House Building in Newton St Cyres in the 1920s

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Although there had been a substantial decline in the population of the parish by 1921, as the following figures show, it seems that many of the small cob cottages had been allowed to decay. Both lead and manganese mining during the first years of the nineteenth century eventually ceased to be profitable, while, at the same time, agriculture was in decline due to foreign imports. The cottages had, undoubtedly, been very overcrowded. The coming of the railways with a good local station would also have had an effect. A lack of upkeep during the 1914–18 war years added to the housing problems.

1851	1,144
1901	700
1921	610

Table 1: Population figures for 1851, 1901 and 1921.

There was a slow increase in the population after 1921. The 1911 census shows families, like that of John and Elisja Southcott, living in three rooms with seven children at home (there were two older children).

Newton St Cyres parish is a collection of hamlets: Langford, Norton, Sweetham, Smallbrook, Half Moon and the central village of Newton, as shown in Figure 1.

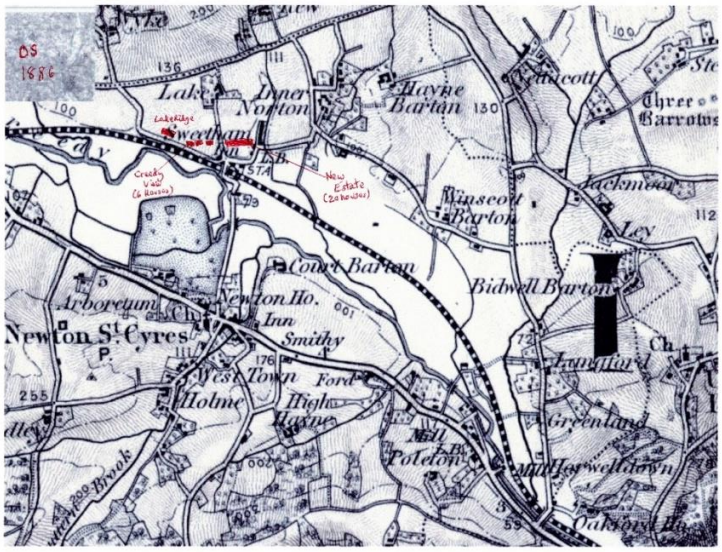

Figure 1: 1886 Ordnance Survey map of the parish of Newton St Cyres.

During the 1920s, dwellings all had their own arrangements for water supply, drainage and sewage disposal. Mains electricity was connected in 1927, but the current was not switched on for private houses until the early 1930s (see p. 9). Mains water came to the village during the 1950s, and it was the early 1960s before there was a comprehensive sewage scheme.

I can only identify six private properties definitely built in the 1920s. Around the turn of the twentieth century, several old farmhouses had been replaced by brick ones and about five brick houses were built on the Langford Road.

Figure 2: 1906 map of the Newton St. Cyres area.

In the 1920s, five houses were also built in lower Sand Down Lane, which were all finished around 1927. In January 1925 two fields of glebe had been auctioned by Husseys at the Crown and Sceptre – they were two freehold pasture fields. After spirited competition, they were sold to Mr McGahey, on behalf of clients Dunn and Baker, for £1,600.

At the time, there was a prominent family of brothers living in the village – mostly farmers, named Batting. They appeared to have an overwhelming desire to look down upon the Quickes (local 'squires').

Charles Batting built Glebeland House, a substantial red-brick house overlooking Newton House in the centre of the village. Incidentally, his brother Tom Batting, formerly tenant of Woodley Farm,

was living there when he died in 1930. This house backs onto the Lane.

The Battings also had Glebeland Villas built at the same time, much nearer the busy main road (about 100 metres away). They are two attractive semi-detached cottages, brick built and sideways to the Lane. It would seem that builders attempted, where possible, to face houses to the south-east, south or south-west. A further explanation may be that the main road in Newton St Cyres was not tarred until 1924, therefore dust and mud would have been a problem on the lanes.

Figure 3: Glebeland House, 2022.

