

Special report by the Medical Officer of Health to the Hertford Rural Sanitary Authority on the houses of the working classes in the Hertford Rural Sanitary District, January 6th, 1894.

Contributors

Hertford (England). Rural Sanitary Authority.

Publication/Creation

1894

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SPECIAL REPORT.

By the Medical Officer of Health to the Hertford Rural Sanitary Authority on the Houses of the Working Classes in the Hertford Rural Sanitary District, January 6th, 1894.

GENTLEMEN,

In obedience to your order I beg to lay before you a special report upon the Houses of the working classes in the Hertford Rural Sanitary District and the steps I have taken during the past twelve months to endeavour to improve the cottages generally.

The housing of the working classes is a matter of great public importance. I have in previous reports given my opinion as to the influence of badly constructed and damp houses upon the health of the occupants and thus indirectly upon the Poor Rates, and shall not occupy your time to discuss that point at present.

The question, however, is one with which it is exceedingly difficult to deal. It appears a simple matter to condemn a house as unfit for human habitation and cause it to be closed. But it must be remembered that there are a certain number of persons in the district who must be housed, and must be housed too within a reasonable distance of their work, and that a cottage pulled down or closed is not necessarily rebuilt or repaired and made fit for habitation, because the rent which an agricultural labourer can afford to pay does not make the erection of houses, such as would in these days be considered fit to live in, remunerative as a speculation.

Cottages in the Hertford Rural Sanitary District, broadly speaking, are owned by two classes of people, viz. Landowners who have built cottages for the convenience of their tenant Farmers, and small owners who have invested their savings in cottage property as a source of income or perhaps as a provision for old age.

Generally little trouble is experienced in dealing with the first class. Most of the new cottages on the large estates are fit for anyone to live in, and, I should say, can yield little or no direct profit. Even when complaints are made with regard to the older cottages the complaints are usually attended to.

With the second class matters are far different ; the owners naturally expect to make money out of the buildings, which when originally bought were probably already far gone in ruin and on which little is spent on repairs. That little too has often been wasted because the owner has given the work over to the jobbing labourer who has contracted to do it at the lowest price, or the owner very frequently persuades his tenant to do the work, supplying the materials. The materials again are very apt to be limited to a little whitewash and the loan of a brush with which to splash the whitewash over the walls and rafters to hide, until after the Inspector's next visit, the too apparent evidences of damp, dirt and decay.

During the past twelve months I have made house to house inspections at Walkern, Bennington, Datchworth, Brickendon, Bayford, Little Berkhamstead, Hertingfordbury, and Little Amwell, directing my attention more particularly to those places which, from an experience of thirteen years, I believed would be most likely to require it.

The defects most usually discovered and reported were—

General dilapidation due to age, rendering the cottage damp and unhealthy.

Privies placed either against the house or too near to it.

Newly erected houses badly built.

Bad or deficient supply of water.

Sometimes the defects were such as to render the house unfit for human habitation without the possibility of any improvement short of demolition and reconstruction ; in other instances the cottages could be made habitable at a comparatively small cost, and the cases have been dealt with accordingly.

The Hertford Rural Sanitary District is under the superintendence of two Sanitary Inspectors. For convenience I will first consider the Watton district, of which Mr. D. Peck is the inspector.

Within this area, in the villages of Aston, Bennington, Datchworth, Walkern and Watton, I have had occasion, during the last year, to report unfavourably upon 44 cottages. As these villages contain 754 occupied houses I have had to make complaints concerning 5·8 % of the whole number. Moreover 22 of these or 2·9 % were so bad that I had to declare them unfit for human habitation.

Taking the Villages in alphabetical order,

ASTON

has 130 houses,
and of these 12 „ or 9·2% were reported,
and 11 „ or 7·7% were declared unfit for human
habitation.

