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Council House Building in County Durham, 1900-1939: The Local  
Implementation of National Policy

**ABSTRACT**

There has been a fundamental transformation of the housing supply in England and Wales since the beginning of this century, when most families lived in private rented accommodation, up to the present, when the majority either own their home or rent it from a public authority. This study looks at a vital stage of this development - the growth of the public sector in housing before the Second World War - and examines, in particular, the experience of an important area in North East England. This was the region which at the turn of the century had the most severe housing problems and where by 1939 local authorities had done much more than most to improve conditions. The study begins by considering briefly the philosophies held by housing reformers in the early twentieth century and the course actually taken by national housing policy up to 1939. The specific problems of County Durham at the turn of the century are then analysed and an account is given of the attempts made by local government before the First World War to deal with them. The bulk of the study is devoted to the experience of the inter-war years. An analysis is made of the physical achievements of local authority housebuilding within the county, the factors that constrained this action and the alternatives that were sometimes adopted in its place. Finally, the study examines in some depth the new responsibilities assumed by local government in the implementation of national housing policy. These duties involved local government in the twin roles of builder and landlord; and, by drawing on hitherto-unused council records of the inter-war period, the final two chapters of the study examine these roles particularly from the local authority viewpoint.

Council House Building in County Durham, 1900-1939:  
The Local Implementation of National Policy

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Thesis submitted for the degree of Master of Philosophy  
University of Durham  
1979

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∅ Reproduced from Ministry of Health, Housing, May 1920

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\* Reproduced from the collection in the South Tyneside Local Studies Department

∅ Reproduced from Local Government Board Inspectors' Report, No 262, 1907

† Reproduced from the Gateshead and District Municipal News, August 1935

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Thanks are also due to the helpful staff in all of the record offices and local studies departments visited, and to the councils of Hartlepool, Chester-le-Street and Derwentside which kindly gave me access to records retained in their offices. I am equally indebted to the staff of the Durham University Library and the Department of the Environment Library, who obtained for me most of the secondary material used in this study.

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INTRODUCTION

A. Housing and the State: A Twentieth-Century Revolution

The 'housing problem' in nineteenth-century England was a product of the rapid industrial development which began to transform the social and economic structure of the country from about 1780. One of the main features of this development was an enormous increase in population and a fundamental shift in its distribution over the face of the country. A nation of some  $7\frac{1}{2}$  million people in 1780, most of them scattered about the countryside, had a century later come to number about 26 million, three-quarters of whom now lived in densely-packed towns.

The two processes of growth and urbanisation of the population necessitated a massive addition to the nation's housing stock. This had been supplied entirely by thousands of independent landowners, private builders and investors, each pursuing his own economic interests in response to market forces. Thus the housing stock of late nineteenth-century England belonged to a relatively small, though diverse, class of private landlords. Nearly all working-class families - and most middle-class families too - obtained what accommodation they could on a rented basis. Housing was very much a 'private' area of the economy which developed according to the ordinary rules of supply and demand in a free market. This was a market in which the State interfered as little as possible and there was no such thing as a national housebuilding policy.

Throughout the century, however, many observers had come to believe that private enterprise was failing to produce a housing stock which was sufficient in quantity and decent in quality. The degree of inadequacy varied over the country, but in general the deficiencies were greatest in the housing of the urban working class. In the second half of the nineteenth century a number of philanthropists attempted to overcome the deficiencies of quantity, but their efforts - on a small scale and a

local basis - were of limited effect. At the same time, the State was becoming involved, for reasons of public health, in the qualitative standards of working-class housing - but there was no radical improvement in urban conditions.

By the last quarter of the nineteenth century, the continued urbanisation of the population, together with a growing element of democracy in national and local government, made a greater degree of State intervention in the housing market more likely. But the formulation of a national housing policy required, in the first place, an accurate diagnosis of what was wrong with the private housing market, and then an agreement as to just how far, and by what means, the State should intervene to relieve the malady.

To diagnose the failings of the market was not particularly difficult: a decent urban house cost a great deal to build and most working-class families could not afford to pay a rent which would cover this cost and also yield a sufficient profit to satisfy the landlord. Private builders and investors thus had no incentive to provide a better standard of housing for the poorer members of the working class, who had to make the best of old, badly-built and overcrowded premises. But if diagnosis was simple, to prescribe a course of treatment was a complicated matter. How deeply should the State involve itself in improving the quality and increasing the quantity of the housing stock? Would it be possible to encourage the private sector to greater efforts, or would the State have to allocate some of its own resources to housebuilding? If so - how much should be spent and in what form? By the end of the nineteenth century most politicians had come to recognise the ailment and to agree that something should be done; but as to what that something should be, they were deeply divided.

Between the turn of the century and 1939 many alternatives were debated and various policies were actually adopted. As a result, by the outbreak of the Second World War the State had - through direct intervention - dramatically transformed the housing market. It had fixed non-economic rents for many houses in the private sector, it had given cash subsidies to private builders, and it had also - through the agency of local authorities - come to be the builder and landlord of over a million dwellings. What motives lay behind this last great change and how was it actually carried out? Before studying in detail the development of local authority housebuilding in one important area of the country, it will be helpful to consider - in the national context - the movement of informed opinion on the housing question and the shifts in government policy to which this gave rise. But as a necessary prelude to any of these things, a few words should be said about the scope of this study and about the definitions and sources used.

## B. Definitions

Writers and politicians in the past, and the historians who have followed them, have tended to discuss housing policy as if it fell into two distinct segments - one dealing essentially with measures to improve the quality of the housing stock, the other with its quantity. A superficial review of housing legislation from 1890 to 1939 lends some support to this distinction, although the two considerations were in fact quite closely interwoven. It is clear that the State's initial concern was to eradicate housing of such poor quality as to be physically or morally harmful to those obliged to live in it or near it. But it is also clear that the private sector would then be less likely to provide sufficient housing of the prescribed higher standard - because prospective tenants could not afford an economic rent - and that this would ultimately impel the State to subsidise building costs, or even to build itself, in order to ensure production of enough houses of acceptable quality. So the broad distinction between 'quality' and 'quantity', though convenient, is not wholly precise.

In the literature on the State and housebuilding, and even in the legislation itself, a comparable distinction is commonly drawn between the 'housing' and the 'rehousing' activities of local authorities, or between their building (a) to help meet an otherwise unsatisfied demand for additional houses and (b) to reform insanitary conditions. At both ends of the period under study, central government policy and local authority action were concerned mainly with the 'sanitary' aspects of housing. The emphasis was on trying to improve health standards by demolishing and replacing the worst accommodation, rather than to meet deficiencies in the total supply of housing. It is useful to draw such a distinction between 'housing' and 'rehousing' because the two types

of activity raise quite different questions of motivation. The roots of 'sanitary' policies can be traced back to public health reformers of the mid-nineteenth century and, even if refined on the way by some notion of 'national efficiency', the motives behind housing policy in the 1930s were not markedly different. Their prime concern was not to add to the nation's housing stock but to improve living standards by eradicating obvious threats to public and personal health.

The motives behind such 'sanitary' policies, which could be given the simplified labels of 'humanitarian' or 'utilitarian', were readily understandable and their implementation generated little alarm. After all, the sanitary provisions of the early housing legislation embodied no manifest threat to the existing social and economic structure. Even the most conservative writers on the housing question in this period welcomed the powers vested in local authorities to deal with unhealthy property. Viewed in the same context of public health, such intervention was perfectly consistent with the more paternalist aspects of late-nineteenth century government. In the same way, the reliance of National Governments in the 1930s on a 'sanitary' housing policy reflected conservative and uncontroversial ideas: the problem of unhealthy and overcrowded housing was an acceptable area for action, an area in which even the most unadventurous administrations acknowledged a duty.

The role of the State as a supplier of additional new housing was quite another matter. In the last century and in the present day the shortage of decent housing may have been persistent, but there has never been any shortage of critics to gainsay the State a part in meeting it. The notion of council housing invaded the very heartland of private enterprise - the province of the investor, builder and landlord.

Schemes for additional working-class housing under the 1890 Act generated controversy enough, even though they were often designed to be self-financing; but the great cost to public funds of council housing schemes since the 1920s has given much more scope for conflict. At the end of the First World War, when the political commitment to a massive housing programme was inescapable and the debility of the private building sector self-evident, the necessary but expensive role of builder and landlord was one which many members of central and local government found unnatural and uncomfortable. It was not surprising, therefore, that the National Government decided in 1933, when the political climate made it possible and the economic climate desirable, to withdraw completely from the provision of 'additional' housing.

This study concentrates on 'housing', rather than 'rehousing' or 'sanitary' policy, because the questions raised by the former in this period seem more interesting and historically more important. In practice, however, the distinction between the two types of policy is not entirely clear-cut. In the first place, with regard to motivation, some protagonists of housing reform - many Medical Officers of Health, for example - supported both 'additional' housebuilding and sanitary 'rehousing' policies for the same reason. They were both ways of improving public and personal health: a 'building' policy was preventive medicine, a 'sanitary' policy curative. Secondly, in practice the questions of the supply of new houses and of insanitary conditions are, as we have already seen, closely related. At one level the quantity of houses needed in any society depends on simple demographic factors - the size of the family unit, the size of the total population and changes taking place in its distribution. But it also depends on the number of existing houses which are deemed to be 'unfit', 'insanitary'

or 'overcrowded' - and the definition of these terms is subjective and liable to change over time. So whenever the State decides on a stricter definition of what constitutes 'tolerable' housing and what should be condemned, it effectively demands the erection of new houses, either by the private sector or by the State itself.

In the inter-war period further connections emerged between schemes to add to the housing supply and those to combat insanitary conditions. Overcrowding is related, of course, to the shortage of new houses, but between the wars there was a significant obverse link. For when local authorities fixed their estimates of housing needs in 1919-20, an important factor in determining the target figure for new houses was the level of overcrowding which had existed in their respective districts before the First World War. And though provision was not made in the Housing Act of 1919 to subsidise the replacement of slums, another factor in fixing the estimate of current needs was the amount of 'unfit' property in each district. It was hoped that the blanket provision of an enormous number of new houses would not only satisfy the war-time accumulation of natural demand, but would solve the slum problem as well. Yet the 1919 Act is usually considered to represent a policy of building 'additional' houses rather than a policy of sanitary intent. Conversely, although council houses built under the Acts of 1930 and 1935 served to replace inadequate accommodation in unhealthy and overcrowded areas, they normally represented an addition to the total housing stock of a district. And while the inadequacies of that stock, uncovered by the surveys following the Acts of 1930 and 1935, did not constitute a demand for 'additional' housing in strict market terms, they represented to local authorities a definite programme for the building of new houses. Therefore, although this study does not concern itself with the details of slum clearance, the activity of local authorities as the builders

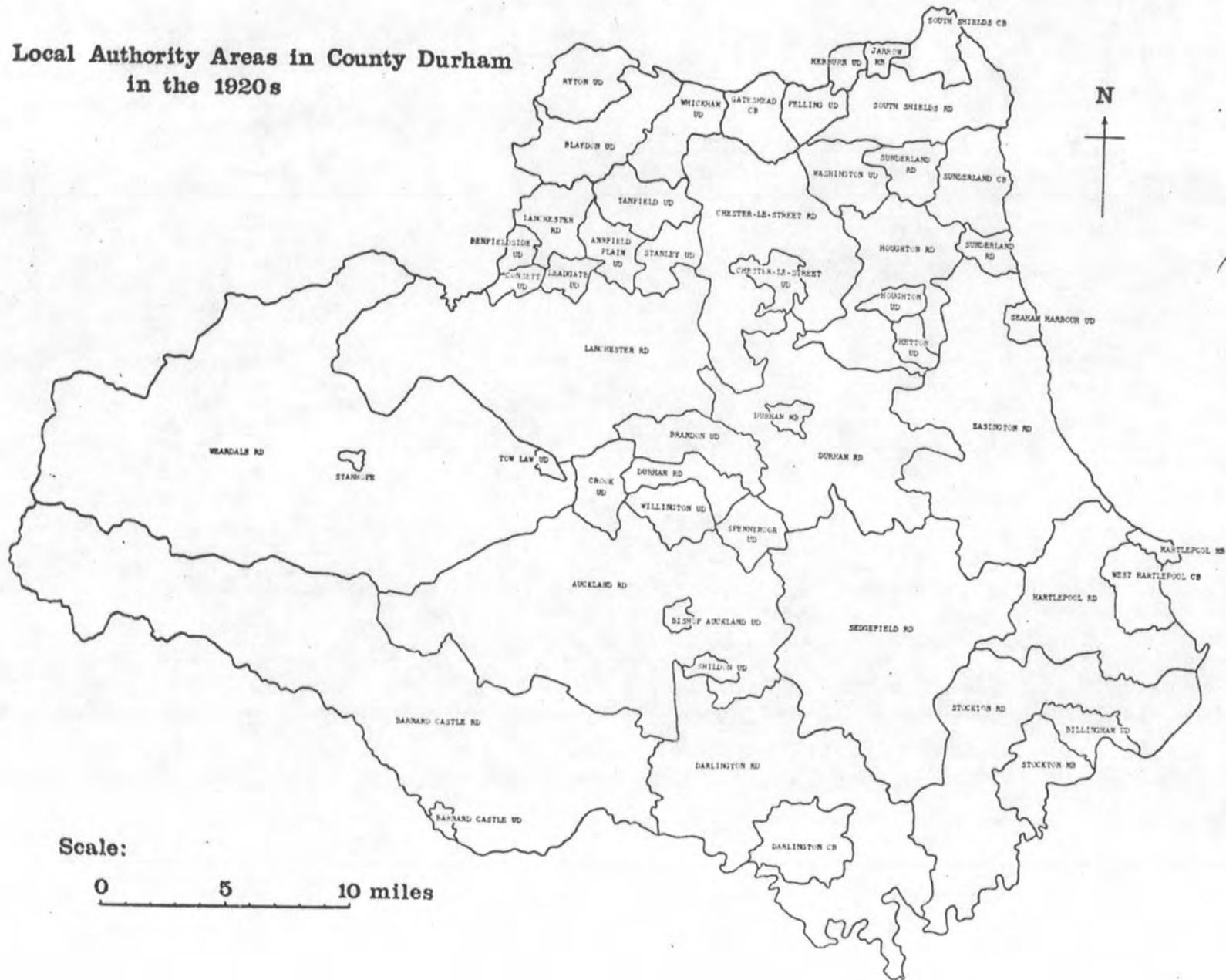
of replacement housing and as the landlords of the rehoused is treated in the same way as their activity under the legislation for 'additional' housebuilding.

In confining itself largely to the expanding function of the council as builder and property owner, this study does not deal in any depth with some of the other important developments in the housing market between 1900 and 1939. Such factors as the control of rents payable in the private working-class housing sector from 1915, the experiment of State subsidies to private builders in the 1920s, and the growth in private owner-occupation between the wars, have received a certain amount of attention elsewhere and would probably support further detailed investigation in their own right. This study claims only to consider one element, albeit a major element, in the changing pattern of housing provision. In the chosen survey area of County Durham the element of local authority intervention was more significant than in most of the country, but naturally it was still only part of a broader picture of housing developments there.

One final point which can be defined far more easily is the geographical scope of this study. The County Durham under consideration is not the forlorn rump of territory left by the local government reorganisation of 1974, but the shire as it was in the period 1900-39 with its related county boroughs. There were, however, a few changes in local government organisation within the county during this period. Chester-le-Street UDC was created as a local authority in 1909, Washington UDC in 1922 and Billingham in 1923. All five of the county boroughs - Gateshead, South Shields, Sunderland, West Hartlepool (created a county borough in 1902) and Darlington (created in 1915) - absorbed parts of the surrounding districts during the period, and the expansion

of Sunderland in 1928 actually swallowed the whole of the Southwick-on-Wear Urban District. The most wide-reaching changes occurred in the reorganisation of 1935-37, which stemmed from the Local Government Act of 1929. These changes are shown in the accompanying maps - one of local government districts in County Durham in the 1920s and the other in 1939. Briefly, they involved a reduction in the number of councils from 49 to 40; most of the urban authorities were enlarged, some were consolidated and the rural authorities were generally reduced or abolished.

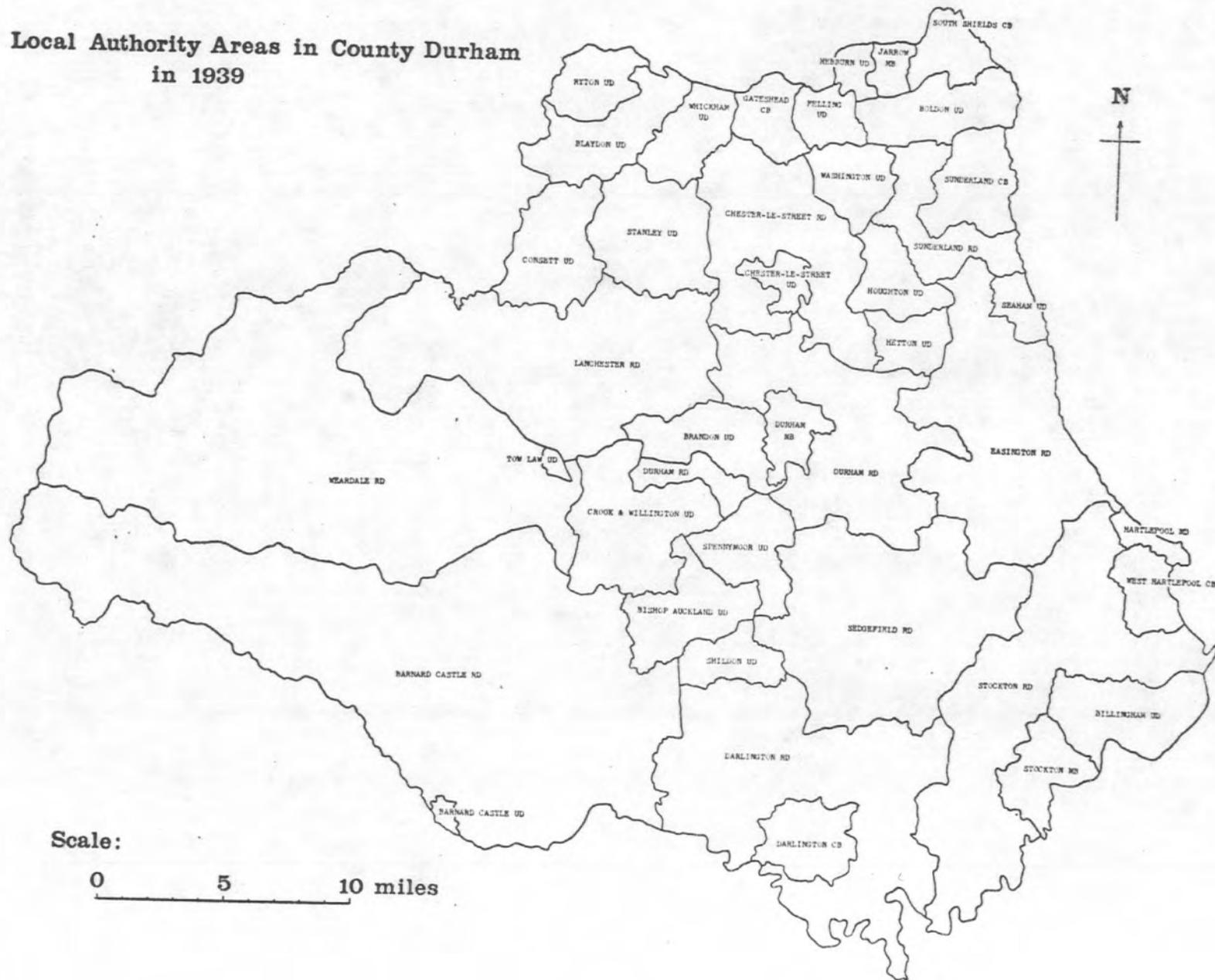
# Local Authority Areas in County Durham in the 1920s



Scale:

0 5 10 miles

**Local Authority Areas in County Durham  
in 1939**



Scale:

0 5 10 miles

### C. Sources

The staple research material for much of this study is the official record of proceedings kept by local authorities in County Durham - the minute books of the councils themselves or of the relevant committees. This material is now available for most of the districts of the survey area for most of the period 1900-1939. It is to be found mainly in the county record offices of Durham, Cleveland and Tyne and Wear, and in the local studies departments of the central libraries of the metropolitan boroughs of Gateshead, South Tyneside and Sunderland. Access was made available by three local authorities to material still in their possession; only one council (Durham City, which now administers the old borough and rural district) was not prepared, at the time when the research for this study was carried out, either to deposit its records in a public archive or to make them available for examination. Local authority records were supplemented by reference to the surviving Ministry of Health files held in the Public Record Office: this source was also useful in filling in the gaps of information left where local records were incomplete or unavailable. The only local authorities not covered by one or other of these sources were Southwick-on-Wear UDC (absorbed by Sunderland in 1928) and the sparsely-populated Weardale RDC. For some local authorities - particularly the county boroughs - it was also possible to use the annual reports of the Medical Officer of Health, which frequently discuss housing matters; the summary reports of the County Medical Officer provided some useful information about some of the smaller local authorities.

Council and committee minutes are obviously of prime importance in an analysis of what local authorities were actually doing in a particular area of responsibility. They not only record the decisions of the body controlling the local implementation of policy, but may

also contain a wealth of background information - details of the circumstances leading up to a decision, for example, or statistics of what the council had already achieved. But such records do have their disadvantages. One problem is that the surviving sets of minutes are not always those which give the fullest treatment of housing matters. A particularly disappointing case is that of Sunderland, where the relevant committee papers are unavailable and the full council minutes do not give much detail. On the other hand, some sets of council minutes reproduce full reports from the housing committee or else incorporate a detailed account of its proceedings.

Another drawback is that the practised writer of minutes does not convey the full range of opinion, prejudice and dissent expressed at meetings of a controversial or political character but, in the style of Cabinet secretaries, may compress the discussion into little more than a summary of the decisions finally reached. Similarly, matters which were of some delicacy (the granting of contracts, for example, or accusations made by councillors) are normally treated as discreetly as possible in the official record. This is unfortunate for the researcher, who is likely to be particularly interested in the aspects of most controversy and delicacy: if no other sources are available, he must develop a facility to read between the lines of the minute book.

It was possible in this study, however, to use the Ministry of Health's records of correspondence with local authorities in the county and of its own assessments of particular local matters - matters which were often tinged with controversy. Another useful supplement to the councils' own records are those items which found their way into the local press - the reporter's view being affected by considerations vastly different from those influencing the committee clerk. It did

not seem profitable for the purposes of such a specific study to undertake a comprehensive survey of local newspapers for the period, but a few sources were found to be extremely useful. These were a collection of local Labour and ratepayers' publications held in the Gateshead local studies archive, together with books of cuttings from local newspapers on civic matters - and a ten-volume collection of cuttings compiled by the county ratepayers' association between 1929 and 1939. The latter collection, which is deposited in the Durham County Record Office, was methodically compiled from local newspapers as a dossier of information on the most controversial aspects of local government in the county.

As well as helping to throw more light on the activities of local authorities in this period, the Ministry of Health files in the Public Record Office touch on some interesting aspects of national housing policy. These records have been used in the more general sections of this study, which otherwise rely heavily on secondary material. In both the national and local parts of the study, however, considerable use has been made - both for background information and direct quotation - of Government publications, including the appropriate Census volumes. The Government or official material found to be most useful has been listed separately in the Bibliography.

Apart from the main sources mentioned above, there has naturally been a range of miscellaneous material, largely of a local character, which has helped to illustrate certain historical aspects of housing. The most important of the miscellany were found to be the records deposited at the County Record Office in Durham by the National Coal Board (which contain useful information about colliery housing in the early part of the period) and the business papers of a prominent local

architect who was employed by several local authorities between the wars. The photographs which illustrate this study have also been drawn from miscellaneous sources - mainly from collections in the local studies archives at Gateshead and South Tyneside. They also include some from the writer's own collection, which was built up on visits to some of the sites mentioned in Chapters 2-5: these tours served in some measure to drape flesh on the bones of the written records.

#### D. Abbreviations

The abbreviations most commonly used in the footnotes to the text of this study relate to the location of primary sources. They are suffixed in the footnotes by the class number (if any) designated by the office in question. The abbreviations, in alphabetical order, are as follows:

CCRO	-	Cleveland County Record Office
CDC	-	Chester-le-Street District Council Offices
DCRO	-	Durham County Record Office
DDC	-	Derwentside District Council Offices
GLS	-	Local Studies Section, Gateshead Central Library
HBC	-	Hartlepool Borough Council Offices
PRO	-	Public Record Office
SLS	-	Local Studies Section, Sunderland Central Library
STLS	-	Local Studies Section, South Tyneside Central Library
T&WCRO	-	Tyne and Wear County Record Office
WHR	-	Reference Section, West Hartlepool Central Library

The status of a council in the local government hierarchy has been referred to frequently in the text in abbreviated form. These abbreviations, which were in common use before the recent reorganisation of local government, are as follows:

CB	-	County Borough
MB	-	Municipal Borough
UDC	-	Urban District Council
RDC	-	Rural District Council

Most references to the districts of Brandon and Byshottles, Houghton-le-Spring and Hetton-le-Hole have been shortened to Brandon, Houghton and Hetton. This liberty has not been taken with

Chester-le-Street, the contraction of whose title might cause confusion.

Sums of money which had a contemporary value (such as 'rent per week') have been expressed in the '£sd' system. Interpolative amounts (such as 'rent arrears per house-year') are expressed in decimal currency.

CHAPTER ONE

NATIONAL HOUSING POLICY, c 1900-1939

A. The Debate on Housing Policy in the Early Twentieth Century

The belief that the State had a role to play in regulating housing conditions developed from the mid-nineteenth century. The justification for this belief was expressed very well by Lord Shaftesbury:

The maxim that 'every man's house is his castle' is a very good one, till it interferes with health, the peace, the comfort, the property, and the lives of the neighbourhood. When that is the case we beg to interpose the still older ... maxim, Salus populi suprema lex est. (1)

It was precisely this philosophy, which had developed from Edwin Chadwick's work on public health in the 1840s, that prompted the 'Torrens Act' of 1868:<sup>2</sup> an Englishman's 'castle' could be condemned and demolished if it was a menace to the common good. The principle was extended by the 'Cross Act' of 1875,<sup>3</sup> which enabled entire areas to be cleared if they threatened public health, and which allowed local authorities to make provision for the rehousing of displaced tenants. As well as dealing with existing private property, the State was also prepared to regulate the conditions for new housebuilding: the Public Health Act of 1875 required local authorities to ensure that new houses were constructed in accordance with certain byelaw specifications. The principle of State intervention was reasonably well established, therefore, but it concentrated on public health, or sanitary provisions. By the turn of the century, however, the debate on housing policy hinged on whether the State should tackle the persistent problem of bad housing by further application of such measures, or whether it should develop the more active

1. Nineteenth Century, vol 14, 1883, p 935.
2. The Artisans and Labourers Dwellings Act 1868 (31 & 32 Vict, c 130). The provisions of this act were incorporated in Part II of the Housing of the Working Classes Act 1890.
3. The Artisans and Labourers Dwellings Improvement Act 1875 (38 & 39 Vict, c 36). This was incorporated in Part I of the 1890 Act.

role of housebuilder itself.

Before examining some of the arguments deployed by the participants in this debate, it is helpful to consider briefly the motives which impelled them. The motivation of housing reformers in the early part of the century is particularly interesting for its isolation from national political creeds: until the 1920s the 'housing question' - while important enough to stimulate much public discussion - was remarkable for its absence from the battleground of party politics. The major Housing Bills of 1890 and 1908-09 were debated carefully and responsibly in the Commons with scarcely a reference to party differences and in 1919, when the Addison Bill awaited its second reading, MPs fell over each other in their eagerness to support the proposals. Before 1920 most politicians who felt moved to speak on the housing question united in expressions of concern about the prevailing conditions and of a common desire for the State to play some part in bringing improvements.

Party difference was absent because the parties themselves had formulated no distinct policy on the matter. The important Housing and Town Planning Act of 1909 was passed during a Liberal administration, yet housing was not an issue brought forward in the Party's manifestos of 1905 and 1910. More surprising is the lack of attention paid to housing matters by socialist writers and politicians: they assumed that improvements in quality and supply would occur in a socialist society, but detailed consideration of the problems was rare. There was, for example, only one Fabian pamphlet before 1914 specifically about the housing question: although it went through several editions, the work offered no new philosophy or practical suggestion about housing reform but simply described the existing legislation and the use so far made of it.<sup>4</sup>

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4. Fabian Society, Houses for the People, Fabian Tract No 76 (London, 1897).

The motives which led men of all political persuasions to take an interest in the housing question were in fact more a mixture of the humanitarian and the utilitarian - a rather mid-nineteenth century combination which has survived for a remarkably long time.

The humanitarian motive which inspired so many reformers was a matter of religious or ethical conscience. The feeling was succinctly expressed in 1926 by J J Clarke, a prolific writer on local government topics, whose views on housing reform often sounded like appeals from the previous century:

The solution of the housing problem lies deep in the ethics and principles of Christianity. It is a moral and religious problem ... [it] must be faced with a prayer upon the lips, and sincerity, co-operation and toleration in our hearts. (5)

Just as those who condemned the physical damage caused by bad housing conditions hoped that reform would bring higher standards of health, the underlying belief of the 'moral' housing reformer was that, given an end to poor living conditions, private and public morality would inevitably improve. Or, as Clarke felicitously put it, 'if the individual be given a good house, he will seize the opportunity of revealing himself as the respectable citizen that he is at heart.'<sup>6</sup>

Most reformers believed that insanitary and overcrowded housing conditions constituted, as Neville Chamberlain said when moving the second reading of his Housing Bill in 1923, '... a perpetual danger to the physical and moral health of the community.'<sup>7</sup> The danger posed by bad housing conditions to physical health could be demonstrated easily enough. As a Newcastle councillor observed in 1902, Gateshead was the

5. J J Clarke, Housing in Relation to Public Health and Social Welfare (Liverpool, 1926) p 31-2.
6. J J Clarke, Some Factors Relating to the Re-Housing of Slum Dwellers (Liverpool, 1923) p 46.
7. PD, 5th Series, vol 163, col 303, 24 April 1923.

most overcrowded town in England and Wales and also the town with second highest rate of mortality from infectious diseases.<sup>8</sup> The connection between bad housing and health can, of course, be over-emphasised: other income-related factors, such as diet, also had an important effect. Nevertheless, the highly experienced County Medical Officer for Durham could claim in 1919 that 'the housing conditions existing in this County are almost entirely responsible for its bad health and high mortality statistics.'<sup>9</sup>

An intriguing but less credible argument was the association which many reformers drew between low housing standards and corrupted morals. Clarke claimed that

... overcrowded tenements are responsible for the excessive craving for 'spoon-fed' amusements like the picture houses and public whist-drives, and for the enormous increase of dancing in public halls, and, of course, the public-house found so intimately in the slums and congested areas, together with the excessive custom of women who have no house to keep in order. .(10)

Even more sinister than the creeping menace of public whist-drives was the belief of many reformers that working-class families living in overcrowded conditions were liable to develop incestuous habits. This fear was given serious consideration by the Royal Commission on the Housing of the Working Classes, which concluded in 1885 that, even if the link between overcrowding and incest were not proven, 'every effort should be made to put an end to a state of things which familiarises

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8. J Whitburn, The Housing Problem in Newcastle and District (Newcastle, 1902) p 29-30.
  9. Speech by the County Medical Officer of Health to a Housing Conference in the Durham Miners' Hall, 2 May 1919, DCRO: CC/H/79. This claim was elaborated in his Annual Report to the County Council for 1925: 'this scarcity of houses seriously prejudices the success of our efforts to prevent and reduce tuberculosis, it is a serious handicap to our maternity and child welfare work, and it undoubtedly is one of the chief causes of our comparatively high infant mortality rate' (DCRO).
  10. J J Clarke, Housing in Relation to Public Health ..., p 8.

children of tender years with scenes they ought never to witness.'<sup>11</sup> The belief that small houses engendered immorality crops up frequently in the reports of professional observers and writers. For example, the Medical Officer of Health for West Hartlepool complained in 1927 that overcrowding in the borough produced '... an unsatisfactory mixing of the sexes amongst the adolescents',<sup>12</sup> while George Orwell was still harping on about the incest theme in 1937.<sup>13</sup> This long-established concern about morality was shared by those who drafted and enacted the Housing Act of 1935. The first standard by which a house was deemed automatically to be overcrowded was '... when the number of persons sleeping in the house ... is such that any two of those persons, of ten years old or more of opposite sexes and not being persons living together as husband and wife, must sleep in the same room.'<sup>14</sup> However exaggerated these middle-class suppositions about working-class morality were, they represented an enduring inspiration for many housing reformers.

