Plymstock Housing in the 1920s

How Plymstock Went From Market Gardens to a Suburb

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The 1921 Census shows the population of the parish of Plymstock as 4,121. By 1931 it had grown to 7,057.[1] In Plymouth, the population was shrinking. In 1927, Mr A. E. H. Webb, Plymouth's housing manager, remarked that there was an exodus of the townspeople to villages. He stated that in 1914 the population of Plymouth was 212,421 but by 1921 it had shrunk by 2,385 to 210,036.

In May 1925, the *Western Morning News* headline read, 'Plymstock Business Men's Suburb',[2] suggesting reasons why people were moving from Plymouth to Plymstock.

Land development at Plymstock had been going on apace since the end of the First World War, and the parish could be described as 'Little Plymouth across the Cattewater', in view of the fact that the majority of the residents had migrated there from the borough and journey to the town daily to follow their business. 'One can hardly recognize the place', observed one old resident to the reporter, while another added, 'Yes houses are going up like mushrooms'.[3] The reporter said that both comments were correct, suggesting:

> … if anyone who has been away from Plymstock for any length of time would identify the once meadow-covered hillside, extending from the Oreston landing-stage to Plymstock Church, for the whole landscape has been transformed and stone, brick and rough-cast, semi-detached dwellings stand as tribute to the growth of this health-giving neighbourhood.[4]

How did this collection of small villages, market gardens and quarries become so important that the neighbouring town of Plymouth was contemplating including it in the borough? One reason was that rates and land were cheaper in Plymstock, but the biggest influence and part of the answer lies in the way transport links with Plymouth improved during the 1920s. Apart from the train, prior to 1920, people living at Plymstock's only means of reaching Plymouth was either walking, pony and trap, or cycle. From 1920 to about 1927 there were a few coaches run by Mr Pullen. In 1927, the first buses to run in the area were operated by the Devon Motor

[1] A Vision of Britain Through Time, <https://www.visionofbritain.org.uk/unit/10077620/cube/TOT_POP>.
[2] *Western Morning News*, 12 March 1927.
[3] Ibid.
[4] Ibid.

Transport. These buses had no tyres, canvas roofs, and there was a door at the side of every row of seats (a ladder enabled passengers to get up to those doors as they were high off ground). In 1929 glass windows were introduced and these had curtains to prevent draughts. Between 1920 and 1927, oil was used for lighting, but this was later replaced by acetylene, which in turn was replaced by electricity.

Plymstock is separated from its neighbour by the Laira Estuary, spanned by a road bridge and a railway bridge. The road bridge was a toll bridge. Both vehicles and pedestrians had to pay for the crossing until, on 1 April 1924, a convoy of 100 cars crossed the bridge to celebrate the end of the toll.

Figure 1: The Mayor of Plymouth in the first car to pass toll-free over the bridge[5]

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To the growing number of motor car owners, Plymstock seemed an attractive place to live – far enough out of town to be almost 'the country' and close enough to get to work and home again for dinner. The houses that were already there were cheaper than the ones in the semi-rural north of Plymouth and the fashionable Mannamead district.

A desire to live somewhere is not enough if there are no houses to live in. Before the First World War, Plymstock was mainly the property of the large estates. The farmers and market gardeners were mostly tenants. Just before the war, impending tax changes saw the big landowners selling off land. A good deal of the land around Plymstock and the neighbouring hamlet of Pomphlett belonged to the Duke of Bedford, and most of it was sold by auction in 1911.

Joseph Rowland

One of the bidders there was Joseph Rowland. Originally from South Brent, Joe's family moved to Plymouth and established themselves as market gardeners. In the 1921 Census, Joe, farmer, and Elizabeth, with their servants William and Beatrice Northey, were living at Home

[5] Chris Robinson, *Plymouth in the Age of the Petrol-Driven Motor Car, 1896–1939* (Pen & Ink Publishing, 2021). The car contained Solmon Stephens, Mayor of Plymouth; Sir Thomas Baker, a senior alderman, and the Town Clerk.

Farm. Joe bought Home Farm, Quick's farmhouse, Millway Farm and pasture land in 1911 and then moved into Home Farm House, a large, imposing structure of grey limestone. The house still stands with some of the original outbuildings, but the last of the farmland was built over in the early 1950s.

