THE OPERATION OF THE HOUSING OF THE WORKING CLASSES ACT.*

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I HAVE considered the reference to the Public Health Committee from the Housing Committee (dated November 16th, 1905), and am of opinion that there is no insanitary area in the Inner Wards of Lambeth Borough which I could, conscientiously, advise the Council to condemn, and clear, as a whole, under the Housing of the Working Classes Acts, with a view to working-class dwellings being erected on the cleared site.

In my opinion, as medical officer of health, and with a special local experience of ten years, *area* condemnation as opposed to *house* condemnation is, as far as Lambeth Borough is concerned, undesirable and unnecessary—not only for financial reasons, but also from the point of view of efficient sanitary administration. I am of opinion, however, that systematic house-to-house inspections are most desirable, especially in the inner wards of the borough, so that all houses may be gradually levelled, and kept up to a fair and proper sanitary standard, and any individual houses, which may be found to be sanitarily unfit, dealt with under the Public Health Acts, or condemned under the Housing Acts, as may be required, with a view to them being put into proper order and condition, and so rendered fit for human habitation. To secure this, systematic house-to-house inspection is merely a question of the number of sanitary inspectors to be employed.

When a Sanitary Authority (e.g., Lambeth Borough Council) decides to take action under the Housing of the Working Classes Acts, there are practically two ways of doing so. The medical officer of health may condemn (or, in the words of the Act, *represent*) on the ground of danger to health,

- (1) A large or small sized area ; or
- (2) An individual house.

The former course (i.e., condemning large or small sized areas) displaces large numbers of persons on account of houses being pulled down, and, in course of time, rebuilt on improved lines, but at a very considerable financial cost to ratepayers (compensation and otherwise). As a rule, all the houses within a condemned area are closed and pulled down—good, bad, and indifferent, sanitarily.

* From Dr. Priestley's Annual Report, 1906.

Further, such action is officially and legally dilatory, and leads to inspectorial neglect, with the result that dilapidated and insanitary houses become more and more dilapidated and insanitary, and matters pass from bad to worse. As far as the Metropolis is concerned, the London County Council deals with large or small-sized condemned areas under Part I. of the 1890 Act, provided no such small-sized area contain ten or less houses.

The latter course (i.e., condemning individual houses) avoids the displacement of persons, and throws any financial cost involved upon the owner or owners concerned. By this method only really insanitary houses need be condemned. Further, action in this way is officially and legally less dilatory than in the former case, and has recently been rendered more expeditious by the new amending Housing Act. The Lambeth Borough Council deals with individual house condemnation under Part II. of the 1890 Act, and is empowered also, under the same part of the Act, to deal with a collection of houses not exceeding ten in number, and in Lambeth Borough this individual house condemnation under the Housing Acts has proved most satisfactory. Local knowledge of the amount of congestion and crowding, whether of houses over areas or of persons in houses, has always made it desirable to avoid, in Lambeth, the necessary wholesale displacing of persons consequent upon the clearing of an area, large or small. Such area condemnation simply tends, by the displacement of persons, to increase the congestion or crowding in other immediately neighbouring parts, and so to create, by means of one Act of Parliament (the Housing Act) serious nuisances, which it then becomes the duty of a Sanitary Authority to abate by the powers invested in them under another Act of Parliament (the Public Health Act). Indeed, experience shows that, where an area (large or small) is cleared on account of its so-called slumminess, neighbouring properties, which were previously, considering all things, passable, are apt to become rookeries, requiring, in their turn, to be dealt with. It is common knowledge that, amongst the persons displaced, there are those who must live in the immediate neighbourhood, so as to be near their work, which may be of a casual or irregular kind, or for other equally cogent reasons, and they necessarily tend to still more crowd and overcrowd, and so perpetuate all the evils (sanitary and moral) attendant thereon. As houses become scarce, rents increase, and over-crowding, consequently, results from the sub-letting of rooms. In this way, the difficulty is not overcome, but simply transferred from one district to another, or from one house to another, and so the continuity of the vicious circle is ensured. In view of the well-

known fact that, in the inner wards of Lambeth, house accommodation (good or bad) for the poorer classes is already scarce, the Council would be advised to pause before deciding to take steps with a view to closing a large area or areas, thereby accentuating the housing difficulty.