A more utilitarian argument used by those who advocated public expenditure on housing reform was the 'cost-effective' approach. It was claimed that improved social conditions, of which housing was among the most important, would bring tangible benefit to the State. In an influential article written in 1901, Sidney Webb asked,

Why does not the Local Government Board ... insure, by one means or another, a supply of healthy houses sufficient to enable every family to comply with the formula of 'three rooms and a scullery', as the minimum necessary for breeding an even moderately Imperial race? The equivalent money gain to the community would be many millions sterling. (15)

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11. PP 1884-85 (C 3478) vol xxx, p 13.
  12. Annual Report of the Medical Officer of Health for West Hartlepool, 1927, WHR.
  13. G Orwell, The Road to Wigan Pier (London, 1937) p 51.
  14. 25 & 26 Geo V, c 40, Section 2(i)(a).
  15. S Webb, 'Lord Rosebery's Escape from Houndsditch', in Nineteenth Century and After, vol 50, 1901, p 377-8.

The financial argument appeared again in 1919, when the MP for Morpeth asked 'would it not be better, instead of spending money on sanatoria, to spend the money on building better houses for the people?'<sup>16</sup> In 1923 a Glasgow MP claimed that Britain was '... losing £100,000,000 every year as a result of the bad health of the people caused mainly by bad housing.'<sup>17</sup> This was an argument for reform endorsed by even the most privileged: 'the nation cannot afford, from an economic point of view,' opined the Prince of Wales in 1933, 'the perpetuation of slums ... which adds to the expenditure on all social and health services.'<sup>18</sup>

These statements had a compelling ring, but it was difficult conclusively to prove that the preventive benefits of housing reform would work out cheaper to the State than curative medicine. The reformers' arguments carried more weight when they also incorporated the suggestion that the improved health standards that would arise from better housing conditions would be beneficial to the British Empire. This approach was part of the campaign for 'national efficiency', which began with revelations about the level of health among Army recruits - many of whom could not satisfy even the unexacting official medical requirements - during the Boer War. The news was fanned by the press and flared into a panic: it boded racial and imperial decline, for 'the white man's burden had to be carried on strong backs.'<sup>19</sup> Out of the scare there emerged an influential book, The Heart of the

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16. PD, 5th Series, vol 114, col 1918, 8 April 1919.

17. PD, 5th Series, vol 163, col 408-9, 24 April 1923.

18. Address by the Prince of Wales to the Association of Municipal Corporations, printed in the Municipal Review, June 1933.

19. B B Gilbert, in an introduction to a new edition (Brighton, 1973) of Masterman's The Heart of the Empire, p xxi.

Empire, a collection of essays by a group of radical young Liberals.<sup>20</sup> Their arguments proved infectious and, one month after the publication of the book, even such a well-established and less radical Liberal as Asquith was moved to ask,

What is the use of Empire if it does not breed and maintain ... an imperial race? What is the use of talking about Empire if here, at its very centre, there is always to be found a mass of people, stunted in education, a prey of intemperance, huddled and congested beyond the possibility of realising ... either social or domestic life? (21)

Such fine rhetoric made many converts, some of whom were to be prominent in the debate on housing reform. For example, J S Nettlefold, Chairman of Birmingham's Housing Committee, declared that

The time has come for the people of England to refuse to allow important and urgent domestic questions to be any longer neglected .... No Empire can be in a really safe, sound and satisfactory condition unless the heart of that empire is pure and healthy. (22)

This sentiment, in a less imperialist form, has survived to the present day: many still advocate further improvement of housing standards on the grounds that the consequent improvements in health would be desirable not only in themselves but also, from a social and economic point of view, would be beneficial to the nation. Similarly, on the 'moral' front, although the supposed sexual dangers of bad housing conditions are no longer stressed, it is widely assumed today that such environmental factors may engender certain forms of anti-social behaviour. The motivation of reformers is, perhaps, less clear nowadays, as the housing question has become increasingly a party-political issue since the 1920s. On the whole, however, the underlying beliefs of the

20. C F G Masterman (ed), The Heart of the Empire: Discussions of Problems of Modern City Life in England (London, 1901)

21. Quoted by Webb, op cit, p 376.

22. J S Nettlefold, A Housing Policy (Birmingham, 1905) p 89.

early housing reformers have proved remarkably enduring.

Although there was a general concern about the problems of bad housing conditions existing at the turn of the century - a concern which, as we have seen, was fuelled by a variety of motives - there was no general agreement about just what role the State ought to play in trying to bring about improvements. Divisions of opinion about the best solution were as common among commentators at the turn of the century as they are among interested parties today. Indeed, the more conservative writers then seemed to question at times whether it was worthwhile for the State to take positive action at all. As one of them put it,

... people accustomed to the laxity of slum life will not readily or easily fall in with any other mode of life. Even if they could be bodily transplanted to the most favourable conditions and the pleasantest surroundings, they would still cling to old habits ... and in time ... degrade their new neighbourhood into the regular type of slum. (23)

Or, as another believed, 'there are thousands of people in this country who, if transferred to the West End, would convert it into a slum within a month.'<sup>24</sup> They considered that, 'before any radical measures can be enforced, an educative process must be set in action.'<sup>25</sup> Apparently, those who advanced such pessimistic views about housing reform failed to see that improved standards, whether established by municipal schemes, philanthropy, or even by private enterprise, might themselves constitute the most effectual 'educative process'. Or, as one writer had pointed out in 1895, 'it is idle to proclaim that [slum dwellers] would make newer and improved dwellings as bad as those they

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23. E R Dewsnap, The Housing Problem in England: Its Statistics, Legislation and Policy (Manchester, 1907) p 225.

24. J J Clarke, The Housing Problem: Its History, Growth, Legislation and Procedure (London, 1920) p 294. This contradicts the equally bland assertion made by the same author and quoted above, p22 and footnote 6.

25. Dewsnap, op cit, p 225.

now occupy, until you have at least given them the opportunity of doing so.<sup>26</sup>

Nevertheless, there was agreement on the whole at the beginning of this century that action was needed to improve housing conditions. The real dispute was about the form of action that should be taken. Under the Act of 1890 there were two distinct channels for State intervention - the 'sanitary' policy of slum clearance under Parts I and II of the Act, and an 'additional' housing policy under Part III, which would add to the total housing stock independent of any slum clearance programmes.<sup>27</sup> Much of the argument in the early years of this century arose because the two approaches were often presented as being mutually exclusive.

One of the ablest advocates of an 'additional' housing solution was William Thompson, a town councillor for Richmond in Surrey, whose Housing Handbook was published under the auspices of the National Housing Reform Council.<sup>28</sup> This manual for local government officers called for action under Part III of the 1890 Act because 'private enterprise, unstimulated, unregulated, unassisted, undirected, has hopelessly failed.' Overcrowding showed that there was a 'deficient supply', while rows of 'brick boxes with slate lids' were a standing indictment of jerry-building. Thompson considered 'the product of private enterprise [to be] insufficient in quantity and inferior in quality'<sup>29</sup> and that 'in the event of private enterprise not being

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26. E Bowmaker, The Housing of the Working Classes (London, 1895) p 26.
27. A brief description of the 1890 Act - and of the other major housing acts up to 1939 - is given in Appendix 1.
28. Thompson was to be made Chairman of this body when it became the National Housing and Town Planning Council. (J N Tarn, Five Per Cent Philanthropy: An Account of Housing in Urban Areas Between 1840 and 1914 (Cambridge, 1973) p 179.)
29. W Thompson, The Housing Handbook (London, 1903) p 9.

forthcoming, it would undoubtedly be the bounden duty of the municipality to provide the whole of the necessary accommodation.<sup>30</sup> Or, as the Newcastle councillor John Whitburn wrote, 'action is as needful at times to provide houses as to provide a sufficient supply of gas or water.'<sup>31</sup>

The argument that private enterprise was failing to keep pace with demand did not go unquestioned. Using the 1901 Census publications, E R Dewsnup calculated that there had been a 15.5% increase in the total housing stock of England and Wales since 1891, as against a population increase of 12.2%. He thought that 'too much emphasis is being laid upon the so-called short-comings of private enterprise.'<sup>32</sup> His argument is weakened by the fact that during the intercensal period 1891-1901 the level of housebuilding in England and Wales reached a peak unequalled at any other time before the First World War;<sup>33</sup> indeed, one of the strongest arguments used by the advocates of municipal housing schemes was to be the continued fall in the output of private enterprise down to 1914. Dewsnup's argument is weakened further by the fact that, pursuing his own methods of calculation, the increase in housing stock between 1891 and 1901 did still not quite meet the increase of 15.7% in the number of private families over the same period.<sup>34</sup> This figure was more significant than the one for population increase alone, since reformers were agreed that each private family should ideally have what

30. Ibid, p 12.

31. Whitburn, op cit, p 46.

32. Dewsnup, op cit, p 247-8.

33. J P Lewis, 'Indices of Housebuilding in the Manchester Conurbation, South Wales, and Great Britain, 1851-1913' in Scottish Journal of Political Economy, vol 8, 1961, p 153.

34. Dewsnup had overlooked the fall in average family size that had started in the last quarter of the nineteenth century.

came to be described in the Census as a 'structurally separate dwelling'.

Even those who agreed that private enterprise was failing to supply enough working-class housing argued in some cases that if local government itself took any initiative in building, the private sector would be deterred to such an extent that the overall supply of housing would actually fall. Dewsnup thought that 'fear of municipal competition ... has already contracted the activities of private enterprise',<sup>35</sup> while Nettlefold laid it down that 'every house built by a Local Authority stops at least four being built by other people.'<sup>36</sup> These claims seem somewhat alarmist in view of what the Local Government Board had to say. To begin with, under the 1890 and 1909 legislation, 'it is only in those places where private enterprise has failed to provide [working-class] houses, or has failed to provide them for a certain class of workman, that the local authority is required to step in.' Moreover,

... cases are not wanting to show that where this position [of the failure of the private sector] has been found to exist, and the local authority has built, private enterprise has been stirred again into action. In other cases the mere threat of action by the local authority has been sufficient to awaken private enterprise to do what was necessary. (37)

As one observer had remarked a few years earlier, '... experience has shown in Germany and other countries [that] individual enterprise in the erection of working men's dwellings is stimulated rather than discouraged by municipal activity in this direction.'<sup>38</sup>

Most of the critics of 'additional' housing policy agreed that the

35. Dewsnup, op cit, p 245.

36. Nettlefold, op cit, p 37.

37. Local Government Board, Annual Report, 1912-13.

38. M Kaufman, The Housing of the Working Classes and of the Poor (London, 1907) p 145.

alternative was to trust in a system of private enterprise regulated by sanitary housing legislation, or - as Nettlefold wrote - 'the firm but friendly enforcement by Local Authorities of their powers under Part II of the Housing of the Working Classes Act, 1890.'<sup>39</sup> With disarming optimism he believed that '... when it is recognised that bad housing accommodation will be condemned, by the Sanitary Authority, in the same systematic way that bad food is already condemned, then a demand for good houses will arise, and a supply will follow that demand, as day follows the night.'<sup>40</sup> Statutory notices and closing orders were thus considered suitable measures for solving the housing problem and even council building to rehouse people displaced by slum clearance was acceptable, especially when, before the 1909 Act, the freehold of houses built for this purpose had to be relinquished by the local authority after ten years.<sup>41</sup>

Advocates of an 'additional' housing policy could, however, raise some sound arguments against local authorities relying solely on sanitary measures. Thompson believed that the requirements of public health regulations and building byelaws actually had a damaging effect on the output of private enterprise, by lessening '... the profitable inducements to build more cottages, besides necessitating higher rents.'<sup>42</sup> He believed, furthermore, that the enormous cost of improvement schemes meant that 'local authorities dare not do one-tenth of what is considered necessary for fear of overwhelming the already much burdened ratepayer'; and he cited

39. Nettlefold, op cit, p 81.

40. Ibid.

41. Housing of the Working Classes Act, 1890 (53 & 54 Vict, c 70) Section 12(5). This provision did not apply to houses built under Part III of the Act.

42. Thompson, op cit, p 10.

the expenditure of the London County Council on clearing insanitary areas, which worked out at between £50 and £70 for each person displaced, quite apart from the cost of rehousing.<sup>43</sup> Thompson believed that an 'additional' housing policy was not only necessary to deal with the overall shortage of supply, but could also help to solve the problem of insanitary conditions:

If there were in every district a sufficient number of additional healthy houses ... let at reasonable rents, the tenants of the worst houses would quickly get into the new dwellings .... The whole housing conditions of the locality would be raised, and the very worst slums would be left untenanted. (44)

This was precisely the theory implicit in the Housing Acts of 1919, 1923 and 1924: additional houses were to release a 'filtering-up' process that would destroy the slums indirectly by removing the overall shortage on which they were thought to depend.

A further argument adduced in favour of an 'additional' housing policy was that local authority housing schemes could not only correct the previous qualitative shortcomings of private enterprise and the current deficiencies in quantity, but might also - by their good example - influence the standards of the private sector in the future. F W Lawrence, writing in The Heart of the Empire, claimed that local authority schemes acted

... as a wise experiment and as a model for others. If a municipality can build healthy, well-constructed dwellings, and make them pay ... it stands to reason that it will be well worth the while of an individual ... to do the same. (45)

43. Ibid, p 8. In fact, by 1912 the net capital cost to the London County Council of rehousing one person under Part I of the 1890 Act came to an average of £71; for housing a person under Part III of the Act the cost was about £41. (Calculated from London County Council, Housing of the Working Classes in London (London, 1913) pp 148 and 151.)

44. Thompson, op cit, p 9.

45. In Masterman, op cit, p 99.

The assumption that council schemes might do anything more than break even was doubtful, of course, but the suggestion that local government could set an example in housing standards was a valid argument. The effect of greater council activity would be, claimed Thompson, '... to set up a standard of a decent sanitary home that a working man might reasonably expect; and to establish a model street of well-managed houses in every district, as an object lesson.'<sup>46</sup> Some years later the Local Government Board endorsed these opinions and declared that housebuilding by local authorities had the effect of

... raising the standard of building by the private builder. If his houses are to compete with those erected by local authorities they must compare favourably with them both as regards accommodation and appearance. (47)

Whatever beneficial effects 'additional' council schemes might have on the quantity and the quality of the housing supply, some critics feared that the policy would have wider social and economic effects of a harmful nature. It was sometimes claimed, from the social point of view, that too much State intervention in the housing market would erode working-class independence and self-reliance. An early proponent of this idea was Lord Shaftesbury, who argued that 'if the State is to be summoned not only to provide houses for the labouring classes, but also to supply such dwellings at nominal rents, it will, while doing something on behalf of their physical condition, utterly destroy their moral energy.'<sup>48</sup> Part of Shaftesbury's case against the 'mischief of State aid in housing' rested on the assumption of uneconomic rents - a question considered in the following paragraphs.

46. Thompson, op cit, p 12.

47. Local Government Board, Annual Report, 1912-13.

48. Nineteenth Century, vol 14, 1883, p 935.

But his general point about the supposedly vulnerable moral fibre of the working class is worth a brief word here, if only because of its persistence. Dewsnup, for example, claimed a few years later that 'any provision that relieves people of the necessity of relying upon their own exertions [destroys] self-reliance and independence of character, virtues the absence of which in a nation forecasts decay and ruin.'<sup>49</sup> This point of view has survived through the inter-war period and beyond. 'It would be a disaster', claimed a Conservative MP in 1927, 'if the housing crusade leads to the dependence on the State of any class for so vital a commodity as its housing: it would but create a fresh form of pauperism, with all its essential waste and stigma.'<sup>50</sup> What was often forgotten in the pursuit of this argument was that a laissez-faire housing policy, even if it strengthened the moral backbone of working-class people, had helped in the past to destroy their physical health.

An important economic argument against 'additional' council housing schemes was based upon the belief that rents would inevitably be subsidised by local ratepayers. It was this assumption that prompted Octavia Hill in 1883 to urge the working class 'never [to] accept a rate in aid of wages, whether in the form of houses, or of anything else': the result would be lower wages.<sup>51</sup> Nettlefold iterated the idea in greater detail:

No thoughtful man will advocate the letting of houses below their economic rent, by means of subsidies from the rates .... Wages follow rents, and therefore that policy would only result in providing capitalists with cheap labour at the expense of the general body of ratepayers. (52)

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49. Dewsnup, op cit, p 243-4.

50. F E Fremantle, The Housing of the Nation (London, 1927) p 174.

51. Nineteenth Century, vol 14, 1883, p 926.

52. J S Nettlefold, Practical Housing (Letchworth, 1908) p 55.

Before the First World War, at least, this argument was weakened by the fact that many council housing schemes were not designed to rely on subsidies from the rates but were budgeted to break even. For example, none of the housing schemes under Part III of the 1890 Act in County Durham before the First World War was designed to lose more than £1 per house per year.<sup>53</sup> This was not true of houses provided as part of slum clearance schemes (under Part I of the 1890 Act) and, as we have seen, the very expense of these schemes was one of the arguments used by the supporters of an 'additional' housing policy.

A more subtle economic argument used against 'additional' schemes, while resting again on the assumption that subsidies would be required, was concerned with the question of who was to foot the bill:

Municipal housebuilding results in taxing the many for the benefit of the few, through the fact of the few being a charge on the rates .... It must not be forgotten that anything which tends to raise the rates presses most heavily on those just above the poverty line, and must inevitably force some of them below it. (54)

This was a valid objection to rate-aided housing schemes; for even families in the cheapest private rented accommodation had to sustain rate increases through the inclusive rent they paid to landlords. As mentioned above, schemes under Part III of the 1890 Act were not a crushing burden on the rates; nor were those under the Addison Act of 1919, which limited the local authority contribution to a penny in the pound on the general rate. But later schemes were a much greater burden: in the Tyneside district of Felling, for example, by 1939 housing liabilities accounted for 2/- in the pound on the rates.<sup>55</sup> As Nettlefold had rightly pointed out, this burden fell on the whole of the local

53. See below, p 132.

54. Nettlefold, A Housing Policy, p 38.

55. D M Goodfellow, Tyneside: The Social Facts (Newcastle, 1940) p 79.

community, and with most force on the poorest section.

On the other hand, a point which most of the early writers on housing reform failed to realise is that council houses can be regarded as assets which enhance the total rateable value of a district and thus increase the revenue of the local authority. Although the equation is difficult, one could to a certain extent weigh the cost of a housing scheme charged to the rates against the extra income 'earned' by the houses in the form of rates due from the tenants, whether paid direct or through an inclusive rent to the council. This should not, however, obscure the fact that most inter-war housing schemes made heavy demands on the whole body of ratepayers; but this is less a criticism of local authority housebuilding activity than of the rating system itself, which dictated that the areas most in need of improvements were least able to afford them. As we shall see later in this study, the Addison scheme surmounted the problem by casting the major part of the cost onto the Exchequer, which raised the required funds more equitably over the whole country. Later housing acts threw more of the burden back onto local rates, to the disadvantage of poorer local authority districts.<sup>56</sup>

One final, political fear of those who opposed the role of the local authority as housebuilder was that 'the existence of a large number of houses owned by the local authority and tenanted by voters might easily result in elections being seriously influenced by considerations of cheaper rents.'<sup>57</sup> This fear was expanded by Dewsnap:

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56. This question is discussed in Section 4A below in relation to County Durham.

57. Nettlefold, A Housing Policy, p 38.

The great bulk of the tenants of [council] houses would belong to the working classes .... It goes without saying that these would be deeply interested in securing a minimum rate of rental .... Constant pressure would be brought against the administrative body to this end, and suasion could be reinforced by the coercion of the polls .... In truth, there is some possibility that, in the course of a generation or two, the demand of the working-man might be extended from cheap houses to free houses: our socialist friends would certainly not demur. (58)

This possibility attracted the attention of Harold Laski, who published his thoughts in 1923 on the question of whether council tenants might '... use their political power as electors to advance their economic interests to the detriment of the rest of the community.'<sup>59</sup> Laski was inclined to dismiss the possibility because, in the first place, council tenants would, he believed, always be in a minority of the electorate, secondly because central government could be relied upon to intervene and prevent abuses, and thirdly because local authorities would never be able to raise loans privately or from public sources to finance capital projects that were totally uneconomic. These were telling arguments, although Laski was assuming that central government would also remain free from subversion to the cause of low rents. But, in any case, he believed that if groups of council tenants or wider working class movements did exercise pressure, their action would be

... no different from that of farmers who secure differential rates, or of business men who utilise the Key Industries Act to protect their particular article of manufacture .... Anyone who has looked at the civil list before the Reform Act of 1832 will, I think, be heartened by the extraordinary moderation of the present elector. (60)

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58. Dewsnap, op cit, p 242-3.

59. H J Laski, 'Economic Interest of Electors in Services Provided by a Public Authority' in Journal of Public Administration, vol 1, 1923, p 332.

60. Ibid, p 328.

Although in some of the arguments that we have briefly considered here the respective roles of the public and private sectors - or the role of the State as sanitary reformer or 'additional' housebuilder - were sometimes presented as being mutually exclusive, this was not always the case. The most fitting conclusion is provided by William Thompson:

Public and private enterprise must be combined ....  
Instead of creating friction by merely pitting the one against the other as the 'only' cure, it will be necessary to combine and utilise every available remedy of either public or private origin if the present serious deficiency of healthy house-room is to be met by a sufficient number of new dwellings. (61)

This appeal, made in 1903, anticipated precisely the attitude prevailing at the end of the First World War and has, indeed, become an established feature of national housing policy today.

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61. Thompson, op cit, p 10.

B. The Course of National Policy, c 1900-1939

The earliest provision of working-class dwellings by a local authority was made in Huddersfield in 1853 when the council took advantage of Lord Shaftesbury's Act of 1851<sup>62</sup> to build a municipal lodging house. The first council housing in the conventional sense was erected in Liverpool in 1869 under a Local Act.<sup>63</sup> But it was not until the 1890 Act,<sup>64</sup> which was in fact little more than a consolidation of earlier legislation, that a significant number of councils began to build. The process was hastened by the Act of 1909 and when building operations were stopped by the First World War there were 'about 20,000' dwellings owned by local authorities in England and Wales.<sup>65</sup>

Unfortunately, many writers on the subject of council housing, blinkered by their knowledge of the inter-war programme, have belittled or ignored developments before 1914.<sup>66</sup> To call the Acts of 1890 and 1909 'negative' and their value 'negligible' is to judge them by standards appropriate to inter-war schemes. Thus in 1944 a Ministry of Health publication could dismiss the achievement of local government under these early Acts as unimportant, '... from the facts that whereas in the period 1909-15 some 200,000 additional houses were built in England and Wales, only 11,000 on those houses were provided by local

62. 14 & 15 Vict, c 34. Huddersfield was, in fact, the only town to take advantage of this Act. (See H C Heales and C H Kirby, Housing Finance in Great Britain (London, 1938) p 57.)
63. J H Jennings, Geographical Aspects of the Local Authority Housebuilding Programme in England and Wales from 1919 to 1939 (unpublished New University of Ulster Ph D thesis, 1972) p 10.
64. See Appendix 1 for a summary of the main points of this Act and of the other major housing acts before the Second World War.
65. Local Government Board, Annual Report, 1914-15.
66. See, for example, B B Gilbert, British Social Policy, 1914-1939 (London, 1970) p 138, and M Bowley, Housing and the State, 1919-1944 (London, 1945) p 3.

authorities.<sup>67</sup> The fact that council housing only accounted for  $5\frac{1}{2}\%$  of the total housing supply in the period quoted was being measured against the inter-war period, when local authorities built about 28% of the total.<sup>68</sup> It corrects the perspective if one compares the figure of  $5\frac{1}{2}\%$  with the  $\frac{1}{2}\%$  of the total housing supply provided by local authorities over the period 1891-1908.<sup>69</sup> Considering the facts that councils were effectively under very little legal obligation to build before the First World War and had no encouragement in the form of a Government subsidy to do so, their contribution to the housing supply is all the more significant.

The Housing and Town Planning Act passed in 1909<sup>70</sup> was not quite the great radical reform that its leading promoter, John Burns, made it out to be. There was no fundamental change in practice to the substantive Act of 1890 and its minor amendment of 1900. Rural district councils were given full authority to build under Part III of the 1890 Act and all councils were obliged, rather than merely allowed, to adopt this instrument - though not necessarily to act upon it. Nevertheless, a great increase in local authority building took place after the passing of the 1909 Act - a fact that has largely been forgotten or ignored by historians.<sup>71</sup> The number of houses sanctioned each year by the Local Government Board rose from 464 in 1910-11 to 4,408 in 1914-15 and the

67. Ministry of Health, Private Enterprise Housing (HMSO London, 1944) p 5.

68. See Table 1-1 for details of the inter-war period.

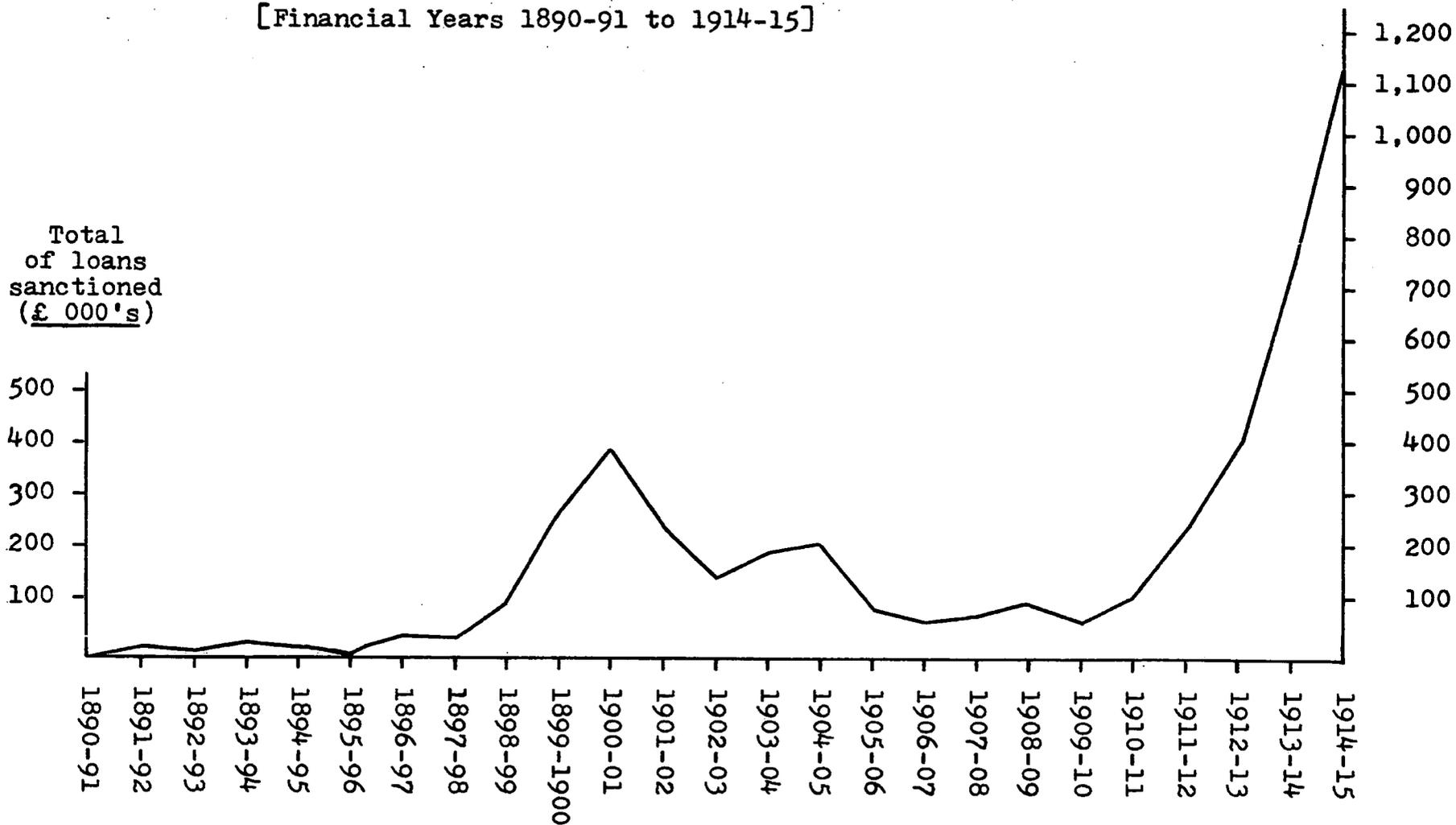
69. Calculated from figures in Local Government Board, Annual Reports.

70. See Appendix 1 for the main points of this Act.

71. This development is remarked upon by E Gauldie, Cruel Habitations (London, 1974) p 306, but she fails to consider the bumper year of 1914-15, in which the number of schemes formulated by local authorities continued to leap forward (see Figure 1-1).