Figure 2: Home Farm House.

Figure 3: The gable end of Home Farm House was adorned with the letter B and a ducal coronet.

Figure 4: Joseph Horne Rowland at harvest in 1930.[6]

Joe's great nephew said that Joe had an eye for business and began selling off land for building plots in 1921, when town planning was in its infancy. Permission to build houses was granted by the Medical Officer of Health for the district and the requirements were minimal: the plot must have 'frontage' and access to water. The size, layout and construction of the house were in the hands of the developer and there was no consideration given to the existing amenity value of the proposed site.

Home Farm comprised of approximately 50 acres of land, mainly devoted to market gardening. The Rowlands had twelve pigs, various poultry, horses, and five cows producing milk for the Dean Cross Dairy, Plymstock, which opened in 1928. Apparently their house was the very last to be built in Plymstock in quarried stone from Pomphlett Limestone Quarry and mortar at a cost of just over £300. His brother Charles, wife Kate and their four children joined him in 1920.

There were numerous adverts with Joseph selling land and residences. In March 1921 he sold Quicks Freehold Residence containing eight rooms.[7] In December 1921 he sold '4 Desirable Fields, situate close to Plymstock and Oreston Stations suitable for any purpose, buildings, factory, motor works, sports fields etc.'[8]

[6] Arthur L. Clamp, *Plymstock in Perspective* (1982).
[7] *Western Morning News*, 5 March 1921.
[8] *Western Morning News*, 15 December 1921.

In the 1920s, Joseph Rowland described himself as a retired market gardener. In January 1929 he was interviewed by a reporter asking his views on how to help farmers, as at that time he was chairman of the Plympton branch of the National Farmers' Union. His solution to the problem of the depression of agriculture 'might be found if the Government becomes a customer of the farmers and thus setting an example by purchasing their goods from their own producers'.[9]

In August 1929, it was reported that Mr J. H. Rowland, a member of the Devon Farmers' Union, would be among the party of English farmers visiting Australia and New Zealand.[10]

King Billy of Plymstock

The second – and most colourful – of the 1911 bidders, was William Alfred Mitchell, known as 'King Billy of Plymstock', who after the auction began building houses. In the 1921 Census, Billy, a corn merchant and Priscilla, his wife with Arthur, stepson and Gordon, son and their servant Alice were living at Rockville, Plymstock. King Billy was a member of Plympton Rural District Council, which controlled Plymstock at that time.

Figure 5: William Alfred Mitchell at Rockville in the late 1920s, courtesy of their grandson, Neil Mitchell.

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[9] *Western Morning News*, 23 January 1929.
[10] *Exeter and Plymouth Gazette*, 24 August 1929.

Figure 6: William and Priscilla Mitchell with friends at Rockville House, courtesy of Neil Mitchell.

Figure 7: William and Priscilla Mitchell, courtesy of Neil Mitchell.

Figure 8: Bernard Gale, chauffeur of the Daimler, courtesy of Neil Mitchell.

As a member of the council, King Billy often wrote letters in various newspapers. In June 1922, he wrote:

> Sir, I notice in your today's issue Mr Walter Williams complains once more concerning conditions of roads. Personally I went over one of the roads under his castigation from Plymouth to Modbury and my experience was that the road is in very fair condition all the way, excepting that portion from Plymouth to its boundary at Laira Bridge. Anyone must realise the extraordinary expenditure entailed and should feel the best is being done. In my opinion, formed by observation, many of the letters appearing in the papers suggesting comparison of different roads are not true to fact.[11]

King Billy and Joseph Rowland were often in competition. In March 1925, the *Western Morning News* reported the result of the County Council Elections for Plymstock: 'W. A. Mitchell… 863, J. H. Rowland… 315 – Majority… 488.'[12]

Just like Joseph Rowland, King Billy wrote many adverts in the newspaper selling property or land. In July 1921, 'Plymstock Building Sites for Sale, Apply W.A. Mitchell, Rockville, Plymstock.'[13] Also, in September 1921, 'For Sale: Houses, six or seven rooms, near Plymstock Station, also well-situated, cheap and good building sites, any quantity, quarter-acre up, apply W.A. Mitchell, Rockville, Plymstock.'[14]

Billy Mitchell was described as being devoted to Plymstock and especially the hamlet of Pomphlett, not buying a pair of shoelaces outside the parish. He built a bungalow to be lent to the Plymstock Nursing Association for accommodation for the district nurse and left the bungalow to the association in his will.

