Housing in Buckfastleigh in the 1920s

Anne Goulborn, The Valiant Soldier, Buckfastleigh

In 1919 Dr Williams, the Medical Officer for Health (MOH)[1] stated that there was a shortage of 50 homes in Buckfast and Buckfastleigh. Of the 936 working-class homes that existed, only 60 had more than two bedrooms. The medieval pattern of housing – which still exists in Fore Street (lower town) and Market Street (upper town) – consisted of terraced cottages with entrances to courts behind. The quality of the housing, he reported, however, was quite good; the main problems being overcrowding and, in some cases, poor ventilation, mostly in some of the courts.

Dr Williams was an advocate of public housing, supporting the council's proposals for building and the plans that had been drawn up for the Abbey Meadow site in Buckfast. There was discussion about whether the houses should be 'parlour' or 'non-parlour' houses, the former had two living rooms downstairs (one of the arguments for the former was that they could be bedrooms for wounded servicemen).

In September 1917, Buckfastleigh Urban District Council (BUDC) had received a circular from the local government board about plans to build working-class accommodation after the war – 'homes fit for heroes'. The council replied that they were prepared to build some houses, provided the board would 'make a substantial free grant towards the same'.

In October 1918, the clerk to BUDC, Mr Windeatt, reported back from a housing conference in Exeter. The government was going to pay 75 per cent of the cost of building council houses, the rest to be found from local rates.[2] A year later, the government changed this to a refund on any deficit from house building that was above the level of the income from a local rate of a penny in the pound of rateable value.

In January 1920, a number of houses in the town were damaged by flooding and declared to be unfit for human habitation, putting pressure on the existing housing stock.[3]

Developments during the 1920s

In July 1920, the council received a loan of £400 from the Public Works Loan Commissioners, which allowed them to go ahead with the purchase of the Abbey Meadows site in Buckfast with an initial draft mortgage of £3,000.[4] These 'government houses' would be made from concrete.

[1] Report of local MOH to BUDC, 1919.
[2] *Western Times*, 11 October 1918.
[3] *Western Times*, 28 January 1920.
[4] *Western Times*, 30 July 1920.

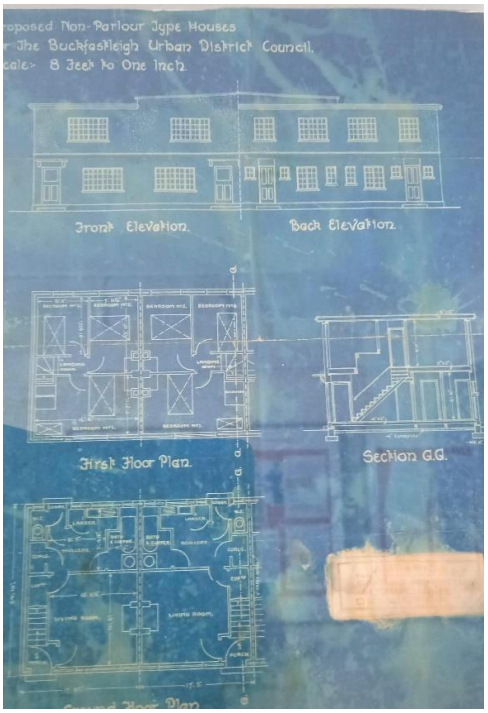


Figure 1: A plan for type B non-parlour houses for the BUDC; there were four of these and seven type A, a similar size. They had gardens.[5]

By October the purchase was complete, the architect was completing plans for eleven houses and they were about to consider the future rents.[6] At the same, a serious problem soon emerged. If the rents charged for the new houses were economic, the workers – who by 1921 were suffering reduced hours and wages – would not be able to afford to live in them. A battle over the amount the rents should be subsidised commenced. An inspector, representing the Bristol Housing Commission, attended a meeting of the BUDC. He stated that rents should be fixed at 8s or 10s per week; the council had suggested 7s or 8s. The clerk to the council pointed out that the mills were on half time working, therefore the rents the council were proposing were high for local people. The inspector said the ministry policy was that 'the new houses would be occupied, not by the average working man, but by the highest grade of workers, so that the second grade could move into the homes they had vacated'. The council pointed out that there were a number of houses almost as good as the new ones available for 6s 6d. The inspector said that when rent restrictions were relaxed, these rents would shoot up.[7] So much for 'homes for heroes'.