FIGURE 1-1 Loans to Local Authorities Sanctioned by the Local Government Board for the Erection of Houses Under Part III of the 1890 Act  
 [Financial Years 1890-91 to 1914-15]

£ 000's



Board's report for 1914-15 concluded that 'up to the outbreak of the war the year had promised to be one of exceptional progress.'<sup>72</sup> Though still small in absolute terms, the contribution made by local authorities to the total housing supply was rising sharply before war intervened.<sup>73</sup>

Another misleading tendency of some text-book accounts of national housing policy is to imply that the legislation of 1919 - the so-called 'Addison Act'<sup>74</sup> - was the product of certain revolutionary ideas whose ancestry went back no further than the wartime Reconstruction Committee. In fact, with the exception of the provision which limited the liability of local authorities to the product of a penny in the pound on the rates, all the major features of the Addison scheme had been proposed long before the wartime building recession intensified the need to consider new measures. For such features of the scheme as the clear definition of local authorities' statutory duties, the detailed housing survey to be undertaken in each district, the Exchequer subsidy and the regional Commissioners who were to supervise the new programme, there were several proposals and recommendations before 1915.

One of the harbingers of reform was the Bill put forward in 1912 by the Conservative MP, Sir Arthur Griffiths-Boscawen, 'to provide for the better application and enforcement of the Housing of the Working Classes Acts'.<sup>75</sup> It would have established three Housing Commissioners and an Exchequer subsidy of up to £500,000 per year. If the economic rent of houses erected under Part III of the 1890 Act was more than '... persons of the working classes in the district could reasonably be

72. Local Government Board, Annual Report, 1914-15.

73. See Figure 1-1 for an indication of the growing expenditure by local authorities on housing, as sanctioned by the Local Government Board.

74. See Appendix 1 for the main points of this Act.

75. PP 1912-13, vol ii, p 759.

expected to pay,' the Treasury would have been empowered to make a grant '... not exceeding one-half of the capital amount of the deficiency.'<sup>76</sup> Similarly, the Land Enquiry Committee set up by the Liberals in 1912 recommended that 'aid of local rates shall take the form of annual block grants' and that 'the Central Authority shall appoint officers to reside in different parts of the country ... to stimulate the work of the local authorities.'<sup>77</sup> Equally prophetic of the 1919 measures was the Committee's desire to make it '... a statutory duty resting upon all local authorities to see that adequate and sanitary housing accommodation is available for the working-class population employed, or reasonably likely to be permanently resident within their area'<sup>78</sup> and to require every local authority, '... within a stipulated period, to make to the satisfaction of the Central Authority a complete survey of the housing conditions within its area.'<sup>79</sup> According to recent research, it was indeed the intention of Herbert Samuel (President of the Local Government Board in 1914 and 1915) to make the supply of working-class housing a more sharply defined duty of local authorities. This is suggested by the undated Summary of Proposals of the Late Government to Improve Urban Housing Conditions in the Ministry of Reconstruction records.<sup>80</sup>

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76. It is interesting to note that this subsidy proposal was followed closely in the slum replacement provisions of the Chamberlain Act in 1923. Out of an annual allowance of £200,000 the Ministry of Health was empowered to meet half the loss on such schemes.
77. Land Enquiry Committee, The Land: The Report of the Land Enquiry Committee, vol 2, Urban, p 210.
78. Ibid, p 208.
79. Ibid, p 210.
80. P R Wilding, Government and Housing: A Study in the Development of Social Policy, 1906-1939 (unpublished University of Manchester Ph D thesis, 1970) pp 41-3.

Even the improved design and building standards embodied in the Tudor Walters Report of 1918<sup>81</sup> and embraced by the Ministry of Health in the Addison scheme were a development of earlier recommendations - those made by the Small Holdings Committee in 1913.<sup>82</sup> The Committee proposed a set of progressive design principles and recommended a generous minimum standard of room sizes. It argued, furthermore, that 'considerations of economy, or the inability of a tenant to pay more than a particular rent, would not justify the erection of a house containing accommodation below this minimum.' This challenging philosophy, which was to become a notable feature of the Addison scheme, had also been endorsed by the Land Enquiry Committee, whose members put forward in addition the suggestion that there should be a limit to the number of houses per acre permitted in local authority schemes.<sup>83</sup>

In fact, the belief or lucky guess of one pair of text-book writers that 'the end of the war gave an illusion of dramatic suddenness to what might otherwise have been a gradual and almost imperceptible progress'<sup>84</sup> was not far out. The legislation of 1919 did not emerge like a magical rabbit from Dr Addison's hat: it was, to use a more appropriate metaphor, knitted together from the strands of reforming ideas already available. The worsening of the housing shortage during the war and the prospect of high building costs afterwards forced the Government to consider radical ideas in the search for a solution. The process of reform was accelerated, rather than created, by the emergency. The Housing Panel of the wartime

81. Report of the Departmental Committee on Questions of Building Construction in Connection with the Provision of Dwellings for the Working Classes in England, Wales and Scotland. PP 1918 (Cd 9191) vol vii, p 391.
82. Report of the Departmental Committee on Buildings for Small Holdings in England and Wales. PP 1913 (Cd 6708) vol xv, p 591.
83. Land Enquiry Committee, op cit, p 219.
84. H Wickwar and M Wickwar, The Social Services (London, 1936) p 137-8.

Reconstruction Committee, which included Seebohm Rowntree and Beatrice Webb, was an influential body and, as research into this area has shown, 'the voice of unofficial campaigners had now become a voice within the circles of government.'<sup>85</sup> Thus, for example, it was possible for Rowntree personally to persuade the complacent Local Government Board in 1917 that its estimate of a housing shortage of 120,000 dwellings should be revised to a figure of 300,000.<sup>86</sup>

The influence of the Housing Panel owed everything to the remarkable eagerness of the Government to solve the housing problem. The promise of 'homes fit for heroes'<sup>87</sup> had swiftly become a popular slogan and to many politicians and members of the public 'housing was the reconstruction programme'<sup>88</sup> - a state of mind reflected quite clearly by newspapers of the time. Members of all parties, or both wings of the coalition, affirmed their commitment to a radical housing policy; Bonar Law vied with Lloyd George on a tour of the housing regions in demonstrating and arousing enthusiasm for the programme. When the Bill was discussed in Cabinet, Ministers were so anxious to avoid delay that they cut the proposed time limit for the submission of all local authority schemes from six months to three.<sup>89</sup> Even though Addison himself was sceptical about the principle of a mere penny rate contribution from the local authorities,<sup>90</sup> pressure from the National Housing and Town Planning Council

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85. P B Johnson, Land Fit for Heroes: The Planning of British Reconstruction, 1916-39 (Chicago, 1968) p 66.

86. Ibid.

87. The phrase was apparently first used by Lloyd George in an election speech in November 1918. See L F Orbach, Homes for Heroes: A Study of the Evolution of British Public Housing, 1915-1921 (London, 1977) p 42.

88. P Abrams, 'The Failure of Social Reform, 1918-1920' in Past and Present, vol 24, 1963, p 43. See also Johnson, op cit, p 419, and Gilbert, op cit, p 142, for this oft-repeated point.

89. Johnson, op cit, p 345-6.

90. See below, p 53.

and from some of the larger county boroughs forced official acceptance. Wilding sees this as 'largely accidental',<sup>91</sup> but the significant point is that the Government felt unable to risk leaving local authorities any justification for inertia; it was at this stage so intent on getting the houses built that it was prepared even to accept an unlimited financial liability. At the time nobody seemed to mind: when the Bill was given its second reading in the Commons, Waldorf Astor (Parliamentary Secretary at the Local Government Board) could justifiably say that 'hardly any criticism has been levelled at our proposals.'<sup>92</sup>

Such stout support by the coalition Government for the cause of housing reform is all the more interesting in the light of the volte-face two years later, when Addison and his subsidy were summarily ditched. This violent change of policy is more easily understood upon closer examination of the motives which inspired the 1919 Act. One of the most powerful considerations to influence the Government after the Armistice, and one which has been neglected by most historians of housing, was a deeply-felt need to allay working-class unrest or, as many believed, to avert revolution. It was this concern that lay behind the introduction of rent control in 1915;<sup>93</sup> but by 1919 the fear had deepened and Lloyd George was moved in the Cabinet discussion of the Housing Bill to remind colleagues of the need to prevent a Bolshevik takeover.<sup>94</sup>

The supposed connection between housing shortage and social disquiet was brought to prominence in 1917 by the report of the Commission of Enquiry into Industrial Unrest. The report declared 'the want of sufficient housing accommodation in congested areas', particularly in

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91. Wilding, *op cit*, p 146.

92. *PD*, 5th Series, vol 114, col 1947, 8 April 1919.

93. Orbach, *op cit*, pp 23-33.

94. Johnson, *op cit*, p 345.

South Wales, Scotland and North East England, to be an important factor.<sup>95</sup> In the Commons debate on the Housing Bill the dangerous consequences of failing to overcome the problem were frequently stressed: Addison himself claimed that his measures were essential for '... our social stability and industrial content'<sup>96</sup> and Astor that 'the money we propose to spend on housing is an insurance against Bolshevism and revolution.'<sup>97</sup> Two months later, in his address to a large gathering of local government officers and representatives, '... Mr Bonar Law appealed most strongly to the Local Authorities not to lose a day in pushing forward their Schemes so as to prevent what is at present something of a real revolutionary movement.'<sup>98</sup> Home Intelligence continued to report to the Cabinet on the effects of the housing shortage: '... there is probably no more active cause of discontent than this.'<sup>99</sup> Members of the public were urged to invest in housing bonds as '... a great insurance against the perils of Bolshevism'<sup>100</sup> - a message unmistakably depicted by the cartoonist of the Daily Graphic (see Illustration 1-1).

If so much of the enthusiasm for housing reform depended on the fear-laden assumption that social upheaval was the alternative, the life expectancy of such an expensive venture as the Addison scheme could not exceed the time taken either for the danger to pass or for those in authority to shake off their apprehension. The onset of a serious

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95. PP 1917-18 (Cd 8696) vol xv, p 1.

96. PD, 5th Series, vol 114, col 1713, 7 April 1919.

97. PD, 5th Series, vol 114, col 1956, 8 April 1919.

98. Borough Surveyor's report on a conference of local authorities in London, 5 June 1919, in Gateshead CB Housing Committee Minutes, 17 June 1919, GIS.

99. Report to Cabinet by Director of Home Intelligence, 25 September 1919, quoted by Gilbert, op cit, p 147. Intelligence reports are also considered by Orbach, op cit, pp 93-5.

100. Ministry of Health, Housing, 12 April 1920, p 270.

ILLUSTRATION 1-1

**SIGNS OF SPRING CLEANING.**



'Everything is ready. Now it is up to you  
to seize the broom and sweep them out.'

This cartoon, which first appeared in  
the Daily Graphic, is reproduced from  
the Ministry of Health magazine, Housing,  
24 May 1920

recession in the summer of 1920 - and the Government's belief that severe economies in public expenditure were an appropriate response - provided the justification for abandoning the Addison scheme. In June of that year his Permanent Secretary at the Ministry of Health incautiously expressed to Addison what was probably a common view:

The final justification of the housing programme was, I suppose, that it was an insurance against something a great deal worse. It may be that the insurance is still necessary [and] that the Cabinet ... will tell us to go ahead on present lines till such time as the labour question is eased or till we can conveniently switch off .... (101)

Addison replied curtly that he was 'puzzled' by this attitude, but it was one shared by his fellow Ministers. The Cabinet Finance Committee wanted to close down the scheme in December 1920, but was still sensitive to the possibility of '... unrest or the fear of unrest in the country on a large scale.'<sup>102</sup> By the summer of 1921, however, the Cabinet had recovered its nerve. In spite of the continuing recession, the Government no longer felt the need for insurance cover and gave Addison, its chief underwriter, his notice. His offence, as Lloyd George remarked, was '... his unfortunate interest in public health.'<sup>103</sup> Having been warned that the Conservatives would vote against the Government if he supported Addison,<sup>104</sup> Lloyd George's defence of his Minister was, to say the least, half-hearted.<sup>105</sup> The time had come, the Cabinet Finance Committee resolved, '... to decide housing questions not on merits, but on financial considerations only.'<sup>106</sup> The Addison scheme was dead - the idealism of

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101. Minute dated 30 June 1920, in PRO: HIG 68/29.

102. Minute dated 8 December 1920, ibid.

103. PD, 5th Series, vol 143, col 1600, 23 June 1921.

104. Johnson, op cit, p 498.

105. Addison was removed from the Ministry of Health and given a post 'without portfolio'. The Conservatives continued to hound him, however, and his final humiliation was a Commons vote to halve his salary.

106. Minutes of the Cabinet Finance Committee, June 1921, quoted by Johnson, op cit, p 498.

reconstruction having survived not a moment longer than the fear of social unrest.

The idealism would no doubt have lasted longer if the scheme had not been so costly. Nevertheless, the expense of the Addison programme was not unexpected: the Act of 1919 was in itself a recognition of the prohibitively high costs which it was anticipated that the building industry would face at the end of the war. The cost of the scheme was, admittedly, higher than had been imagined and seemed intolerable to many at a time of economic recession; although, having been led over the top by promises of new homes, the nation's heroes could reasonably argue that, 'as the community as a whole stood by the Government in war time, when eight millions per day, more or less, were spent to destroy human life, the community have a right to demand the Government stand by them in their Housing Schemes.'<sup>107</sup> In Addison's eyes, the decision to judge housing questions '... not on merits, but on financial considerations only' - in other words, to subsidise no more houses - was 'the betrayal of the slums.'<sup>108</sup> He had every right to be bitter: the only drawback to his scheme - its high cost - had been inevitable and expected. It is worth further examination here because of the influence it exerted on the formulation of subsequent housing policies.

All subsidised council houses in the inter-war period relied on contributions from the Exchequer and from the local authority concerned, but the balance between the two components varied under each housing act. Thus each house built under the Addison Act made heavy demands upon the taxpayer but was a relatively slight burden on the rates; under most of

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107. Resolution circulated to local authorities by Shoreditch Borough Council, 31 May 1920, in DCRO: UD/Sh 89.

108. This was the title of his book on the subject (London, 1922).

the later schemes the balance shifted the other way. Unless this is borne in mind, misleading conclusions can sometimes be drawn about the comparative cost to the public of houses built under the different acts.<sup>109</sup> Having said this, it cannot be denied that a house erected under the Addison scheme was considerably more expensive to public funds as a whole than a house built under any other inter-war scheme. In 1938-39, Addison Act houses were being subsidised by the taxpayer to the tune of about £35 per year each, compared with about £8 for 1924 Act houses and about £6 for houses built in the 1930s to replace slums or relieve overcrowding.<sup>110</sup> On the other hand, many local authorities in County Durham only had to raise £1 or £2 per year for an Addison house, but £3, £4.10.0d. and even more for those built under later Acts. Taking both central and local government contributions into account, however, the average cost to the public each year was at least three times greater for an Addison house than for the average of all other subsidised council houses in the inter-war period.

There were many reasons for the high cost of houses provided under the Addison scheme, most of which have been carefully considered elsewhere.<sup>111</sup> Post-war inflation affected the price of building materials

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109. For example, Gilbert, *op cit*, p 148, notes the fact that by April 1939 the Exchequer had spent over £200 million on housing subsidies, of which the Addison variety accounted for about 63%. By that time, each house erected with a subsidy under the 1919 legislation had cost the taxpayer an average of £611, compared with an average of £58 for each house built under later subsidy schemes: thus by 1939 each Addison house had involved the taxpayer in '... about ten times the outlay for each house built under subsequent acts.' As well as ignoring the question of rate contributions, this also fails to bring out the cumulative nature of the expenditure: 1919 Act houses had constituted an annual charge to public funds for twice or three times as long as 1930 Act houses.

110. Calculated from Ministry of Health, Annual Report, 1938-39.

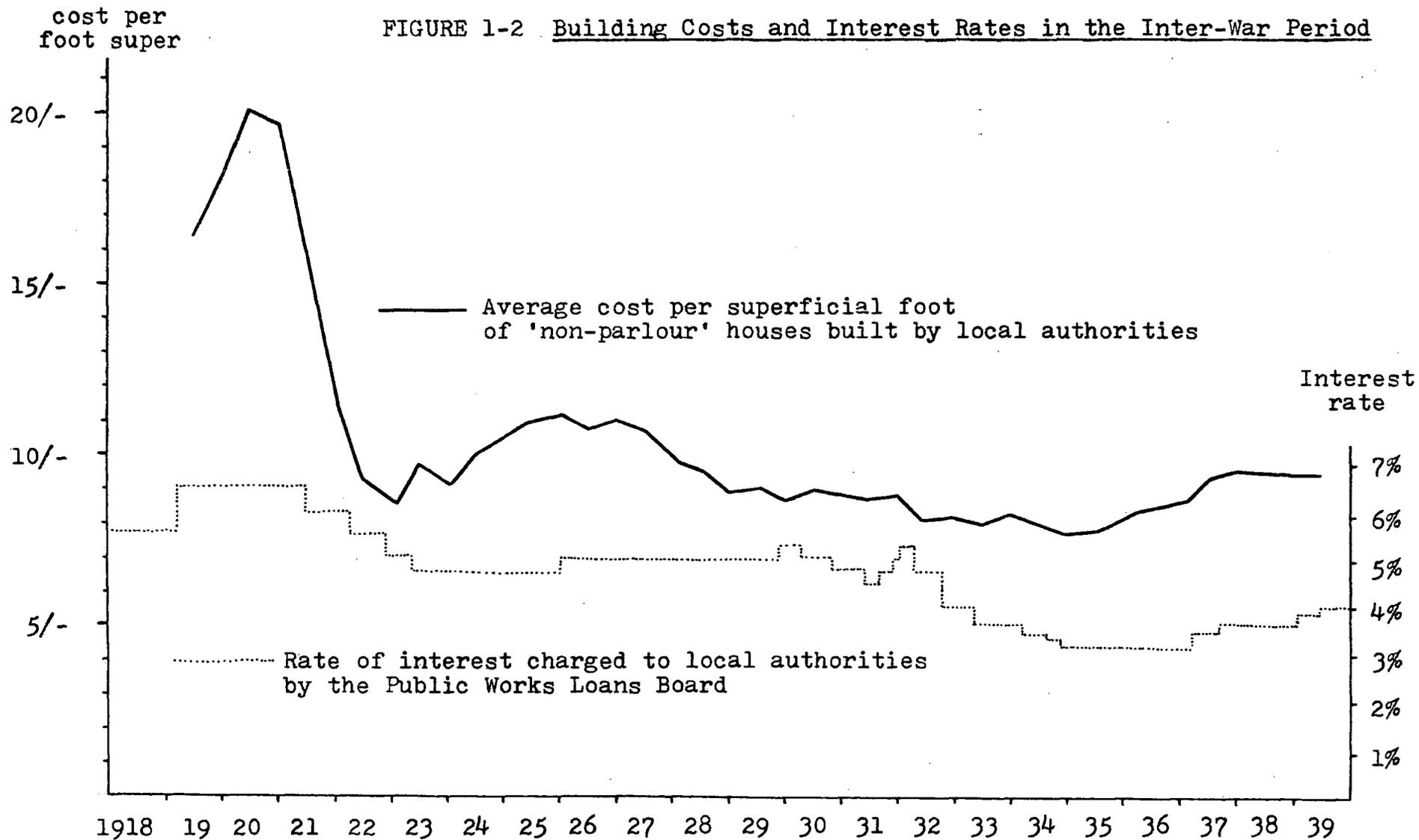
111. See, in particular, Bowley, *op cit*, pp 26-35.

and wages,<sup>112</sup> while the collapse of the industry during the war was responsible for costly inefficiency afterwards. Insufficient attention had been paid by the Government in the latter stages of the war to reviving the industry and to controlling the supply of materials. Further problems were caused by builders and building labour: while the employers were inclined to combine against competitive tendering,<sup>113</sup> the building unions fought a stubborn rearguard action against any form of job dilution, relaxation of apprenticeship regulations, or the drafting of large numbers of unskilled ex-servicemen into the industry.

The post-war problem was not only one of high construction costs: there was also the difficulty of obtaining loans except at very high rates of interest. Building costs in 1920 were almost twice as high as those in the 1930s, while the interest of  $6\frac{1}{2}\%$  charged by the Public Works Loans Board was exactly double the rate in 1935 and 1936 (see Figure 1-2). To a certain extent the problem was intensified by the competition of many local authorities each trying to obtain loans in the open market,<sup>114</sup> but a major cause was the Bank of England's conviction that only a policy of dear money and restricted public borrowing would restore to Britain its former position as the centre of international credit.<sup>115</sup> By April 1920

112. On the subject of wages, Addison wrote in June 1920 that 'it would be difficult to shew that the increases obtained by the building trade over pre-war rates can be regarded as abnormal as compared with the increases acquired by other trades,' although he admitted that 'output per man' was down considerably on the pre-war average. It is significant that he feared increases in wages and material costs might be used as a pretext by the Cabinet to suspend building operations. (Memorandum dated 20 June 1920, in PRO: HLG 68/29.)
113. This practice is considered in Section 4C below. It was, of course, entirely within the pale of law; and the Central Profiteering Committee was, according to Addison, '... unable to find that there exists any serious profiteering' in the building industry outside the law. (Memorandum dated 2 June 1920, ibid.)
114. Thus at the end of the Second World War local authorities were obliged to borrow only from the Public Works Loans Board. (Wilding, op cit, p 162.)
115. See Gilbert, op cit, p 148-9.

FIGURE 1-2 Building Costs and Interest Rates in the Inter-War Period



the bank rate stood at 7% and building costs were almost at their inter-war peak. Had it not been for the indisputable need for new houses, these conditions could easily '... be used to damn the whole idea of building at that time.'<sup>116</sup>

Unfortunately, most of the damnation dispensed at the shutdown of the Addison scheme was dealt out to the wrong people and the wrong institutions. The chief scapegoat, as we have seen, turned out to be Dr Addison, but blame was also apportioned to the nature of the 1919 subsidy and to the local authorities. The limitation of the local authorities' financial liability, many critics claimed, was a spur to extravagance. Addison himself had initially been against the proposal for a penny rate limit, as '... this would remove incentives to economy.'<sup>117</sup> In fact, the Ministry of Health's Committee on the High Cost of Working Class Dwellings found the charge of extravagance to be not proven.<sup>118</sup> By comparison with most earlier and later council dwellings, Addison houses were built to a more generous standard of accommodation and, for the most part, a more pleasant standard of design. But these costly standards were precisely those which had been accepted, encouraged and even enforced by the Ministry of Health, in line with the Tudor Walters Report of 1918. Much of the 'extravagance' was, in fact, the fault of the Ministry of Health, whose model contracts, by safeguarding the builder from the risk of increased material and labour costs, did nothing to encourage a sense of economy in contractors.<sup>119</sup> On the other hand, very few contracts would have been sealed at all except on such terms. It was unfortunate that, by association with the high cost of the

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116. Bowley, op cit, p 33.

117. Memorandum quoted by Wilding, op cit, p 82.

118. PP 1921 (Cmd 1447) vol xiii, p 919

119. See Bowley, op cit, p 34.

Addison scheme, the principle of its subsidy provision was condemned as a cause of the problem. By exacting a contribution from local rates roughly proportionate to a district's resources, it had given each local authority aid in rough proportion to its needs and thus had broken the vicious circle of local rates and local needs in poor districts.

Subsequent Ministers of Health, mindful of Addison's fate, were unwilling to reintroduce a system which effectively gave help where it was most needed - to the areas which suffered from a combination of poverty and acute housing shortage.<sup>120</sup>

Blame for the high cost of the Addison scheme was also heaped onto the local authorities, although the Ministry of Health's committee of enquiry exonerated district councils in general from charges of gross inefficiency. In Addison's opinion, however, 'many local authorities were incompetent.'<sup>121</sup> To be more charitable, it was rather a question of inexperience on the part of councils, most of which had never previously supervised housebuilding programmes, and certainly not on the scale demanded by the 1919 legislation.<sup>122</sup> There were a few spectacular instances of incompetence on the part of local government: the example of Liverpool Corporation's £1 $\frac{3}{4}$  million contract with a building firm which had a previous annual turnover of about £30,000 (and which promptly went bankrupt) is notable evidence.<sup>123</sup> To a certain extent, however,

120. This question is considered more fully in Section 4A below, with regard to North East England.

121. Minutes of a discussion between Addison and Ministry of Health officials on 6 July 1920, in PRO: HLG 68/29.

122. Up to March 1915 local authorities in England and Wales had between them built about 20,000 houses (see above, p 39). Under the Addison scheme they actually built about 170,000 (see Table 1-1) and had planned for a total of about 800,000 (the local authority target set down in the Survey of Housing Needs - see Ministry of Health, Housing, 10 May 1920, p 293).

123. See S Marriner, 'Cash and Concrete: Liquidity Problems in Mass-Production of "Homes for Heroes"' in Business History, vol 18, 1976, pp 171-8.

local authorities were hurried by the Housing Commissioners beyond the capacity fixed by their experience and ability. And those authorities which were able and anxious to proceed apace were themselves often vehemently critical of inefficiency at the Ministry of Health.<sup>124</sup> This was a charge equally as plausible as its converse, especially when one considers that the Ministry was at that time staffed by many of the same people who, under Hayes Fisher as President of the Local Government Board, had waged a petty campaign to obstruct Addison and his plans for reconstruction.<sup>125</sup>

In all, the 1919 legislation provided subsidies for 213,821 new houses. Local authorities built 170,090 and public utility societies 4,545 houses under the main Act, while the private sector built 39,186 with the aid of the lump sum subsidy granted under the Additional Powers Act.<sup>126</sup> This rate of progress was, however, probably insufficient, even in the short period between 1919 and 1923, to keep pace with the increase in the number of families over that period, let alone to cut into the shortage existing at the end of the war. According to Bowley, the housing shortage which had developed between 1911 and 1918 increased between January 1919 and March 1923 by about 35%.<sup>127</sup> On the credit side, the level of council building reached in 1922 was only twice exceeded in the whole inter-war period - in 1927 and 1938, when the conditions for building were many times more favourable.<sup>128</sup> In view of the adverse circumstances under which it took place, and in spite of the mistakes made,

124. See below, p 165-6.

125. See the numerous references to Addison's dealings with the Local Government Board in Johnson, op cit, and Gilbert, op cit.

126. See Table 1-1.

127. Bowley, op cit, p 24 and pp 269-72.

128. See Table 1-1 and Figure 1-3 for details of inter-war council housebuilding activity and Figure 1-2 for construction costs and borrowing rates.

TABLE 1-1 Number of Houses Completed in England & Wales Between 1 January 1919 and 31 March 1940

	LOCAL AUTHORITY							PRIVATE ENTERPRISE (including Housing Associations & Public Utility Societies)						TOTAL Local Authorities + Private Enterprise		
	Subsidised					Unsub- sidised	Total	Subsidised					Unsub- sidised		Total	
	1919 Act	1923 Act	1924 Act	1930 Act	1935-38 Acts			1919 Act	1923 Act	1924 Act	1930 Act	1935-38 Acts				
January 1919- September 1920	3,502						3,502	2,625								
Year ending 30 Sept. 1921	47,651						47,651	20,294					c 30,000	c 73,108	c 210,237	
1922	85,976						85,976	20,189								
1923	24,385	856					25,241	613	135				52,749	53,497	78,733	
1924	5,515	9,029					14,544	10	21,905				73,032	94,947	109,491	
1925	1,497	18,314	12,279				32,090		60,095	106			66,735	126,936	159,026	
1926	975	14,769	45,658				61,402		69,662	831			65,689	136,182	197,584	
1927	527	17,083	95,664				113,274		97,990	1,652			60,313	159,955	273,229	
1928	30	6,200	52,990				59,220		41,769	802			64,624	107,195	166,415	
1929	18	9,058	51,291				60,367		71,182	811			71,083	143,076	203,443	
1930	14		49,038				2,965			2,272			107,410	109,682	161,699	
1931			59,777	392			3,119			1,860	6		129,790	131,656	194,944	
1932			61,266	5,168			2,056			2,656			130,830	133,486	201,976	
1933			41,741	6,236			1,236			2,390	66		166,644	169,100	218,313	
1934			34,814	14,865			3,663			2,400	181		257,746	260,327	313,659	
1935				32,685			10,660				230		275,069	275,299	318,644	
1936				48,932	742		15,200				306		274,348	274,654	339,528	
1937				52,890	3,566		14,883			1,462		102	264,231	265,795	357,134	
1938				64,285	10,645		13,400			3,502		123	248,923	252,548	340,878	
October 1938 - March 1940				69,477	19,823		16,134			4,000		1,103	257,219	262,322	367,756	
Total	170,090	75,309	504,518	294,930	34,776		83,316		1,162,939				2,596,435	3,029,765	4,192,704	

the achievement of the Addison scheme was a remarkable one.

Nevertheless, if the Government had seriously intended in 1919 to provide a complete solution to the housing problem, it had manifestly failed. That much was clear even to Sir Alfred Mond, who owed his succession to the Ministry of Health more to his hefty contributions to Liberal party funds than to any great fervour for housing reform.<sup>129</sup> At an early stage in office he rather incautiously admitted that 'we are not dealing at all adequately with the acknowledged housing needs of the country.' He warned that '... some further schemes will have to be evolved which I fear must contain an element of State assistance, in order to reduce the housing shortage to reasonable dimensions.'<sup>130</sup> Before long, however, Sir Alfred discovered that it was safer to attack the figures than the problems. He considered it unfortunate that the King's Speech to Parliament in 1919 had mentioned the need for 500,000 houses: this '... was no doubt rather a rhetorical expression for a very large number than a considered estimate.'<sup>131</sup> It was, in fact, a figure which had been arrived at, chiefly by the members of the Housing Panel of the Reconstruction Committee, after much consideration and review since 1916. According to Bowley's calculations, the shortage in January 1919 was about 610,000 houses.<sup>132</sup> The detailed estimates arising from the local authorities' Survey of Housing Needs, as Mond was well

129. Gilbert, op cit, p 155.

130. Memorandum dated 7 July 1921, in PRO: HLG 68/29. Sir Alfred evidently considered a housing shortage to be acceptable if its dimensions were not embarrassing.