Of the eleven houses unfit for human habitation, Mr. Peck reports :

- 1 is closed.
- 1 is partly repaired.
- 3 are in hand.
- 5 are waiting for the owners to make terms with an adjoining landlord.
- 1 is not mentioned in Mr. Peck's report.

11

The 12th house was reported to the Sanitary Authority because the drainage was out of order. I am informed this house has been properly repaired.

BENNINGTON

has 132 occupied houses,
of these 5 houses or 3·8% were reported,
and 3 „ or 2·2% were declared unfit for human
habitation.

Of the three declared unfit for human habitation

1 has been closed.

1 „ repaired.

1 „ partly repaired and an objectionable privy
has been moved.

—
3

Of the remaining two,

1 was overcrowded ; the overcrowding has been abated.

1 „ dilapidated and has been partly repaired.

—
2

DATCHWORTH

has 138 occupied houses,

of these 9 houses or 6·5% were reported,

and 2 „ or 1·4% declared unfit for human habitation.

Of the two unfit for human habitation, one has been closed
and the tenant of the other is under notice to quit.

Of the remaining seven

3 were reported on account of privy nuisances ; these
nuisances have been abated.

4 were dilapidated and have been partly repaired.

—
7

WALKERN

has 177 occupied houses,

of these 17 or 9·6% were reported,

and 5 or 2·8% were declared unfit for human habitation.

Of those declared unfit for human habitation

1 is closed.

1 repaired thoroughly.

1 repaired.

1 no repairs, but overcrowding, of which complaint
was made, has been abated.

1 will be closed as soon as tenant can find another
house.

—
5

Of the remaining twelve, Mr. Peck reports :

2 can get nothing done, *Landlord very angry.*

4 repaired.

3 no repairs, privy nuisances partly abated.

2 will be closed as soon as occupants can find other houses.

1 overcrowded and dirty; both nuisances abated.

12

No house to house inspection was made at Watton, but one house was noticed to be much out of order. Notice was given, and it has been dealt with in a most satisfactory way.

HERTFORD DISTRICT.

In the adjoining or Hertford District, which is under the superintendence of Mr. A. Scales, I have visited Brickendon, Bayford, Little Berkhamstead, Little Amwell and Hertingfordbury.

These five Villages contain 717 houses, of which I have reported 55 or 7·7%, and 18 or 2·5% were so bad that they were declared unfit for human habitation.

	Population at Census 1891.	Occupied Houses.	No. Houses Reported.	Percentage.	No. Houses declared unfit for Human Habitation.	Percentage.
Brickendon	1007	202	12 =	5·9	12 =	5·9
Bayford	349	68	4 =	6·0	3 =	4·4
Little Berkhamstead ...	430	95	11 =	11·6	1 =	1·0
Hertingfordbury	797	160	5 =	3·1	1 =	0·6
Little Amwell	916	190	23 =	12·1	1 =	0·5
Total	3499	715	55 =	7·7	18 =	2·5

As to the amount of attention which may have been paid to your notices in this district, I am not yet in a position to speak, because Mr. Scales, the Inspector, has been ill and unable to attend to his business, and I should have reserved all mention of the Hertford district, on account of the incomplete information, until next month, but for one important occurrence to which I shall have to refer presently at considerable length,

Returning again to the report of the Watton district ; it will be seen that 22 houses were declared unfit for human habitation. Notices have in all cases been served on the owners, and we will now enquire what effect these notices have produced. The Inspector's report states that :

- 4 houses were closed.
- 4 repaired.
- 2 partly repaired.
- 4 in hand.
- 5 the Owners were waiting to make terms.
- 1 occupant waiting to find a new house.
- 2 nothing done.

At the first glance it would be supposed that the notices had been attended with complete success in 36·4% of the cases, 27·2% had been partly successful, and in only 9% had entirely failed.

In my opinion, however, this would give far too favourable an impression of the facts.