[11] *Western Morning News*, 2 June 1922.
[12] *Western Morning News*, 5 March 1925.
[13] *Western Morning News*, 29 July 1921.
[14] *Western Morning News*, 10 September 1921.

In 1913 there was a minor sensation in Plymstock when King Billy was arrested on a charge of arson in relation to Pomphlett Mill, with intent to commit insurance fraud. The charge was dismissed. The allegation of arson had been brought by Billy's brother, captain of the local fire brigade, because he believed that their father had left the mill to him and not Billy.[15]

In 1917, the Harris Bulteel trustees sold a 602-acre Radford Estate in Plymstock. Billy was successful in purchasing the principal lot no. 11, which consisted of the vast fifty-roomed Radford mansion house itself (immortalised in Daphne du Maurier's 1946 novel *The King's General* as 'a great barracks of a place the other side of Plymouth'). The landscaped parkland, gardens, pleasure grounds, woods, lakes and dairy farms, totalling some 263 acres, sold for £11,000.

When looking out from the drawing room windows at Rockville, Billy had quite literally now become 'Lord of all he surveyed'; his Pomphlett and Radford property holdings together amounting to some 500 acres in total. His development of the linear Radford Park building estate, along the perimeter road of the park, thus inevitably followed during the 1920s.

King Billy died of a heart attack in February 1930 while addressing Devon County Council in Exeter. In his obituary, it was said that he was extremely proud that many years ago he had seen that what was a small hamlet was bound to become a great suburb of the city and that he had had something to do with it.[16]

Richard Leander Morrish

The next important entrepreneur in the development of houses in Plymstock is Richard Leander Morrish, who moved from Saltash to Dean House, Plymstock in 1915. In the 1921 Census, Richard and Mary, their five children – three helping their father in the market garden family business – were living at Dean House.

[15] *Western Morning News*, 11 October 1913.
[16] *Exeter and Plymouth Gazette*, 6 February 1930.

Figure 9: Dean House, Plymstock.

Figure 10: Richard Leander Morrish's initials, 1915.

Richard – like his father and grandfather – was a market gardener; he even offered advice to local allotment holders and amateur gardeners. Unlike his family, Richard had wider interests and his obituary in 1933 described him as a prominent figure in Plymouth trading circles as a fruit and vegetable grower, seller of market garden produce and a trader in Plymouth Market, but he was also a car seller, house speculator and a prominent figure in the local cattle markets. When he died, his executors were selling properties and land in Plymstock and Saltash.

Like the other two entrepreneurs, Richard placed many adverts offering numerous items for sale, including houses and building plots. In November 1920 Richard offered:

> 7½ acres of the choicest building sites in the neighbourhood commanding extensive road frontage, excellent views and with building stone on the spot in lots varying from quarter to

> half an acre each, together with the extensive and substantial premises known as the Old Deans Schools which could be easily adapted to form commercial premises for those requiring sites for residential purposes in the delectable neighbourhood.
>
> Because the property is surrounded by public roads, the land, owing to its physical character, is easy and inexpensive to build on and in the majority of cases there should be sufficient stone in each site to provide the requisite building materials; also the company's water and gas is already installed in the roads bounding the property.[17]

In February 1922: 'Lodgings, Apartments to Let, Plymstock, Furnished Flat, four rooms; separate entrance; cheap rent; R.L. Morrish, Dean House.'[18]

Billacombe Trading Company

Of course, these three entrepreneurs were not the only ones involved in the suburbanisation of Plymstock. Randwick Park Road was built by the Billacombe Trading Company. Until 1924, there was a racecourse and football field at Randwick Park.

Figure 11: General view of Randwick Park racecourse, taken while the race was run for the Randwick Park Plate, which aroused much interest.[19]

[17] *Western Morning News*, 2 November 1920.
[18] *Western Morning News*, 4 February 1922.
[19] *Western Morning News*, 17 May 1923.

Figure 12: Plymouth Ladies' Team and the Marizon Ladies' Club defence was a severe test in this strenuously contested 1922 match at Randwick Park.[20]

Figure 13: Randwick Park Road, photographed in the twenty-first century.

