Mount Gould Council Housing in the 1920s

Anne Corry

Mount Gould is mainly a Victorian residential suburb which has some hilly streets and attractive parks. The River Plym forms the eastern boundary and the land rises steeply south to north, from the water's edge.

According to Chris Robinson, there have been lively debates about the spelling of Mount Gould. He suggests:

> Debates that have fuelled a recurring error that has seen the area represented on maps and official documents as Mount Gold. Ordnance Survey maps between the years, 1863–1893 recorded it as Mount Gold; the council minutes of 1888 used both spellings; in the 1930s and 1940s the "Gold" spelling was used on street signs and buses. As the area was named some 350 years ago after Colonel William Gould, who died in 1644, the correct spelling should be Mount Gould.[1]

The confusion over the spelling was further remarked upon in an article in November 1929 when a *Western Morning News* reporter in their reminiscence series said:

> Until the South Western Railway came to Friary there was not a house beyond Beaumont House, in what is now Beaumont Park. The country beyond was farms, farmhouses and buildings stretching out to Mount Gould Farm. Mount Gould is the correct spelling of the word not Mount Gold as it is only too commonly spelt today for it was on this land that Colonel Gould camped and prepared his attack on Plymouth. The road from Lipson Hill to Mount Gould was only a narrow, wet and muddy lane with live hedges on either side of it.[2]

[1] Chris Robinson's Plymouth, <https://www.chrisrobinson.co.uk>.

[2] *Western Morning News*, 26 November 1929.

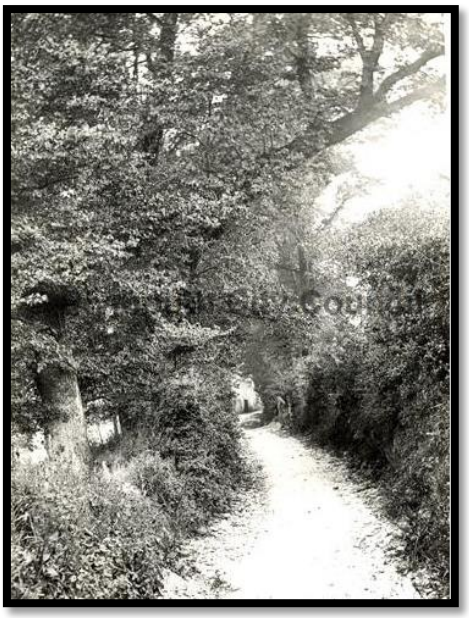

Figure 1: Black-and-white photograph of lane near Mount Gould (now Beaumont Road), late nineteenth century.[3]

On 3 July 1919, the *Western Morning News* published a map of the proposed new Mount Gold site:

> The area of the site is about 12 acres and the number of houses provided for is 144. The land is immediately below the Borough Hospital and extends between Beaumont Road and the continuation of Lanhydrock Road with Jephson Road as the western boundary. As will be seen the inner roads are to be laid out in the shape of a fan. From Beaumont Road there will be an entrance 80 feet wide and the roads are 24 feet in width, with outlets east and west 30 feet wide. Facing the tree-lined entrance on the north is an enclosed garden abutting on the southern boundary. There are six blocks of four houses each and all the remainder will be semi-detached and these houses will be for working classes. [4]

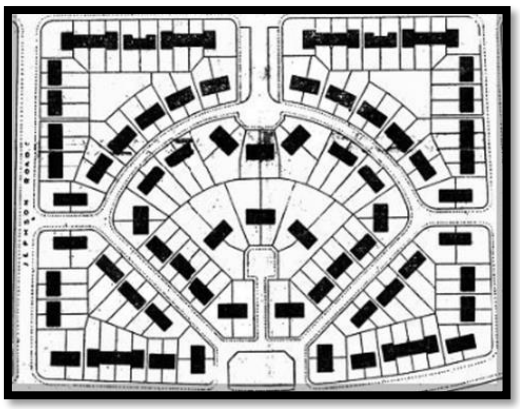

Figure 2: Map of the proposed new Mount Gold site.[5]

[3] The Box: Ref 3488/1698. Former Local Studies reference: P000078032.
[4] *Western Morning News*, 3 July 1919.
[5] Ibid.

On 24 February 1921, the *Western Morning News* gave the names of streets on the housing site recommended for adoption. These were Mount Gold Terrace, Mount Gold Crescent, Mount Gold Avenue and Heathfield Road.