131. Memorandum dated 10 August 1922, ibid.

132. Bowley, op cit, pp 269-72. This estimate made use of hindsight endowed by the Census of 1921.

aware, were for at least 800,000 houses by the councils alone.<sup>133</sup>

Two of the arguments used to justify the scrapping of the Addison scheme were that it '... would tend to bring about a break in prices and to make things easier for the reintroduction of private enterprise.'<sup>134</sup> There was a fall in building costs after 1921;<sup>135</sup> ironically, most of the Addison houses were actually built in 1922 when prices were tumbling, but it was then almost impossible to revise downwards the costly contracts already sealed with the builders. 'The reintroduction of private enterprise' which Austen Chamberlain envisaged was attempted in 1923 by his half-brother, Neville, whose Housing Bill was given its second reading in April 1923. His speech was frequently interrupted, mainly by the Clydeside MPs, who found his delivery supercilious and offensive.<sup>136</sup> The Bill was to be regarded, he said, '... not as the solution of the housing problem, but as the beginning of a solution; not as the engine itself, but as the starting apparatus which will put the engine in motion.'<sup>137</sup>

Although accepting that local authorities still had a part to play in the provision of additional houses, Chamberlain's Act tried to keep their contribution to a minimum. Local authorities were given a distinct

133. The Cabinet Finance Committee thought that the figure of 800,000 was '... certainly an exaggeration' and that '500,000 [was] probably an overestimate,' but no attempt was made to prove these assertions. (Minutes dated 8 December 1920, in PRO: HLG 68/29.) Such an attack on the figures was one of the reasons put forward by Austen Chamberlain for his wish '... to wind up our liabilities under existing schemes.' (Letter from Chamberlain to Addison, dated 18 February 1921, ibid.)
134. Cabinet Finance Committee Minutes dated 8 December 1920, in PRO: HLG 68/29.
135. See Figure 1-2.
136. The debate was particularly ill-tempered: it ended with hon Members trying to establish who had ungallantly shouted 'sit down, nanny!' to Sidney Webb. (PD, 5th Series, vol 163, col 621-2, 25 April 1923.)
137. PD, 5th Series, vol 163, col 304, 24 April 1923.

second place, allowed to build houses themselves only if they could convince the Ministry that subsidised private builders could not, or would not, meet local needs. It was assumed, to pursue Chamberlain's metaphor, that the cranking-handle of State aid could be withdrawn after two years,<sup>138</sup> by which time the engine of private enterprise would be ticking over nicely and turning out all the working-class housing required. By means of a short, sharp injection of subsidy, Chamberlain sought to restore the private sector to the predominant position in the field of housing supply that it had occupied before the First World War; unfortunately, even then it had failed to keep pace with the growing need for working-class houses.<sup>139</sup> It was a pity that Chamberlain had not come across (or had not heeded) Mond's memorandum to the Cabinet:

... private enterprise did not nearly solve this problem before the war, and will not solve it in the near future. Private enterprise operates only where it sees a chance of profit. (140)

When Sir Alfred, founding chairman of ICI, spoke of private enterprise, he knew what he was talking about. There was indeed no profit in building houses to let at rents which working-class families could afford and, in any case, the effect of rent control in older property in the private sector was probably to reduce the incentive for this kind of investment. It is not surprising that the great majority of the 362,738 houses built by private enterprise under the 1923 Act were put up for sale to owner-occupiers.

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138. The subsidy was initially intended only for houses completed by 1 October 1925. (For details of the main provisions of the Act see Appendix 1.)

139. The following chapter examines this aspect of the problem in County Durham before the First World War.

140. Memorandum dated 10 August 1922, in PRO: HIG 68/29.

The Chamberlain Act was deficient in two important respects. The first was in failing to give direct help to the people who needed it most. Chamberlain claimed that his measures would activate a 'filtering-up' process: if new houses could be built at a faster rate than that by which the number of private families increased, every family would begin to move into better accommodation and there would eventually be no market for slum housing. This optimistic theory was also implicit in the Addison Act and the Wheatley Act of 1924, but they at least concentrated on the rented housing sector. Chamberlain's Act was designed to add houses to the top of the pile and to give initial benefit to people who could afford owner-occupation. The process of 'filtering-up', if it worked at all, was bound to be very slow under the 1923 Act. Labour's spokesman on housing, John Wheatley, was prompted to conclude that Chamberlain '... does not understand the extent of the housing problem, ... does not understand the cause of the housing shortage ... and has no sympathy with the people for whom he is endeavouring to provide.'<sup>141</sup> The second major shortcoming of the 1923 Act was that it failed to help the poorer districts, which were generally those with the greater housing needs. Its flat-rate annual subsidy for each approved council house favoured the larger and more prosperous local authorities, which were better able to raise the money to cover the balance of the loss on a housing scheme. In all, local authorities built 75,309 houses under the 1923 Act. Initially, the subsidy was grasped at by councils eager to press on with their building programmes and lacking, of course, any other sources of financial assistance. Some continued with it because it fitted into their policy of putting council houses up for sale, which was rarely possible in practice under any other inter-war housing act.

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141. PD, 5th Series, vol 163, col 322, 24 April 1923.

The 1923 Act was heavily overshadowed by John Wheatley's Act of 1924 - by far the most important material legacy of the first Labour Government. More council houses were built under this scheme than under any other in the inter-war period. The Act provided subsidies for 504,518 council houses (about 45% of the inter-war total) and 15,780 built by private enterprise. In the size of house allowed, Wheatley's Act was slightly more generous than Chamberlain's; its financial conditions were a great deal more so.<sup>142</sup> It did not, however, overturn the qualitative design standards laid down in 1923.<sup>143</sup> Nor, more significantly, did it reject Chamberlain's principle of a fixed flat-rate subsidy. This was welcomed by the Treasury, whose contribution, though larger than under the Chamberlain scheme, was at any rate defined. But the terms of the new subsidy, while giving extra help to agricultural areas, did not give adequate consideration to the urban districts with severe housing shortages and limited financial resources. The Wheatley Act demanded, in most cases, a contribution from the rates of at least £4.10.0d per house each year for forty years. This was a system more encouraging to larger local authorities, backed by the confidence of a large rateable value on which to draw; and, as recent research has shown, the heaviest use of the Act was made by the County Boroughs.<sup>144</sup>

In spite of certain shortcomings, the combined achievement of the Chamberlain and Wheatley Acts in adding to the nation's total housing

142. See Appendix 1 for details.

143. The Chamberlain Act embodied certain minimum standards of amenity without which houses would not qualify for a subsidy (for details see Jennings, *op cit*, p 111). The only significant change under the Wheatley Act was the requirement for a separate bathroom. (N Branson, Britain in the Nineteen Twenties (London, 1975) p 114.)

144. Jennings, *op cit*, p 101.

stock was considerable. The two Acts contributed to the building of nearly one million houses (579,827 council and 378,518 privately owned) between 1923 and 1934.<sup>145</sup> In two important respects, however, this phase of legislation was not as successful as it might have been. In the first place, considering that building costs were very low compared with those during the Addison scheme, that there was no shortage of labour and materials, and that borrowing was easier and cheaper than before, it is a little difficult to understand at first why the number of council houses built each year should have fallen away after the steady rise up to 1927.<sup>146</sup> The main reason for this missed opportunity was Chamberlain's decision in that year to reduce the subsidies.<sup>147</sup> The effect of this discouraging move, apart from a relatively modest saving to the Exchequer, was a slight fall in building prices. But this was obtained at the expense of a drastic fall during 1928 in the rate of housebuilding; the number of new subsidised houses - both council and private - fell to half of the 1927 total, while unassisted private enterprise only responded with an increase of about 4,000 over the previous year.<sup>148</sup> A further factor restraining the level of council building was economic depression: after 1929 it discouraged many local authorities from plans involving large capital expenditure. In County Durham, already suffering in the aftermath of the 1926 Coal Dispute, it was a factor which frequently prompted a refusal by the Ministry of Health to sanction local government loans for the building of new houses.<sup>149</sup>

145. See Table 1-1.

146. See Figure 1-3.

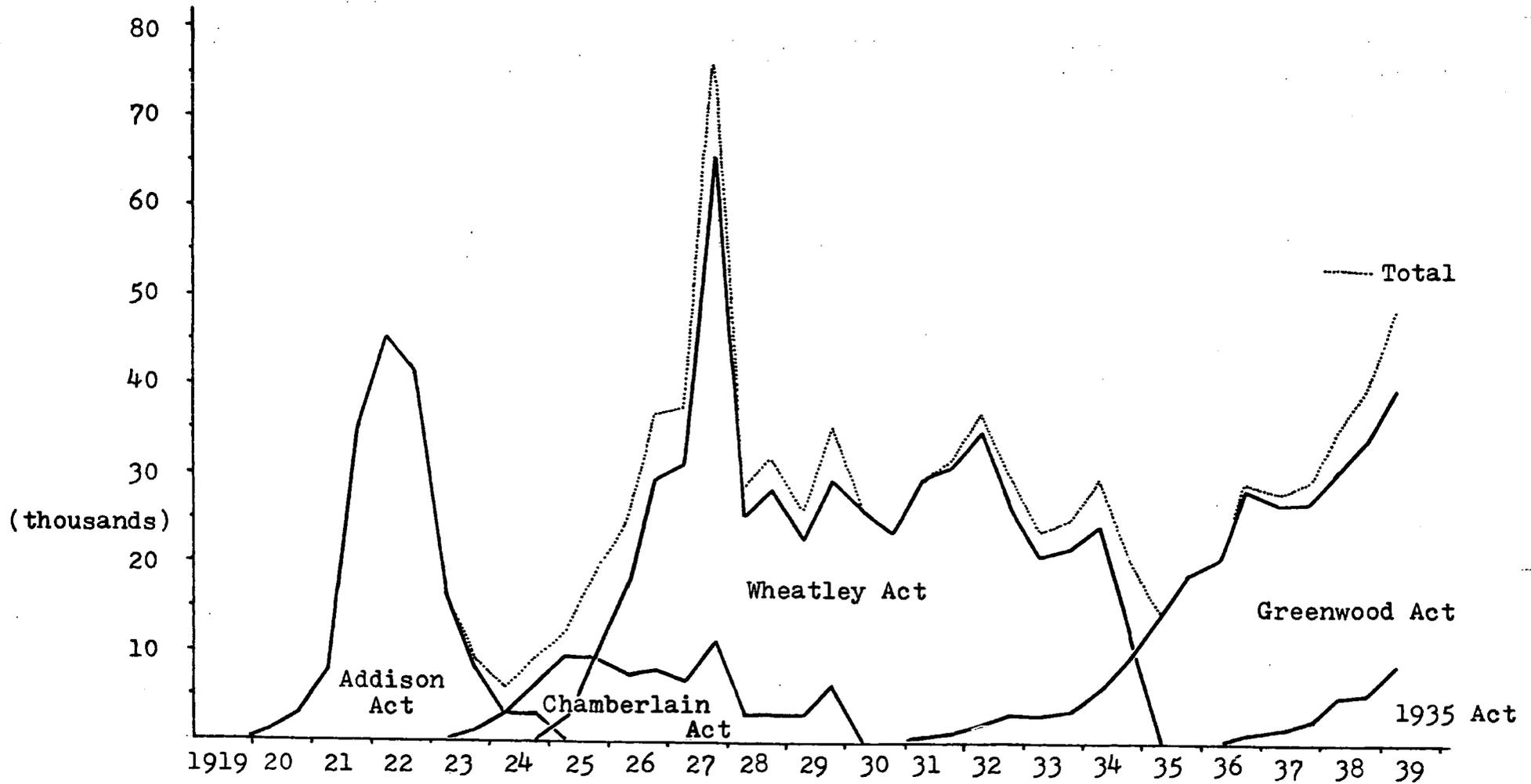
147. The Wheatley subsidy for new houses was cut from £9 to £7.10.0d per year and the 1923 Act subsidy from £6 to £4.

148. See Table 1-1.

149. See Section B of Chapter 3.

Number of houses  
per half-year  
(thousands)

FIGURE 1-3 Council Houses Built in England and Wales, 1919-39,  
by Individual Housing Acts



The other disappointing feature of these Housing Acts was their failure significantly to improve the housing conditions of the poorest section of the population. Many working-class families could not afford even a subsidised council house rent, for only the pooling of housing accounts allowed in 1935 really enabled a local authority to charge rents related to its tenants' incomes. There was a certain fear, in some cases quite justified, that council houses erected under the first three inter-war Acts were allocated to people of comfortable means who could have afforded to buy new private houses. Indeed, one committee of investigation was forced to recommend that there should be a fixed level of family income above which applicants for council houses would be ruled ineligible.<sup>150</sup>

If the theory of 'filtering-up' had held good in practice, it would not have mattered ultimately that the people living in the worst conditions were not the first to be awarded tenancy of the desirable new council houses; for no matter who moved into a new house, a chain of movement would, according to the theory, eventually leave an empty and unwanted slum at the other end of the line. This was the theory present in all of the first three inter-war Housing Acts: by no other process could a policy of building for general needs have helped to relieve the slum problem. But, as Bowley has pointed out, there were several obstacles which, in practice, tended to prevent working-class families enjoying the theoretical benefits of the 'filtering-up' argument.<sup>151</sup> Although there was indeed a general improvement in housing conditions during the 1920s,

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150. Ministry of Health, 'Strictly Confidential Report ... re. Letting of State-Aided Houses to Persons of the Working Classes', dated October 1932, in PRO: HLG 52/853.

151. Bowley, op cit, pp 53-4.

as shown by the Census statistics for overcrowding, it had become clear towards the end of the decade that slum property was not falling into disuse. The tenants were often worse-off at the end of the decade than at the beginning, occupying the same sector of accommodation as it deteriorated even further with age. This was a failure of housing policy strikingly presented by E D Simon, in writing of his experience and investigation of conditions in Manchester.<sup>152</sup> The solution which he propounded was to press on with the Wheatley policy of a high level of council building, but to support this with a much larger Exchequer subsidy. This, he argued, would enable local authorities to provide not for 'the clerk and well-to-do artisan' but for working-class families which could not afford an inclusive weekly rent of more than 10/-.<sup>153</sup>

This suggestion, had it been adopted, would no doubt have improved matters greatly, but it was, after all, only a more radical version of the 'filtering-up' approach to the housing problem. As such, it could not immediately overcome the unpleasant fact of urban life that, as long as there was an overall shortage of cheap accommodation and as long as the slums were left standing, there would be no shortage of takers for the very worst property. The continuation of rent control for many sitting tenants served, if anything, to aggravate the problem by making working-class families reluctant to move from older, 'controlled' property. Only a systematic policy of demolishing the slum sector and rehousing its tenants could deal effectively with the situation. During the 1920s, when housing policy concentrated on adding to the existing stock, fewer than 10,000 houses had been built specifically to rehouse slum dwellers.<sup>154</sup>

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152. E D Simon, How to Abolish the Slums (London, 1929). He concluded that 'the position of the slums is little or no better than it was at the time of the Armistice. The slum dwellers are not filtering up into better houses [and] overcrowding in the slums is not being relieved.' (Ibid, p66)

153. Ibid, p 67 and pp 73-4.

154. PD, 5th Series, vol 237, col 1804, 7 April 1930. It was not surprising that local authorities were reluctant to take any initiative in slum replacement activity, for under the provisions in the 1923 Act the average cost devolving on local rates was about £9 per house per year. (Simon, op cit, p 93.)

But the slum question was fairly prominent in the General Election campaigns of 1929 and, following Labour's success, Arthur Greenwood introduced legislation designed to complement the 'additional' housing policy of the Wheatley Act with a new 'sanitary' approach.<sup>155</sup> The emphasis on a two-pronged attack on the housing problem was clearly expressed to the local authorities in a Circular from the Ministry of Health: 'the two acts are part of one single policy and are intended to be worked in combination.'<sup>156</sup>

Nevertheless, local authorities were slow to adapt to this dual approach in the three years during which the Wheatley and Greenwood Acts co-existed. The Greenwood scheme made a sluggish start; only 11,796 houses were built under it between September 1930 and September 1933, compared with 162,784 subsidised by the Wheatley Act over the same period.<sup>157</sup> This is not really surprising: as long as the Wheatley subsidy was available, local government was reluctant to come to terms with the difficulties inherent in a slum clearance programme. Slum property was expensive for councils to buy - being mainly in town centres, its land value could be very high. It was possible for slum landlords to force the holding of a public enquiry and to raise objections which, however worthless, could delay considerably the process of compulsory purchase. And, of course, not a little slum property was owned by local councillors themselves.

Activity under the Greenwood Act was, however, given an effective boost by the National Government's Housing (Financial Provisions) Act of 1933.<sup>158</sup> Local authorities were given a five-year deadline to raze all

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155. For details of the 1930 Housing Act see Appendix 1.

156. Ministry of Health Circular No 1138, 19 August 1930.

157. See Table 1-1 and Figure 1-3.

158. See Appendix 1 for details.

the slums and to rehouse the denizens. And to focus local government attention on this problem, it was announced, the Wheatley subsidy was to be withdrawn in respect of any housing scheme not approved by the Ministry of Health before December 1933. In fact, the decision to terminate the role of local government as a supplier of additional housing was the result of two quite different considerations. One was the Report of the Committee on Local Expenditure,<sup>159</sup> which had recommended that the Wheatley subsidy should be axed as an economy measure. The other was the unreasoning faith of Hilton Young (Greenwood's successor as Minister of Health) in private enterprise. It is unusual for a Cabinet Minister to offer up his own Department for major sacrificial economies, but at one point Young was pressing for the abolition of both the Wheatley and the Greenwood subsidies.<sup>160</sup> His policy was based on an imperfect understanding of the problems involved:

There is no obvious reason why Private Enterprise and capital should not now provide the supply [of working-class housing]. There is evidence that the chief thing that prevents them is the competition of subsidised houses built by the local authorities. The right course then, not for financial reasons only, but to promote the building of houses for the working classes, is to stop the general subsidy. (161)

Young failed to appreciate what most of his predecessors had realised: the root of the housing problem was that it was no longer profitable for private enterprise to build houses to let to working-class families.<sup>162</sup>

159. PP 1932-33 (Cmd 4200) vol xiv, p 1.

160. Wilding, op cit, Chapter 12.

161. Quoted from Cabinet papers, dated 17 November 1932, by Wilding, op cit, p 324.

162. While most observers in the 1930s were agreed that a working-class family could not be expected to pay more than about 10/- per week for accommodation, the economic inclusive weekly rent of a four-roomed house built in 1934 (when costs were at their lowest in the inter-war period) was 12/6 at the very least - and landlords were naturally anxious to do more than merely recover their costs. (Political and Economic Planning, Housing England (London 1934). See also Gilbert, op cit, p 201-2.)

There was no real competition between the private and council sectors, because the private builders were primarily concerned to serve a middle-class market of aspiring owner-occupiers.<sup>163</sup> By scrapping the Wheatley subsidy the National Government was cutting off the supply of new houses to the many working-class families which could not contemplate the expense of home-ownership. There was a cyclical revival in the output of the housebuilding industry from about 1933, which was aided by the prevailing low construction costs and borrowing rates, but this could only help working-class families through the gradual process of their filtering-up into the houses vacated by the better-off. The prime beneficiaries of the 1930s housebuilding boom were the people who were able and willing to buy property with the help of a building society mortgage.

At the bottom end of the housing market, the Greenwood Act was fairly successful in dealing with the families in greatest need and in rehousing them at suitably low rentals. Nevertheless, by its very nature as a housing replacement policy, the scheme made a relatively small net addition to the total housing stock of the nation. In all, up to March 1939, about 289,000 houses were built under the 'sanitary' Housing Acts of the 1930s, but after deduction of the houses demolished and closed<sup>164</sup> this figure represents a net increase of only about 16,000 to the housing stock over a period of nine years. Over the 1930s as a whole, the predominant source of 'additional' housing was

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163. In a speech in Manchester in 1933, Young himself stated that during the year '... of over 11,000 sample houses built by private enterprise 82% were to sell; only 18% ... were to let.' (Quoted by H Quigley and I Goldie, Housing and Slum Clearance in London (London, 1934) p 160-1.)

164. For details of demolitions and closures see H W Richardson and D H Aldcroft, Building in the British Economy between the Wars (London, 1968) p 60.

private enterprise, which provided about 85% of the total net increase.

The second stage of 'sanitary' policy was the Housing Act of 1935,<sup>165</sup> which - in certain circumstances - made overcrowding illegal and which allowed local authorities to build houses to relieve the problem. Not very much use was made of this Act by local authorities, especially as before 1938 the subsidy payable by the Exchequer was lower than that under the 1930 Act. Overcrowding and slum conditions were frequently found under the same roof and councils were inclined to deal with the problem under the latter heading. A uniform rate of subsidy was established, however, by Act of Parliament in 1938<sup>166</sup> and the level of housebuilding in relief of overcrowding began to pick up before the outbreak of war.<sup>167</sup>

The inadequacy of reliance upon 'sanitary' housing policies was apparent even in the administration of these Acts. A district council was obliged to rehouse slum-dwellers and overcrowded families within its own boundaries even though there might be a far more pressing need for new houses in another district. This problem was particularly vexing in County Durham, where there were several districts in which there were no economic prospects but plenty of slums. Attempts to have slum replacement houses built only in the more industrially viable districts were hampered by the letter of the law.<sup>168</sup> If national policy had continued to allow a 'quantitative' element, as Greenwood had intended, these problems would

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165. For details of this Act see Appendix 1. This Act and the Act of 1930 were consolidated in the Housing Act of 1936, but an administrative distinction was usually maintained between schemes connected with slum clearance and those for the relief of overcrowding.

166. For details see Appendix 1.

167. See Figure 1-3.

168. This matter is considered more fully in Section 3A below.

have been less important; as it was, the question of where additional houses were to be built was left mainly to the intuition of private enterprise. Some councils were prepared to tackle the problem of meeting general needs by building on their own initiative without a subsidy, but the total of 70,277 houses between October 1934 and March 1940 was relatively small (representing only 4.1% of all houses built over the same period).

In one sense, the restriction of council housebuilding in the 1930s was a wasted opportunity. Although the MP who reported to Parliament on the depressed state of Durham and Tyneside suggested greater council housing activity '... for the relief of unemployment as well as for its own intrinsic value',<sup>169</sup> such 'job creation' policies did not appeal to the economically orthodox Governments of the 1930s. As a result, the limited housing policy of the National Government failed to take advantage of the resources available: unlike Addison at the end of the First World War, Ministers of the 1930s had the opportunity to exploit low material costs, favourable borrowing rates, a good supply of labour and a local government system experienced in the management of building programmes. Although it was often claimed that the extra demand for labour and raw materials generated by large local authority schemes was responsible for increasing costs in the housing market as a whole,<sup>170</sup> the industry was sufficiently buoyant by the mid-1930s to

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169. Reports of Investigations into the Industrial Conditions in Certain Depressed Areas, 1933 (Durham and Tyneside) PP 1933-34 (Cmd 4728) vol xiii, p 313.

170. See, for example, Ministry of Health, Private Enterprise Housing (HMSO London, 1944) p 12 and J Sykes, A Study in English Local Authority Finance (London, 1939) p 8.

absorb this demand without serious effect.<sup>171</sup> A more important reason for the reluctance of the National Government to countenance any return to 'additional' housebuilding policy was the belief that this was simply unnecessary: the shortages of the 1920s had been an emergency requiring exceptional action, but in the 1930s, when private enterprise showed every sign of recovery, the State need only concern itself with the reform of insanitary conditions. Whether this view was justified or not, the belief that the State could gradually withdraw from the housing market was overturned by the Second World War. The combination of a virtual cessation of building during hostilities, the effect of enemy bombing and in 1945 the election of a strong Labour Government, was to produce a massive new programme of 'additional' council housebuilding.

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171. The rise in building costs in the late 1930s (see Figure 1-2) was due not so much to increased council activity as to the rearmament programme. (See C Morgan-Webb, Three Million Houses (New York, 1937) p 122-3 and Bowley, op cit, p 167.)

CHAPTER TWO

HOUSING IN COUNTY DURHAM, c 1900-1914

#### A. The Development of Housing Conditions up to 1914

There are two factors which make the choice of County Durham as a survey area particularly interesting. The more general factor is the diversity of economic activity within the county, which will be described in the following four sub-sections. The other factor, which we shall now consider, is Durham's chronic record of bad housing conditions.

Inadequate housing has become one of the North East's least enviable traditions. In every Census which has measured overcrowding, the towns and even the rural districts of the North East have consistently headed the tables in their respective leagues. Changing definitions of the problem have made little difference. Rearrangement of the overcrowding data in the 1901 Census shows that the worst five towns were Gateshead, South Shields, Tynemouth, Newcastle and Sunderland, in which over 30% of the population was housed at a level of more than two persons to a room.<sup>1</sup> The placings had undergone only slight change by 1961: Gateshead, Newcastle, Sunderland and South Shields came first, third, fourth and seventh, with between 10% and 16% of the population living at more than '1½ persons' per room.<sup>2</sup> The first detailed survey of overcrowding - in which children were classified as fractions of a person, according to age, and in which exceptions were made of kitchens and particularly small rooms - was instituted by the Housing Act of 1935. The report issued in 1936<sup>3</sup> showed that these refinements helped merely to confirm that the North East made all other black-spots seem pale. Details from this report

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1. E R Dewsnup, The Housing Problem in England (Manchester, 1907) p 49. In sixth place was Plymouth, with a comparatively modest 20%.
  2. B T Robson, Urban Analysis (Cambridge, 1969) p 87. Willesden, London and Birmingham filled the intervening places.
  3. Ministry of Health, Housing Act, 1935. Report on the Overcrowding Survey in England and Wales, 1936 (HMSO London, 1936).

are reproduced in Appendix 3 to illustrate the comparison.

Although the fact of bad housing conditions in County Durham is perfectly clear, a simple explanation is impossible to find. For example, bad housing in the 1960s might well be a reflection of the economic depression which has plagued the area since 1914. But how can it be explained before the First World War, when much of the county was industrially prosperous? Before 1914, wages in this region were generally good compared with those in the rest of England and Wales.<sup>4</sup> There was, it is true, a dearth of female employment,<sup>5</sup> but this was balanced by a high level of occupied males. There again, suggestions are made below as to why conditions were so poor in the districts of Tyneside and the coalfield. But why should other quite different places in County Durham like Tow Law and the Hartlepoons also have figured so prominently in the national tables? One argument is that the proximity of the North East to Scotland has exerted a baleful influence.<sup>6</sup> The concept of housing conditions improving gradually from the north of Britain towards the south, rather like the climate, does have an element of fact in it, but merely shrugs off a proper explanation. So too does the argument that bad housing had always been the case in the North East, for a tradition is finite: it starts at a certain time and has a discernible cause. In any case, it is quite probable that the North East's housing tradition is not a very long one. Were housing conditions in Durham and Northumberland in the early nineteenth century markedly worse than those in the rest of England and Wales? Were the warrens on the banks of the Tyne any more overcrowded and unhealthy at that time

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4. E H Hunt, Regional Wage Variations in Britain, 1850-1914 (Oxford, 1973) pp 44-47.

5. County Durham had the lowest proportion of occupied females in the country. (Ibid, p 127.)

6. H A Mess, Industrial Tyneside (London, 1928) p 47.

than the rookeries of any other large urban settlement?

It seems more likely that the rot set in during the third quarter of the nineteenth century as a result of heavy population growth. Between 1851 and 1881, in line with expansion in the coal, iron and shipbuilding industries, the population of the North East increased dramatically. The population growth rate over this period - a combination of very high natural increase and considerable immigration - was much greater than in any other region of England and Wales.<sup>7</sup> If housing standards did only begin to deteriorate, in comparison with the rest of the country, from about the middle of the nineteenth century, the development might more easily be explained by the suggestions made later in this chapter. If the centres of the lowest housing standards in the county were, in fact, Tyneside and the coalfield, conditions in adjacent areas, like Tow Law and the Hartlepoons, might easily have become depressed - there would have been less incentive in these places for builders to erect better houses and more encouragement for landlords to charge higher rents for minimal accommodation.

One important factor in the making of bad housing conditions in the North East - particularly in the mining villages - was the high average family size. For whatever reason, miners were inclined to have larger families than those of other workers; and although their fertility declined in the second half of the nineteenth century, it did not fall as quickly as in most other occupational groups.<sup>8</sup> On a par with Monmouth and Glamorgan in Wales, Durham in 1911 was the county in England with the

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7. See Hunt, *op cit*, p 226.

8. T H Stevenson, 'The Fertility of Various Social Classes in England and Wales, 1850 to 1911' in Journal of the Royal Statistical Society, vol 83, 1920, p 414.

highest average family size.<sup>9</sup> Within the county, the level was highest in the mining districts, but still fairly high in South Tyneside, Sunderland, the Hartlepoons and Stockton (around the county average of 4.84 persons per family). Only in Darlington, Weardale and Teesdale was the level significantly lower.

The other simple factor in the making of overcrowded conditions is, of course, the size of dwellings. In County Durham, unfortunately, the record for large families was matched by another for small houses. The 1921 Census (the first to embody a fully reliable definition of a 'structurally separate dwelling') showed that the average number of rooms per dwelling was lowest in Northumberland and Durham, with levels of 3.78 and 3.89 respectively.<sup>10</sup> These low standards are attributed below to the spread of the two-storey flat in Tyneside and the effect of the 'free house' system in mining districts. Dwellings of four rooms or less accounted for only between 60% and 64% of the total housing stock in Darlington, Stockton and West Hartlepool in 1911, but for about 83% in Gateshead and South Shields. In other districts in the county, the lowest average house sizes were to be found mainly in the areas of most intensive mining settlement.

One other possible explanation of the North East's housing problems should be mentioned here, if only to be refuted. At best it is the idea that the working class of this region demanded small houses,<sup>11</sup> at worst that the local poor took pleasure in filth.<sup>12</sup> Because rents on Tyneside

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9. G A Nadur, Some Aspects of the Urban Geography of Chester-le-Street and Houghton-le-Spring and Other Small Urban Settlements in North Durham (unpublished Durham University PhD thesis, 1967) p 360.

10. The third and fourth lowest figures were for the West Riding and Lancashire, with 4.30 and 4.71 rooms per dwelling.

11. See Dewsnup, op cit, p 75.

12. See the opinion of the Gateshead councillor quoted below, p 130-1.

were, as we shall see, so high, there was in a sense a demand for small houses and flats. This was simply the only available accommodation to fall within the working-class income bracket. Choice played little part on Tyneside - and even less in the coalfield, where the 'free house' system operated. The whole argument was sharply countered by William Straker, Secretary of the Northumberland Miners' Union, before the Sankey Commission in 1919:

- Q. What sort of house do you think is most suitable for a miner's family?
- A. I consider that there ought to be no houses without a kitchen and scullery, and a living room with three bedrooms over.
- Q. That practically means a five-roomed house?
- A. Yes ...
- Q. ... You will probably tell me that I have been misinformed, but I always have been led to believe that the average miner prefers for his family a four-roomed house?
- A. To a three-roomed or a two-roomed house he certainly does. (13)

As Straker implied, it was disingenuous to maintain that the low standard of working-class housing was the result of free choice.

Bearing in mind the low overall standards so far described, we now turn to consider the problem on a more detailed local level. As mentioned above, there existed within the county a considerable diversity of economic activity - the result of geographical and geological disposition and the way in which natural resources were exploited. This diversity allows interesting comparisons to be made between what were, in effect, different economic regions within the county.

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13. Report of the Coal Industry Commission, Vol I, PP 1919 (Cmd 359)  
vol xi, Qq 8301-3.

