nothing whatever for us. The roads between the huts are unlighted, bad falls are frequent and we have to pay for water and for refuse removal. We came out of Plymouth at a time of acute housing shortage, and now that houses are being built in the borough we cannot get back because they tell us we are outside the boundary, and our names cannot be placed.[10]

The plight of the Ernesettle Camp families brought some residents of Plymouth and nearby areas writing to the newspaper to criticise Plympton RDC for their lack of support. Mr H. G. Murdoch, who was a member of Plympton RDC, responded:

> These erections were Army huts and never intended for dwelling houses. True, the land is in Plympton area, but we had no control over their erection. The War Office is a power beyond us. When they were no longer needed as Army huts, and owing to the scarcity of houses in Plymouth, the War Office let them to over-crowded families, the bulk, if not all of them, being workers in the Dockyard, but this should not throw the onus on Plympton to build and provide them with houses.[11]

A couple of days later, Frank Fisher, a resident in Ernesettle Huts, responded to Mr Murdoch's letter:

> I think Mr Murdoch is a little off the mark to throw cold water on any recognition that the tenants of Ernesettle Camp may derive from any publicity. I feel quite sure that if Mr Murdoch had only spent one winter at Ernesettle Camp, St Budeaux, most probably he would have painted Plympton red.
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> I would point out to Mr Murdoch that these huts were let, as temporary dwellings, through the kindness of Captain Ward, and I know he interviewed the Plympton Council, and that Ernesettle Camp was accepted by them as temporary dwellings and we lived here free of rates for some time until Plympton woke up and issued rate demands, and then summonses for payment of arrears from the date of occupation. The arrears being paid, the Government recognised the fact that the rents, including rates, were rather high, stepped into the breach, and have paid rates to Plympton ever since on our behalf to the extent of nearly £1,000 during the past 6½ years.[12]

In 1928 Frank Fisher and his family were living at 10 Woodland Villas, Plympton Rural District Council House, which was built in 1927.

In March the newspaper reported again on the plight of the Ernesettle Camp residents, putting the blame solely on Plympton RDC and saying that the War Department was anxious that alternative housing should be provided for the 200 people who lived in the camp, realising that the huts were not in a habitable condition. In January 1926, they said that Plympton RDC were informed that the huts were unfit for human habitation and were asked to consider

[10] *Western Morning News*, 1 March 1927.
[11] *Western Morning News*, 5 March 1927.
[12] *Western Morning News*, 8 March 1927.

measures for finding alternative accommodation for the residents. They were hoping that the new housing being built by Plympton RDC would be used for these people.

Mr Percy Loosemore, clerk of the Plympton RDC had obviously had enough criticism and wanted to clear the council's name. In March 1927 he wrote a letter setting out the facts of the case:

> When we gave approval to the use of the huts by homeless ex-servicemen it was understood & agreed by the War Department that the hutments would be regarded as temporary buildings. The War Dept wanted to keep the original war-time sanitation otherwise they would have been requested to carry out a proper system of drainage. In the circumstances the Council hardly deserve censure, as it was not strictly a case in which they would be required to exercise their powers under the housing Act by providing permanent dwellings for those about to be dispossessed. Nonetheless the Council had already decided to erect 38 dwelling houses at St Budeaux, in the vicinity of those huts, primarily with the object of providing accommodation for tenants from Ernesettle Camp.
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> I find upwards of £700 per annum has been the gross amount of the rents paid to the War Department in respect of these huts, and during the period they were in a good state of repair it was the duty of the War Department to have made provision out of the relatively heavy rents charged to cover the cost of maintenance and repair. Rents paid to the War Department since 1920 have amounted to more than double the market value of the huts themselves, so it is difficult to reconcile this fact with the suggestion of pure philanthropy on the part of the War Department. Instead of commending the action of them in this matter, it seems to me that the proper course to take is to make representation to them with a view of some of the profit received by them being now applied in putting the huts in a substantial state of repair.[13]

Mr Loosemore said he had been interested in the articles and letters on the subject of Ernesettle Camp in the Western Morning News and the remarks of one writer who stated that the camp came within the jurisdiction of Plympton RDC, and, according to him nothing had been done for them and that no self-respecting District Council could allow things to remain as they are after the publicity the matter had received.

