Restoring Devon Cottages

The 1926 (Rural Workers) Housing Act

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There are a number of otherwise unremarkable houses in Devon villages that conceal earlier existences. Had these houses been restored today, they would look – from the outside at least – much as they had done when they were built several hundred years ago; their much-altered form is the direct result of a central government initiative to provide improved housing in rural areas: the 1926 Housing (Rural Workers) Act.

A typical example, 1–3 Church Hill cottages in Awliscombe, East Devon, demonstrates how some of these houses leave few visual clues as to their transformation, requiring both local knowledge and archival research to identify them.

Figures 1 and 2: 1–3 Church Hill, Awliscombe, taken by the author in 2023 (left) and c. 1926 by R. T. Shears (right).[1]

In the early 1920s, following a period of coalition government in which all three main political parties recognised the need for improved housing (see the 1919 Housing, Town Planning (Addison) Act), no serious thought had been given to the specific needs of rural housing, although a national legislative framework was already in place in the form of a series of subsidised housing acts (1885, 1890 and 1909). In East Devon, at least, this had resulted in one or two rare examples of pre-First World War rural council houses (Newton Poppleford, 1913, for example). Local authorities throughout Devon received letters from the local government board regarding the need for housing, before the dust of a world war had even settled.[2]

[1] R. T. Shears, *The Conservation of Devonshire Cottages* (Gazette Printing, 1968).

[2] J. Moss, 'Housing in the 1920s: Tiverton Rural District Council's House Building Program' (unpublished essay, DHS 1920s project) and P. Planel, 'Homes for Heroes', *Country Smallholding* (June 2004) pp. 76–77.

While council houses in Devon were indeed being built in villages as well as in urban areas in the early 1920s, especially following the 1924 Housing (Wheatley) Act of the short-lived Labour government, attention to the specific needs of rural housing had to wait until 1926 when the then minister of health, Neville Chamberlain, convincingly argued that the problem for rural workers was often not a shortage of housing but the poor quality of housing stock and low wages:

> In the country districts we have a population which is, generally speaking, stationary, if not declining, and consequently you have not there the problem which you have in the towns of having to provide for a constantly increasing number of families. The other feature is that even in pre-War times the agricultural labourer was never expected, and, as a matter of fact, was never in a position, to pay an economic rent for his house. Perhaps to that fact must be ascribed the practical stagnation of house building in rural districts for a great number of years.[3]

As a Conservative and a minister who had already stimulated the private housing sector in a previous Housing Act (1923), Chamberlain preferred subsidising rural property owners to restore their properties rather than resort to compulsory purchase or other local authority intervention. However, although the 1926 Act was national legislation, it was to be largely a Devon matter, since Devon was the only county council to enthusiastically and comprehensively take advantage of this government subsidy in the 1920s. A few smaller authorities, such as Atcham (Shropshire) Rural District Council, also made use of the Act, but it was only after the Act expired in 1931 and was extended until 1936 (and then 1939) that any other county councils took advantage of its provisions.[4]

The reasons for the uneven take up of the Act in other parts of the area is discussed by Hoggart.[5] The twenty-year fixed rent tenancies that landowners had to agree to for their properties to qualify for 1926 Act funding tied them down and prevented them from renting to holidaymakers or tenants willing to pay higher rents. Chamberlain was not alone in laying the issue of lack of interest firmly at the door of landowners: 'I think the only way to stimulate them is to get the District Councils to make themselves disagreeable to the owners.'[6]

Chamberlain's interest in Devon and the leading role of Sir Francis Acland (Liberal member for Tiverton, 1923–24) were no doubt catalysts in the success of the Act in Devon. The ability of the two men, from different political horizons, to embrace the same project may indicate a survival of the idea of cross-party working, but it also reflects well on their individual qualities. Acland's interest in housing had led him to support Labour's 1924 Housing Act in his election address for the October 1924 election and yet he was also willing to chair the Devon County Council committee, which administered the Conservative-inspired 1926 Act.[7]

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[3] HC Deb Hansard, 'Housing (Rural Workers) Bill', vol. 198 (03 August 1926), cc. 2839–2919.

