St Budeaux Council Houses for the Men of Rosyth and Pembroke Dockyard

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In 1925 various newspapers announced that the Royal Dockyards at Pembroke and Rosyth Docks were redundant and would be closed.

In September 1925, Leslie Hore-Belisha, MP for Devonport, wrote to the First Lord of the Admiralty saying the news of the closing down of these dockyards had struck fear into the yards which had been temporarily spared – particularly into Devonport. He asked that these men would not be sent to Devonport as this dockyard was already 'over-swollen with 2,000 men unemployed.'[1]

He also explained that there were no alternative industries in and around Devonport in which these men could be absorbed, and asked the First Lord if he could assure him that the unemployed of Rosyth and Pembroke would not be sent to Devonport. His reason why there were so many unemployed at Devonport Dockyard was because in the war men were urgently needed and came to Devonport from all over the country. They then stayed and when Devonport men returned there were no jobs available.

Major Hore-Belisha also said that Devonport was one of the most overcrowded towns in England:

> Whole streets might be traversed in which families were "existing" not only in a congested state, but in damp and insanitary conditions. As the Admiralty was the only large employer of labour in the town, both naval and Dockyard, he had always urged that it had a particular obligation to see that its employees had proper coverings. Hitherto the Admiralty has disclaimed responsibility, casting the onus of finding accommodation on the Ministry of Health, which, in conjunction with the Town Council, hardly succeeded in touching the fringe of the problem. That made it all the more necessary that no more influx of labour should be tolerated.[2]

Mr Leslie Hore-Belisha persisted in his efforts to the First Lord in 1925, requesting that men were not sent to Devonport, but to no avail. On 14 January 1926, he asked Mr Bridgeman, the First Lord of the Admiralty to send no more men to Devonport from Rosyth and Pembroke until Devonport's housing conditions had been improved. He sent a copy of a letter he had written to the Minister of Health, showing the deplorable conditions of the new houses erected by the Town Council in Devonport, including some that were unfit for habitation. He finished

[1] *Western Morning News,* 11 September 1925.
[2] Ibid.

his letter saying he was hoping to hear that no men will be sent 'until the housing conditions are sufficiently satisfactory to admit crowding in of further persons into Devonport'.[3]

In February 1926 he was told by the Admiralty that the men transferring from Rosyth and Pembroke to Devonport would have to make their own arrangements regarding accommodation. If they were unable to obtain housing they would, no doubt, go into lodgings and store their furniture, but the Admiralty would pay allowances on account of the additional expense to which such men were put.

On 29 April 1926, Mr Hore-Belisha was told by the Admiralty that 296 married and 51 unmarried men, including apprentices, had already been transferred from the closed dockyards of Rosyth and Pembroke to Devonport and that 125 of the married men had left their families at Rosyth and Pembroke Dock.[4]

According to 'Hansard', writing in the *Western Morning News* in January 1927, whatever the scheme was for the housing of dockyardmen from Rosyth and Pembroke,

> It must not be lost sight of the fact that there is such a scheme at all is due to the persistent efforts of Mr Leslie Hore-Belisha, MP who since the transfer of the Dockyardmen from the closed Dockyards took place has been in close and constant touch with the Ministry of Health and the Admiralty about it.[5]

In July 1926, Colonel Day asked the First Lord of the Admiralty if he was aware that employees transferring from Pembroke and Rosyth Dockyards were compelled to sell their houses at great financial loss, owing to the depreciation in value following the closing of the yards. 'One of the men having had to sell his six-room house for £10, and another one with a 10-room house which could not let it at 5s. a week?'[6]

By March 1926, Mr Webb, chairman of the Plymouth Housing Committee, reported that Plymouth was prepared to hand over a portion of the site at North Prospect, which had already been laid out to rehome the 'immigrants' from Rosyth and Pembroke. A site had been set aside in St Budeaux to build 300 houses, and it was hoped the men would take advantage of the council's house purchase scheme.[7]

By August 1926, Mr Webb said progress had been made and the transfer of land at St Budeaux by the Government to Devonport Dockyard Housing Association was shortly to be affected:

> The Admiralty have agreed on a site at St Budeaux, its size and the number of houses to be erected and have also agreed that the scheme be based on the principle of a public utility society. Plans have been prepared for the erection of 150 houses of various types and tenders will be invited. An enthusiastic committee are dealing with the matter and have appointed a board of directors of seven members of whom three are Government employees, two

[3] *Western Morning News*, 14 January 1926.
[4] *Western Morning News*, 20 April 1926.
[5] *Western Morning News*, 25 January 1927.
[6] *Western Morning News*, 7 July 1926.
[7] *Western Morning News*, 27 March 1926.

> Dockyard officials and Alderman J. Churchward, Deputy Mayor and Mr Albert Webb, representing the Corporation.[8]

On 18 January 1927, the newspaper reported that the Admiralty was to make a free gift of land at St Budeaux, valued at over £4,000, to provide for the erection of 144 non-parlour-type and 30 parlour-type concrete houses. Alderman J. J. H. Moses said that this offer was the result of the representations made in the past six months to the Ministry and the Admiralty pointing out the necessity for provision being made for the 300 dockyard workers transferred to Devonport from the closed yards of Pembroke and Rosyth.[9]

Building of the first 100 houses at St Budeaux for dockyard employees, to be erected under the Devonport Dockyard Housing Association, was due to start in January 1928 but this was stopped almost immediately by a building dispute. The *Western Morning News* on 22 March 1928 gave reasons why.

