

## SOME ASPECTS OF THE HOUSING QUESTION.\*

By A. E. BRINDLEY, M.D., D.P.H.

Medical Officer of Health, Bury.

THE housing problem in our cities and towns is no new one, but is, perhaps, receiving a greater amount of attention at the present time than at any former period, and housing reformers are awaiting with anxious interest further legislative developments.

Recently, a special enquiry has been made into the housing accommodation of the working and poorer classes in Bury, and as it is probable that the conditions existing in this town are typical of those present in other manufacturing towns, I have made the results of this enquiry the subject of my address to-day.

Some 1500 households were investigated, and of these 147 were found to be overcrowded on the basis of over two persons per room (including living rooms). These houses do not of course include the common lodging-houses, nor the houses let in lodgings (furnished rooms).

The following examples will illustrate the state of things found in Bury :—

Reference No.	No. of rooms.	Particulars.
M. (15)	4 (2 bedrooms) very large.	Rent 3/6 per week Occupied by a family of 12, viz :—Father and Mother, nine Girls and one Boy, Girls' ages 23, 21, 19, 17, 15, 14, 12, 10, 6  Very clean people. Five beds.
M. (17)	4 (2 bedrooms)	Rent 3/6 per week Occupied by a family of 10 Three beds.—(1) Father, Mother, and Girl, 3 years. (2) Two at top and two at bottom of bed. (3) Three Girls  All family are girls.
M. (20)	2 (1 bedroom)	Rent 2/6 per week Occupied by seven persons Two beds.—(1) Grandfather and Grandmother. (2) Father, Mother, and two children, aged two and four years; also baby one week old

\* Presidential Address to the North-Western Branch.

The following is an instance of the results of idleness and intemperance :—

Reference No.	No. of rooms	Particulars.
M. (23)	2 (1 bedroom)	Rent 2/6 per week Occupied by a family of six Two beds.—(1) Father, Mother and Baby. (2) Boys 10 and 4, and Girl 8 years. (Boy of 10 suffers from incontinence of urine)

No proper bedclothes, old dirty coats and skirts used as bed coverings.  
Woman not clean—seems idle. House dirty.

A very common state of things is this :—

Reference No.	No. of room	Particulars
Ea. (4)	4 (2 bedrooms)	Occupied by a family of 11 persons Father and Mother Eight Sons, 21, 17, 15, 12, 10, 6, 4, and (?) years, one Daughter, 19 years

A child died in this house a few weeks ago. Total then 12.  
If three bedrooms were available these would move. But if any houses come empty tenants are not taken with large families.

In several of the above instances the householders could readily afford to pay higher rents for larger houses, since several of the children are working; but the difficulty is with the landlord, or agent, who is always unwilling to let a house to a man with a large family. In the majority of cases, however, there is no doubt that the occupiers cannot afford to pay a higher rent. The following are cases in point :—

Reference No.	No. of rooms	Particulars.
Ea. (49)	2 (1 bedroom)	Rent 3/3 per week Occupied by a family of five Two beds.—(1) Father, Mother, and 3 year old Girl. (2) Two children
		Clean, but very poor; short of food. Husband earns £1 per week at Blackpool (boiler cleaner).
Ea. (43)	4 (2 bedrooms)  Front bedroom Back bedroom	Rent 3/6 per week Occupied by a family of eleven Three beds. { (1) Father, Mother, and Baby. (2) Four Girls (two at top and two at bottom). (3) Three eldest boys

The worst examples of overcrowding were found in some of the two-roomed houses. In one instance (E. 29), nine persons slept in one bedroom, mother, five sons, 2 to 10 years, and three daughters, 8 to 17. In this case the mother would find great difficulty in paying 5/- or 6/- per week for a five-roomed house, although this disability

should disappear in a few years as the members of the family grow up and obtain regular work.