The method adopted in Lambeth, and approved by the late Vestry on January 18th, 1900, has been to deal with houses, singly or in the form of courts or streets, and condemn them, as required under Part II. of the Housing of the Working Classes Act, 1890, as unfit for human habitation, on account of the premises being dirty, damp, dilapidated, badly constructed, ill planned, defective in drains and sanitary appliances, insufficiently provided with water or w.c. accommodation, deficient in light and ventilation, generally worn out, etc. Displacement of persons has been, in this way, avoided.

Fortunately, in Lambeth only one instance has occurred requiring action being taken under Section 38 of the 1890 Act, dealing with obstructive buildings—a most difficult and impracticable section of the Act to carry out. In the Lambeth case the three cottages affected by a large factory were purchased, and afterwards demolished by the owner of the factory.

The result of these condemnations has been that the houses in question have been put into proper order and condition to the satisfaction of the Lambeth Sanitary Authority. In a few instances, about 100 houses, the conditions found have been such that the houses could not be rendered fit for human habitation; they have been, consequently, closed and demolished.

As against these 100 houses closed and demolished, a tabular statement could be given of thousands of houses that, during the same period, have been levelled up to a fair and proper sanitary standard. This has been accomplished by systematic house-to-house inspection, as far as the size of the sanitary staff would allow, followed by the service of notices, under both the Housing and Public Health Acts. Large amounts of money have been spent by the different owners concerned; in fact, owners have been compelled to improve their own insanitary properties—a most desirable condition of things, and one to be preferred to owners being offered a premium for slum property, as is apt to be the case where a sanitary authority compulsorily purchases such property with a view to clearing an area under the Housing Acts.

Even when model dwellings are erected on the cleared site of a condemned area, it does not follow that the displaced tenants will occupy them. Experience teaches the reverse.

The owners under Part II. of the Housing Acts, 1890, are freeholders, or, at least, lease-holders who have not less than twenty-one years' interest; and they naturally desire to render their condemned houses fit for human habitation, and not to close them, thereby avoiding even a small amount of displacement of tenants.

It must be remembered that the Housing Acts need only be put into motion in exceptional cases. In the larger majority of cases it is found to be sufficient to proceed under the Public Health Act, which also enables the sanitary authority to apply for closing orders in connection with houses unfit for human habitation by reason of the existence therein of ordinary nuisances mentioned in that Act—such ordinary nuisances as are met with in house-to-house inspections.

In Lambeth Borough, the average number of notices served under the Public Health Acts is 10,722.

Before leaving the subject of area condemnation under the Housing Acts, mention may be made of the so-called *unavoidable displacements* connected with railway extensions, improvement schemes, increase of business premises (factories, workshops, etc.)—such as are going on in the most northerly parts of the Borough. The difficulties connected with the displacement of persons is well exemplified, and should prevent the Council from adding to such difficulties by area condemnations under the Housing Acts.

In the past, the late Vestry has done well to insist upon a *pro rata* amount of suitable accommodation in the neighbourhood being provided *before any unavoidable displacement of persons is allowed to take place*, and that the displaced tenants should have the first refusal of the new rooms which are to be let at (or about) the same rents as the old ones. This is a counsel of perfection—somewhat difficult to accomplish in practice, and one that has not been carried out in London in the past.

APPOINTMENT.—T. F. PEARSE, M.D., F.R.C.S., M.R.C.P., D.P.H., has been appointed Health Officer to the Corporation of Calcutta.

BRITISH AND COLONIAL SPAS AND HEALTH RESORTS.—For a work on British and Colonial Spas and Health Resorts, which Professor Hewlett has in preparation, he is collecting the principal data in regard to individual towns, and he will be obliged to any Medical Officers of Health who would be so good as to let him have at 6, Bentinck Street, London, W., the data relating to their towns, the source of which will be duly acknowledged.

Apart from the ordinary sanitary data, information is particularly wanted as to the diseases for the treatment of which the place is indicated or contra-indicated. It is requested that references may be given to the sources of publication of any statements not resting on the personal authority of the writer.