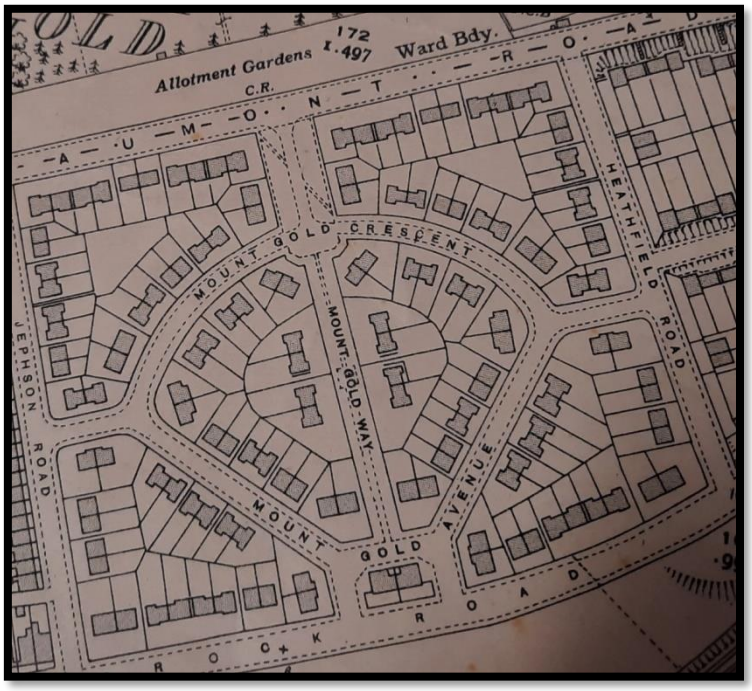

Figure 3: Map of the proposed names for the Mount Gold streets, published in 1921.[6]

On 10 June 1920, at the Plymouth Town Council's meeting, the Housing of the Working Classes Committee reported on tenders for the new Mount Gold site. These were to be forwarded to the Housing Committee with a recommendation to accept the tender from A. N. Coles and Son Limited for the fourth block of sixteen houses of the parlour type for £16,695 10s 4d and Mr E. E. Endicott for the third block of 35 non-parlour houses for £26,236 16s, but they were not happy with Mr Endicott's tender for the third block of houses as they thought it was too high.[7]

Until 1923, Mr Endicott had been in business as a builder and contractor in Plymouth until he was forced to retire by reason of a serious breakdown in 1923. On his retirement he gave his employees all his stock. He had been for some years the honorary secretary of the Plymouth and District Association of Building Trade employers and was a representative on many occasions in courts of arbitration and on committees on production set up by the Ministry of Labour. After his retirement, he took a keen interest in the Juvenile Employment Committee and was elected an honorary member of the Unemployment Assistance Board for the Plymouth area.[8]

[6] *Western Morning News*, 24 February 1921.
[7] *Western Evening Herald*, 10 June 1920.
[8] *Western Morning News*, 17 December 1940.

The building of the Mount Gold estate was carried out by local contractors. The architects were: Mr B. Priestley Shires at 21 Lockyer Street and Mr J. Leighton Fouracre at Lloyds Bank Chambers, Bedford Street. Mr R. J. Fittall was the town clerk, at the Municipal Buildings, Plymouth.[9]

In 1920 as there was a shortage of bricklayers. Lady Astor suggested that women might be employed to help with the building of the new houses, which was pooh-poohed. A Plymouth builder, interviewed on the subject, at first gave it as his opinion that it was, 'too silly to talk about.' He admitted that women did a good deal of painting during the war and that women might do 'lots of things'. He had never heard, however, of their becoming bricklayers, and what was more, alluding to trade union restrictions they would not be allowed to do it. Mr Endicott was paying bricklayers and plasterers at Mount Gold 2s 1d per hour.[10]

In August 1920, the *Western Evening Herald* reported that there had been a lot of criticism concerning the houses being built at the Mount Gold site and so they decided to send one of their reporters to inspect the site. The reporter said that the site was situated a few yards from the tram terminus in Beaumont Road, which slopes 'somewhat steeply down to that part of the district known as "the Tip"'.[11] This meant the contractors met major problems that the plans had not considered.