The four houses which have been closed will, probably after a longer or shorter interval, be quietly re-opened. The repairs, except in two cases, are equally certainly of the most flimsy description. The houses "in hand" will very likely remain "in hand" until they fall down ; I have known this process extend itself over many years. As to the other items, the only one in which I have complete confidence is the one which declares that absolutely nothing has been done.

Certainly it is not probable that owners will be over-ready to obey the notices of the Sanitary Authority while it is publicly demonstrated that it is far cheaper to disregard the notices than to comply with them.

In February last year I was asked by the Inspector, Mr. Scales, to inspect ten houses at Brickendon, in the Hertford district. I did so and reported to the Board that they were unfit for human habitation. The owner, a member of the Board, disputed the fact, but the Sanitary Authority eventually decided to prosecute him.

The case was heard by the Magistrates at Hertford on July 1st, and they were assured by Dr. Thresh, Mr. Austin Smith, C.E., Mr. Scales and myself that these cottages were in no way weather proof, that we could see the light through the boarded ceilings and the slate roofs of all of them, and that in most we could see through the walls into the adjoining cottages or into the open air, and that they were so badly constructed as to be unfit for human habitation.

This evidence with regard to the roofs was contradicted by witnesses on the other side, whose evidence on this head I am quite prepared to believe, as applied to the time at which their inspection was made. But even these men admitted, under cross-examination, that the style of building was unusual—"lightly built" was the expression used.

The Magistrates visited the houses and allowed the defendant five weeks, until August 5th, "with a view to giving the defendant an opportunity of carrying out those repairs substantial and otherwise, which they (the Magistrates) deemed to be necessary."

Eventually the time allowed was extended to August 19th. On that date the Magistrates again inspected the cottages. The boarded ceilings upstairs had been covered with mortar spread upon the upper side. Some mortar had been inserted between the boards of the walls, and one or two of the larger holes between the cottages had been blocked with mortar or cement placed upon and between the woodwork. The Magistrates saw the cracks which let in the light from outside and the holes between the cottages.

Upon returning to the Bench the Chairman said: "Since we last met certain alterations and repairs have no doubt been made, but the Bench deem these nevertheless insufficient, and before I say anything further I should like to know whether certain things that the Magistrates deem imperative should be done, will be done. One of these requirements is that the matchboarding should be taken off one side of the party walls and replaced with plaster and hair, and where the daylight shows through the frames of the windows and doors a small fillet should be fixed over the aperture to prevent the draught."

This the defendant's solicitor, on behalf of his client, undertook should be done.

The Chairman then gave the decision of the Court as follows: "Under the circumstances we have come to the determination to dismiss the case, but we do not wish it to be imagined for a moment that we express anything but a favourable opinion as to the conduct of the Sanitary Authority. We make no order as to costs, and therefore the court fees will be paid in equal moieties."

With all due respect to the Bench, and while I fully appreciate the great difficulties the case must have presented to the Magistrates, because any other decision simply meant turning about 50 people out of house and home and moving them away from their work, I must say I regret that decision, especially as regards the costs.

The trial flung an expense of about £27 upon the rates. The offender was a member of the body charged with the care of the Public Health, and therefore doubly bound to comply with the requirements of the Sanitary Authority. He was a builder and must have known he was entirely in the wrong.

Are the owners of small cottage property, who are often ignorant persons, more deserving of pity than blame, likely to comply with, what must seem to them the unjust and oppressive, requirements of the Sanitary Authority, when they see that compliance must necessarily diminish, if not do away with, all their profits, while resistance, even in case of failure, will entail no punishment, and that a heavy cost being imposed upon the ratepayers the Sanitary Authority will not be very ready to take action?

I have visited these cottages and have to report that the promise made to the Magistrates, upon the faith of which the summons was dismissed, has not at present been fulfilled, and I must ask the Sanitary Authority to again take the matter before the Bench.

I am, GENTLEMEN,

Yours truly,

GEORGE TURNER,

Medical Officer of Health.