A few weeks later, a compromise had been reached. They split the difference and agreed rents of between 7s 6d and 9s 6d, and it was agreed to look for tenants. This was a sad meeting, as the chairman who had presided at the previous meeting, Mr A. J. Stone had died suddenly; he was described as a 'man of peace' who had worked his way up. There was more discussion about housing. A ratepayers representative, Mr J. Willcocks, who owned the local iron foundry, had written to the council suggesting that before the council proceeded with building more houses on the Glover's Park site, they needed to see if they could let the Abbey Meadows ones at an economic rent. Mr J. R. Dyer said the working class were waiting for the houses. Mr Chaffe said it would be worth waiting a few months to take advantage of falling prices. They agreed the tenders they had already received were too high.[8]

[5] Valiant Soldier Collection.
[6] *Western Morning News*, 27 October 1920.
[7] *Western Morning News*, 8 April 1921.
[8] *Western Times*, 27 April 1921.

An article in the *Western Morning News* by the previous housing commissioner for the West of England in October 1921 describes the progress made in Devon in building new homes. Devon and Cornwall were doing slightly better than the UK average, but progress had been disappointing, reaching only 15 per cent of total needs, or 40 per cent of needs relating to overcrowding and not the state of the buildings. Progress had been held up by a shortage of skilled labour in the larger towns, but principally by concerns about costs. It lists the numbers of houses started and completed in various towns and areas. Buckfastleigh was about average per capita of population compared with other places with housing programmes, except for the big towns; slightly better on completed houses. The commissioner berated those places that have made no attempt to build houses. 'Why' he said, do 'these councils prefer to pay through their taxes for houses in other parts of England while proving none for their own ratepayers (and) allowing a unique opportunity of improving the life of the working classes in their districts slip by?' Ashburton was one of the disappointing Urban District Councils.[9]

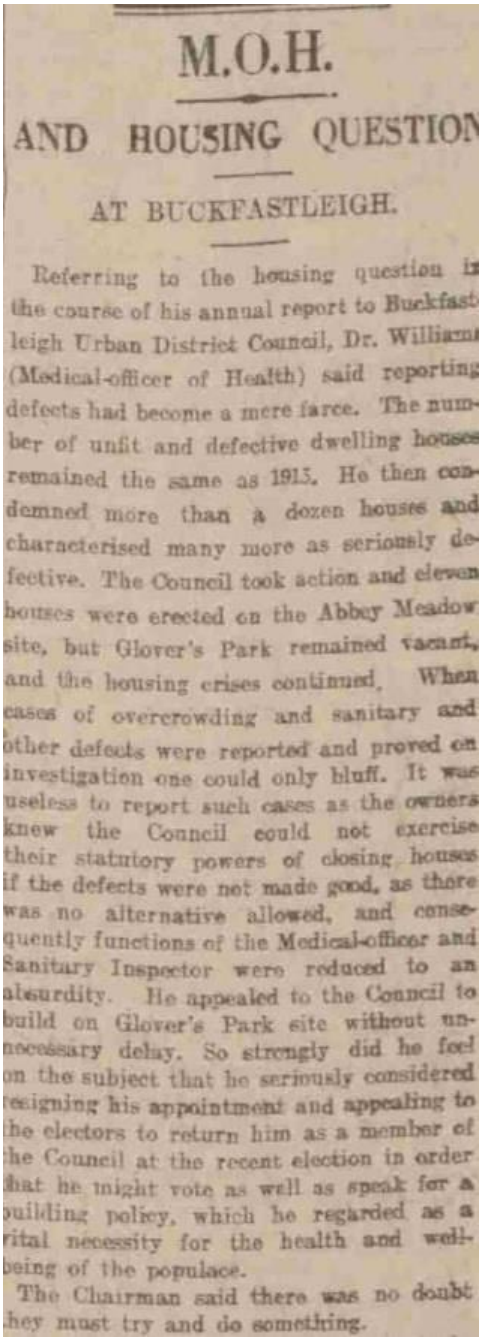
Tenants had now moved into some of the houses at Abbey Meadow but unfortunately things were not going smoothly. The stoves, or their chimneys, were causing a smoke problem. Some of the tenants were refusing to pay their rent in protest. The council decreed that the architect must sort out the chimneys at once.[10] And then Lloyd George's coalition government abandoned all subsidies for house building not approved by July 1921, which put a stop to new schemes for a time. [11]