[4] R. T. Shears, *The Conservation of Devonshire Cottages* (Gazette Printing, 1968), pp. 21, 39.

[5] K. Hoggart, *A Contrived Countryside: The Governance of Rural Housing in England 1900–1974* (Springer, 2021).

[6] K. Hoggart, 'Diary 19.11.1927' in *A Contrived Countryside: The Governance of Rural Housing in England 1900–1974* (Springer, 2021).

[7] Tregida (2006), pp. 146–47.

Chamberlain visited Devon in 1926 'as one of a series of visits he was making to confer with local authorities about the coming changes in the reform of the Poor Law',[8] but, as Shears goes on, Mr Chamberlain, when in Devon, 'intimated that there was another important and more urgent problem facing the country, namely the housing conditions of Agricultural Workers.'[9]

Either on the above, or a later occasion in the same year, Chamberlain is described as:

> … spending the vacation in visiting rural districts with a view to obtaining knowledge on the housing conditions … the tour will be of a semi-private nature and will not include any public meetings … The minister will be accompanied by Sir Arthur Robertson, secretary to the Ministry of Health, and they will be the guests in Devon of Mr Brian S. Miller, clerk to the County Council, who is making the local arrangements.[10]

The following year, Chamberlain was once more in Devon; in Sidmouth, opening the excellent Arcot council estate designed by R. W. Sampson, as evidenced by a two-minute film that has survived from the period.[11] Chamberlain's speech, in which he compliments the architect on layout and amenity as well as house design, supports the widely held view that he both knew and cared about housing.[12] We should note that the rents, at 9s 6d for the two parlour houses and 8s for single parlour houses, were high for lower paid workers. Chamberlain could not refrain, in his speech, from a swipe at the now defunct Addison Act.

Devon was fortunate in having several figures dedicated to housing (such as Sir Robert Newman, Conservative then Independent MP, Exeter). Another individual who seems to have played a leading role in implementing the 1926 Act in Devon was R. Shears, clerk to the Devon County Council 1926 Act Committee, whose book, *The Conservation of Devonshire Cottages*, was published in 1968, following his retirement. The tone of this work – from his criticism of the state of some rural housing in Devon as 'little short of scandalous', quoting extracts from damning Medical Officers of Health (MOH) reports, to the photographs he took as examples of houses – demonstrate a quiet but passionate interest in the work of administering the Act. Shears took his own photographs; some of houses before they were restored, some after they were restored and some both before and after.

For professionals on the ground, Sanitary Inspectors (SAs) and MOHs, there was relief that older properties could be saved; something a 1925 Act militated against:

> The Rural Sanitary Inspector welcomes this Act as one that should assist him in dealing with old cottages. He dare not take strong action to get these places made into a satisfactory condition for human occupation for fear he loses the cottages altogether. If section 3 of the Housing Act, 1925, is put in force in Rural Districts it nearly always results in the Ministry conforming the closing orders made by the owners on the grounds that the houses cannot be made fit in all respects for human occupation, without structural improvements….. therefore if the 1926 Act is used … this will mean … new roofs as well as drastic repairs to existing walls, floors, etc.[13]

[8] R. T. Shears, *The Conservation of Devonshire Cottages* (Gazette Printing, 1968), pp. 1.
[9] Ibid.
[10] *Torquay Times*, 8 October 1926, p. 7.
[11] Zoom talk by Nigel Hyman for the DHS 1920s Project Housing Group, 11 September 2023.
[12] *Exeter and Plymouth Gazette*, 25 May 1927, p. 2.
[13] Redfern in C. E. Tangye, H. B. Mapleton and A. J. Redfern, 'The Housing (Rural Workers) Act', *Journal of the Royal Sanitary Institute* (1927), p. 20.