Mr William T. Gay

What was the locals' reaction to the changes in their surroundings? One letter writer, Mr William T. Gay, in March 1928 described the houses built by the Billacombe Trading Company in Randwick Park Road as 'semi-Asiatic bungalows'.[21] He emphasised the need of an intelligent interest in the development of houses. He argued that most of the residents in the neighbourhood had invested the whole of their savings in houses, and if they allowed such bungalows to be sandwiched between their houses, the selling value would fall considerably. He also said the bungalows looked undignified. There was much spirited correspondence between Mr Gay and the Billacombe Trading Company.

[20] *Western Morning News*, 27 March 1922.
[21] *Western Morning News*, 30 March 1928.

In 1929, Mr Gay stated that Plymstock was in a pickle, which was not caused by the wickedness or short-sightedness of any individual but was rather the result of undirected movement or drift of people from an adjacent city (like Plymouth) 'who had built homes where they liked, and in many cases how they liked'.[22]

Mr William T Gay of 'Kelmscott', Horn Lane, Plymstock, fought for many issues in the 1920s on Plymstock's behalf. He addressed the Plymstock Ratepayers' Association on several occasions, declaring slums could be found in the old parts of Oreston, Turnchapel and Hooe, but the great difficulty of abolishing them was the provision of alternative houses for those who could not afford to pay high rents. He wanted a playing ground for the children of Plymstock and the neighbourhood.

His obituary in June 1940, 'Death of Pioneer West Socialist', said:

> He twice fought Sutton Division for Labour. From his youth up he was an earnest student of politics and sociology and was one of the pioneers of Socialism in the Westcountry. He identified himself with the I.L.P. of which movement in Plymouth he was one of the founders. He was an able propagandist, possessed a fine, natural voice for public speaking and had a lucid platform style. He was especially well versed in economics in which subject he had conducted classes and his wide outlook and vision and good platform manner led to requests for his services in the cause of Socialism at meetings in all parts of Devon and Cornwall. He took a keen interest in the Workers Educational Association and had worked for Plymouth Co-op.[23]

Views of other residents

In April, 1925, a reader of the *Western Morning News* wrote:

> May I underline your very sound comments on the Mayor's speech concerning buildings along rural roads by drawing attention, as an excellent specimen of how not to do it, for example the houses built between Pomphlett and Billacombe stations? Here private garages, shops, blind gateways and walls have been dumped on the road's very edge, not even a footpath intervening.[24]

Ivy Langdon wrote that:

> The sporadic building which took place following the First World War resulted in untidy ribbon-type development, which lacked an overall plan. In 1925, the Plympton St Mary Rural District Council commenced the preparation of a Planning Scheme for Plymstock. This took several years to pass through the various stages of draft plan, advertisement and approval, until in 1939 the scheme received the approval of the Minister for Health. At its third reading in September 1939 the Plymstock Planning Scheme received the approval of both Houses of

[22] *Western Morning News*, 13 April 1929.
[23] *Western Morning News*, 24 June 1940.
[24] *Western Morning News*, 20 April 1925.

> Parliament. Unfortunately due to the Second World War the provisions of the Planning Scheme were not put into effect.[25]

In July 1921, Mr Leonard Hine of the Plymstock parish council stated that there was a lack of system in the building of houses in the parish, 'Some people are building houses practically as they liked and that ample provision for planning and drainage has not been made.'[26] A letter was to be sent to the district council asking them to consider the advisability of applying the town-planning system to Plymstock.

In April 1927, Mr Leonard Hine at a Plymstock parish meeting said:

> People must realize that Plymstock is no longer a mere country village but was a parish growing in importance and was getting more and more urban in character. The population of Plymstock has increased by between 800 and 900 since 1921. Randwick Park, until about 12 months ago, was a race course and the estate today has been set out in plots for building purposes and already several sites are covered by modern residences.[27]

Town-planning scheme for Plymstock

In September 1924, Plympton Rural Council, on the motion of the Paymaster Lieutenant W. G. Abell, passed a resolution that a town-planning scheme for Plymstock area be prepared.