## 1. South Tyneside and Sunderland

Although the two settlements were and still are physically separate, the growth of the Tyne and Wear conurbations in the late nineteenth century was based on very similar economic developments along the banks of the two rivers - the expansion of the coal trade combined with the rise of shipbuilding and marine engineering. In Sunderland this industrial growth was accompanied by an increase in population from about 70,000 in 1851 to about 170,000 by 1911. Concentrated urban growth to the south-west, close to the riverside works, swamped the old village of Bishopwearmouth, while shipyards on the north bank led to the development of Southwick as a badly overcrowded 'industrial annexe'.<sup>14</sup>

The industrial development of South Tyneside was rather more complex, as the growth of shipbuilding and engineering was accompanied by a decline in the established chemical and glassware industries. Coal staithes proliferated along the riverside and major shipbuilding yards were developed in Jarrow and Hebburn. Later in the century electrical engineering flourished in Hebburn, while locomotive works in Gateshead employed about 2,000 men by the turn of the century.<sup>15</sup> The population of Tyneside as a whole grew from about 200,000 in 1850 to about 750,000 by 1914 and was absorbed in massive housing development close to the river banks. The result was a giant conurbation, of a quite homogenous nature, artificially divided by many local government boundaries and physically divided by the great river. .

These concentrated urban areas in the north of County Durham were afflicted at the beginning of this century by the problems of high rent and acute overcrowding. A vital source in the study of urban housing in

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14. A E Smailes, North England (London, 1960) p 179.

15. Ibid, p 177.



ILLUSTRATION 2-1 Barge Inn Yard, Hillgate, c 1933



ILLUSTRATION 2-2 Davidson's Buildings, Hillgate, c 1933



ILLUSTRATION 2-3 Pipewellgate, seen from the High Level Bridge, 1925

Hillgate and Pipewellgate, on the river bank in Gateshead. The high concentration of old, sub-divided housing, mixed with industrial buildings, produced most unsatisfactory living conditions.



ILLUSTRATION 2-4 Bankwell Stairs, Pipewellgate, in the 1920s

this period is the Board of Trade enquiry held in 1905 and repeated for the purposes of comparison in 1912, which investigated (among other things) housing conditions and rent levels in more than seventy towns in England and Wales.<sup>16</sup> It can be seen from the indices published in the reports of these enquiries (reproduced in Table 2-1) that rents in all the Tyneside towns investigated (Newcastle, Gateshead, Jarrow and South Shields) were among the highest in the country, that rents in Sunderland were almost as high, but lower in Darlington and relatively cheap in Stockton. As is often the case in the urban housing market, however, the areas of highest rent were largely those where conditions were worst. In South Tyneside about  $34\frac{1}{2}\%$  of the population in 1911 was living at a level of more than two persons to a room, in Sunderland about  $32\frac{1}{2}\%$ , but in Darlington and Stockton only about 13% and 11% respectively.<sup>17</sup>

One of the reasons for the high level of overcrowding in South Tyneside was the predominance in the housing stock of the 'Tyneside flat'. This form of housing consists of terraces two storeys high, which at first glance appear to be of conventional design. But, as the extra front door suggests, what appears to be a single terraced house is in fact two quite separate, self-contained dwellings. One front door leads directly into a ground-floor flat, the other up an enclosed staircase to the first-floor flat. At the rear of the house there are usually two separate yards, one at the back door of the lower flat, the other with a stairway (open or enclosed) to the upper flat. Earlier flats, built from the 1860s, were usually of two rooms each, but later designs, from the 1880s, were for three rooms in the lower flat and four above.<sup>18</sup> This type of building

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16. PP 1908 (Cd 3864) vol cvii, p 319, and PP 1913 (Cd 6955) vol lxvi, p 393.

17. See Table 2-6.

18. Various aspects of the Tyneside flat are shown in Illustrations 2-5 to 2-11.

TABLE 2-1 Urban Rents in England and Wales, 1905 and 1912

<u>1905</u> (index for 77 towns)		<u>1912</u> (index for 74 towns)	
London	100	London (middle zone)	100
Croydon	81	NEWCASTLE	84
Plymouth	81	Croydon	81
NEWCASTLE	76	Plymouth	81
Birkenhead	70	Swansea	76
Ø JARROW	68	Birkenhead	73
Swansea	68	Ø JARROW	72
Ø GATESHEAD	66	Huddersfield	70
Liverpool	65	Southampton	70
Southampton	65	Ø SOUTH SHIELDS	70
Huddersfield	64	Ø GATESHEAD	68
Barrow	63	Sheerness	67
Newport	63	Cardiff	66
Manchester	62	Luton	66
Luton	61	Ø SUNDERLAND	66
Ø SOUTH SHIELDS	61	Barrow	65
Oldham	60	Liverpool	65
Birmingham	59	Manchester	64
Bradford	59	Newport	64
Cardiff	59	Bradford	62
MIDDLESBROUGH	59	Oldham	62
Sheerness	59	Birmingham	61
Ø SUNDERLAND	59	MIDDLESBROUGH	61
Swindon	59	Portsmouth	61
Ø DARLINGTON	58	.....	..
.....	..	Ø DARLINGTON	59
Ø STOCKTON	54	.....	..
.....	..	Ø STOCKTON	55
		.....	..

Note: Ø CAPITALS - district in County Durham  
CAPITALS - district in North East England

Aspects of the Tyneside flat. The older (two-room) variety were followed by a larger (three and four-room) type. It also became more common, in larger terraces, to build front doors in groups of four. In both of the back-view examples shown here, rear staircases were enclosed in the building shell.



ILLUSTRATION 2-5 Eldon Street,  
Gateshead, 1956



ILLUSTRATION 2-6 Back of Elizabeth  
Street, Gateshead,  
1956



ILLUSTRATION 2-7 Tyneside flats in South Shields, 1976



ILLUSTRATION 2-8 Rear view of flats in South Shields, 1976

is almost unknown outside the North East and even then is uncommon except in Tyneside districts. It would appear from the 1911 Census that in Gateshead and South Shields this form of housing accounted for over 60% and 70% respectively of the total stock and for about 60% in South Tyneside as a whole (see Table 2-2). Away from this area, the only other districts in County Durham with a significant proportion of flats were Stanley (about 16%), South Shields Rural District (15%) and Seaham Harbour (10%).

This was a form of accommodation which, however inadequate it may now be considered, no doubt '... in its day marked an improvement in working class housing standards.'<sup>19</sup> One can calculate from the 1911 Census that housing standards were indeed higher in the flats than in the other forms of accommodation available to the working class. Fewer than 1% of the flats in South Tyneside were tenanted by more than one family, whereas multi-occupation was much more common in conventional 'dwelling houses' (see Table 2-2). But while the Tyneside flat offered more privacy and better sanitary standards, it was too small a unit to allow any great improvement in the overcrowding level. The lower density of occupation shown in Table 2-2 to some extent reflects merely the smallness of flats compared with older (but often larger) multi-tenanted property. Although drab and monotonous rows of late nineteenth-century Tyneside flats were a great improvement on the horrors of places like Pipewellgate and Hillgate - two of Gateshead's unloveliest riverside quarters<sup>20</sup> - overcrowding on Tyneside was still much higher in 1911 than anywhere else in the country. Other areas had faced similar problems of industrial development and population growth

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19. N McCord, Northumberland History from the Air (Newcastle, 1972) p 40.

20. See Illustrations 2-1 to 2-4.

TABLE 2-2 Occupation of Houses and Flats in County Durham, 1911  
 [Districts with over 10% flats in total housing stock]

	% of flats in total housing stock	Inhabited 'ordinary dwelling houses'		Inhabited flats	
		Families per house	Persons per house	Families per flat	Persons per flat
Whickham	21.3	1.04	5.18	1.00	4.95
Gateshead	62.6	1.23	5.57	1.01	4.88
Felling	44.2	1.02	4.86	1.01	4.83
Hebburn	57.1	1.04	5.43	1.01	4.98
Jarrow	51.9	1.31	6.27	1.00	4.87
South Shields	71.7	1.55	6.73	1.00	4.51
[South Tyneside]	[60.4]	[1.25]	[5.77]	[1.008]	[4.74]
Stanley	15.8	1.06	5.55	1.00	4.51
South Shields RD	15.3	1.03	4.98	1.00	4.26
Seaham Harbour	10.9	1.45	7.29	1.00	4.34

in the nineteenth century and had coped with greater success.

The rise of the Tyneside flat is just as hard to explain as that of the 'back-to-back' house in Leeds.<sup>21</sup> The facts of the Tyneside development are fairly clear, the reasons for it open to any conjecture. It may well be '... superficial to conclude that it was a direct outcome of the obvious need to provide additional housing at an unprecedented rate of housebuilding.'<sup>22</sup> It is possible that conditions on Tyneside and in the coalfield were particularly bad in the early nineteenth century and that later 'the existing standard was accepted uncritically and comprehensively as the standard to which to work.'<sup>23</sup> But, in the absence of statistics, it cannot be proven that housing conditions in the early nineteenth century were at their worst in the North East. And other towns, inheriting a standard which may have been little different from that found on the banks of the Tyne, did not uncritically accept such a standard.

Of course, the standard of the later nineteenth-century urban development of South Tyneside has many times been held up for execration. J B Priestley, for example, wrote of Gateshead that '... the whole town appeared to have been carefully planned by an enemy of the human race'<sup>24</sup> and Raymond Unwin, a pioneer of garden city and council house design, used South Shields in his lectures to incredulous Americans as an example of town planning at its very worst.<sup>25</sup> In fact there was no planning at all. The main problem of the South Tyneside towns was that

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21. For the latter problem see M W Beresford's article, 'The Back-to-Back Houses in Leeds, 1787-1937' in S D Chapman (ed) The History of Working-Class Housing (Newton Abbot, 1971).
22. E Allen, N McCord, et al, The North-East Engineers' Strikes of 1871 (Newcastle, 1971) p 15-16.
23. Ibid, p 16.
24. J B Priestley, English Journey (London, 1934) p 301.
25. W L Creese, The Legacy of Raymond Unwin (Massachusetts, 1967) p 180.



ILLUSTRATION 2-9 Back of Thornton  
Street, South Shields,  
1936



ILLUSTRATION 2-10 Thames Street,  
South Shields, 1931

Illustrations 2-9 and 2-11 are examples of less substantial rear entrances to Tyneside flats. Illustration 2-10 (above) shows an unusual arrangement of front doors.



ILLUSTRATION 2-11 Back of Pleasant Place,  
South Shields, 1934

they grew in a haphazard, almost accidental way.

This is shown by the example of Gateshead.<sup>26</sup> Until the 1860s there was little expansion from the riverside areas, which were hemmed in by burgage land and large freehold and leasehold estates. Only in the mid-1860s were scattered tracts of these estates released for building on a large scale. The builder William Affleck, for example, bought a small site from the Ecclesiastical Commissioners in 1870 - when the lease of one of their tenants had expired - and took full advantage of the demand for new houses by packing as many flats as possible into six acres. It was probably in this period that the pattern of development was set. It was reinforced by the conditions sometimes imposed on builders by the vendors of housing sites: when Affleck bought another large plot, he agreed to build houses '... for not more than two families with separate arrangements as far as possible.' Similar difficulties arising from the slow and irregular release of building sites may also have obtained in Hebburn, a district of gross overcrowding, where most of the land was owned by a single family.

Given the shortage of building land and the heavy demands of population growth, it is not surprising that builders tried to build at a very high density on the sites available to them. Flats, like back-to-back houses, were a good proposition for the landlord: costing little more to build than a single house of the same size overall, divided premises yielded a higher rent.<sup>27</sup> There may have been models for this type of building in Tyneside dating back to the 1830s<sup>28</sup> which,

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26. Most of the information used in this paragraph is taken from F W D Manders, History of Gateshead (Gateshead, 1973) Chapter 5 and pp 166-70.

27. The division between two back-to-back houses meant a 20% higher return in rent. See Beresford, op cit, p 115.

28. See the suggestion noted by J Noddings, Working Class Housing in Newcastle-upon-Tyne, 1890-1914 (unpublished Newcastle University B Arch dissertation, 1974) p 12.

given the target of high density development that the builders set themselves, would make the rise of the flat from the 1860s more understandable. There is, of course, much to be said in favour of the two-storey flat design. As a form of economical building it was preferable to the unhealthy back-to-back system. Its design could be adapted to higher standards - as it was in the 1880s, when the three and four-roomed type superseded the older two-roomed version. The principle was sound enough to survive into the inter-war period and beyond - Newcastle Corporation built almost a thousand two-storey flats between 1945 and 1965.<sup>29</sup> But the Tyneside solution to a particular architectural problem, involving the economical use of limited space, is still a source of mystery. Other towns in England and Wales must have had to face similar problems of population pressure and land shortage at some point during the nineteenth century, but none followed the Tyneside pattern - not even Sunderland. The phenomenon raises many interesting questions but defies attempts to answer them convincingly.

The housing pattern in Sunderland holds different mysteries. Apart from the older riverside parts to the east, where large three-storey houses were subdivided into many small tenements, and apart from a few two-storey flats, the characteristic working-class accommodation consisted of small terraced houses of a single storey, with no garden and a tiny yard.<sup>30</sup> The 1908 Board of Trade report described the '... long rows of one-storeyed cottages, containing sitting-room, living-room, bedroom and scullery' as being popular with '... the skilled machinic', who in some cases was a freeholder.<sup>31</sup>

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29. E Stringer, The Housing Pattern in North Tyneside since 1945 (unpublished Durham University MA thesis, 1971) p 30.

30. Houses of this type may still be seen in the Millfield district of Sunderland (see Illustration 2-14).

31. PP 1908 (Cd 3864) vol cvii, p 826.

Relatively good single-storey accommodation in the Millfield district of Sunderland contrasts with older examples from Gateshead and South Shields.



ILLUSTRATION 2-12 Quarry Field Road, Gateshead, in the 1930s



ILLUSTRATION 2-13 Cornwallis Square, South Shields, 1935



ILLUSTRATION 2-14 Single-storey houses in the Millfield district of Sunderland, 1976

The concentration of this type of development helps to explain the high level of overcrowding in Sunderland. Like Tyneside flats, these one-storey houses offered better living conditions than older, subdivided property but were still too small, in comparison with standards elsewhere in England and Wales, for many of the families who occupied them. In 1911 the proportion of tenements of four rooms or less to the total housing stock in Sunderland (78.5%) was almost as high as on Tyneside.<sup>32</sup> Much more difficult to explain is the reason for the proliferation of this particular type of housing development. In terms of building, street-making and drainage costs per dwelling, it was much less economical than two-storey construction, even allowing for a higher density of development. One might have expected these costs to be reflected in higher rents, but Sunderland was placed lower on the Board of Trade indices than the Tyneside towns, where land use was more economical.<sup>33</sup> This would suggest that building land was more cheaply and readily available in Sunderland in the second half of the nineteenth century than in Tyneside, but such a conclusion would not in itself explain the divergence of building styles. The answer to that question might be revealed by a study of land ownership and development in the two districts: the size of estates, the policy of landowners as to selling land freehold or leasehold, the involvement of builder-landlords and the pattern of demand are all factors which could account for local differences. Some towns have already received the benefit of close examination of this sort,<sup>34</sup> but the conurbations of the North East have yet to be put under a similar historical microscope.

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32. See above, p 76.

33. See Table 2-1.

34. See, for example, M J Daunton, Coal Metropolis: Cardiff 1870-1914 (Leicester, 1977).

## 2. Darlington, Stockton and the Hartlepoons

The development of these towns in the second half of the nineteenth century owed much less than Tyneside and Wearside to 'carboniferous capitalism'.<sup>35</sup> Darlington already enjoyed a modest prosperity at the beginning of the nineteenth century as a market town and the centre of an outwork linen industry. It became one of the largest railway centres in the country, served by several engineering works, and retained its importance as a market and service centre.<sup>36</sup> Stockton-upon-Tees was an old-established port which profited from the expansion of the iron and (later) the steel industries on Teesside. Although it made a slow start compared with the rapid industrial growth of Middlesbrough, Stockton did develop as an iron producer, and secondary engineering and shipbuilding industries also prospered. Next to the old peninsular borough of Hartlepool, West Hartlepool grew as a coalfield port, but the railway also made it '... an industrial outlier of Teesside',<sup>37</sup> with iron and steel works and some shipbuilding and marine engineering. West Hartlepool was, like Middlesbrough, a new 'boom town' development of the nineteenth century and there was an element of planning in the grid pattern of its streets of terraced houses. Nevertheless, the population growth of both West Hartlepool and Stockton had almost fizzled out by the end of the century. In the former there was a growth rate of only 2.1% between 1901 and 1911, and in the latter an increase of only 1.3%, while in old Hartlepool there was actually a decrease of 9.3%. In Darlington, however, industrial prosperity was able to sustain a 25% population increase over the same decade.<sup>38</sup>

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35. See Allen op cit, p 12.

36. Smailes, op cit, p 183.

37. Ibid, p 182

38. See Table 2-6.

Housing conditions were worse in the Hartlepoons before the First World War than in the other two towns. In 1911, 16.7% of the population of West Hartlepool lived in houses with more than two persons to a room; in the old borough, which had been densely populated for centuries, the figure was 28.3%.<sup>39</sup> The problem of space on the Hartlepool peninsula was particularly acute, so that much of the increase in population had previously been absorbed in the same very old buildings near the harbour. In the three larger boroughs, population growth in the late nineteenth century had been accommodated in housing of a more conventional sort than in Tyneside and Wearside - usually two-storey dwellings of four or five rooms, laid out in terraces forming a grid pattern.

The geographical and industrial circumstances of these three boroughs were, in fact, much more favourable to a conventional, less crowded housing development than those of the conurbations in the north of the county. The shipbuilding industry and the coal trade of the Tyne and Wear could only be conducted along the banks of the rivers and the housing of their workers followed the same, necessarily lateral development. Along the Tyne there was an added problem arising from the very early industrial settlement of so many points along the banks; when industrial expansion came in the second half of the nineteenth century, housing development was restricted even in a lateral direction to the extent of the 'gaps' between these older settlements. There were no such pressures to force high-density housing patterns upon the three southern conurbations. Stockton and West Hartlepool were, of course, bounded on one side by river or sea, on which they partly depended for industrial prosperity. But there were fewer physical obstacles to lateral urban development and the greater economic diversity of these towns (with their iron and steel industries) allowed effective development of their hinterlands. Darlington was the

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39. This compares with a 10.9% overcrowding level in Stockton in 1911 and 12.8% in Darlington. (See Table 2-6.)

most favourably placed of all the large towns in Durham. Its engineering industries and its housing could develop, in the terms of the urban historian, concentrically or centrifugally. As the Town Council appreciated, it was only necessary periodically to annexe another slice of the surrounding rural district.

As mentioned in the first section of this chapter, not only were housing conditions better on the whole in these three conurbations than in Tyneside and Sunderland, but rents were also lower. Although West Hartlepool was not included in the Board of Trade surveys, the rent index figures for Stockton and Darlington in 1905 and 1912 were considerably lower than those for Gateshead, Jarrow, South Shields and Sunderland (see Table 2-1). Compared with the coalfield districts, the three southern towns also had a good record for housing provision (reflected in the overcrowding statistics) which continued up to the First World War. In contrast with the coalfield, the percentage increase in families between 1901 and 1911 was actually exceeded by that of the increase in housing stock in Darlington, Stockton and the Hartlepoons (see Table 2-6).

In these urban settlements, therefore, conditions were healthier and shortages less acute than in other industrial areas of the county. Although the housing situation in these towns was still not very favourable compared with many other parts of England and Wales, it has been used in this study to some extent as a basis of comparison, by means of which the rest of County Durham may be judged against a 'normal' pattern.

### 3. The Durham Coalfield

This is a convenient title to distinguish this area of the county from the large towns and agricultural districts, but it does not convey the major differences within the area itself. Coal measures vary in type and accessibility, so that particular sections of the coalfield developed and declined at different times, according to changes in demand for various types of coal, in mining technology and in transport facilities. The production of the whole coalfield grew enormously during the nineteenth century, with an increase of 85% (the highest decennial rate) in the 1850s,<sup>40</sup> but each district had a different history of development by the end of the century and, of course, different prospects for the future.

In 1914 the most recent development had been the colliery expansion in the coastal region, particularly in the Easington Rural District, where a plateau of magnesium limestone covering the rich coal measures had previously been a deterrent. New sinking and pumping techniques changed this and development was aided by a new railway link between Sunderland and the Hartlepoons. This part of the coalfield had by far the best prospects - indeed, most of the surviving pits in the county are now to be found here. In the second half of the nineteenth century there had been increased activity in the north-west of the county, particularly in the Stanley area and at Chopwell (where the Consett Iron Company developed pits to serve their works direct). Prospects here and in the central part of coalfield north of Durham City were reasonably good, but in the south and south west they were much more doubtful. The area around Bishop Auckland was to suffer severely from pit closures between the wars and even the Brandon district, west of Durham City and developed relatively late, quickly became depressed.

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40. Allen, op cit, p 10.

There were other forms of economic activity on the coalfield, but only on a limited scale. The Consett Iron Company, on the western edge of the area, was a large employer, but other iron works to the south, at Tow Law and Witton Park, had collapsed before the turn of the century. Shildon contained a railway engineering works connected with Darlington. Bishop Auckland and Durham were important service centres, while some of the older villages served as market centres for smaller areas. Except in Whickham and Felling, the proportion of miners living in industrial Tyneside districts was low; but further west, in Ryton and Blaydon, where other industries had not spread, it was very high indeed.<sup>41</sup> In 1911 the proportion was highest in the Stanley area, where between 75% and 79% of all occupied males were engaged in mining.<sup>42</sup>

A peculiar feature of the housing pattern in the Durham coalfield was the 'free house' system, mentioned earlier in this chapter. It meant simply that certain categories of miners, mainly family men who worked below the surface, were given free occupation of a house owned by the coal company in addition to their wages. If there were not enough 'free houses' to go round, the unlucky miners who qualified for this bonus were given - if they could produce a rent book - a rent allowance. This was calculated as a certain number of pence per shift worked and was paid in addition to the money wage. The system was barely known outside the North East - the Samuel Commission found in 1925 that 'almost all' of the existing 68,000 free colliery houses were in Northumberland and Durham.<sup>43</sup> In 1912 about 28% of all the miners in Durham were allocated

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41. The 1911 Census showed that 73% and 63% respectively of the occupied male population in these districts were miners.

42. See Nadur, *op cit*, p 364, for an ordered list of the areas of highest employment in mining.

43. PP 1926 (Cmd 2600) vol xiv, p 214-5. South Wales came next on the list with about 600 'free houses'.

a free house and about 25% received a rent allowance. A large proportion of the remainder were not heads of families; the coal owners' figures for 1903 indicate that fewer than 10% of their employees who were householders did not receive some aid from the system, either in the form of free accommodation or of rent allowance.<sup>44</sup> Clearly, the system affected the vast majority of families whose livelihood depended on the pit.

What little there has been written on housing in the Durham coalfield concentrates on describing how bad living conditions were. The Land Enquiry Committee, for example, reported in 1914 on disgusting sanitary conditions and high overcrowding in the mining villages of County Durham.<sup>45</sup> When local council inspectors and medical officers made a report they would describe 'damp musty walls', wet floors of broken brick and mud, and families 'forced to live and rear their children in a house where the kitchen is a bedroom sometimes containing two beds, general living room, birth place, nursery and scullery'.<sup>46</sup> The few quantitative guides to bad housing conditions, particularly the Census overcrowding data, point to the same conclusion. In most parts of the coalfield in 1911 more than 30% of the population were living in houses with more than two persons to a room - that is, at about the same very high level of overcrowding as in the towns of South Tyneside.<sup>47</sup> One of the factors contributing to this poor record was the prevalence of lodgers in mining

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44. See Table 2-3 for further details. The majority (about 80%) of householding miners who did not qualify for these benefits were workers above ground.

45. Land Enquiry Committee, The Land, vol 2, Urban (London, 1914) pp 183-5.

46. Easington RDC Housing Committee Minutes, 27 September 1917, DCRO: RD/Ea.

47. See Table 2-6.

**TABLE 2-3 Miners, Free Houses and Rent Allowance,  
1903 and 1912**

**November 1903 (householding miners only) :-**

Area $\phi$	Living in free house		Given rent allowance		Given nothing		Total (No.)
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	
North	10,247	58.5	5,891	33.6	1,369	7.8	17,507
East	16,680	59.9	9,113	32.7	2,065	7.4	27,858
Auckland	10,110	59.9	4,721	25.3	2,503	14.8	16,884
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>37,037</b>	<b>59.5</b>	<b>19,275</b>	<b>31.0</b>	<b>5,937</b>	<b>9.5</b>	<b>62,249</b>

**April 1912 (all mine workers) :-**

North	11,258	23.6	15,114	31.7	21,261	44.6	47,633
East	19,101	29.7	15,441	24.0	29,703	46.2	64,245
Auckland	10,743	32.3	6,369	19.2	16,131	48.5	33,243
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>41,102</b>	<b>28.3</b>	<b>36,924</b>	<b>25.4</b>	<b>67,095</b>	<b>46.2</b>	<b>145,121</b>

$\phi$  Administrative divisions made by Coal Owners' Association :-



districts. These paying additions to the family household were common in an occupation with a high level of migratory labour: many unmarried miners who had moved to a new pit would be put up in the 'free' or rented houses of their workmates.<sup>48</sup> But this particular problem was only an aggravation - not the prime cause of overcrowding in Durham. In other coalfields, where the problem of lodgers also existed, the level of overcrowding was much lower. The root of the trouble in the Durham coalfield was quite simply a deficiency in the supply of adequately-sized houses.

Early nineteenth-century colliery housing was of a type known as the 'two-fall'. Many of these houses had only two rooms, the upper one being a garret usually reached by a step-ladder. The Easington inspectors reported that such attic rooms '... are unceiled, minus fire place, and the roof comes down to within a yard of the floor, a small window is placed at floor level, and is absolutely useless as far as ventilation is concerned'.<sup>49</sup> Three-roomed houses were built on the same principle, with two rooms below and the third stuck up in the angle of the roof. Later colliery housing, from about the 1870s, tended to be of four and sometimes five rooms, built in terraces to a more conventional design.<sup>50</sup>

There is little detailed information available about living conditions in colliery houses at the turn of the century, but an

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48. As an indication of the high level of labour mobility in the mining industry in County Durham, it may be noted that Peter Lee (the first Labour leader of the Durham County Council) once worked at 15 different collieries over a period of seven years. (J Lawson, Peter Lee (London, 1936) p 27.)
49. Easington RDC Housing Committee Minutes, 27 September 1917, DCRO: RD/Ea.
50. Examples of these different housing types are shown in Illustrations 2-15 to 2-21.

interesting record exists in the form of two sets of correspondence from 1896 to 1905<sup>51</sup> and an illustrated Local Government Board report of 1907.<sup>52</sup> The object of this attention was the housing in Marley Hill, a mining village in the Whickham Urban District. Ninety per cent of the houses there, apart from being two-roomed hovels built in about 1840, had the added delight of back-to-back construction.<sup>53</sup> They generated considerable controversy between the County Medical Officer of Health and the local councillors. He considered that 'from the standpoint of both decency and health, such conditions are disgraceful, and should not be tolerated'; they, on the other hand, believed the houses to be '... good and sanitary', although 'there is some little overcrowding'. Had the councillors bothered to analyse the table compiled by their own Inspector of Nuisances, they would have discovered that 76% of the inhabitants in 1896 were living at a level of more than two to a room. In 1905 it was reported that 50% of the houses were overcrowded on this standard - equivalent to about 60% of the inhabitants.<sup>54</sup> The County Council took a more serious view than the local body and prompted an inquiry by the Local Government Board. It was conducted by one of the Board's Medical Inspectors, Dr Darra Mair, who went on to produce in 1910 the authoritative condemnation of back-to-back housing.<sup>55</sup> Showing infant mortality to be nearly 50% higher in the back-to-backs than in the other houses in Marley Hill, Darra Mair paved the way for his major study of the Yorkshire towns. But he also took some time to speculate on the

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51. Printed correspondence, retained in GLS.

52. Local Government Board, Reports of the Medical Inspectors of the Local Government Board, No 262 (HMSO London, 1907).

53. See Illustrations 2-15 to 2-17.

54. See printed correspondence in GLS.

55. PP 1910 (Cd 5314) vol xxxviii, p 893.

These photographs of back-to-back colliery housing in Marley Hill are reproduced from a Local Government Board Inspector's Report of 1907. 'Two-fall' construction meant that the upper room occupied the space formed by the slope of the roof. In these houses, access to the upper room was by means of a stepladder and trapdoor (seen in the right of Illustrations 2-16 and 2-17).



ILLUSTRATION 2-15 Chapel Row, Marley Hill, c 1907



ILLUSTRATION 2-16 Ground floor interior, Marley Hill, c 1907



ILLUSTRATION 2-17 First floor interior, Marley Hill, c 1907

origins of the housing conditions in the Durham coalfield and produced the most clearly reasoned attack printed before 1914 on the free house system.<sup>56</sup>

Darra Mair was puzzled initially by the high level of overcrowding in the North East (about 30% according to the 1901 Census) compared with other mining districts like Merthyr Tydfil (12%) and Rhondda (5%). As the 'free house' system was peculiar to the North East coalfield, he drew the simple conclusion that this was the factor chiefly responsible for the inferior housing conditions of the region. The Land Enquiry Committee came to the same conclusion in 1914: 'there is a definite relation between the "free house" system obtaining in these two counties on the one hand, and overcrowding and insanitation on the other'.<sup>57</sup> The system was attributed by Darra Mair to the distant origins of coal mining in the North East, when a coal owner might have faced a quasi-feudal obligation to house his workers. However it may have begun, the 'free house' principle was strengthened by the 'bond system' - a free house was one of the concessions granted to a miner in return for his annual bond to work for the employer.<sup>58</sup> Even when the unions eventually broke the bond system, the provision of a free house was still recognised as an integral part of the miner's wage, or else a rent allowance was paid by the employer. Between 1900 and 1914 the usual rent allowance was between 2/- and 2/6 per week,<sup>59</sup> but

56. Local Government Board, op cit.

57. Land Enquiry Committee, op cit., p 197.

58. Ibid., p 197-8.

59. The Local Government Board report, op cit., quotes an average of 2/4½ per week in 1907, while figures produced by the Durham miners' lodges in 1903 yield an average of 2/1½ (Coal Owners' Records, DCR0: NCB 1/CO/86/512).

most miners had to pay over 4/- in weekly rent.<sup>60</sup>

The effect of the free house system was to encourage a low overall standard of housing. It was more economical for a miner to live in free accommodation than to have the inadequate rent allowance: the Land Enquiry Committee thought 'the most serious evil is that there are always applications from men living in "rented" houses for the tenancy of a free colliery house, however old and worn-out it may be'.<sup>61</sup> This tendency was reinforced by the Conciliation Board agreement in 1900 that 'no rent allowance be granted to any person who is offered a colliery house and refuses to accept it'.<sup>62</sup> As coal owners would rather have sunk their investment in colliery workings than in housing, it is hardly surprising that free houses were often - for the sake of cheapness - small and badly built. But the same low standards were also adopted by the private builders operating in the mining districts of the county. In such areas there was no incentive for private enterprise to build to a higher standard than that of the colliery houses. A miner forced to seek rented accommodation would have preferred not to pay more than his cash allowance, but even the most ruthless jerry-builder could not build down to a standard which enabled 2/- or 2/6 per week to be a profitable rent. Many a builder seems to have tried, nonetheless, with the result that rented property for miners was of no better quality than the free colliery housing.