A. J. Redfern, quoted above, was the SA for Honiton Rural District Council and seems to have come to the same conclusion as Chamberlain several years before the 1926 Act was passed:

> Mr A. V. (sic) Redfern, of Honiton, speaking at the Sanitary Inspectors Conference at Bath …. put in a word for the rural districts, which he said did not require new houses, but did require the present number to be kept up. The rents were as low as 2s 6d, and it was impossible for the owners to do large repairs as the houses were falling down. It was cheaper to buy and repair them than to spend £1,000 on building new houses, yet the Ministry of Health refused to let rural authorities do that.[14]

The two large volumes that constitute the record of the subcommittee of the Public Health and Housing Committee (Devon County Council), mentioned above and chaired by Sir Francis Acland, considered each application for funding through the successive stages of: condition reports and submission of plans; approval, modification or disapproval; completion; inspection and the paying out of funds to the owner of the property. The committee worked closely with architects and rural district SAs and MOHs. Some applications were turned down; sometimes because the houses were too far gone to be saved, other times because the owner had started work without official permission.

A.J. Redfern, believed strongly in the contribution his profession brought to applying the 1926 Act:

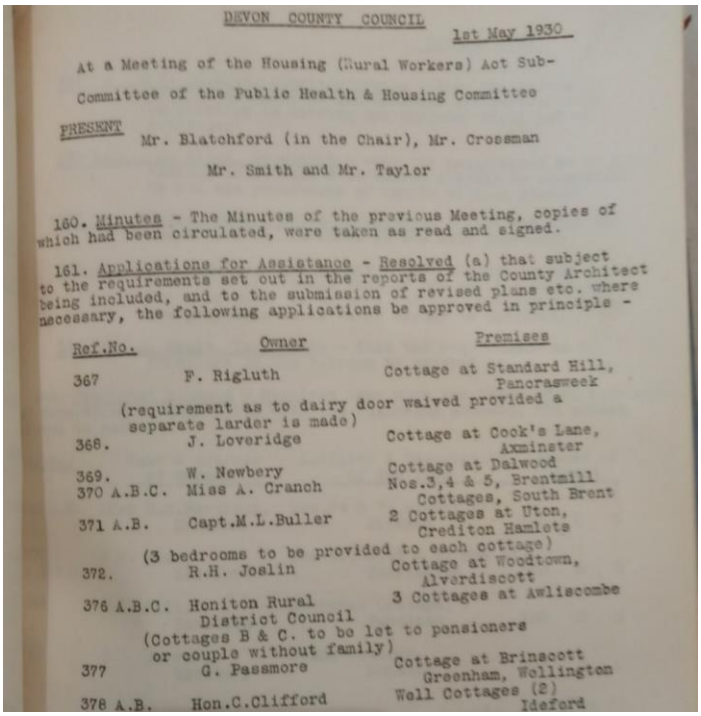
> The local Sanitary Inspector knows the local conditions best, and has records in his office of most of the cottages in his district, so that he could give the history for years back of most of the property.[15]

Identifying the 1926 Act houses on the ground today is complicated by the fact that exact addresses are rarely given, either in the records or in Shears' book. This is why local knowledge, combined with the reading of the fabric of the houses themselves, is often required in identification. To assist this process, the Devon History Society website has helped identify several properties by placing some of the photographs online with the request: 'Do you recognise this building?'[16]

Awliscombe: A type site

If we consider the Awliscombe properties in Figures 1 and 2, identified by local resident John Cann, we find that they were, in one respect, atypical, since they were owned by Honiton District Council – see No. 376 in Figure 3.

[14] *Western Times*, 3 September 1921, p. 2.
[15] Redfern in C. E. Tangye, H. B. Mapleton and A. J. Redfern, 'The Housing (Rural Workers) Act', *Journal of the Royal Sanitary Institute* (1927), p. 21.
[16] Devon History Society, 'Devon in the 1920s – Tracking Down Some Cottage Locations' <https://www.devonhistorysociety.org.uk/research/devon-in-the-1920s-tracking-down-some-cottage-locations>



DEVON COUNTY COUNCIL

1st May 1930

At a Meeting of the Housing (Rural Workers) Act Sub-Committee of the Public Health & Housing Committee

PRESENT Mr. Blatchford (in the Chair), Mr. Crossman

Mr. Smith and Mr. Taylor

160. Minutes - The Minutes of the previous Meeting, copies of which had been circulated, were taken as read and signed.

161. Applications for Assistance - Resolved (a) that subject to the requirements set out in the reports of the County Architect being included, and to the submission of revised plans etc. where necessary, the following applications be approved in principle -