In March 1922 the council requested a reduction in rent, now becoming unaffordable because wages were coming down. In April 1922 there were still problems with the new houses, and one councillor, Mr Bowerman, said the houses were 'made of rubbish'.[12] Nevertheless, later that year it was decided to go ahead with housing on the Glover's Park site.[13]

In 1923, with a better economic outlook, the government reintroduced subsidies. This time, the subsidy would be a fixed amount per house, per year, starting a programme of social housing building that continued into the 1930s. The scheme was aimed at private builders but local authorities could apply for the subsidies (although they would have to raise the capital themselves). The basis of the scheme was simple; the state would pay the developer £6 per house per annum for 20 years for a two-bedroom house, and £8 for a three-bedroom house. The grants and the payback time were increased the following year.

In 1924, BUDC, now chaired by Mr Willcox, obtained approval for the new scheme 'subject to the houses being suitable for the working class'.[14] There was also more flooding at this time, and again – more seriously – the following winter, in Church Street, Hunt's Court and Abbey Meadow.[15] Two years after the new government funding programme had been launched, progress on the new housing was slow.

[9] *Western Morning News*, 26 October 1921.
[10] *Western Times,* 30 November 1921.
[11] https://www.historyandpolicy.org/policy-papers/papers/the-housing-crisis-as-the-long-term-casualty-of-austerity-politics-1918-201
[12] *Western Times,* 26 April 1922.
[13] *Western Times,* 10 November 1922.
[14] *Devon & Exeter Gazette*, 4 June 1924.
[15] *Devon & Exeter Gazette*, 7 January 1925.



M.O.H.

AND HOUSING QUESTION

AT BUCKFASTLEIGH.

Referring to the housing question in the course of his annual report to Buckfastleigh Urban District Council, Dr. Williams (Medical-officer of Health) said reporting defects had become a mere farce. The number of unfit and defective dwelling houses remained the same as 1915. He then condemned more than a dozen houses and characterised many more as seriously defective. The Council took action and eleven houses were erected on the Abbey Meadow site, but Glover's Park remained vacant, and the housing crises continued. When cases of overcrowding and sanitary and other defects were reported and proved on investigation one could only bluff. It was useless to report such cases as the owners knew the Council could not exercise their statutory powers of closing houses if the defects were not made good, as there was no alternative allowed, and consequently functions of the Medical-officer and Sanitary Inspector were reduced to an absurdity. He appealed to the Council to build on Glover's Park site without unnecessary delay. So strongly did he feel on the subject that he seriously considered resigning his appointment and appealing to the electors to return him as a member of the Council at the recent election in order that he might vote as well as speak for a building policy, which he regarded as a vital necessity for the health and well-being of the populace.

The Chairman said there was no doubt they must try and do something.

Figure 2: Report in the *Devon & Exeter Gazette* about the housing situation in Buckfastleigh, 1925.[16]

At a council meeting in April 1925, the MOH berated BUDC for its lack of action. The arguments about the cost of housing being too great to let them to the working class were restated. Mr Willcocks, no longer chairman after elections, said that nothing had been done because the costs were too high, and rates would have to go up by 6d in the pound to subsidise affordable rents (it was only 1 penny at the time). It was reported that Ashburton was now going ahead with council house building, and the council decided they would go and have a look at the Ashburton scheme before they made any decision.