Many instances were found of very undesirable conditions of living in houses not technically overcrowded. In one house with two bedrooms lived a man and his wife with two grown-up sons, and one adult daughter with her husband and child. It has become, I believe, quite a custom now for a young working-man on his marriage not to take a house of his own, but to go to live either with his parents or with those of his wife. I am also assured that the Police Court records of the town show that such an arrangement is a most fruitful cause of domestic infelicity and separation orders.

As a last example of housing conditions investigated, I may mention the following instance of a large and healthy family reared in house provided with only two bedrooms :—

Reference No.	No. of rooms	Particulars
M. (24)	4 (2 bedrooms)	Rent 3/6 per week Occupied by a family of 11, viz :—Father and Mother, six Girls, 18, 15, 13, 12, 8, and 3 years, three Boys, 17, 10 and 6 years. Three beds All look healthy and well (all breast fed).

Here the chief factors which doubtless nullified any evils arising from defective housing accommodation were (a) The rural surroundings of the house ; and (b) The primary natural feeding of the children. The first factor lends support to the Garden City principle, which, as the experience at Bournville, Port Sunlight, and elsewhere shows, is conducive to a greatly improved physique of the children living in these places.

The weekly rentals of the houses investigated varied from 2/6 to 3/9, but rentals of 1/6 and 1/10 were respectively paid in two instances.

We now come to consider the difficult problem of “ how to remedy the evil ” ; we are all of us aware of the unsatisfactory, and often deplorable, housing conditions existing in most of our manufacturing towns at the present time, but a satisfactory solution of the question is most difficult to suggest. Increased cost of labour and building materials, and increased stringency of building by-laws, together with increased cost of land, are the main factors accounting for this. Added to this, we have in Bury certain conditions imposed by the ground landlord, in the shape of 20-feet back streets, a certain amount of stone to be built in the brickwork of the front of every house, the provision of three bedrooms, etc. All these conditions tend naturally to increase the rent of the cottage.

The increased prosperity of our manufacturing towns has led to increased need of housing accommodation for the workers, while, owing to the fact of money being "dear," investors have had more profitable outlets for their capital than in the shape of purchasing house property, or in the erection of new houses. Further, in most towns, the rates have risen, with the result that it is not possible to build a house in Bury (nor, I believe, in any other town in this part of the country) to let profitably at 3/9 per week; the minimum rental of houses built in recent years being 5/6 to 6/- per week, exclusive of Poor Rate. These houses have two living-rooms, a very small scullery, and three bedrooms; and they are for the most part quite beyond the means of the inhabitants of most of the houses investigated.

This scarcity of suitable house accommodation for the poorer class has led to an increase in the number of people living in furnished rooms, or houses let in lodgings; and has also led me, as the medical officer of health, to hesitate to condemn many houses existing which have a very low sanitary standard, as I believe, rightly or wrongly, in the axiom that "a poor house is better than no house at all"; that it is infinitely better, in the majority of instances, for people to live in separate houses than in lodging-houses or furnished rooms. We have at the present time in the borough some 119 houses which, though structurally good, are in a more or less unsatisfactory condition as regards situation and surroundings; but one believes that if these houses were dealt with and closed, greater hardship would result to the tenants, and certainly no improvement in their surroundings would result. Also there exist in the town 806 dwellings, out of a total of 13,760 houses, either situated back-to-back, or are so constructed as to be without through ventilation. Conditions of living, however, in the majority of these latter houses are far better than such as obtain in the furnished rooms in the town.

I will now briefly refer to these dwellings (i.e., houses let in lodgings) which we have been dealing with during the past seven or eight years under the model by-laws adopted at the commencement of that period.

In the annual report of the medical officer of health for 1896, it is stated that in the furnished rooms in one district of the town the conditions which existed were deplorable: "These houses were overcrowded, and most of them rendered unhealthy by the dirt and filth which accumulated in the passages, or any of the surfaces which are used in common by the occupants. With nobody responsible for the cleansing of these passages, etc., they are entirely neglected." So-called sanitary conveniences, almost invariably of the midden

privy type, and used in common by the inmates, were usually in a dilapidated condition.