Ref.No.	Owner	Premises
367	F. Rigluth	Cottage at Standard Hill, Pancrasweek
	(requirement as to dairy door waived provided a separate larder is made)	
368.	J. Loveridge	Cottage at Cook's Lane, Axminster
369.	W. Newbery	Cottage at Dalwood
370 A.B.C.	Miss A. Cranch	Nos.3,4 & 5, Brentmill Cottages, South Brent
371 A.B.	Capt.M.L.Buller	2 Cottages at Uton, Crediton Hamlets
	(3 bedrooms to be provided to each cottage)	
372.	R.H. Joslin	Cottage at Woodtown, Alverdiscott
376 A.B.C.	Honiton Rural District Council	3 Cottages at Awliscombe
	(Cottages B & C. to be let to pensioners or couple without family)	
377	G. Passmore	Cottage at Brinscott Greenham, Wellington
378 A.B.	Hon.C.Clifford	Well Cottages (2) Ideford

Figure 3: Page from the minutes of the subcommittee of the Public Health and Housing Committee (Devon County Council), formed to administer the 1926 Housing (Rural Workers) Act and led by Sir Francis Acland, thanks to Devon Heritage Centre.

Cottages B and C were not deemed large enough for families with children. This was permissible in a row of cottages, but in general the subcommittee was conscious of the need to provide sufficient space – a third bedroom, where possible. This space debate is similar to the parlour debate surrounding 1920s council houses in Devon: yes or no to a front parlour in a council house? An additional factor, cited by Shears, was the threat of TB and the need to provide for patient care at home, if necessary.[17]

[17] R. T. Shears, *The Conservation of Devonshire Cottages* (Gazette Printing, 1968), pp. 21.

Clearly, the Awliscombe cottages were of some antiquity. The 1840 Tithe map (see plot 666, Figure 4) suggests the building may already have comprised three living units because there appear to be three separate gardens.

Figure 4: Awliscombe Tithe map (1840), thanks to Devon Heritage Centre.

A 1894 painting by Lyman and a 1904 postcard both suggest at least a twofold division, given that the thatch seems to have been renewed in two distinct episodes, see Figure 5. The property had become near ruinous by the mid-1920s.

Figure 5: 1–3 Church Hill by Lyman (left) and 1904 postcard (right).

Estate agents plans for 3 Church Hill (see Figure 6) testify to the thickness of the original walls, in contrast with a more recent extension, and the survival of features such as fireplaces and chimney breasts. East Devon Council planning application drawings for 1 Church Hill tell the same story. However, the building has unfortunately been deprived of a couple of metres of its characteristic steep thatched roof and its gables. A lowered roof was a cheaper solution, both as regards to lighter roof construction, using shorter and smaller section timbers, and presenting a smaller area to cover.

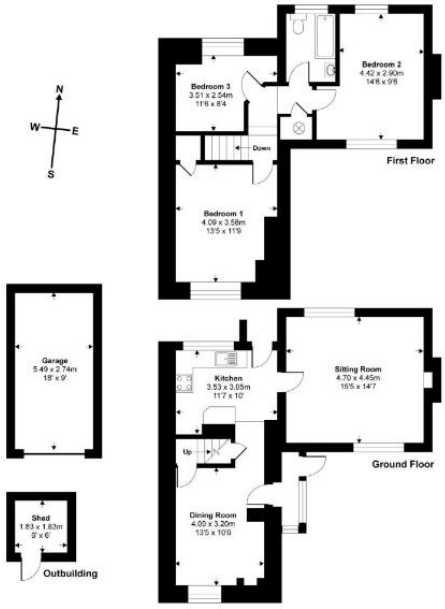


Figure 6: 3 Church Hill, Awliscombe – Stags estate agent plans.

Prospect Cottage, in nearby Kentisbeare, appears to have received the same treatment (grant of £87 and 2s awarded on 2 May 1929). The roof, the size of the windows and the low recessed door also reveal the thick walls and hint at an earlier existence (see Figure 7).

Figure 7: Prospect Cottage, Kentisbeare.