Another depressing tendency emerging from the system was for the coal companies to hold back as much as possible from building new houses.

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60. The average of the miners' figures in 1903 was  $4/1\frac{1}{2}$  per week. (DCRO: loc cit.)

61. Land Enquiry Committee, op cit, p 199.

62. Quoted by A L Bowley and A R Burnett-Hurst, Livelihood and Poverty (London, 1915) p 141.

It was, of course, necessary to build when a new pit was opened in an undeveloped district, but coal companies might hope eventually to rely upon the stimulation of private building in the area to cater for any expansion of the colony.<sup>63</sup> Some collieries calculated on this hope, even though it might mean that their workers would pay higher market rents for private accommodation. As the manager of Langley Park Colliery wrote to his counterpart at Medomsley in 1906,

... if the Company forthwith put up sufficient houses to accommodate all our workmen, the rents obtained by the owners of private property in proportion to the demand would go down, and this would have the effect of destroying any further private enterprise in the erection of house property. If we can manage to tide over the next few years without erecting much property, rents are so remunerative in Langley Park that private enterprise will go a long way to supply our needs. (64)

It was calculations such as these that aggravated the acute shortage of housing in the mining districts of Durham, about which correspondents to the Land Enquiry Committee complained.<sup>65</sup> As will be seen in the last two sections of this chapter, this shortage was one of the pressures which acted on the councils in these districts to build houses themselves. It also served to keep the rent level for private housing unduly high.

Although the two Board of Trade surveys contain useful information on rent levels in six industrial towns in County Durham before the First World War, little has hitherto been known about rents in the coalfield area. The one printed source is the study of Stanley made in 1913 by Bowley and Burnett-Hurst.<sup>66</sup> Their figures for 136 rented houses<sup>67</sup>

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63. See P H White, 'Some Aspects of Urban Development by Colliery Companies, 1919-39' in Manchester School of Economic and Social Studies, vol 23, 1955, pp 169-70.

64. Letter dated 13 September 1906, in DCRO: NCB 4/3. Both collieries were owned by the Consett Iron Company.

65. Land Enquiry Committee, op cit, pp 182-5.

66. Bowley and Burnett-Hurst, op cit, pp 140-5.

67. Ibid, p 142.



ILLUSTRATION 2-18 West Cross Street, Langley Park



ILLUSTRATION 2-20 Victoria Street, Shotton Colliery



ILLUSTRATION 2-19 East Cross Street, Langley Park



ILLUSTRATION 2-21 Wynyard Street, Dawdon

In the later nineteenth century, colliery housebuilding moved away from the tradition of the stone built village (as in Langley Park) to more formal urban terraces set in a grid-iron pattern of wide 'byelaw' streets.

enable direct comparison to be made with those of the Board of Trade's 1912 enquiry. Fortunately, this information can be supplemented by figures compiled in 1914 by the Medical Officer of Health for the Sunderland Rural District, whose valuable statistics cover a total of 1,389 rented houses in three parishes.<sup>68</sup> A third source is the information contained in a return made for the coal owners in 1903 by the Durham Miners' Association of the average rent paid by the members in each of 149 lodges.<sup>69</sup> By matching these average rent figures with the average size of dwellings in each district (calculated from the 1901 Census) it is possible to sketch a picture of rent levels in different parts of the coalfield and even to make an approximate comparison with the urban data of the Board of Trade's 1905 enquiry.<sup>70</sup>

Taking the latter local source first, it can be seen from Tables 2-4 and 2-5<sup>71</sup> that the rents paid by Durham miners in 1903 were highest in the Tyneside districts of Gateshead, Felling and Hebburn, then in the north-west districts, becoming lower towards the east coast and the southern part of the coalfield. When measured against the Board of Trade index (see Table 2-1) these figures suggest that rents in the Stanley area were as high as in South Tyneside - that is, near the top of the national scale. From Ryton and Benfieldside in the west, through the Chester-le-Street area across to Whitburn and Ryhope on the coast, the overall rent level was about the same as in the boroughs of Sunderland and South Shields - that is, higher than in the great majority of large

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68. Sunderland RD Council Minutes, February and August 1914,  
T&WCRO: SDR.

69. DCRO: NCB 1/CO/86/512.

70. The methods of calculation are described in Appendix 2.

71. The information discussed in the following paragraphs has been presented in two tables owing to the technical difficulties described in Appendix 2. In particular, it is only possible to deal with the questions of free houses and their allocation in the wider regions defined in Table 2-4.

TABLE 2-4 Rent and Related Factors in the Durham Coalfield, c 1903  
 [By 6 areas shown in the map below]

	Index of rent paid by miners in 1903 [London (1905)=100]	% of free houses to total housing stock of area 1901	% of householding miners given free houses 1903	% of householding miners given rent allowance 1903	% population housed at more than two per room 1911	% population increase 1891-1901
① Gateshead Felling Hebburn	68	4	37.2	58.6	35.3	27.9
Whickham Ryton Blaydon Consett						
② Leadgate Benfieldside Stanley Tanfield Annfield Plain Lanchester RD	62	27	58.1	32.7	36.3	31.7
Chester-le-Street RD						
③ Houghton Hetton Houghton RD	58	46	67.7	25.2	31.2	15.9
④ Easington RD Seaham Harbour	49	38	76.5	21.2	36.6	10.7
⑤ Brandon Durham Durham RD	47	42	64.5	21.8	30.1	8.5
Crook Willington Spennymoor						
⑥ Shildon Auckland RD Bishop Auckland Sedgefield RD	46	20	50.9	36.7	23.5	6.1

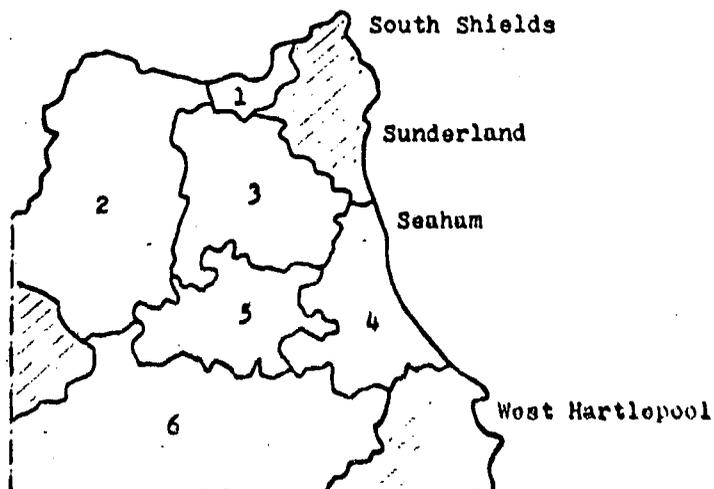
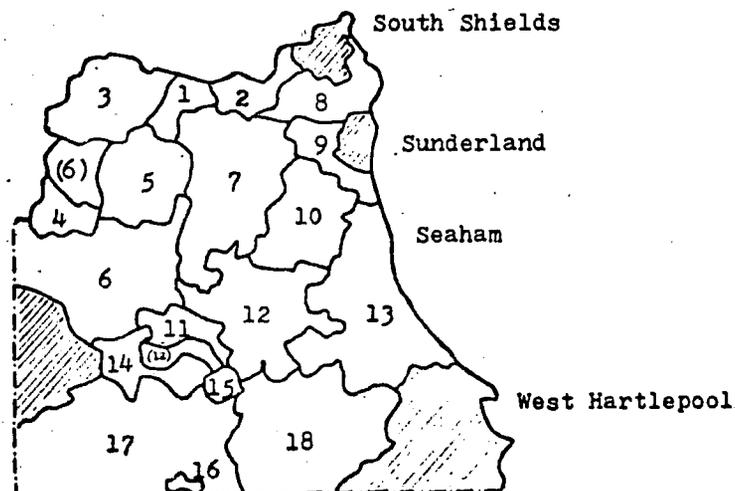


TABLE 2-5 Rent, Overcrowding and Population Increase  
in the Durham Coalfield, c 1903  
 [By 18 areas shown in the map below]

	Index of rent paid by miners in 1903 [London(1905)=100]	% population housed at more than two per room 1911	% population increase 1891-1901
① Whickham	58	32.3	1.1
② Gateshead Felling Hebburn	68	35.3	27.9
③ Ryton Blaydon	65	38.5	49.9
④ Consett Leadgate Benfieldside	61	31.7	15.4
⑤ Stanley Tanfield Annfield Plain	66	37.7	40.3
⑥ Lanchester RD	56	36.6	18.9
⑦ Chester-le-Street RD	62	33.1	22.2
⑧ South Shields RD	61	24.4	12.4
⑨ Sunderland RD	63	28.8	35.0
⑩ Houghton Hetton Houghton RD	49	28.2	7.7
⑪ Brandon	49	32.2	9.4
⑫ Durham Durham RD	46	29.3	8.1
⑬ Easington RD Seaham Harbour	49	36.6	10.7
⑭ Crook Willington	49	27.9	0.6
⑮ Spennymoor	41	22.1	1.7
⑯ Shildon	47	15.9	25.3
⑰ Auckland RD Bishop Auckland	48	23.6	5.2
⑱ Sedgfield RD	43	24.3	9.9



industrial towns in England and Wales. The level was considerably lower in districts on or south of a line stretching from the Lanchester area, through the Houghton-Hetton region, to Seaham Harbour.

These differences are more easily described than explained. One way of attempting an answer is to compare the rent index for a particular district with the estimated proportion of colliery housing in the total stock. One might, perhaps, expect higher rents to be more common in districts where free houses constituted only a small proportion of the total. To a certain extent Table 2-4 indicates such a correlation, but the pattern is disturbed by the southern part of the coalfield, where low rent levels and a low proportion of colliery houses could be found together. Another method is to consider the proportion of householding miners in each district (a) living in a free colliery house and (b) receiving rent allowance. Where (a) is found to be low, it might mean that there was more competition for rented accommodation, which would force up the price. Where (b) is high, and it was common for the miners looking for rented accommodation to qualify for an allowance, this too might have had the effect of tempting landlords to take advantage of the demand by charging higher rents. There is some correlation of this sort in Table 2-4, but the pattern is again dislocated by the southern parts of the coalfield: although (a) was relatively low here and (b) relatively high, rents were not among the highest in the coalfield but were lower than anywhere else.

A different approach would be to look at the overall demand for housing in each district. A possible guide to the level of demand could be statistics of overcrowding in the county. Unfortunately, percentage figures are not given in the 1901 Census, but the 1911 data should serve to test the rough idea. As can be seen from Tables 2-4 and 2-5 there is

an approximate connection between levels of high rent and high overcrowding. But the closest correlation is obtained by plotting the 1903 rent level in each district against the rate of population growth between 1891 and 1901. The relationship between rent and population pressure, the result of shifting fortunes in the coalfield, is shown quite clearly in the accompanying 'scatter diagram' (Figure 2-1). With this last factor in mind, it is now possible to sketch some conclusions about rent levels in the mining districts of the county.

For miners living in the industrial districts of Tyneside, rents were determined mainly by the prevailing prices in an area where families involved in mining constituted only a small section of the demand for houses.<sup>72</sup> Rents paid by miners working in the rural districts of South Shields and Sunderland were high because of the proximity of the large boroughs: nearly 3,000 miners lived in South Shields itself and many had to pay the prevailing urban prices (there were relatively few free houses), while many others were competing with industrial workers in the developing outskirts of the Wearside conurbation, like Hylton and Grangetown. The most important factor in determining rents in the main body of the coalfield was the rise and fall of the industry in different districts within it. The patterns of migration set up by this fluctuation created great differences in population pressure. To take extreme examples, the rate of population growth between 1891 and 1901 was five times higher in the north-west of the coalfield than in the south and south-east.<sup>73</sup> The effect on housing conditions was to open up a difference in the level of overcrowding (36.3% in the north-west in 1911, compared with 23.5% in the south) and in the relative cost of rented property.

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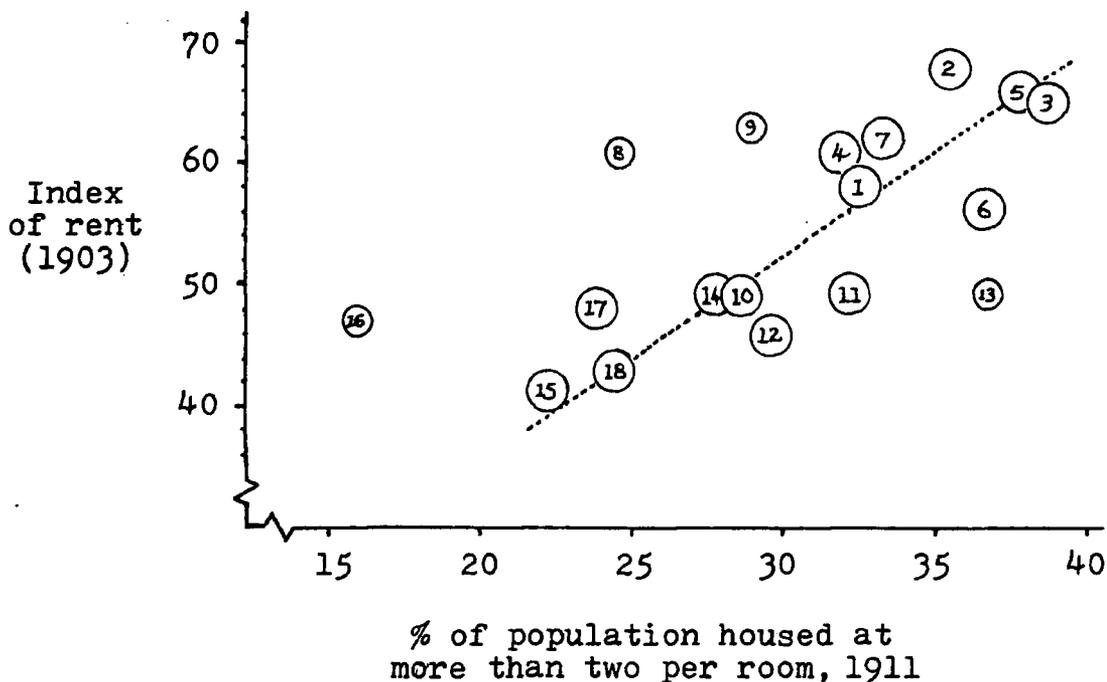
72. The 1901 Census showed that only 13.2% of the occupied males in Gateshead, Felling and Hebburn were miners.

73. See Table 2-4.

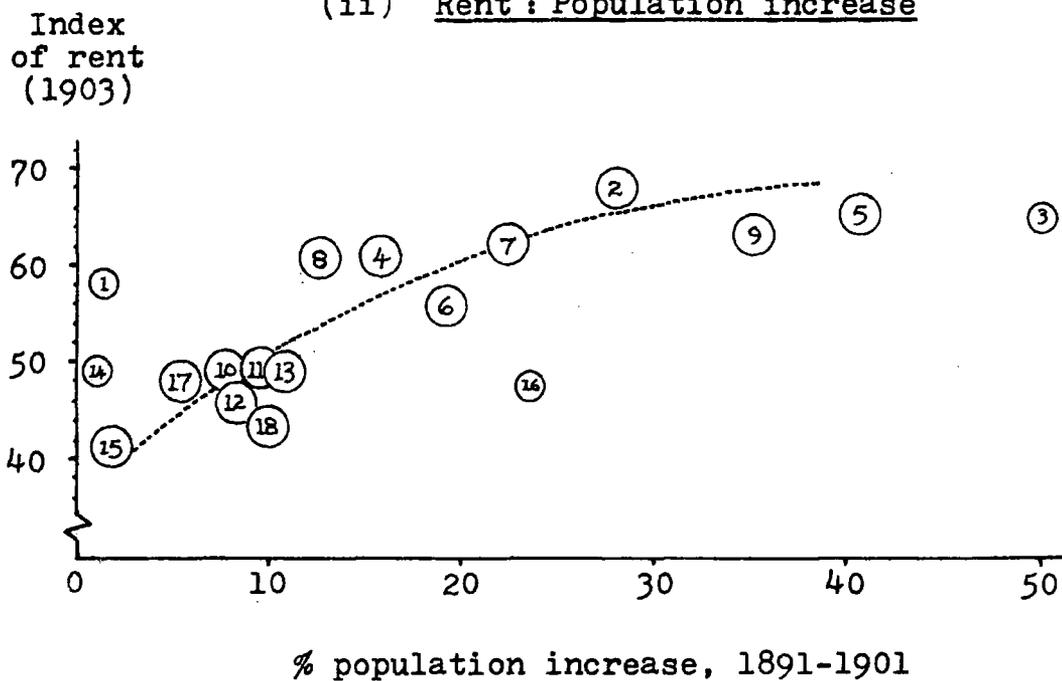
FIGURE 2-1 Rent, Overcrowding and Population Increase  
in the Durham Coalfield, c 1903

[By 18 areas numbered as in Table 2-5]

(i) Rent : Overcrowding



(ii) Rent : Population increase



While, for example, a 35% increase in the population of Sunderland Rural District (between 1891 and 1901) encouraged a high rent level, the mere 1% growth in the Whickham area helped to keep rents below those in the expanding coal districts to the immediate west and south (Ryton, Blaydon and the Stanley area) and those in the industrial districts of Tyneside to the east.<sup>74</sup>

The 'free house/rent allowance' system was partly responsible for the difference between rent levels in certain districts. The sector of privately rented housing was much larger in the districts of north-west Durham than around Houghton: in none of the former districts did the proportion of colliery housing exceed 30% of the total stock, but in the Houghton-Hetton area it was about half. Whereas only about 20% of the married miners in the latter area had to be given a rent allowance to use in the private market, in Ryton, Blaydon, Stanley, Tanfield and Annfield Plain the proportion was over 40%. This failure of the companies in the north west adequately to provide for their growing labour force, their reliance on speculative private enterprise (as illustrated above, p 98) and their more extensive hand-outs of rent allowance probably served to push up the price of rented accommodation in this region.

The other sources of information about rents, mentioned above, tend to confirm these conclusions. The table produced by Bowley and Burnett-Hurst of working-class rents in Stanley in 1913<sup>75</sup> can be analysed to give an index figure of 81 on the 1912 Board of Trade scale.<sup>76</sup> From a high position on the 1905 scale (on the same level as Gateshead) rents in Stanley increased over the ten years from 1903 to 1913 by 16%

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74. See Table 2-5 and map.

75. Bowley and Burnett-Hurst, op cit, p 142.

76. See Table 2-1.

(in money terms) to stand almost as high as Newcastle on the 1912 scale. There were two reasons for this. One was the continued colliery development in the district. The number of families in Stanley increased by 84% between 1901 and 1911, but the builders could not keep pace with the expansion and added only 71% to the housing stock.<sup>77</sup> The second reason was that the new miners were, for the most part, obliged to take their rent allowance and look for housing in what was an increasingly competitive market. The collieries themselves made a pitifully small contribution to the housing supply. Only between 200 and 300 colliery houses were built in Stanley from 1903 to 1913,<sup>78</sup> but over the intercensal period 1901-11 the total housing stock of the district increased by about 1,800 dwellings.<sup>79</sup> More generally, throughout the coalfield, as a result of the population movements in different districts and of the reluctance of some coal companies to erect new houses, a clear pattern of 'free house/rent allowance' provision was emerging. By April 1912, as Table 2-3 shows, the proportion of miners living in free houses was low and the proportion awarded rent allowance was high in the north west of the coalfield; in the southern parts the reverse was true. Unfortunately, it is impossible to demonstrate the effect which this trend may have had on rent levels in the decade before the First World War - there are no widely based statistics available to compare with those of miners' rents in 1903.

The other local source of information about rents is contained in the minutes of the Sunderland Rural District Council for February and August 1914. As the Council was considering the question of whether or not to undertake a second housing scheme, its Medical Officer of Health

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77. See Table 2-6.

78. Information derived from DCRO: NCB 1/CO/86/778, a source used more fully in the following section of this chapter.

79. Calculated from 1911 Census.

collected statistics of overcrowding and rent levels in Grangetown, Ford and Ryhope Village. In Grangetown - effectively an industrial suburb of Sunderland - rents were comparable with those inside the Borough (68 on the 1912 index compared with 66 for Sunderland itself) and in Ford - a similar parish with much old property let out as tenements - they were considerably lower (55 on the index). But in Ryhope Village, predominantly a mining settlement, rents were significantly higher (70 in the 1912 index) than in Sunderland - as, indeed, they appear to have been on the 1905 scale.

The Medical Officer provided some further interesting statistics on the housing problem in Ryhope. There had recently been considerable colliery development in the district, he pointed out: the number of householders working at the pit had grown by 438 (37%) since 1907. Over the same period the colliery's housing stock had increased by only 31 (3 $\frac{1}{2}$ %). Whereas in 1907 only 23% of the householding miners had to look for rented accommodation, the proportion had risen to 42% by 1914. Private builders had not stepped in to make up the difference. Demand for the available housing in Ryhope was very high (only 4 out of 649 properties were vacant when the Medical Officer made his survey) and 297 miners were living in the borough of Sunderland and commuting out of town to work in this part of the rural district. The council resolved unanimously on a new housing scheme, having concluded that conditions in the village were not only bad, but had actually deteriorated in the recent past. As we shall see in the remainder of this chapter, several other district councils in the coalfield were responding to similar conditions. They were, quite simply, stepping in where the coal companies and private builders had demonstrably failed.

#### 4. The Rural Areas of South and West Durham

Any account of the housing in these parts of the county before the First World War can only be very sketchy. Apart from the limited Census statistics, there are very few sources of information to allow detailed comparison with conditions in the rest of Durham. Fortunately, this is not too serious a lacuna; although the agricultural districts in question constituted a high proportion of the total surface area of the county (about 42%), they contained only about 4% of the total population and housing stock.<sup>80</sup> The districts themselves fall into two types. The rural districts of Darlington, Stockton and Hartlepool, in the south and south east of the county, were predominantly agricultural and drew benefit from the prosperity of the urban centres whence their names derived. The districts in the west, on the other hand, although they had reverted mainly to agriculture by the end of the nineteenth century, reflected a long history of lead mining. The industry had operated to the west of the more fertile land, on the higher slopes of the Pennine dales. Its centres had been the villages of Stanhope in Weardale and Middleton-in-Teesdale, both of which had declined, in line with the dwindling fortunes of the industry itself, from about 1870.

Those areas of the county least troubled by the problem of overcrowding were the rural districts of Darlington, Stockton and Hartlepool. In 1911 only between 11% and 12% of the population in these districts were housed at a level of more than two persons per room. The population had sustained a healthy natural increase of between 14% and 18% since 1901; nevertheless, the number of new houses built during this decade had kept pace with the increase in families.<sup>81</sup> There was, moreover, a

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80. Calculated from 1911 Census.

81. See Table 2-6.

comparatively high proportion of vacant accommodation in the agricultural villages. Although very little is known at present about rent levels in this area, housing conditions appear to have been generally very much better than in South Tyneside and the coalfield.

Conditions in the west were not so good. As Table 2-6 shows, population growth was almost at a halt by 1911; and during the inter-war period an absolute decline set in over the whole region (see Table 3-4). The lead-mining villages were affected much earlier: the population of Middleton, for example, slithered from 4,579 in 1871 to 3,574 in 1901.<sup>82</sup> Overcrowding, though much less of a problem than in the coalfield, was still at a much higher level than in the agricultural districts of south-east Durham. The proportion of the population housed at more than two persons per room in 1911 was approximately 17% in the Barnard Castle Rural District, 19% in the Weardale Rural District and 23% in Stanhope. Nearly all the housing was stone-built and fairly old. The level of new building was very low by the turn of the century and during the inter-war period there was actually a decline in the housing stock as vacated properties fell derelict.

The urban district of Barnard Castle did not suffer serious population decline until after the First World War, but its commercial fortunes had foundered long before. Although the town remained the major market centre for the south west, its old riverside industries - dye-works and small textile and carpet mills - had collapsed or were failing by the end of the nineteenth century. These economic circumstances were reflected in the dilapidation of the housing stock: it was this problem of deterioration rather than housing shortage which the council had to face between the wars.

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82. C J Hunt, The Lead Miners of the Northern Pennines (Manchester, 1970) p 187.

Because it was beset by similar problems of stagnation and population decline, the urban district of Tow Law has, for the purposes of this study, been lumped together with the rural areas to its west. Like Consett and Witton Park, the town had sprung up in the 1840s around iron-works on the edge of the coalfield. But its industrial raison d'être had disappeared by the end of the nineteenth century, leaving it in a position like that of Stanhope. Overcrowding was very high (nearly 34% in 1911) but economic depression discouraged any new housebuilding: the council itself built nothing between the wars and even the North Eastern Housing Association wanted to avoid building slum replacement houses in Tow Law in the 1930s.<sup>83</sup> Like the smaller settlement of Witton Park, Tow Law became something of a ghost town. Its fate was like that of the declining western districts, but also gave a foretaste of what was to happen in Jarrow once the town had been deprived of its vital industry.

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83. See Section A of the following chapter.

B. Private Housebuilding Activity, c 1900-1914

The level of output in the housebuilding industry before the First World War could vary enormously from year to year in small districts. But in larger regions, or in the country as a whole, distinct 'cycles' of activity - over a period of 20 to 25 years - can be discerned. The reasons for the phenomenon of 'long cycles' have been the subject of much academic debate in recent years<sup>84</sup> but few definite conclusions have emerged. The course of the cycles has, however, been well charted; and it has been established that from about the turn of the century to the outbreak of the First World War there was a steady decline in housebuilding activity in England and Wales.<sup>85</sup> Research has shown that a similar trend prevailed in the North East after peaks of activity in 1898 and 1903. The downswing was so severe that the level of housebuilding in 1913 was less than a third of that in 1903.<sup>86</sup> This rate of decline was, however, only slightly sharper than in the rest of England and Wales.

Between 1901 and 1911 the building record of County Durham appears at first sight to be quite creditable. Over the whole county the housing stock increased at a higher rate than the number of families - by 21.1% as against 17.5% (see Table 2-6). But this pattern was by no means uniform throughout the whole county. Nor did it apply to the last few years before the World War. The areas where the housing supply exceeded

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84. Among the more important contributions to the debate are H J Habakkuk, 'Fluctuations in House-Building in Britain and the United States in the Nineteenth Century' in Journal of Economic History, vol 22, 1962, pp 198-230; S B Saul, 'House Building in England, 1890-1914' in Economic History Review, vol 15, 1962, pp 119-137; and B Thomas, Migration and Urban Development (London, 1972).

85. See B Weber, 'A New Index of Residential Construction and Long Cycles in House-Building in Great Britain, 1838-1950' in Scottish Journal of Political Economy, vol 2, 1955, pp 104-132, and J P Lewis, 'Indices of House-Building in the Manchester Conurbation, South Wales, and Great Britain, 1851-1913', ibid, vol 8, 1961, pp 148-156.

86. A G Kenwood, 'Residential Building Activity in North Eastern England, 1853-1913' in Manchester School of Economic and Social Studies, vol 31, 1963, pp 115-128. See also Figure 2-2.

TABLE 2-6 Population, Housing Stock and Overcrowding in  
County Durham Before the First World War

Local authority district	% population increase 1901-11	% over-crowding 1911	% increase in families 1901-11	% increase in housing stock 1901-11
Whickham	42.6	32.3	43.5	26.1
Gateshead	6.3	33.7	7.1	29.6
Felling	11.4	37.0	12.5	25.5
Hebburn	4.1	42.1	8.2	15.3
Jarrow	-1.7	37.8	2.4	6.1
South Shields	7.7	32.9	9.6	6.1
Sunderland	3.5	32.6	6.5	9.6
Southwick-on-Wear	9.0	41.5	8.4	24.9
Darlington	25.0	12.8	30.1	31.8
Stockton	1.3	10.9	5.0	12.1
West Hartlepool	2.1	16.7	8.0	14.9
Hartlepool	-9.3	28.3	-6.2	6.6
Darlington RD	13.8	11.1	17.8	15.4
Stockton RD	18.3	11.9	26.1	29.8
Hartlepool RD	16.3	11.2	12.3	13.8
Weardale RD	-0.6	19.4	1.9	1.8
Stanhope	2.3	23.2	2.1	0.9
Barnard Castle RD	6.9	16.9	8.1	8.0
Barnard Castle	7.6	14.8	9.5	13.8
Tow Law	-1.1	33.7	4.7	1.2

[Continued on following page]

TABLE 2-6 [Continued]

Local authority district	% population increase 1901-11	% over-crowding 1911	% increase in families 1901-11	% increase in housing stock 1901-11
Ryton	53.2	32.1	57.7	52.4
Blaydon	57.3	41.2	55.0	55.0
Benfieldside	12.0	28.2	13.8	10.2
Consett	15.6	28.9	21.5	15.3
Leadgate	7.1	43.6	12.6	13.1
Tanfield	22.1	39.9	24.6	17.2
Annfield Plain	32.6	41.4	35.4	29.9
Stanley	71.9	34.2	84.0	70.9
Lanchester RD	19.0	36.6	22.5	22.4
Chester-le-Street	25.2	29.7	27.7	27.9
Chester-le-Street RD	30.9	33.9	32.3	29.7
South Shields RD	34.2	24.4	36.1	41.7
Sunderland RD	27.3	28.8	29.0	35.0
Houghton RD	32.2	30.7	33.8	30.8
Houghton	24.1	27.0	24.7	20.9
Hetton	14.7	24.8	19.1	16.4
Brandon	13.4	32.2	16.1	13.8
Durham City	8.7	27.2	7.2	-6.6
Durham RD	14.1	30.5	17.3	15.8
Easington RD	48.0	37.6	47.3	42.5
Seaham Harbour	55.0	32.9	45.4	56.2
Crook	7.3	26.9	7.9	5.3
Willington	10.7	29.4	10.2	8.8
Spennymoor	7.5	22.1	11.4	7.7
Bishop Auckland	15.6	18.1	20.5	17.2
Sildon	14.7	15.9	21.0	24.0
Auckland RD	13.3	24.9	16.4	20.3
Sedgefield RD	65.5	24.3	69.5	56.7
COUNTY DURHAM	15.4	28.6	17.5	21.1

the new demand (and could thus help to relieve the overall shortage) were chiefly the industrial towns of South Tyneside and the three larger settlements of Darlington, Stockton and the Hartlepoons. In the former the number of houses increased by 18.6% between 1901 and 1911, the number of families by 9.4%; in the latter towns the proportions were 17.7% and 11.1%. But in the local authority areas which may be described as 'mining districts', the increase in families - a very high 37.4% - far exceeded a 28.6% increase in the housing stock.<sup>87</sup> Furthermore, the decline in the level of building activity since 1903 continued beyond 1911 (see Figure 2-2). It will not be surprising, therefore, to find in the following section of this chapter that it was the local authorities in the coalfield part of the county which took most initiative in considering council housing schemes before the First World War and that the pressure on these and other councils to build increased steadily during the years before 1914 as the rate of private building declined.