In 1896 the following was the state of things in the town :—

Total number of houses on the flat system	..	39
Total number of rooms	.. .. .	106
Males living in same	.. .. .	81
Females living in same	.. .. .	81
Children living in same	.. .. .	46

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Total number of persons	.. .. .	208
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As showing the profit made from this class of dwelling, it might be stated that the rental per annum received amounted to £869 14s. 0d., and total gross assessment amounted to only £249 17s. 6d. The Annual Report further states that “each room is furnished (?) with a bedstead and bedding, a rickety chair or two, something which serves as a table, and a small assortment of mixed crockery and cooking utensils, the value of all not being more than ten shillings.” These rooms are then sublet at rents varying from 3/- to 5/- per week (payable in advance).

Much progress has been made in the improvement of these places since 1896; model by-laws were adopted in the following year, and we have, at the present time, some twenty-seven of these houses on the register, all of which conform to reasonable sanitary requirements in the shape of water-closets, separate wash-basins, etc. The work of bringing these houses under supervision and inspection is naturally very tedious, as well as unpleasant; as the atmosphere of many of them is most unsavoury, both from a sanitary and from a moral standpoint. I think it highly desirable that these places should be brought into line with common lodging-houses, and be subject to annual registration. Bury was one of the earliest towns to follow the example of Stockport in obtaining the annual registration of common lodging-houses, and this has led to much better supervision and control of the latter. I also recommended in my last Annual Report that the Council might consider favourably the question of providing municipal furnished rooms, with a view of ensuring that poor people who are forced to inhabit these places should have something approaching value for the rental which they pay. I may add that the Bury Town Council has already passed a resolution approving of the provision of a Municipal Common Lodging-house, but I certainly think that Municipal Furnished Rooms are more needed in the town.

A final word regarding the provision of houses. I believe that every endeavour should be made by municipalities to provide a class of house required by the poorer workers, and that an attempt should

be made to bridge over the ever-increasing gulf which is separating the people who can afford to pay the rent of houses that are now being built, and those people who are unable to pay the rent of any house which can be built under present conditions, and who are consequently forced into lodgings or furnished rooms.

There can be no doubt that there are many people in the Borough who do not require a five-roomed house, who can neither afford to furnish so many rooms, nor have they the time or energy to keep them clean; and my suggestion is, that houses containing smaller accommodation should be provided, but that these should be under Corporation control. A house, consisting of a good-sized kitchen, a small scullery, and a good-sized bedroom, would meet the requirements of elderly couples or widows, with one or two children, as well as the newly-married working-man. A small house, consisting of kitchen, scullery, with two bedrooms, would be the next step; then a house, with a large kitchen, scullery, and three bedrooms, would meet the requirements of a working-man with a fairly large family.

I believe that such accommodation could be provided in houses built in one row, the third bedroom in the last class being dovetailed in with the single-bedroomed house. I would abolish the large back-yard, with its 7-ft. unsightly brick wall, obstructing light and ventilation; the yard itself also is often unsanitary when unpaved. I am in favour of having an open space to serve as a common playground for the children, the arrangement and type of houses as may be seen at the present time at Sheffield. This type is evidently very popular with the working-man, for the majority of the occupiers of these houses, I believe, have a thirty minutes' walk to their work in the centre of Sheffield.

If such houses, as I here recommend, cannot be built without a loss to the ratepayers at large, possibly the *cottage flat* might meet the needs of those requiring houses at a low rental; larger block dwellings would probably be unnecessary in towns of less than 80,000 inhabitants; moreover, objections have been urged against large block dwellings, both on sanitary and on social grounds.

The sum and substance of this somewhat cursory address on a very large and important question is, firstly, the provision of cheap dwellings, not by means of jerry-building, but in the way of diminishing the amount of accommodation provided which is not required or asked for by many of the poorer class workers; and, secondly, increased inspection of furnished rooms or houses let in lodgings, in the shape of annual registration, or by the municipalization of these places.