Mr Percy Loosemore, the clerk, was asked how long this would take to prepare and was told that the surveyor would have to go into various matters and probably nothing more would be heard for a month or so. Much data had to be got ready to fulfil the requirements of the Ministry of Health. The surveyor explained that the scheme involved about 4,000 acres, extending from Plymstock to the main road joining with Plympton. Mr Joseph Rowland thought it a pity the whole district could not be tackled. Mr Leonard Hine suggested that the Randwick Park Estate might be made to conform with the scheme.[28]

There were many meetings with Plymstock Parish Council and Mr Percy Loosemore. In December 1926, the *Western Morning News* reported that at the Ministry of Health's inquiry into the Plympton St Mary Rural Council's town-planning scheme in respect of Plymstock stated that the by-laws of the district were not sufficiently stringent to enable the local authorities to prevent some houses being erected which were undesirable. Mr H. Stewart, the Ministry of Health's inspector, pointed out many objections were lodged, some were:

> Mr Joseph Rowland, market gardener Miss Moore, on behalf of F.J. Moore, Ltd, Pomphlett Limestone Quarry Mr W.L. Wade Dalton for Lord Morley Mr C.C. Elford, Oreston and Turnchapel Steamship Company[29]

[25] Ivy Langdon, *The Plymstock Connection* (Westcountry Books, 1995).
[26] *Western Morning News*, 5 July 1921.
[27] *Western Morning News*, 21 April 1927.
[28] *Western Morning News*, 13 September 1924.
[29] *Western Morning News*, 18 December 1926.

Mr Loosemore said the inquiry was unique as far as this part of the country was concerned, because it was the first town-planning scheme that had reached this stage under any rural district council in the West of England. Being the first of its kind in the district, he did not think the general body of objectors quite understood what was meant by town planning.

He said the area surrounding Plymstock was still rapidly developing and it would be seen that houses were being erected so rapidly that the council were confronted with the question of controlling practically a new district. Houses were being promiscuously erected all over the place and some undesirable buildings were being erected on the main road from Yealmpton to Plymouth as not to conform with the requirements of the district in view of the increased traffic, which necessitated road widening. The by-laws of the district were not sufficiently stringent to enable the local authorities to prevent this kind of thing. It became imperative that the council should prepare a town-planning scheme.

Mr Loosemore made a dramatic appeal:

> I am going to make an appeal to the wealthy landowners who own property in the heart of Plymstock. It is not my business to go into the cost of this land or your private affairs but having made nice little fortunes out of this land I am hoping you will have a different outlook. I want to appeal to those owners who were fortunate enough to acquire land from the Duke of Bedford to look at the scheme from a different point of view and not to be mercenary in any way. I want them to help us and co-operate in the development of your area and not deprive people who are going to live there of their allotments and playing fields.[30]

Mr Joseph Rowland thought such observations were uncalled for.

In April 1928, town planning at Plymstock was the topic discussed at a meeting of Plymstock ratepayers. Mr H. Evans, presiding, said, 'the time has arrived when the building by-laws of the Plympton Rural District Council should be revised so that the houses and bungalows erected should conform to the spirit of the Town Planning Act of 1909.'[31]

Mumford's Billacombe Works

It wasn't just houses that were built in the 1920s. In 1920, Mumford's Garage purchased a site at Billacombe, Plymstock, which was a one-and-a-half acre site, comprising five single storey buildings, a woodworking shop, painting and finishing, a dry timber shed, a saw mill and a smith shop, along with their new and impressing engineering shop (measuring 150ft × 60ft) to carry out repairs and overhauls of every description. The shop was staffed with highly skilled mechanics and the machine shop was equipped with the best and most up-to-date plant, including universal milling machines, lathes, shapers, drilling machines, power hacksaws, universal grinders, crank shaft grinders, a 300 tonne power hydraulic press etc. Power was supplied by a 85hp semi-diesel engine. Their spacious stores were stocked with wide range of spare parts, every size ball-baring and popular size solid tyres.

[30] *Western Morning News*, 18 December 1926.
[31] *Western Morning News*, 14 April 1928.

Figure 14: Young men learning the trade at Mumford's Billacombe Works.[32]

Figure 15: Mumford's Billacombe Works.[33]

[32] Chris Robinson, *Plymouth in the Age of the Petrol-Driven Motor Car, 1896–1939* (Pen & Ink Publishing, 2021)
[33] Ibid.