Figure 4: Glebeland Villas, c. 1960.

Water supply to these three dwellings was from a well at the foot of their deeply sloping fields, many feet and some distance below. There was a pumping station halfway up to the site of an

elevated storage tank, itself further up the hill to the south side of Glebeland House. Presumably, each property had its own septic tank.

Figure 5: Glebeland water tank, in use until the 1990s.
(OS 1906 map gives the site of well and water storage.)

A house of similar design to Glebeland House was also built by the Battings across the other side of the village in Sweetham, past the Beer Engine. This is now named Lake Ridge. It is on a high bank and overlooks Newton House from the north. The present owner was unable to give the date of building, but it seems very likely to have also been built during the 1920s.

The other two houses are on the east side of Sand Down Lane and were both built by the county council.

The School House was built for the headmaster of the then adjacent Board School (now in the process of demolition), and fronts the main road. It is a house of narrow depth, as building was delayed by restrictions on the site due to the road and the requirements of the land sale (Quickes). It is a rendered, painted property and bears the date 1927 above the front door.

The Police House, fronting the Lane, was most probably built at the same time. It is of a pattern seen around the county. It also is rendered and painted. Initially, the county had wished to reserve one of the new council houses to be built at Sweetham, however the parish council insisted the village policeman must live near the busy through road to North Devon, which caused the villagers much aggravation.

The council houses

It seems there were some old cottages somewhere in the village owned by the council – in this case, the Crediton Rural District Council (RDC). In February 1927, Crediton RDC considered their

repair. The floor of one house was affected by dry rot, and slates had fallen off the roofs of others. It appeared that these cottages had been used to house a ‘surplus’ from Exeter. Landowners had found that this type of property did not pay, which was how Crediton RDC came to have them. They decided to proceed no further.

There were four cottages, some remains of which may be seen to the south of West Town between West Holme and Bakers. Could these have been the houses owned by the council?

Council houses at Sweetham

In February 1921, at a meeting of Crediton RDC Housing Department, Tom Batting (Newton St Cyres representative) described the delay in producing houses as scandalous. The houses were proving so costly that the number had to be reduced to the barest need.

In October 1921 the letting of a new cottage near the station was discussed. There were two applicants and the rent was expected to be about 8s 6d a week. Just which or where this cottage was is uncertain. However, there are six council houses to the west of the lane to Lake Farm (Creedy View), which are of a different design and may have been built first. They are three pairs of semis and they all have an unusually long sloping roof to the north. They back onto a service road and front their own long gardens. There is good space between the pairs.

Figure 6: Creedy View (from a family album). The date is given as 1925.

From the newspaper report of the Crediton RDC meeting in October 1923, it would seem that the main block of land was still to be acquired. Applications had been made in Newton St Cyres for building sites. It was suggested that the RDC should communicate with the Ecclesiastical Commissioners, as the Church owned a considerable area north of the River Creedy. This appears

to have come to a successful conclusion as a strip of land to the south of Lake Farm must have been acquired.

During the next six years or so, sixteen houses were built to the east of the lane to Lake Farm and named New Estate. They were built in one row, again facing south and fronting long gardens. The service road ran behind them. Next to the farm lane there was already a pair of semis which were farm cottages for Lake Farm. Then came a plot set aside for the raised water storage tower to service the council houses, followed by a pair of semis, three terraces each with four properties and and finally at the east end another pair of semis. Their final release to tenants was quite slow and took place over a period, possibly continuing after 1930. Numbering was from the east. The well was in the garden of number 1 (this has been sold as a separate building site and now has a modern house) and by the early 1930s a settling and filtration tank was installed in the bottom of the garden of number 2 for the sewage. It seems likely building started from the east of the site *(Chris Southcott)*.

Figure 7: Towards the west end of New Estate.