As he mentioned:

> They found on commencing the work, that as the result of certain quarrying which took place years ago, the ground here and there was so unstable that the foundations had to be sunk several feet deeper than had been anticipated and when the clerk of the works first arrived, the place was very uneven and used as gardens.
>
> The first thing that was done was to lay the drainage system, after which the roads and pavements were laid out. The roads, which now consist of loose stones between the pavements, have been constructed upon the geometrical pattern whilst economizing space is artistic in conception. At the bottom of the site a large space is to be left, presumably to form a recreation ground for the children.[12]

He then remarked upon the progress of the construction:

> Of the 140 houses which are to be built here, I found that 32 had been set out, six of which stood with their brick walls practically completed and the roof timbers in place, the others being in various stages of completion, some with the foundations just completed, others with the walls built about four feet above the ground and about 50% of the kerbs and 60% of the roads to be built have now been completed.[13]

The reporter continued:

> The houses of the parlour type, technically known as the B.O.I., are to comprise six rooms; the living room, the parlour, the scullery and three bedrooms. Plaster-fronted each dwelling

[9] *Western Morning News*, 12 May 1920.
[10] *Western Morning News*, 20 July 1920.
[11] *Western Evening Herald*, 6 August 1920.
[12] Ibid.
[13] Ibid.

> will be so constructed that the front door will be in the centre of the wall and the visitor, on entering, will find himself in a small passage terminating in the stairs and having two other doors, one on each side. The door on the left will open into the parlour, a room approximately ten feet by twelve. That on the right will give entrance to the living room which, being sixteen feet by eleven will be the largest room in the house. A door near the back wall of the living room provides access to the kitchen, which opens on the back garden.
>
> As there is no passage from the front door to the kitchen, it will be necessary for anyone who wishes to reach the courtyard to pass through the living room. The three bedrooms are about the size of the downstair rooms with space taken out for the bathroom and the lavatory. An unusual feature of all the houses of this type now being built at Mount Gold is the fact that the lavatories are not to be on the ground floor, but upstairs. Opinions on this will vary.
>
> There are 16 houses of the non-parlour or A.O.3. type in process of construction. They will possess only five rooms. The front door will open on a lobby which will communicate with the living room. This room, being sixteen feet by fourteen, will be slightly larger than the living room of the parlour type. The bathroom is downstairs. Of the 3 bedrooms, one is about thirteen and a half feet by twelve feet, another thirteen by ten and the third, suitable for use as a spare bedroom, a small one to take a single bed. Most of the dwellings are to be semi-detached in blocks of two, but there are to be at least four blocks of four houses each.
>
> Each house will have a small garden in front and a longer one behind, where vegetables may be grown. The site upon which each house stands is approximately one hundred feet long and the back gardens in length will average forty feet. Thus every family will be able to obtain sufficient air and sunshine and none will be without some ground in which flowers or fruit or vegetables can be cultivated.[14]

He commented that several pairs of houses were on their way towards completion with two pairs to be finished within a very short time. He also mentioned, as Lady Astor had already indicated, that the principal difficulty the builders had to contend with was finding builders and securing good materials. As with all council building, all Mount Gold materials had to be passed by the Ministry of Health, who had condemned some of the materials used for Mount Gold. They had to make sure that their bricks, mortar and wood were of sufficient quality.

The *Herald* reporter concluded, 'that on the whole the work that has been done on the Mount Gold site is as good as can be expected.'[15]

In the 1920s, women wanted electricity rather than gas in their homes. In August 1920 the Electrical Trades Unions in Plymouth asked the Plymouth Housing Committee if electricity could be installed to all the houses now being built on the sites at Mount Gold and North Prospect, including lighting up the roads and avenues. But they were disappointed as the committee had previously made arrangements for the installation of gas, which they regarded as more economical for cooking purposes.[16]

In November 1920, twelve Mount Gold houses were ready for occupation and the subcommittee of the Housing Committee selected the first twelve tenants nominated to live in them. There were 176 applications for one type of house and 56 for the other. They agreed

[14] Ibid.
[15] Ibid.
[16] *Western Morning News*, 28 August 1920.

that preference would be given to ex-servicemen with large families who were crowded into one or two rooms. As can be imagined, the committee had a considerable number of men answering to these conditions. In the end they had a ballot for their final selection.[17]

On 11 July 1921, Mr W. F. Willmott of Plymstock Stone Company suggested that good top stone for surface roads could be produced at shillings less than imported stone. This, he stated, brought no relief to the unemployed. 'Thousands of men would be employed now raising stone if all the new homes in Plymouth were built of stone instead of ashes, cement and bricks, bought from distant towns.'[18]