Messrs Barker and Sons thought:

> Construction of roads and sewers should be under the terms of the civil engineering award instead of the building trade rate, which is 1s 9¾d per hour for a 44-hour week for labourers, civil engineering award being 1s 2½d for a 49½ hour week. Various trade union officials believed allowing for the weekly aggregate, plus the question of overtime and the difference between the working hours, the total was a difference of 4s per week. The circumstances in the case have been reported to headquarters of the respective unions. The labourers, members of the National Union of Municipal and General Workers, are continuing at work, so that it would appear that the "innocent victims" are the craftsmen, whose fellow-workers are determined that national agreements shall be honoured.[10]

On 28 March 1928, the *Western Morning News* reported that steps were being taken by the Craftsmen's Union, which blacklisted the work on the St Budeaux Housing Scheme by withdrawing the labour of the local masons and bricklayers. This was in order to get the Bristol representative of their union to approach the contractors, Messrs Thomas Barker and Sons of Loughborough, with a view to considering their decision.[11]

Eventually, on 22 June 1928, the *Western Morning News* reported on the opening of 162 houses to be built at St Budeaux for the families of dockyard employees and men serving in the Royal Navy, reaching fruition when the Commander-in-Chief, Admiral Sir Rudolf Bentinck, opened the first parlour-type house costing £87,324.

[8] *Western Morning News*, 6 August 1926.
[9] *Western Morning News*, 18 January 1927.
[10] *Western Morning News*, 22 March 1928.
[11] *Western Morning News*, 28 March 1928.

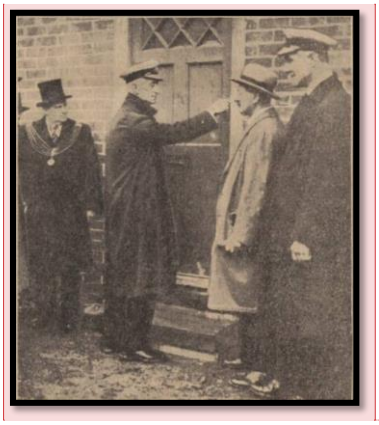

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Figure 1:

> The estate comprises 64 non-parlour-type buildings and 98 parlour-type. Each house will eventually become the property of the occupier by a system of weekly rent-purchase payments which will be within the means of the tenants. The average cost ranges from £450 to £490 per house. Plymouth Corporation advanced £80,000 to the association, but there will be no charge on the rates. The tenants will be responsible to the association, and the association to the Corporation. The houses had been built under the Chamberlain Act and each would receive a lump sum of £50 from the Government. If the houses had been erected under the Wheatley Act of 1924, they would have involved a charge of £3.15s a year from the local rates.[12]

Not everything ran smoothly. On 19 December 1929, Mr Hore-Belisha – still concerned about the Rosyth and Pembroke dockyardmen – questioned the First Lord of the Admiralty regarding the St Budeaux Housing Scheme for dockyard and naval employees.

> Are you aware of the condition of these houses and of the danger to health caused by the inadequate protection against bad weather and is your department taking any steps to safeguard the interests of tenants, all of whom come under the aegis of your department?[13]

The reply Mr Hore-Belisha received was that certain complaints had been made unofficially, but that the Admiralty had no responsibility for these houses, which were erected by the Devonport Dockyard Employees Housing Association Limited, on land given by the Admiralty.

Not giving up, Mr Hore-Belisha asked the First Lord if he would look into the question as some employees of the Admiralty were in a serious plight and the Medical Officer of Health had expressed his disapproval of the conditions existing. The answer he received was that the Admiralty had no responsibility in the matter.

Not every houseowner took advantage of this scheme. On 30 July 1931, Richard Symons, a former member of the Devonport Dockyard Employees Housing Association, was sued at

[12] *Western Morning News*, 22 June 1928.
[13] *Western Morning News*, 19 December 1929.

Plymouth County Court for possession of 2 Blairgowrie Road, St Budeaux and for £82 1s 8d due to the association. Mr Symons claimed that his house 'belonged to the association, of which I am a member, and I claim an equal share in the assets of the association. There were 162 in the association, which had 162 houses.'[14]

The value of his house, according to the Corporation valuer, was £600 and it was subject to a mortgage of £540. Mr Nash, solicitor, said the defendant was no longer a member of the association, his membership having ceased many months ago and his share having been forfeited under the rules.

The judge pointed out to Mr Symons that the rule said that if a share is forfeited you cease to be a member. If you cease to be a member, you cannot have any claim on the assets of the society. The judge then made an order for possession in a month and for the amount the association were entitled to claim after they had forfeited defendant's share, which would be the amount of the interest on the capital then owing.

[14] *Western Morning News*, 30 July 1931.