The next press reference was from October 1926 when Mr Vicary of Smallbrook had his tender of 16s 6d accepted by Crediton RDC for the painting of a council house. Meanwhile there was discussion within the village on the placing of the toilets in the new houses. They were to be included within the house footprint on the ground floor, but there was consternation that unpleasant smells may reach into the living areas. I understand from Chris Southcott, who grew up living there, that a rather less than satisfactory compromise was reached. This was that the toilets were included within the house, but with no interconnecting door and they could only be accessed by going outside. Apparently the residents erected themselves some individual form of shelter from the weather, but this was no protection against freezing, and things were especially bad during the winter of 1962–63. It was thought that it was not until the 1980s that this system was changed. Bathrooms were downstairs until this time.

Figure 8: John and Eliza Southcott who were the first tenants of 3 New Estate. Photograph taken outside the house in about 1926, soon after it was occupied. Supplied by grandson Chris Southcott, who still lives in Sweetham.

Mains electricity came through the village on its way to Crediton in 1927. In the December of that year, an Exeter company sought permission from Crediton RDC to erect poles ready to supply some houses in Newton St Cyres. The proposal was to take electricity from the mains near the old school, down into the village and on to the council's cottages and to other property. Permission was granted. The previous month, the tenants had expressed the desire to be connected and have electric light installed. They were allowed to have their homes wired and a clause was inserted in their tenancy agreements that future tenants may take the lighting over at valuation.

However, it appears from two further press entries that it would be another six years before the current was switched on. In 1929 Crediton Urban District Council received a circular from the electricity commissioners to the effect that they could receive a fifty percent grant from the Unemployed Grants Committee for extensions of their undertakings. Unfortunately for the many householders of Newton who were hoping to be connected, this grant was for mains only.

It was not until the end of November 1933 that the current was switched on simultaneously to light up the three villages of Stoke Canon, Broadclyst and Newton St Cyres. Broadclyst had had gas but Newton went from paraffin lamps to electricity.

Meanwhile, in August 1927 Crediton RDC had many letters from prospective tenants in Bow and from Newton St Cyres Parish Council to the effect that the rents were just too high for agricultural workers. The chairman, J. F. Shelley, also felt the rents were wrong and a previous decision was rescinded. The clerk agreed to prepare an estimate of what the total rents would amount to.

The Newton St Cyres council houses seem to have been let over a period of time, most likely as they were finished. In December 1929, applications for three vacant houses were approved. In April

1930 a stove cracked beyond repair the very first time it was lit. It seems that this had happened frequently in Morchard Bishop. The stove in Newton was replaced. In February 1933 tenders were invited for painting council houses, six external and fifteen internal. Presumably in some cases this was a repeat job.

The water supply appears to have been pumped from the well into a raised storage tank from early on in the estate's development. The windmill can just be seen in the background of the photo of the Southcott couple, who moved into number 3. Just what the sanitary arrangements were for the earlier residents, we do not know. In February 1932 the RDC decided to provide an additional water tank of 1,000 gallons.

Following the supply of mains water to the village in the 1950s the water tower and its storage tanks became redundant leaving the space for two more semidetached houses to be built in the 1960s.

In February 1929, Crediton RDC advertised for tenders for the construction of a septic tank and filter bed and also water closets for the council houses in Newton St Cyres. The drainage was into a field opposite and later proved unsatisfactory. New Estate was to have its own sewage system.

The water situation is made clearer by an advertisement in *The Western Times*:[1]

> CREDITON RURAL DISTRICT COUNCIL to water engineers
>
> 1 Dismantle windmill and pump at Newton St Cyres and re-erect at Wembworthy
>
> 2 At Newton St Cyres council houses provide and fix in well, one automatic deep well direct coupled Electric Pumping Set, necessary wiring and automatic floats on storage tanks, providing and fixing 16 flushing cisterns to WCs. Taps over sinks, stop cocks, etc, connections to service pipes and storage tanks.
>
> Tenders by 10th March 1938.

Many thanks to Chris Southcott who now lives in one of the old cottages at Sweetham. His grandparents lived in number 3 and his parents in number 8 New Estate.

[1] *Western Times*, 25 February 1938.