By December 1926, Plymouth Council were asking for tenders to erect 212 houses at Higher Mount Gold Housing Estate. They were asking for a deposit of two guineas to be refunded on the receipt of a bona fide tender and the return to the undersigned of all drawings and documents. This was signed by Mr J. Wibberley, Borough Engineer, Municipal Offices, Plymouth.[19]

In February 1928, siege pipes were found at Mount Gold during recent excavations. They were found about midway between the entrance to the Infectious Diseases Hospital and the old Mount Gould farmhouse, over an area of an acre northward.

> Hundreds of portions of small clay tobacco pipes have been unearthed, together with a coin dated 1630 and a small cannon-ball. The pipes are those commonly known as siege pipes. The find fixes the position of one of the encampments which commanded the Lipson slopes, up which Prince Maurice's men swarmed on that fateful Sabbath-day, December 3rd, 1643, only to be driven back ignominiously into the mud and slime of the creek below.[20]

On 9 June 1928, Mayor Mr W. H. J. Priest with Chairman of the Housing Committee, Mr A. E. H. Webb, Mr E. G. Catchpole, deputy borough architect, and Mr R. Bradley Barker, who prepared the plans for most of the houses already erected under the schemes, were inspecting the whole of the housing schemes undertaken by the Plymouth Corporation since the war. The Mayor remarked that over 4,000 dwellings, costing £1,600,000, had been built.

> Under the Addison Scheme of 1919, 736 houses at a cost of £635,548 were built and under the Chamberlain Scheme of 1923, 132 houses and 70 flats were erected at a cost of £88,690. The Wheatley Scheme of the following year saw no fewer than 1,145 houses, 143 flats and eight shops built at a cost of £620,107.[21]

In addition to these schemes, many houses had been erected under utility schemes. The Lady Astor Trust provided 92 houses at a cost of £50,000; the Great Western Railway Scheme built 84 houses at a cost of £40,000; and the Dockyard employees erected 162 houses at a cost of £90,000.

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[17] *Western Morning News*, 30 November 1920.
[18] *Western Morning News*, 11 July 1921.
[19] *Western Morning News*, 24 December 1926.
[20] *Western Morning News*, 9 February 1928.
[21] *Western Morning News*, 9 June 1928.

He also said that private enterprise had also been responsible for 1,248 houses; 342 being with the aid of the subsidy and the remainder without.

Carrying on, he said that the total number of houses built or being built at the present time came to 3,623, to which has to be added 609 flats and 13 shops, and of these buildings the Corporation own 2,619.

Not less than £1,681,440 represents the monetary efforts of the Plymouth Town Council to solve the housing problem.

The Mayor's party inspected the Mount Gold estate, where 208 houses were built on the terrace system. He was pleased that already 54 of these houses were occupied and the others would be shortly but were being held up, owing to the strike of painters. These houses contained five rooms each and cost about £450, exclusive of the site.

The party continued to Lower Mount Gold (opposite the Astor housing estate), where the Corporation started their housing plans in 1919 and which contains 144 houses (140 of which were built under the Addison Scheme).

Figure 4: The Mayor of Plymouth with Mr A. Webb, Mr O. Lee, Mr E. G. Catchpole and Mr R. B. Barker inspecting the Mount Gould council houses.[22]

[22] Ibid.

Figure 5: One of Mount Gould houses built in the 1920s, photographed in the twenty-first century.

Mount Gold rents

In December 1921, the tenants at Swilly and North Prospect were victorious. The assessment of the parlour-type houses had been reduced from £36 gross and £29 rateable to £25 and £20, and the non-parlour type from £28 gross and £22 rateable to £22 and £17. They also felt that their rents were too high. Since the rents were fixed in June, the wages of the majority of the tenants had fallen by 20%. On the motion of Mr P. Urell, the committee were recommended to consider the advisability of acting as early as possible in conjunction with the Mount Gold Tenants' Association in an endeavour to effect a reduction in the weekly rents and he suggested they should prepare a petition for presentation to the council.[23]

In March 1922, 'All Rent and No Grub' wrote:

> Sir, As a tenant on the Corporation Estate at Mount Gold I should like to ask when something is going to be done to reduce the high rents we have to pay. Some months ago we were told that a sub-committee of the Housing Committee was inquiring into the matter but nothing seems to have been done. Meanwhile, wages have been falling rapidly and there are more cuts to come during the year. Soon we shall be paying most of our wages in rent and rates. Other towns have reduced the rents of their houses to meet the changed wages conditions and it is time Plymouth came into line.[24]

[23] *Western Morning News*, 10 December 1921.
[24] *Western Evening Herald*, 7 March 1922.