East Devon's 'pointy' council houses were also being built in Awliscombe in the mid-1920s, only a stone's throw from 1–3 Church Hill. While they might also house rural workers, they did not exclusively do so.[18] Villages such as Awliscombe, Combe Raleigh or Monkton were only a mile or two from Honiton, and their newly built council houses, known as 'pointy houses', satisfied the housing needs of a more diverse workforce.

The wider picture in Devon

Several hundred houses in Devon were in various stages of progress towards restoration by 1930 and a total of over 2,000 restorations were achieved before the scheme was finally wound up at the outbreak of war in 1939. Although most of the grants were awarded to farmers and estate owners, titled and untitled, and often for groupings of several cottages, it was possible for owner-occupier rural workers to apply for a grant.

Shears, already writing articles about the cottage restorations in the late 1920s, no doubt to promote wider adoption of the scheme, captions a photograph of a simple but very attractive cottage where the thatch has in this case been retained: 'all the work was carried out by the owner, an agricultural labourer' – no location is provided. [19] Interestingly, in the same article Shears also writes, in a caption beneath another thatched house:

> Cottage (possessing archaeological interest) before reconditioning. The owner desired to remove the bay and thatched roof but has been requested to supply a revised scheme so that these picturesque features may be retained.[20]

Clearly there was something symbolic and cherished about the Devon thatched cottage, and it was perhaps inevitable that a tension should exist between cost and aesthetics. In the cases of the Awliscombe and Kentisbeare houses, retaining desirable features such as the roof pitch may have been too expensive, but equally the owner (in one case a public body) may not have possessed any sentimentality regarding cottage architecture.

It is worth noting that improving landlords such as Mark Rolle and his steward Robert Lipscombe considered thatched buildings in the lower Otter valley to be inherently unhealthy and backward, even in the late nineteenth century, and demolished a number of them.[21] However, it is difficult to gauge how much this opinion was shared in the 1920s by other landowners and the general public. Certainly several decades later, when Shears compiled his work on Devon cottages, he exhibited a strong attachment to the idea of the cottage. The frontispiece of his book consists of a quote from Stanley Baldwin:

> Nothing is more characteristic of England's countryside than the cottage homes which for century upon century have sheltered her sturdy sons of toil … Ought we not, then, to be proud of them, to protect them, to do everything in our power to save them from decay.[22]

[18] P. Planel, 2024 (forthcoming).

[19] R. T. Shears, 'Reconditioning of Rural Workers Cottages', *Journal of the Ministry of Agriculture* (1929), pp. 207–14.

[20] Ibid.

[21] A. Ford, *Mark Rolle: His Architectural Legacy in the Lower Otter Valley* (Otter Valley Association, 2002).

[22] R. T. Shears, 'Reconditioning of Rural Workers Cottages', *Journal of the Ministry of Agriculture* (1929), frontispiece.

SAs and MOHs, united in their desire for better housing, clearly also felt the tension between modernity and aesthetics. Restorations were clearly preferential to new build council houses:

> The desire of the Ministry that the time-honoured architectural features of the countryside shall be respected and preserved [through the 1926 Act] is a most welcome indication of the revulsion of feeling in official quarters against naked modernity. …. The conservative mind from the time of cave man right down the ages has been horrified by each successive wave of new building, but we who live in the age of Council Houses have been reserved a greater trial.[23]

Tangye was an MOH who shared a conference platform with Redfern. He would no doubt have relished Anthony Powell's term, passed down from a similarly lofty height, concerning 'tenements' of the same era: 'experiments in architectural insignificance'. Chamberlain clearly also had a preference for older buildings and did not wish to replace cottages with: 'buildings which, though they may be sensible, are of a different style and cannot be said to harmonise with surroundings.'[24]

Assessed as a building or a machine for living, rather than a symbol, the cottage does – unlike a new council house – come with some less attractive features: the absence of a damp course or of cavity walls, low ceilings and small window openings. So, what were the relative costs of restoring a damp cottage compared with tearing it down and building anew with brick, featuring cavity walls and damp courses?