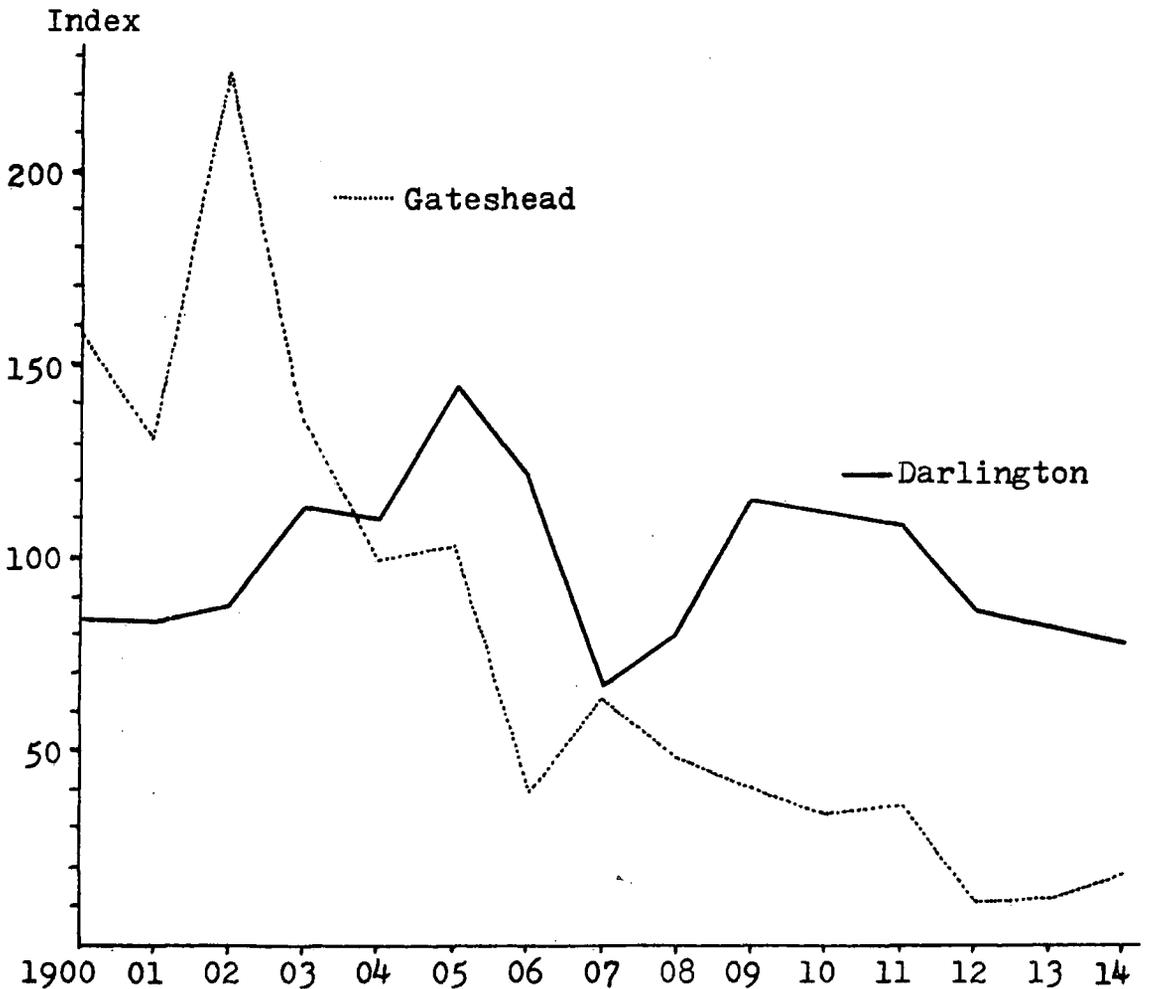
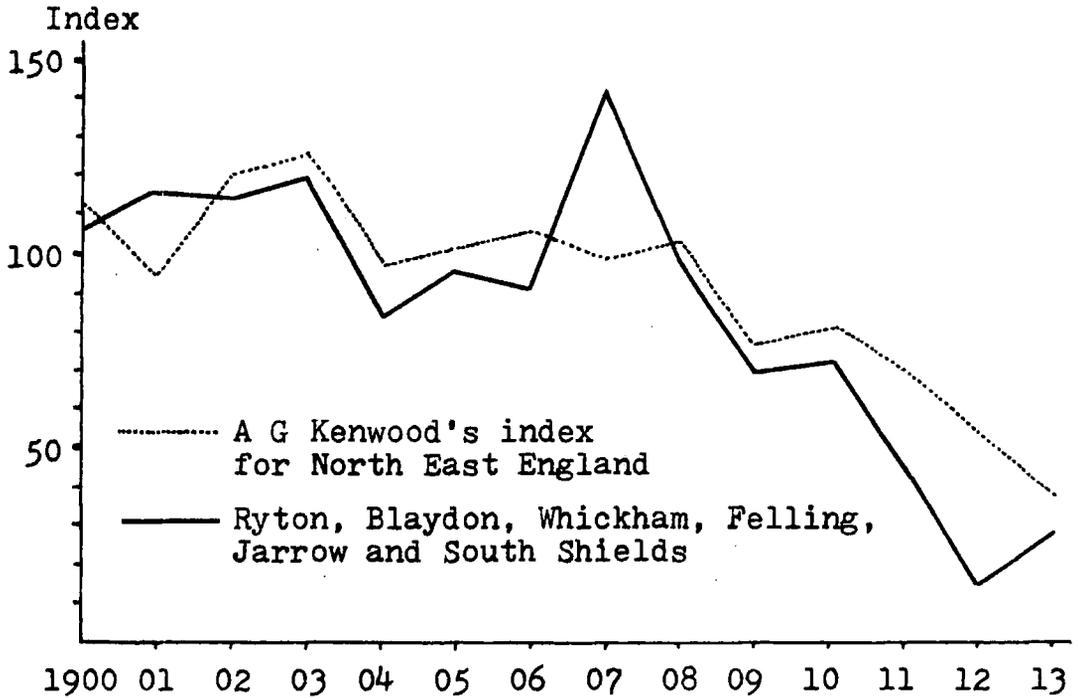
The relative success of the urban industrial areas in housebuilding between 1901 and 1911 is quite easily explained. In the southern towns, the building industry was probably more certain of demand than the industry elsewhere in the county. In Darlington it matched a large increase in the number of families (30.1%) with an increase in the housing stock of 31.8%. Darlington also stood out as an exception to the general decline in building activity after 1903: the index in Figure 2-2 shows no pattern for this town to compare with the trend in the North East as a whole.

The apparent success of the South Tyneside conurbation between 1901 and 1911 was due mainly to a large increase in the housing stock of

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87. For details of each local authority district see Table 2-6.

FIGURE 2-2 Housebuilding Activity in the North East, 1900-1914  
 [Index: annual average (1900-10) = 100]



Gateshead. This accounted for about 60% of the total increase in industrial South Tyneside and was over four times greater than the percentage increase in the number of families in Gateshead itself. The town's speculative flat-builders evidently overestimated the demand for their product; in 1908 it was reported that a thousand dwellings were standing empty.<sup>88</sup> When the builders realised the extent of their over-production, they cut down their activities to the dramatic extent shown in Figure 2-2. There was even a slight fall in rents, which dropped by 2% in money terms between 1905 and 1912, according to the Board of Trade reports.<sup>89</sup>

In South Shields, however, the position was much bleaker. Early in 1914 the Medical Officer of Health reported that, 'after careful investigation, it has been possible to discover, among the 25,297 dwellings in the Borough, only 11 which are unoccupied and "to let".' And of these eleven dwellings eight were out of working-class reach, valued at over 10/- per week before rates.<sup>90</sup> The response of the landlords to such demand was to push up rents. The Medical Officer gave figures in April 1914 directly comparable with the 1912 Board of Trade information: they represented a rise from 70 to 72 on the 1912 index and an increase of nearly 3% in money terms.<sup>91</sup>

In the coalfield districts the failure of the housing supply to keep pace even with the increase in families between 1901 and 1911 was largely due to the inertia of the coal companies. Whereas the number of miners employed by them increased by 45,528 (46.1%) between 1901 and

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88. Evening Chronicle, 26 August 1908.

89. See also Table 2-1.

90. Annual Report of the Medical Officer of Health for South Shields, 1913 (published April 1914), STLS.

91. Ibid.

1911,<sup>92</sup> the stock of colliery houses increased between 1903 and 1913 by only 7,869 (19.2%).<sup>93</sup> Expressed another way, this meant that there were approximately 400 colliery houses per thousand miners in 1901, but little more than 300 per thousand by 1913. The coal companies were evidently doing less than in the past to house the growing number of workers employed by them and relying on private builders to do much more of the job. Just how ineffective this policy was, from the miners' point of view, is shown by Table 2-6. In 20 out of 28 local authority areas in the coalfield new families were being created at a faster rate than houses were being built.

The level of colliery housebuilding in this period was, however, by no means uniform throughout the coalfield. There was negligible colliery building in the Tyneside districts from Whickham to Hebburn, but the lowest level in the main body of the coalfield was in the rural district of Durham and Chester-le-Street. The level was little higher (no more than a 10% increase in the stock of colliery housing, 1903-13) in the environs of Stanley and Lanchester and of Houghton and Hetton, or in Sunderland Rural District. The level of building was highest (well over 50%) in Ryton and Blaydon, South Shields Rural District, Easington and Seaham Harbour, and in the Sedgefield and Auckland coalfield (including the Brandon district). Such activity can be understood in the north-west and coastal parts of the coalfield, for these were recently developed areas with good long-term mining prospects. It is less easily understood in the southern part of the coalfield, where long-term prospects were less promising and where population growth had been lower than other mining districts since at least 1890. The building probably centred on

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92. Census volumes for County Durham, 1901 and 1911.

93. Calculated from DCRO: NCB 1/CO/86/778. A brief account of this source is given in Appendix 2.

a few developing pits, at Chilton, Trimdon, Ferryhill, Coundon, the outskirts of Bishop Auckland and the relatively new workings of the Brandon district. Another point of interest is the great variation in building levels: in most districts there was an increase of colliery housing in this period either of less than 10% or more than 50%, but apparently in none was there anything near the 'average' level of 20%.<sup>94</sup>

The coal companies, when they did build houses in this period, built to a higher standard than previously (see Table 2-7). They concentrated on erecting four-roomed and five-roomed dwellings (or converting older property to these standards), so that the average size of a colliery house rose by 7.7%, from about 3.10 rooms in 1903 to about 3.34 in 1913. Nevertheless, even in 1913, houses of four or five rooms accounted for only 46% of the total colliery stock, while two-roomed houses constituted nearly a quarter. Another perspective on the improvement of colliery housing standards over this decade is the fact that in 1911 the 'average dwelling size' in the whole of England and Wales was 4.72 rooms (over 40% larger than the average colliery house in County Durham in 1913).

One of the reasons behind the improving standards of colliery housebuilding, and one about which some coal owners complained, was the tightening of building byelaws by local authorities. The legal imposition of higher standards raised building costs and gave coal owners, who received no visible return on the houses they provided, a plausible excuse for building fewer dwellings. The Consett Iron Company, for example, answered the plea of the Blaydon council for more colliery houses to relieve overcrowding in the district, by referring to the

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94. The figures quoted in this paragraph have been calculated from DCRO: NCB 1/CO/86/778.

TABLE 2-7 Colliery Housing and Housebuilding in County Durham, Years Ending December 1903 and 1913

Size of house	1903		1913		Increase, 1903-13	
	No. of houses	% of total	No. of houses	% of total	No.	%
5 rooms +	2,250	5.5	5,110	10.5	2,860	127.1
4 rooms	12,314	30.1	17,249	35.4	4,935	40.1
3 rooms	13,701	33.5	15,433	31.6	1,732	12.6
2 rooms	12,500	30.5	10,952	22.4	-1,548	-12.4
1 room	157	0.4	47	0.1	-110	-70.1
TOTAL	40,922	100.0	48,791	100.0	7,869	19.2

	1903	1913	Increase, 1903-1913	
			No.	%
Number of inhabitants	211,764	261,703	49,939	23.6
Total no. of rooms	126,766	162,796	36,030	28.4
Average no. of rooms per house	3.10	3.34	-	7.7
Average no. of persons per room	1.67	1.61	-	-3.8

'onerous conditions' of the byelaws, which were discouraging the company itself and other builders.<sup>95</sup> Tighter byelaw restrictions might well, as the company suggested, have deterred builders in the rented sector. Coupled with the sanitary requirements of the 1890 Act, such restrictions had, it was claimed in 1903, '... lessened the profitable inducements to build more cottages'.<sup>96</sup> Another discouraging factor may have been Lloyd George's budget of 1909, which has sometimes been blamed for the continued drop in the building cycle before the First World War. Housing for the working class was gradually becoming less remunerative for the investor who, like the coal companies, may have begun to prefer other, more promising or more convenient ventures in which to sink capital.<sup>97</sup>

Whatever its exact causes, the effect of the fall of building activity in County Durham was, as the Consett Iron Company sardonically informed the Blaydon councillors, to 'allow the Council to exercise its powers under the Housing and Town Planning Act'<sup>98</sup> - that is, to undertake housing schemes of its own. This chapter has attempted so far to show how badly such intervention was needed in many parts of County Durham before the First World War. The following section describes how local government in the area responded to this enormous challenge.

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95. Blaydon UD Council Minutes, 12 December 1911, GLS.

96. W Thompson, The Housing Handbook (London, 1903) p 10.

97. A point considered by Daunton, op cit, p 114-5.

98. Blaydon UD Council Minutes, loc cit.

### C. Council Housing Before the First World War

In absolute terms, the contribution that council schemes made towards the housing needs of the county before the First World War was very small indeed. The number of dwellings erected by local authorities in Durham before the war intervened was between 650 and 700: this represents a quarter of one per cent of the total housing stock of the county at that time. Nonetheless, the efforts of those councils which did succeed in getting a scheme off the ground were remarkable. At a time when there was no great national campaign for council housing and no provision for an Exchequer subsidy, when locally there were often powerful vested interests and prejudices to overcome, it demanded considerable initiative and determination to win support for a housing project and to carry it through. So while the total number of houses built was exceeded nearly a hundredfold by local authorities between the wars, it is interesting to examine in some detail the origins of the pre-1914 schemes and the ways in which they anticipated some of the problems that councils were to face as large-scale builders and landlords later on.

The first local authority scheme in the county was in the east end of Sunderland - the 'Hat Case' area in the oldest dockland quarter. The scheme was not for additional working-class housing (under Part III of the 1890 Act) but for the replacement of slum property demolished by the council: it was, in fact, the only scheme under Part I of the 1890 Act carried out in the county before the First World War. After reports submitted by the Medical Officer of Health, the council decided in 1893 on an experimental programme of slum clearance;<sup>99</sup> the approval of

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99. Interview with the Mayor of Sunderland in the Evening Leader, 3 August 1899.

Parliament was given in 1894.<sup>100</sup> The scheme was delayed first by negotiations with the property owners and then by administrative wrangles with the Local Government Board.<sup>101</sup> The new buildings - or 'Harrison Buildings' as they were called, after the Chairman of the Health Committee<sup>102</sup> - were finally opened in September 1903. They contained 84 flats - 36 of three rooms and 48 of two rooms.<sup>103</sup>

The first scheme in the county under Part III of the 1890 Act (representing an addition to the existing housing stock) was in Stanley. After deciding to take action under Part III in November 1900,<sup>104</sup> the council deliberated for several years with the Local Government Board and with landowners and builders in the district. The scheme was christened, with due civic pride, 'Council Street'; it consisted of 24 houses and was occupied by the middle of 1905.<sup>105</sup> Following a little way behind Stanley were the rural districts of Sunderland and Chester-le-Street. Sunderland RDC formally adopted Part III of the 1890 Act in November 1905<sup>106</sup> and, after a three-day enquiry conducted by the Local Government Board and considerable administrative delays,<sup>107</sup> the buildings were eventually completed and opened in May 1909.<sup>108</sup> The scheme consisted of 120 dwellings (60 at Tunstall and 60 at Ryhope) and the new streets were named after senior councillors and the Clerk.<sup>109</sup> Less information has been discovered about the projects carried out by Chester-le-Street RDC, but it can be seen from the annual reports of the

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100. H Barnes, The Slum: Its Story and Solution (London, 1931) p 385.

101. Evening Leader, 3 August 1899.

102. Sunderland CB Council Minutes, 8 July 1903, SLS.

103. Report of the Medical Officer of Health for Sunderland, 1928, SLS.

104. Stanley UD Council Minutes, 28 November 1900, DCRO: UD/Sta.

105. Ibid, 9 December 1902, 7 September 1904 and 28 June 1905.

106. Sunderland RD Council Minutes, 21 November 1905, T&WCRO: SDR.

107. Ibid, 12 February 1907.

108. Rent Collector's Report, ibid, 3 November 1914.

109. Ibid.

Local Government Board that loans for a scheme in Usworth were approved in the financial year 1909-10 and for another in Washington in 1911-12; the former estate consisted of 50 houses and the latter 42.<sup>110</sup> The new streets at Usworth were named after prominent councillors of the time; in Washington they received the dignified, if unglamorous, titles of 'Council Terrace' and 'Municipal Terrace'.

The rest of the activity by councils under Part III of the 1890 Act appears to have been stimulated by the amending Act of 1909, for all of these schemes came to fruition in 1913-14. In February 1914, 103 houses were opened in Murton (in the Easington Rural District)<sup>111</sup> and two months later an estate of 60 houses was being occupied in Annfield Plain.<sup>112</sup> During the same year another 57 houses were erected at Usworth (in the Chester-le-Street Rural District)<sup>113</sup> and by November the council of Sedgefield Rural District had substantially completed a scheme of 25 houses at Trimdon Grange.<sup>114</sup> It can be seen from inter-war records and from Ordnance Survey maps that an estate of 52 houses at Houghton-le-Spring took rather longer to complete, but was occupied during 1915; similarly, it is possible to trace a later scheme of 50 houses at Chester-le-Street. Apart from these completed estates, a scheme of 45 houses in Seaham Harbour was abandoned, after only a week's work on site, in response to the outbreak of war;<sup>115</sup> the same fate appears also to have overtaken a project for 20 houses at Chopwell (in the Blaydon Urban District).<sup>116</sup>

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110. Local Government Board, Annual Reports, 1909-10 and 1913-14.

111. Murton Housing Committee Minutes, 11 February 1914, DCRO: RD/Ea.

112. Annfield Plain UD Council Minutes, 21 April 1914, DCRO: UD/Sta.

113. Local Government Board, Annual Report, 1913-14.

114. Sedgefield RD Council Minutes, 13 November 1914, DCRO: RD/Se.

115. Seaham Harbour UD Council Minutes, 11 August 1914, DCRO: UD/Sea.

116. Local Government Board, Annual Report, 1913-14. It is possible that this scheme was carried out, on an unsubsidised basis, after the withdrawal of the Addison subsidy in 1921. (Letter to Ministry of Health from Blaydon UDC, dated 30 November 1922, in PRO: HLG 48/49.)

Except for the Harrison Buildings in Sunderland, which were erected for sanitary reasons rather than to meet a housing shortage, all of these early council schemes were carried out in districts where mining was the predominant industry. There was no council housing activity in the industrial towns of South Tyneside<sup>117</sup> or in the industrial towns in the south of the county. Before examining some of the influences which led councils to take action (and those which prevented other councils developing an interest in housebuilding) it is worth noting that there was no tradition of philanthropic housing in County Durham from which local authorities might have derived inspiration. Indeed, an effort by the Sutton Dwellings Trust to found an estate in Gateshead was abandoned in 1911 because of the lack of interest shown by the council: the dwellings were eventually erected in Newcastle.<sup>118</sup> There was, however, an important example of what one might call 'co-operative' action in the homes provided by miners' lodges for members who had grown too old for pit work: a declining mortality rate in the later nineteenth century had accentuated the problem of housing for the aged in an area where the 'free house' system was so prevalent. The miners' first venture was the purchase from the Ecclesiastical Commissioners of a large house and two acres of land in Boldon Colliery: the house was converted into flats in about 1895. The next big step was the purchase of the whole village of Haswell Moor from the Ecclesiastical Commissioners: the houses were renovated and opened in 1899, the first full year of the Durham Aged Mineworkers' Homes Association.<sup>119</sup> By the end of 1914 the

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117. There was, however, a scheme of 126 dwellings opened in Newcastle in 1906. (See Noddings, op cit, for a detailed account.)

118. Manders, op cit, p 172, and Noddings, op cit, p 39.

119. W A Moyes, Mostly Mining: A Study of Easington Rural District Since Earliest Times (Newcastle, 1969) p 109.



ILLUSTRATION 2-22  
Harrison Buildings, Silver  
Street, Sunderland; opened  
in 1903 and photographed  
in 1976 during renovation.



ILLUSTRATION 2-23 Aged Miners' Homes, Esh Winning. Built in 1911, these homes are typical of the example set to local authorities by miners' lodges before the First World War.



ILLUSTRATION 2-24 Fawcett Terrace, Ryhope. These stylish council dwellings, opened in 1909, contain terraced housing and (in the gabled ends) pairs of flats.

Association owned nearly 500 dwellings on 18 different sites around the coalfield; about a third of the homes were newly built, the rest converted from older property.<sup>120</sup> There was some assistance from interested members of the clergy and the more generous coal owners, but much of the cost was met from miners' union contributions.<sup>121</sup>

The example of the aged miners' homes may well have implanted in mining districts a sense of what could be achieved through the effort of the local community. A more obvious example to local authorities was the achievement of those councils which had already completed a housing scheme. It was fairly common for representatives of Sunderland RDC and Chester-le-Street RDC, in particular, to take visiting delegations on tours of their estates at Ryhope, Tunstall, Usworth and Washington. Among the councils which drew directly from this experience was Sedgefield RDC;<sup>122</sup> and the first plans to be considered by Easington RDC were in fact copies of those adopted by Sunderland RDC for the scheme at Ryhope.<sup>123</sup> Another example to local authorities was the 'exhibition estate' of 80 houses developed at Walker Gate in Newcastle. Indeed, this project was conceived by its organisers, the National Housing Reform Council, with the aim of persuading local authorities, as well as private developers, to build working-class housing to 'garden city' standards.<sup>124</sup> Among the councils which sent representatives to the exhibition in 1908 were Blaydon and Easington;<sup>125</sup> the latter also sent representatives to

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120. Durham Aged Mineworkers' Homes Association, 16th Annual Report and Financial Statement, 1914, DCRO: D/X 188/5.

121. Between the wars, when the Association's work continued to expand, nearly £ $\frac{1}{2}$  million was collected to finance the homes; over 95% was raised by the miners themselves. (W R Garside, The Durham Miners, 1919-60 (London, 1971) pp 292-3.)

122. Sedgefield RD Council Minutes, 23 August 1912, DCRO: RD/Se.

123. Easington RD Council Minutes, 16 August 1907, DCRO: RD/Ea.

124. I am grateful to Professor Norman McCord for showing me a copy of the NHRC's exhibition catalogue. Details are also to be found in Noddings, op cit, pp 45-6 and Appendix J.

125. Blaydon UD Council Minutes, 9 July 1908, GLS, and Easington RD Council Minutes, 8 October 1908, DCRO: RD/Ea.

conferences in Newcastle which preceded the exhibition.<sup>126</sup>

The National Housing Reform Council was also active in sending councils communications about housing legislation which, at the very least, kept local authorities aware of their statutory powers. The secretary of the NHRC, Henry Aldridge, was a highly dedicated campaigner and had a particular interest in the housing conditions of the Northumberland and Durham coal-field.<sup>127</sup> In 1902 he offered to address several councils in County Durham on the subject of housing reform and Seaham Harbour UDC, at least, received a deputation from 'Miners' Lodges and other District organisations' led by Aldridge.<sup>128</sup> Miners' lodges also helped to awaken interest in other districts. Sedgefield RDC's investigation of conditions in the Trimdon area and the eventual decision to build houses at Trimdon Grange were prompted by a complaint from the lodge secretary.<sup>129</sup> Similarly, an investigation by Easington RDC into conditions at Shotton was helped considerably by information volunteered by the local lodge, which was strongly in favour of a housing scheme in the village.<sup>130</sup>

Thorough investigation of local conditions was one of the most important influences in promoting a council housing scheme. In Stanley it was a local resident who first aroused interest by submitting details of overcrowding to the council; this led to a closer study by the Surveyor, which then resulted in a decision to prepare a housing scheme.<sup>131</sup>

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126. Easington RD Council Minutes, 24 May and 6 December 1906, DCRO: RD/Ea.
127. Aldridge's knowledge of these conditions is displayed in his letter (reproduced in J Davison, Northumberland Miners, 1919-1939 (Newcastle, 1973) pp 212-5) used in evidence before the Sankey Commission in 1919.
128. Seaham Harbour UD Council Minutes, 25 November 1902 and 24 February 1903, DCRO: UD/Sea.
129. Sedgefield RD Council Minutes, 4 June 1909, DCRO: RD/Se.
130. Easington RD Council Minutes, 18 December 1913, DCRO: RD/Ea. The council's plans for 100 houses in Shotton were abandoned after war broke out.
131. Stanley UD Council Minutes, 31 January and 28 November 1900, DCRO: UD/Sta.

A more common source of detailed information, however, was the local Medical Officer of Health. As we have seen, it was the work of this official which led to the slum replacement scheme in Sunderland. It was also the diligence of the Medical Officer for the Rural District of Sunderland which, as we have seen in Section A3 above, led the council in 1914 to approve a further housing scheme at Ryhope.<sup>132</sup>

Ultimately, of course, even the most detailed surveys and compelling arguments for action by the local authority were of little effect if there were no councillors willing to support them. Sometimes it can be seen that individual councillors managed to create interest by dint of their own enthusiasm and hard work. In Easington, for example, the council's first moves towards a housing scheme arose from the efforts of a certain Councillor Atkinson, who campaigned for over a year to get houses built at Thornley. At one point, when the council's officials could not produce the necessary background information quickly enough, Atkinson undertook to do the surveys himself; he had earlier, on his own initiative, presented the council with plans and estimates for a scheme.<sup>133</sup> More significant, however, than the zeal of individual councillors was the fact that a majority could be won over in certain districts to support proposals for a housing scheme, even though it might entail a charge upon the rates. It is for this reason that we need now to examine briefly the political background and social composition of certain district councils.

Unfortunately, it is possible here only to sketch a superficial impression of local politics in County Durham before the First World War: to paint a full canvas would require considerable research and a study

132. This project was another which had to be abandoned because of the war.

133. Easington RD Council Minutes, 12 September and 16 August 1907, DCRO: RD/Ea.

in its own right. It is possible, however, to reach the broad conclusion that working-class 'labour' and more radical socialist representation in many local authority areas was growing in the years before the war. In the Blaydon district, for example, which is generally noted for its strong socialist bias between the wars, there had been a steady swing away from the position at the turn of the century - when the council had been dominated by tradesmen and those who styled themselves 'gentlemen' - to a position in 1910 where there were three members of the Independent Labour Party on the council and in 1913 where the number had grown to seven (out of a council of 20).<sup>134</sup> Penetration of the council by ILP members was more marked in Chester-le-Street Rural District. One of their number (after whom was named Richardson Terrace, in the early council scheme at Usworth) became vice-chairman of the council in 1904. By 1913 the council was chaired by an ILP man and contained ten miners, seven of whom were Party members.<sup>135</sup> At that stage the whole of the Usworth Parish Council consisted of miners, all of whom belonged to the ILP.<sup>136</sup> In Houghton-le-Spring, another ILP member had become vice-chairman of the council in 1913:<sup>137</sup> his name is preserved by Thomas Husband Street, two rows of council houses that were built shortly afterwards. Perhaps the most celebrated socialist figure was Peter Lee, who was first elected to the Easington Rural District Council in 1907<sup>138</sup> and was unanimously

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134. D C Galleymore, The Effects of Economic and Social Development on Local Government in an Urban District of North East England (Blaydon) (unpublished Durham University MA thesis, 1970) p 26.
135. C R Marshall, Levels of Industrial Militancy and the Political Radicalisation of the Durham Miners, 1885-1914 (unpublished Durham University MA thesis, 1976) p 184-5. Richardson became Labour MP for Whitehaven in 1910.
136. Ibid, p 191.
137. Ibid, p 187.
138. Moyes, op cit, p 126.

voted chairman in 1914 after several years of close involvement in local housing questions:<sup>139</sup> he went on in 1919 to become the first leader of a Labour majority on the county council and is now commemorated by the new town which bears his name.

Although this sort of evidence is necessarily patchy, it can be no mere coincidence that each of the district councils mentioned above, in the context of infiltration by labour representatives, had prepared at least one housing scheme by 1914. It can also be seen, outside the direct political context, that the social composition of many councils was widening before the First World War. Although it is rare to find in council records any indication of a member's occupation, one good example comes from the Sunderland RDC minute book. This shows that in 1904 there were three miners (out of a council of ten) rubbing shoulders with two newsagents, managers of a colliery and of a forge, a gentleman and a hot water engineer; after the 1907 election there were four miners (one of whom had replaced the colliery manager) and a forge worker, giving the council a strong working-class flavour.<sup>140</sup> This kind of movement may also be confirmed, admittedly in a slightly superficial way, by reference to local street directories: it is fairly simple, at least in the case of the more compact urban districts, to trace those members of council who were tradesmen, or who (by virtue of their social standing) were eligible for the directories' rather exclusive list of 'private residents', or who (as freeholders) were recorded on the 'court list' as being eligible for jury service. Taking directories produced by the same company in 1902 and 1914, and selecting seven local authority areas, it can be seen that 86% of the councillors in those districts in 1902 fell into one of these broadly middle-class categories; by 1914 the proportion had dropped to 57%. There was also a very high turnover of personnel in

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139. Easington RD Council Minutes, 16 April 1914, DCRO: RD/Ea.