In July 1922 there was a deputation from the North Prospect and Mount Gold Tenants' Association when they attended the meeting of Plymouth Housing Committee asking for an all-round reduction of 5s per week in the rents of the houses, including the recent reductions varying from 6d to 1s per week, which had been approved by the Ministry. The matter was referred to a special subcommittee for further consideration and report.[25]

At a meeting of Plymouth Town Council in 1923, Alderman Brown discussed a letter from the Mount Gold Tenants' Association with reference to rents and said the council had no jurisdiction in the question of whether or not the association should be represented in the rents tribunal. If the Ministry of Health approved of the rents they would not go to the tribunal; if the rents were not approved it would be for the Tenants' Association to take action in any other way they cared.[26]

In September 1923, members of the Rents Tribunal heard evidence regarding the council's appeal to reduce rentals of the Corporation houses at Mount Gold, Swilley and North Prospect.

> That having regard to the lowered standard of living consequent on the reductions in wages and the hardship caused to the tenants of the housing estates at Mount Gold, North Prospect and Swilly by the present high rent demanded, the same being in excess of that charged on similar estates in other towns of comparable size to Plymouth, it be an instruction to the Housing Committee to immediately recommend to the Ministry of Health that a flat rate reduction of 3s 6d per week be made on rents of houses erected under assisted housing schemes in Plymouth.[27]

At the inquiry, presided over by Colonel Williams, there were also present the Mayor Mr Solomon Stephens, Alderman Moses and A. G. Crowle, Mr S. O. Alford, Ministry of Health, and Mr F. W. H. Pinsent, district valuer. The town clerk gave details of the rents charged for the different types of houses on the three estates, which were proposed by the Ministry, namely, 10s, 10s 3d, 12s 3d, and 14s 6d.

Mr Albert Warren, chairman of the Mount Gold Tenants' Association, stated that:

> The members had great difficulty in persuading the council to reduce the rental charges and some of the tenants have had to pawn their goods in order to pay their rent and buy food. Whereas the tenants of the houses were not allowed to sublet and not to keep a lodger without the consent of the borough treasurer, 85% of the houses in Plymouth were sub-let and that fact accounted for the high rents. He complained of the lack of amenities in the non-parlour houses at Mount Gold but declined to commit himself to suggesting a fair rental for them compared with the 9s 6d per week rental of a comparable house in Rosebery Avenue, preferring to take the average of a district. Rosebery Avenue house was superior to the parlour houses on the Corporation estate for which the rent was 12s 3d.[28]

Alderman Moses said it was no exaggeration to say that in the main the tenants were suffering very great hardships consequent on the scales of rent charged, which was

[25] *Western Morning News*, 13 July 1922.
[26] *Western Morning News*, 16 January 1923.
[27] *Western Morning News*, 17 September 1923
[28] Ibid.

considerably higher than the rents paid by men living in other houses and earning similar wages.

On behalf of the Ministry of Health, Mr Alford called Mr Pinsent who dissented from the figures submitted by the Tenants' Association as the average pre-war rents for comparable houses in the Mount Gold district. His average was £23 10s, as against their £21 14s, and others were in similar proportion. He considered the present rentals of the council houses were justified by comparison with those of other houses in the locality.

Mr Alford said Plymouth was a very high rented town.[29]

In 1925 the Plymouth Board of Guardians said a woman had applied for relief to them, saying that she was paying 18s 10d per week rent in a Corporation house at Mount Gold Avenue, which she said was too high.

She said that her husband was now in the mental ward of Greenbank House and that he was under observation. She remarked that he was strange in his manner, she was in fear of him and he threw up his last job when he was working for the Corporation. She had four children and a nurse child for which she was receiving 10s a week. That was the whole of her income. The applicant was paying more rent than she should. The man was offered a Corporation self-contained flat at Prince Rock for 13s but refused to take it, saying the rooms were too small. The woman was willing but the man was very obstinate. Relief was granted.[30]

[29] Ibid.

[30] *Western Morning News*, 11 March 1925.