In Chudleigh in 1928, a contract for twenty council houses at Pullin's Terrace was for £10,980 13s 8d – or around £500 a house.[25] The grant to property owners under the 1926 Act was for a much smaller sum: up to £100 per house – provided the value of the property on completion was not in excess of £400.[26] And, of course, building a single house in a more isolated location would cost more than a house in a row of twenty terraced houses with good road or rail access for materials and labour.

On the basis of this assessment, £100 per house looks like money well spent, at a time when a certain amount of damp was in any case taken for granted at all levels of society in rural areas and also when building materials were in short supply due to massive urban building projects initiated by the Wheatley Act (1924). This was the first use of improvement grants in the UK and came several decades before such grants were adopted in towns.[27]

The idea of the cottage is indeed a complicated one in our national psyche: the Rolle houses, although brick built and sometimes in terraces of four (at Knowle Village, Budleigh Salterton, for example), are referred to as 'cottages'. However, importantly, the Rolle cottages were built for estate and farm workers, and somewhere in the idea of a cottage there is also perhaps the notion of life and work in the countryside – the labouring but dignified rural poor; to be contrasted with the subversion of the cottage by the upper classes in the form of the cottage orné (the Knowle, Sidmouth, for example). Rural workers, Baldwin's 'sturdy sons of toil' quoted above, are mentioned in the same breath as the cottage as a home, making the cottage an institution as much as an example of vernacular architecture. The desire to recognise labouring heroes, returning from the

[23] Tangye in C. E. Tangye, H. B. Mapleton and A. J. Redfern, 'The Housing (Rural Workers) Act', *Journal of the Royal Sanitary Institute* (1927), p. 16.

[24] K. Hoggart, *A Contrived Countryside: The Governance of Rural Housing in England 1900–1974* (Springer, 2021), p. 211.

[25] H. Turnbull, 'Housing for Agricultural Workers' (unpublished essay DHS 1920s project, 2023), p. 6.

[26] R. T. Shears, *The Conservation of Devonshire Cottages* (Gazette Printing, 1968), p. 7.

[27] K. Hoggart, *A Contrived Countryside: The Governance of Rural Housing in England 1900–1974* (Springer, 2021), p. 60.

ravaged soil of the trenches to till home soil near their cottages, may have held a particular resonance in a rural county such as Devon and may also help to explain Devon's enthusiastic adoption of the 1926 Act.

Sentiment aside, the notion of economic value was, as we have seen, undoubtedly present in Devon's implementation of the 1926 Act. This is also evidenced in the fact that, under the Act, buildings not initially constructed for human habitation could also be converted to housing by their owners; for example: the barn, now known to be at Fremington (thanks to Fremington Heritage and History Group), near Bideford, converted into three cottages, or the textile mill, identified as being in Chagford (thanks to Chagford History Society), converted into multiple dwellings – see Figures 8–10.

Figures 8, 9 and 10: Fremington barn, before and after; Chagford textile mill.[28]

Conclusion

While the adoption of the 1926 Act in Devon was a far-sighted and progressive move, ultimately improving the lives of thousands of people, the legislation also saved many cottages and other interesting buildings from abandonment. Recent work in East Devon has shown that there are entire congeries of cottages and farms present on the Tithe maps that have since disappeared,[29] a process that was still active in the 1920s and even beyond; Hooknoll in Branscombe, for example (Disappeared Houses Walks, 2008, 2009, Branscombe Project) and Aplins in Offwell (Parishscapes Project, East Devon AONB, 2007–2010). While some of the 2000 cottages saved by the 1926 Act have unfortunately lost their exterior, 'cottagey', look, they are at least still present in the landscape. Underneath the new roofs of the 1920s and 1930s, many much older features still remain.[30]

[28] Shears and R. Boys.

[29] H. Riley, *Excavation of a Deserted Cottage at Summerdown Farm (Northleigh), Devon* (East Devon AONB report, 2010).

[30] Unpublished sources referred to in this report: Devon Archives and Local Studies Service (South West Heritage Trust): Minutes of the 'Housing (Rural Workers) Act 1926 subcommittee: DCC 155/2/11/1 (March 1927–February 1937); DCC 155/2/11/2 (April 1937–October 1947).