> It is quite obvious to me that the person responsible for these observations had not taken the trouble to ascertain the facts in connection with the establishment and management of this camp, neither has he ascertained what steps my Council have taken to improve the housing conditions in that part of their district. The other correspondence having preference to the rates paid in respect of these properties has a somewhat limited knowledge as to the application of rates levied in a rural district as distinct from a county borough, and, from the letter which appeared over the name of a certain tenant at Ernesettle Camp, it would appear that he is unaware of the position in regard to the meaning of temporary buildings, and under a misapprehension as to the generosity of the War Department.
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> I recently observed that Councillor Webb, chairman of Plymouth Housing Committee, was lamenting the fact that the population of the borough was less than in 1911, and may I suggest to him that he has now a glorious opportunity of retrieving some of his lost sheep.[14]

In 1928 the majority of the tenants had moved out of the Ernesettle Camp into their new houses at Woodland Villas, St Budeaux, although there were a few families left. In June 1929,

[13] *Western Morning News*, 14 March 1927.
[14] Ibid.

Plympton Rural Council Housing Committee inspected the hutments. Mr Glover condemned the deplorable conditions reporting that:

> One woman had eight children under nine years, and another had six. The families were living in houses worse than his pigs lived in. He moved that the Council should endeavour to get the War Department to allow them to have the hut used as a music-hall or failing that to try and purchase a piece of land on which three bungalows could be erected.
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> Mr E.H.T. Lewis said it was a crying shame the War Office was taking rent from those poor people. The chairman said he also visited the camp and it was disgusting to think anybody should live in the huts.[15]

The question of what to do with the remaining few tenants was put to the First Lord of the Admiralty in the House of Commons by Mr J. J. H. Moses in May 1930. His answer was that there was no longer any camp at Ernesettle but four old army huts that had now been made wind- and watertight, and that the tenants had been warned to find other accommodation, which was a matter for the Plympton RDC.

The last three tenants at Ernesettle Camp appeared before the Plymouth Magistrates Court on 8 May 1931.

> Three applications for warrants of ejectment in respect of huts at Ernesettle Camp, St Budeaux were heard by Plymouth Magistrates. Mr W. E. J. Major appearing on behalf of the owner, Mr Thomas Owen Passmore, said that certain property belonging to the Crown, and in the occupation of his Majesty's Secretary of State for War, had been sold to applicant. The point had never been raised in that court before, but within the last few weeks a decision had been given in the Divisional Court that the Crown was not bound by the Rent Restriction Acts, and that Crown tenants had no protection under those Acts. The decision went further than that, and decided that when the Crown had sold property to private individuals the Acts also did not apply.
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> Mr Major stated that applicant wanted one hut to live in himself and the others for agricultural purposes or demolition to make room for gardens. The tenants were under a weekly agreement at a rental of 5s 6d ech a week.
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> Respondents were Mr and Mrs Morgan, No 2 hut; Mr and Mrs Tate, No 3 hut and Mrs Crago, No 1 hut who stated that they found difficulty in obtaining other accommodastion because of their large families. In the circumstances the Bench made an order for possession in 28 days against Mr and Mrs Tate, but in respect of the others adjourned the cases for four weeks, at the end of which time they intimated they would make orders for possession in 28 days. That would give the tenants an opportunity of finding other accommodation.[16]

While Plympton RDC were providing housing in 1928 for the tenants of the Ernesettle Camp, St Budeaux, this meant that people who lived in St Budeaux for many years and desperate for housing were not given council houses in the 1920s

[15] *Western Morning News*, 15 June 1929.
[16] *Western Morning News*, 8 May 1931.