A month later, the council – now chaired by Mr E Coulton, a local farmer – had a serious discussion about the problem. A scheme at Tiverton was referred to, where they were

[16] *Devon & Exeter Gazette*, 29 April 1925.

building houses for £450 and the rents would be about 5 or 6 shillings a week plus rates, and also in Kingsteignton, where the council subsidy would be £100 and the rents not more than 8s 6d, similar to the proposed Buckfastleigh scheme. Mr Ridgeway, the CWS mill manager, said:

> … the problem was a great handicap to the business of the town. As employers of labour they wanted to bring people into the town for new industries but could not do so because there were no houses for them. A lot of people were prepared to move into better houses if they could get them.[17]

He proposed they should build houses if they could do so for not more than £450 (the clerk pointed out this had been agreed two years ago but at present had not been acted on) and proposed a special meeting to look in detail at the Glover's Park scheme. This resolution was carried.

In July, they decided to proceed if the cost could be kept to £500. It was also reported that a private builder, Mr Jackson, was building four houses with the government subsidy.[18]

In October, the council announced that it had drawn up plans for twenty houses to be built on the Glover's Park site and that they would put these plans on public display. They also proposed to invite a MOH inspector to advise on whether the Jackson houses met government regulations.[19]

By June 1926, a mixture of parlour and non-parlour houses were built and allocated to tenants.[20] By the autumn, all but three of them were occupied and the council was looking for an opportunity to build some more. (They were also investigating the rules on pig keeping.)[21]

The council wanted to build another twenty houses to meet the target set by Dr Williams but had difficulty finding a site, and the government scheme appeared to be coming to an end. Dr Williams said all the new tenants at Glover's Road had come out of the courts and the improvement in their health was simply outstanding. It was also reported that whenever a decent house became available there were about a dozen applications.[22]

Six months later, the brother of Mr E. Coulton, Mr W. E. Coulton (one of the leading farmers in Devon who farmed at Dean Prior) had agreed to sell land known as Chaffe's Ground, on the Plymouth Road, to the council. They planned to build two parlour and twenty-four non-parlour houses on the site.[23] They insisted on having them built with British bricks. By August that year, the council had agreed mortgage loans of about £11,000 with the Public Works Board and they were about to start interviewing prospective tenants for the first six houses.[24]

The non-parlour houses were not large and it seems strange today to have the bath more or less in the kitchen. But most of the Buckfastleigh cottages didn't have inside toilets and still had tin baths, and continued to do so until well after the next war. These new houses also had three bedrooms. The provision of 57 local authority houses within the decade has to be seen as an important achievement which improved the health and welfare of Buckfastleigh

[17] *Devon & Exeter Gazette*, 29 May 1925.
[18] *Western Times,* 10 July 1925.
[19] *Western Morning News*, 6 October 1925.
[20] *Western Times*, 11 June 1926.
[21] *Western Times*, 12 November 1926.
[22] *Western Times*, 8 July 1927.
[23] *Western Morning News*, 5 January 1928.
[24] *Western Times*, 3 August 1928.

residents.

It should not be forgotten that the bulk of the housing was privately rented and that one of the biggest landlords was the CWS, who took on all 94 workers cottages built by the Hamlyns. I think they may have increased this number, because the house I live in (once a tannery owners house) came onto their ownership when it was converted into three rentable properties.

The MOH Dr Williams made it his business to inspect private houses. In the early part of the decade he stated there was no point in condemning poor cottages as the tenants had nowhere else to go, but by 1928, with the increase in council properties, the situation had changed. In 1928 he found ten which 'were not in all respects reasonably fit for human habitation'. All of them were then 'rendered fit' as a result of 'informal action' by the local authority.[25]

[25] MOH report to Buckfastleigh Urba District Council 1928