140. Sunderland RD Council Minutes, election results for 1904 and 1907, T&WCRO: SDR.

this sample of councils: only 18% of the councillors in 1914 had held office in 1902. However, while the turnover of councillors was at much the same level in both industrial and mining districts, the trend of a falling middle-class membership was far more pronounced in the latter.<sup>141</sup>

If one examines more closely the example of Jarrow, it can be seen that, although the voters of the borough had returned a Labour MP at the 1907 bye-election (only to lose him at the next general election), the council itself was solidly middle-class. Even in 1914, the 20 councillors (out of 24) who can be traced from the street directory (nine shopkeepers, four gentlemen, two wholesalers, two insurance agents, a doctor, a registrar and a mineral water manufacturer) were little different in background from the councillors in 1902: the main differences were the absence of representatives from Palmer's shipyard (there had been two in 1902, including Sir Charles Mark Palmer) and the reduced number of butchers (from four in 1902 to one in 1914).<sup>142</sup> It would, of course, be a great over-simplification to state that Jarrow did not produce any municipal housing schemes before the First World War just because of the middle-class domination of its council. On the other hand, it is true that in Gateshead, where the social composition of the council was similar, there were outspoken opponents of any proposals for housing reform who always had the support of a majority on the council. Despite repeated reminders by the Medical Officer of Health of the powers which could be used to relieve some of the wretched housing conditions in the borough, the council flatly refused to act.<sup>143</sup> 'Dirty people make dirty houses,' asserted one councillor, and 'he would not interfere

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141. The volumes used for this exercise were Kelly's Directory of Durham (London, 1902 and 1914 editions) and the councils chosen were Whickham, Felling, Hebburn and Jarrow (representing industrial Tyneside) and Ryton, Blaydon and Seaham Harbour (for the coalfield).

142. Ibid.

143. Manders, op cit, p 171.

with their pleasure in filth.'<sup>144</sup> By a large majority the council also condemned a Housing Bill before Parliament in 1906,<sup>145</sup> because people living in the worst conditions were supposedly '... to be given the same privileges as ordinary citizens.'<sup>146</sup> On another occasion, notwithstanding Gateshead's high mortality rate, the council dismissed a proposal that the local byelaws should require all new dwellings to be served by water closets. The leading opponent of this eminently sensible sanitary measure happened to be one of the town's largest builders and landlords.<sup>147</sup>

There is, of course, considerable danger in assuming that every working-class councillor was a keen housing reformer and every middle-class councillor a blind reactionary. In the Sunderland Rural District, for example, it was a miner who actually became the leading opponent of the council's proposed housing scheme at Tunstall, when it appeared that the ratepayers of the parish had turned against the idea.<sup>148</sup> More surprising, perhaps, was the action of the manager of the Horden Coal Company in proposing from the chair of the Easington District Council that a scheme of 100 houses should be carried out at Shotton;<sup>149</sup> for less than a year later the same gentleman was writing to the Sanitary Surveyor in a blatant attempt to discourage him from carrying out sewer repairs at Shotton because the coal company would have to pay a high proportion of the cost in increased rates.<sup>150</sup> The reason for the councillor's interest in a new housing scheme may have been pure altruism,

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144. Gateshead Guardian, 7 October 1899.

145. Manders, op cit, p 172.

146. Daily Chronicle, 5 April 1906.

147. Ibid, 3 March 1904.

148. Sunderland RD Council Minutes, 7 April and 30 June 1908, T&WCRO: SDR.

149. Easington RD Council Minutes, 27 November 1913, DCRO: RD/Ea.

150. Letter dated 4 August 1914, DCRO: D/X 411/68, and reproduced in Moyes, op cit, p 125.

but it was more likely the astute calculation that it was more economical for a coal company to encourage the council to build in a mining village (and to risk paying back some of the cost in rates) than to lay out large capital sums itself in building 'free houses'. Despite such exceptions, however, when the expected roles were reversed, it is reasonable to conclude that there was a broad correlation between the incidence of housing schemes under Part III of the 1890 Act and the degree of working-class or socialist representation on district councils. Before the First World War, all Part III schemes in County Durham were carried out in mining districts - and it was in these districts that working-class elements within the council were most evident.

By way of comparison with the following part of this study, it is interesting to conclude this chapter by considering some of the features of councils' experience as builders and landlords before the First World War. A major difference from the inter-war period was that housing schemes before 1914 were not subsidised by central government: they had to be financially self-supporting or else the entire loss had to be borne by local ratepayers. There was considerable pressure on the council, therefore, to balance carefully the estimated capital and running costs of a scheme with the rents it expected to receive. It can be seen from the Local Government report for 1913-14, which gives estimates of annual income and expenditure for each scheme approved, that councils in County Durham were fully aware of this pressure. The overall estimates for six schemes (by the councils of Annfield Plain, Blaydon, Seaham Harbour, Easington RD, Chester-le-Street RD and Sedgefield RD) actually projected a profit of 2% more income than expenditure each year; only Chester-le-Street RDC projected a loss - of 4% (or £38) per year on its second scheme at Usworth. It may well be, however, that the general aim of making a scheme self-supporting was very difficult to achieve in

practice. In 1915 the Clerk to Sunderland RDC told the President of the Local Government Board, in respect of the council's schemes at Ryhope and Tunstall, that '... notwithstanding the desire for economy, we find we are still short to the extent of  $1\frac{1}{2}$ d in the £ on the rates.'<sup>151</sup> This represented an annual loss of between £200 and £300.

Nevertheless, by comparison with inter-war standards, council housing schemes before 1914 were not unduly burdensome to the ratepayers. This was due mainly to the low rates of interest charged by the Public Works Loans Board and to the low cost of building. The cost of erecting a council house in Stanley in 1904 was £163<sup>152</sup> and the average in 1914 for the six districts mentioned in the previous paragraph was £192;<sup>153</sup> the interest payable on the capital loans was always between 3% and 4%, usually over a period of 40 years. On the other hand, the cost of land was very high compared with the inter-war period, when effective powers of compulsory purchase were available: the average paid by councils before 1914 was between £550 and £600 per acre. In the Sunderland Rural District it had been impossible to buy suitable land even at this price: the Ecclesiastical Commissioners would only part with sites on lease, at an extortionate ground rent.<sup>154</sup> It will be seen in Chapter 4 how construction costs rose after the First World War (although the finished product was superior) and how the scarcity and expense of building land declined (although sites were generally chosen further away from existing settlements).

The experience of councils as landlords before 1914 was very

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151. Verbatim report of a deputation to the Local Government Board from the Association of Rural District Councils, in Sunderland RD Council Minutes, 23 February 1915, T&WCRO: SDR.
152. Stanley UD Council Minutes, 7 September 1904, DCRO: UD/Sta.
153. Local Government Board, Annual Report, 1913-14.
154. Sunderland RD Council Minutes, 23 February 1915, T&WCRO: SDR.



ILLUSTRATION 2-25 House Terrace, Usworth. These rather plain terraced council houses have recently been modernised.



ILLUSTRATION 2-26 North Side Terrace, Trindon Grange. Another fairly plain terrace, completed in 1914, with the addition of bay windows to lend distinction.



ILLUSTRATION 2-27 Edison Street, Murton. Front gardens and porches were used to add a little charm to these rather four-square council houses, opened in 1914.



ILLUSTRATION 2-28 Bede Terrace, Chester-le-Street. More imaginative treatment of design is apparent in these somewhat later 1890 Act houses. Note the arched passageways for access to coalhouses and bins.

similar to that of the inter-war period, for the problems of attracting suitable tenants, of fixing reasonable rents and ensuring prompt payment, are universal features of estate management. There was generally no firm policy in selecting tenants for the first housing schemes, although Stanley UDC did resolve to give priority to people living in condemned houses and to large families.<sup>155</sup> The only analysis of tenants' occupations which survives is for the Sunderland RDC schemes at Tunstall and Ryhope. At the former, 92% of tenants in the autumn of 1914 were miners, and at the latter 60%; the remaining houses at Ryhope were largely taken by railway workers, Co-operative employees and insurance agents. Only 5% of the people on these estates were living at a density of more than two to a room, compared with nearly 30% in the district as a whole at the 1911 Census.<sup>156</sup>

There was some variation in the rents charged for council houses in different districts and in the type of accommodation provided, but a typical rent was between 6/- and 6/6 per week (including rates) for a house containing living room, scullery (with bath) and three bedrooms. Most council rents, if measured against the 1912 Board of Trade index, would have fallen in the range of 60 to 65. This was rather less than private sector rents in the Tyneside and Wearside conurbations, but was probably about average for most of the mining districts in question. In Stanley and Ryhope, where the prevailing private sector rents were (as we have seen in Section A3 above) very high, the council houses were relatively cheap. In Sunderland, however, rents in the Harrison Buildings were consistently higher than in the town as a whole.<sup>157</sup> This was reflected,

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155. Stanley UD Council Minutes, 7 September 1904, DCRO: UD/Sta.

156. Rent Collector's Report, in Sunderland RD Council Minutes, 3 November 1914, T&WCRO: SDR.

157. Sunderland CB Council Minutes, 13 July 1904 and 11 October 1905, SLS.

particularly in the years 1907 to 1911, by a high level of unoccupied flats (about one-half of the total at a given time) and a fairly high level of rent arrears (about 4% of the total due from tenants).<sup>158</sup> Such problems were not experienced by the Rural District Council, whose dwellings at Ryhope and Tunstall were let to 99.7% capacity from 1909 to 1914 and whose rent collector managed to recover all but 0.5% of the total due in that period.<sup>159</sup>

On the whole, it can be seen that the housing schemes carried out in the county under Part III of the 1890 Act were a success, for they provided modest, but distinctly superior, accommodation at reasonable rents in areas of acute housing shortage - and did so without making heavy demands on public funds. They also represented a striking new area of local government action - at a time when there was little obligation for councils to act in this field - and a brave attempt to tackle problems which existed on a scale virtually unknown in the rest of the country. After the First World War, however, this field of action was magnified enormously: the obligations of local government and its responsibilities as builder and landlord grew to dimensions unimagined before 1914. Against the background of this chapter, the remaining part of this study examines the details of this development.

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158. Annual Reports of the Medical Officer of Health for Sunderland, SLS.

159. Sunderland RD Council Minutes, 3 November 1914, T&WCRO: SDR.

CHAPTER THREE

COUNCIL HOUSING IN COUNTY DURHAM, 1919-1939

## A. Achievements

It is not easy to present the statistics of housebuilding by local authorities between the wars in a way that makes the impact of the achievement stand out. Perhaps the best way is to consider the proportion of the total housing stock which council houses constituted at the beginning and the end of the period. At the point when building operations were halted by the First World War council housing represented less than one four-hundredth of the total stock in County Durham - about the same proportion as in England and Wales as a whole. By the outbreak of the Second World War, however, council houses made up nearly a sixth of the total housing stock of the county; this was a considerably greater concentration than in the rest of England and Wales, where the proportion of council housing was less than one-tenth. It can be seen, therefore, that the local authority sector had expanded enormously in the inter-war period, to a degree which represented a significant impact on social and economic conditions. The impact was naturally much greater in some districts than in others: within County Durham it can be calculated that about two-fifths of the housing stock of Seaham and a third of that in Felling was owned by the council in 1939, whereas in areas where private enterprise was more active - like Darlington - or areas affected by economic decay and declining population - like Bishop Auckland - the proportion was only about one-twentieth.<sup>1</sup> But the effect in most districts was to make the council the largest single domestic landlord.<sup>2</sup>

This section of the study attempts broadly to describe and analyse

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1. The sources for these figures are mentioned in the following paragraph and in footnote 3.
  2. This was true even of most mining districts, where a significant proportion of the housing stock would be colliery 'free houses'. The figures available for Easington RDC show that by early 1946 some 23% of the housing stock was owned by the council and 26% by various coal companies; a further 4% belonged to a housing association and the private sector accounted for the balance of 47%. (C W Clarke, Farewell Squalor (Easington, 1946) p 31.)

the level of council housebuilding activity in County Durham - the quantitative achievement of local authorities - against the background of activity in the rest of England and Wales. It also explores the different levels and patterns of building activity in the constituent parts of the county, while touching upon developments in the private sector. It should be stated at the outset, however, that the figures of exactly how many houses were built are not always easy to obtain and interpret. The most comprehensive sources are the annual reports compiled by the Medical Officer of Health for the county council and the county boroughs, which give fairly reliable figures of local authority and private building in each district for most of the years in question. These statistics can in most cases be supplemented by information in council and housing committee minute books and in several minor sources.<sup>3</sup> Although a reasonably accurate picture can be drawn up in this way, there are certain difficulties. The most important of these is the lack of a comprehensive analysis of annual building totals before 1926, when the district Medical Officers began to record more detailed information; there is also no reliable return for 1939, when statistical routines were disrupted by war. The totals for local authority building in 1937 and 1938 are not entirely trustworthy, because of intervention by the North Eastern Housing Association (of which some details are given below in Section C): some of the councils which co-operated with the Association recorded its houses built under the Acts of 1930 and 1935 as 'local authority' and others as 'private', producing figures which are sometimes impossible to disentangle. For the purpose of statistics

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3. The most important of these lesser sources are the Durham County Council County Development Plan (Durham, 1951), which contains summaries of inter-war housebuilding activity and demolitions, and the Ministry of Health's Housing Act, 1935. Report on the Overcrowding Survey in England and Wales (HMSO London, 1936). The written statements made by local authorities in 1935-36 to the Royal Commission on Local Government on Tyneside (typescript copies held in GLS) contain some useful figures, as do some editions of the Municipal Year Book.

used in this section, Association houses have (wherever they can be identified accurately from the various sources) been included in the figures for private housing. As a final complication, allowances have to be made for changes in local government boundaries and organisation, which occurred mainly in the shake-up of 1935-37<sup>4</sup> but also at other odd intervals during the period. It is usually possible, with the aid of the Census volumes and local authority records, to piece together the effect on housing figures; but councils themselves were not above book-keeping errors when the responsibility for existing houses changed hands, and it is quite likely that houses 'disappeared' or were 'created' by statistical accidents.

Having obtained a slightly flawed, though generally reliable set of figures, one still has the problem of serving them up in a digestible form. The raw statistics of how many houses were built only acquire a meaning when related to the size of the district concerned: some common standard of measurement is required to allow comparison between different survey areas. Two basic standards have been chosen for this purpose. The first is to consider the number of council houses in a particular area in relation to a unit of population - 'houses per 1000 people' being the most convenient expression and the Census population figures for 1921 (in respect of Addison, Chamberlain and Wheatley schemes) and 1931 (in respect of schemes under the Acts of 1930 and 1935) providing the necessary background information. For an overall view at the end of the period, the total number of houses can be measured against the population recorded in the National Registration of 1939.<sup>5</sup> The other simple method is to express

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4. See Section B of Introduction.

5. In the absence of Census statistics for 1941, these Registration figures give the best available breakdown of population by local authority areas. They do have the drawback, however, of being affected by some unnatural movement of population in the early stages of the war.

the number of new houses built as a percentage of the housing stock of the area at the 1921 Census.<sup>6</sup> These statistical devices have been used in the main Tables of this section and enable a rough comparison of building activity to be made between districts within the county and also with the rest of England and Wales. Other useful statistics in assessing the relative importance of housebuilding activity are those of population movement between 1921 and 1939 and of overcrowding in 1921 and 1931: these are presented in Table 3-4.

The total number of houses built between the wars by local authorities in County Durham was about 60,000.<sup>7</sup> When this figure is translated into a form comparable with the rest of England and Wales, it can be seen (in Table 3-1) that the overall level of council activity in County Durham was relatively high. Measured both against population and pre-existing housing stock, the level of building in Durham was about 50% greater than in the rest of the country. It can also be seen (in Table 3-2) that the impact of this high level of local authority activity within County Durham was reinforced by a low level of private building over the same period. Even with the inclusion of housing association dwellings, the level of private building in the county represented little more than half of that in the rest of England and Wales between the wars. We shall examine below some of the local variations within Durham, but it is obvious here that the overall balance of building activity - between council and private sectors - was quite distinct from the national pattern.

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6. It should be noted that the number of Addison Act houses actually completed by June 1921, when the Census was conducted, was an insignificant proportion of the total housing stock both in County Durham and nationally.
  7. It is impossible to be more precise, because of the unreliable figures for 1939. The North Eastern Housing Association built a further 7,000 houses, which have been included (as far as possible) in the figures for private housebuilding in Table 3-2.

TABLE 3-1 Rates of Council Housebuilding in County Durham and Rest of England and Wales, 1919-39

(i) Council houses per thousand population

	(a) 1919 Act	(b) 1923 Act	(c) 1924 Act	(d) 1930 Act 1935 Act & unsub- sidised	(e) Total 1919-39
County Durham	4.5	2.9	11.4	21.7	43.5
Rest of England and Wales	4.5	2.0	13.4	9.9	28.6

Note: Columns (a), (b) and (c) measured against 1921 Census population; column (d) against 1931 Census population; and column (e) against 1939 National Registration figures.

(ii) Council houses as a percentage of total housing stock at 1921 Census

	(f) 1919 Act	(g) 1923 Act	(h) 1924 Act	(i) 1930 Act 1935 Act & unsub- sidised	(j) Total 1919-39
County Durham	2.3	1.5	5.8	11.0	20.6
Rest of England and Wales	2.1	0.9	6.3	4.9	14.2

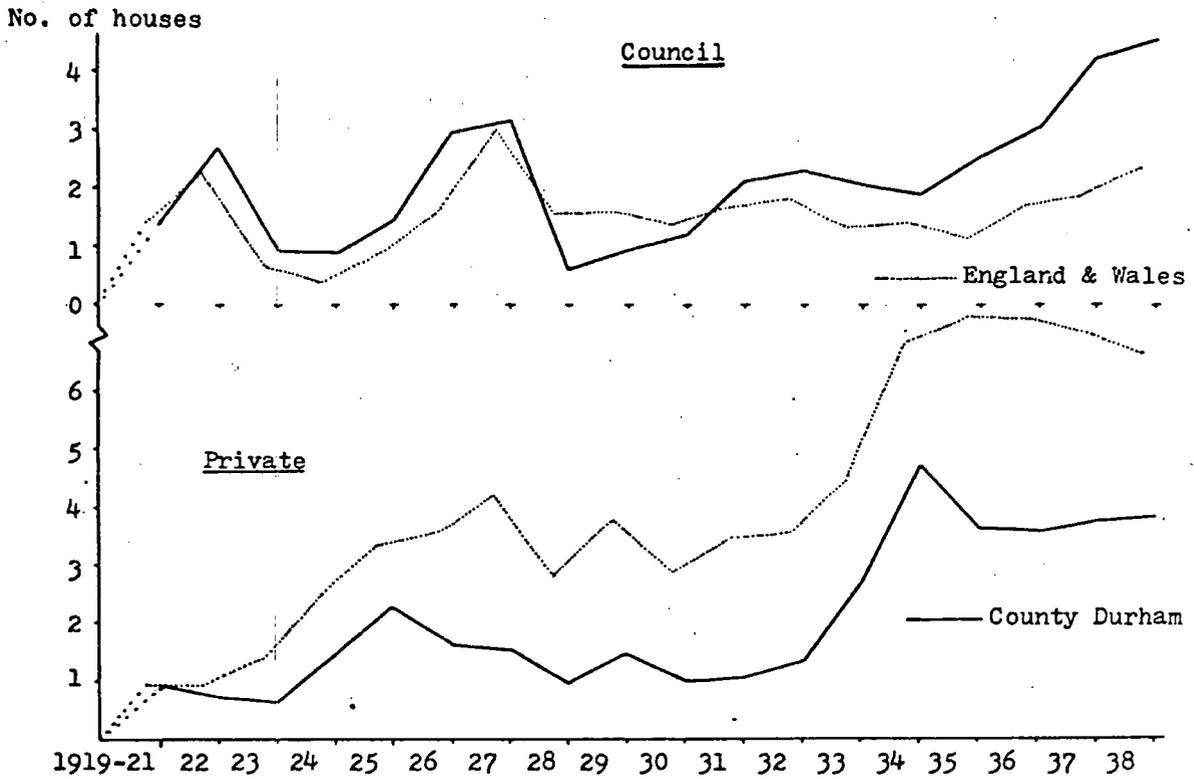
Another difference between the building pattern in County Durham and the national picture was in the level of council activity under the various housing acts. Unfortunately, reliable figures for the distribution of building between the different schemes are not available for all local authorities in the county; but information can be obtained for more than half of the council houses built, and projections can be made which tie up reasonably well with the total annual building rates shown in Figure 3-1. It is estimated that about 7,000 council houses were erected under the Addison Act, 4,000 under the Chamberlain Act, 17,000 under the Wheatley Act, and 32,000 under the Acts of 1930 and 1935. When compared with the national figures in Table 3-1, the estimated distribution of council housing activity in County Durham shows a close similarity in respect of the Addison, Chamberlain and Wheatley schemes. Activity under the Chamberlain Act appears to have been somewhat higher in County Durham than in the rest of the country, but slightly lower under the Wheatley Act: the latter was probably due to the severe financial problems that made many local authorities in the county reluctant to embark on large capital projects in the later 1920s, or else made the Ministry of Health reluctant to sanction them.<sup>8</sup> Under the 'sanitary' Housing Acts of 1930 and 1935, however, the level of building activity was very much higher in County Durham - more than twice as high as in the rest of England and Wales. This was no doubt determined to a great extent by the concentration of overcrowded and slum property in the county, but other factors - the more favourable subsidy arrangements, for example, and the growing domination of local government in Durham by the Labour Party (discussed briefly in the following section) - must

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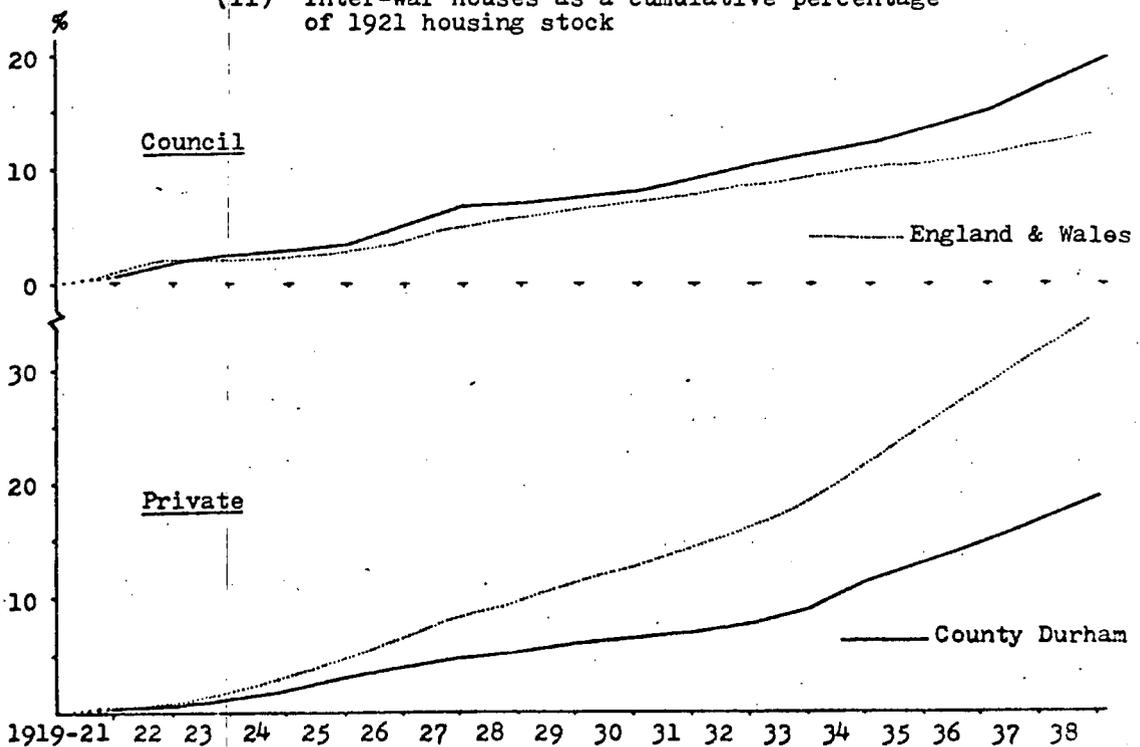
8. See the following section of this chapter.

**FIGURE 3-1 Annual Rates of Housebuilding in County Durham and England and Wales, 1919-1938**

(i) New houses each year per 1000 population (1921 Census)



(ii) Inter-war houses as a cumulative percentage of 1921 housing stock



also have played a part.<sup>9</sup> The differences from the national pattern of council housebuilding activity, together with the different balance between council and private activity mentioned above, are shown graphically in Figure 3-1.

The level of council activity in the various districts of County Durham over the period 1919-38 is shown - together with details of private building - in Table 3-2.<sup>10</sup> One of the most striking features to emerge from this summary is the high level of local authority building in the more viable areas of the coalfield (broadly, groups A, B and C in the Table), where the councils were about twice as active as average local authorities in the rest of England and Wales. Council activity was considerably lower in the more depressed mining districts (mainly those in group D) and very low in the small towns and agricultural villages in the west (group G). The main urban centres are considered in two groups - the Tyne and Wear area (group E) and Darlington, North Teesside and the Hartlepoons (group F). The level of council building was generally higher in the Tyne and Wear area, although not as high on the whole as in the more active coalfield districts. The Tyneside districts of Felling, Hebburn and Jarrow did, however, match the coalfield level - Felling UDC being the most active local authority in the county, in

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9. The figures in columns (d) and (i) of Table 3-1 also take account of a small proportion of unsubsidised council housebuilding, for which there are no separate statistics for County Durham. It is unlikely (given the financial problems of many local authorities in the county) that the level of unsubsidised council building in Durham was any greater than in the rest of the country.
10. In this Table, and in the accompanying Figure 3-2, the districts as constituted in 1939 have been arranged in seven groups. This has been done principally for the convenience of being able to examine wider regions of the county - each of a fairly homogenous nature. There is also the question of the major boundary changes of 1935-37, which make it difficult to calculate certain statistics other than for wider groups of districts. This has led to a few groupings that are not ideal: were it not for the problem of boundary changes, Whickham, for example, would be more appropriately grouped with the other South Tyneside towns and Boldon might be considered separately from those towns and Sunderland. A statistical summary for the whole county and a graphical representation are given in Table 3-3 and Figure 3-3.

TABLE 3-2 Level of Council and Private Housebuilding Activity in County Durham, 1919-1938  
[By districts as constituted in 1938]

	Number of houses built 1919-1938		Houses (1919-38) per thousand registered population		Council housing (1919-38) as % of total 1921 stock	Council housing as % of total housebuilding 1919-38
	Council	Private	Council	Private		
(A) Ryton	641	517	47.0	37.9		55.4
Blaydon	1,442	1,057	48.3	35.4		57.7
Whickham	1,320	1,375	61.7	64.2		49.0
Consett	1,650	1,560	43.7	41.3		51.4
Stanley	2,366	785	48.3	16.0		75.1
Lanchester RDC	1,159	1,022	71.4	63.0		53.1
	8,578	6,316	51.1	37.6	25.1	57.5
(B) Chester-le-Street	1,294	1,181	73.9	67.4		52.3
Chester-le-Street RDC	2,534	1,060	61.0	25.5		70.5
Washington	890	251	52.5	14.8		78.0
Houghton	1,959	768	69.6	27.3		71.8
Hetton	1,177	312	61.8	16.4		79.0
Sunderland RDC	1,162	282	48.9	11.9		80.5
	9,016	3,854	61.4	26.2	27.7	70.1
(C) Easington RDC	4,008	6,090	49.1	74.6		39.7
Seaham	2,021	589	79.2	23.1		77.4
	6,029	6,679	56.3	62.4	36.6	47.4
(D) Brandon	618	65	31.2	3.3		90.5
Durham	754	940	40.9	51.0		44.5
Durham RDC	2,502	540	75.1	16.2		82.2
Crook & Willington	909	276	31.0	9.4		76.7
Spennymoor	74	524	4.1	28.8		12.4
Bishop Auckland	209	615	5.8	17.0		25.4
Shildon	197	149	13.9	10.5		56.9
Sedgefield RDC	1,320	970	37.0	27.2		57.6
	6,583	4,079	32.1	19.9	13.6	61.7
(E) Gateshead	3,104	3,774	30.5	37.1		45.1
Felling	2,340	433	100.0	18.5		84.4
Hebburn	1,268	578	59.9	27.3		68.7
Jarrow	1,640	118	61.0	4.4		93.3
South Shields	4,415	3,097	45.8	32.1		58.8
Boldon	725	1,790	47.0	115.9		28.8
Sunderland	5,502	5,642	33.2	34.0		49.4
	18,994	15,432	42.1	34.2	18.7	55.2
(F) Darlington	978	6,954	12.6	89.7		12.3
Darlington RDC	72	520	7.3	52.5		12.2
Stockton	3,393	3,339	50.9	50.1		50.4
Stockton RDC	54	327	6.8	41.3		14.2
Billingham	1,271	2,773	62.8	137.1		31.4
West Hartlepool	1,501	4,010	23.4	62.4		27.2
Hartlepool	514	278	33.1	17.9		64.9
	7,783	18,201	29.7	69.5	15.3	30.0
(G) Tow Law	-	103	-	31.8		-
Barnard Castle	79	207	16.6	43.5		27.6
Barnard Castle RDC	59	177	3.1	9.4		25.0
Weardale RDC	44	121	4.0	11.1		26.7
	182	608	4.8	16.1	2.5	23.0
COUNTY DURHAM	57,165	55,169	41.5	40.0	19.6	50.9
Rest of ENGLAND & WALES	1.018m	2.756m	26.2	71.0	13.2	27.0

terms of council houses per thousand population. Although the southern towns were generally much less active in the council sector, Stockton and Billingham were exceptional - again matching the higher levels of the coalfield districts.

Turning now to housebuilding in the private sector, one can see that the balance between the Tyne and Wear area and the southern towns was the reverse of that in the council sector. Private building was particularly high in Darlington and in Billingham, the large development in the latter between 1927 and 1930 (coinciding with major industrial expansion) making it the district of greatest private activity. Although the level of private housebuilding was generally lower in the Tyne and Wear area, there was apparently an exceptional level of activity in the Boldon district: this was mainly the result of residential development between 1931 and 1934, probably as an overspill from the Tyneside towns. In Jarrow, on the other hand, private building was extremely scarce; only in the depressed mining district of Brandon was there a lower level of activity. On the coalfield itself there was a wide variation in private building between different districts. The greatest activity was in the Easington district, where mining prospects were the brightest. The level of building was much lower in most other districts in the northern part of the coalfield, although development by the Consett Iron Company improved the position in many parts of the north west. Chester-le-Street was exceptional in attracting substantial private estates, which grew steadily on the edge of the town from about 1932. The lowest levels of private building were in the south-western parts of the county, where even the low figures that obtain are inflated in some cases (for example, Shildon, Crook and Willington) by housing association activity under the Acts of 1930 and 1935.

Some idea of the balance between local authority and private

FIGURE 3-2 Number of Houses Built Each Year  
in Different Areas of County Durham, 1926-38

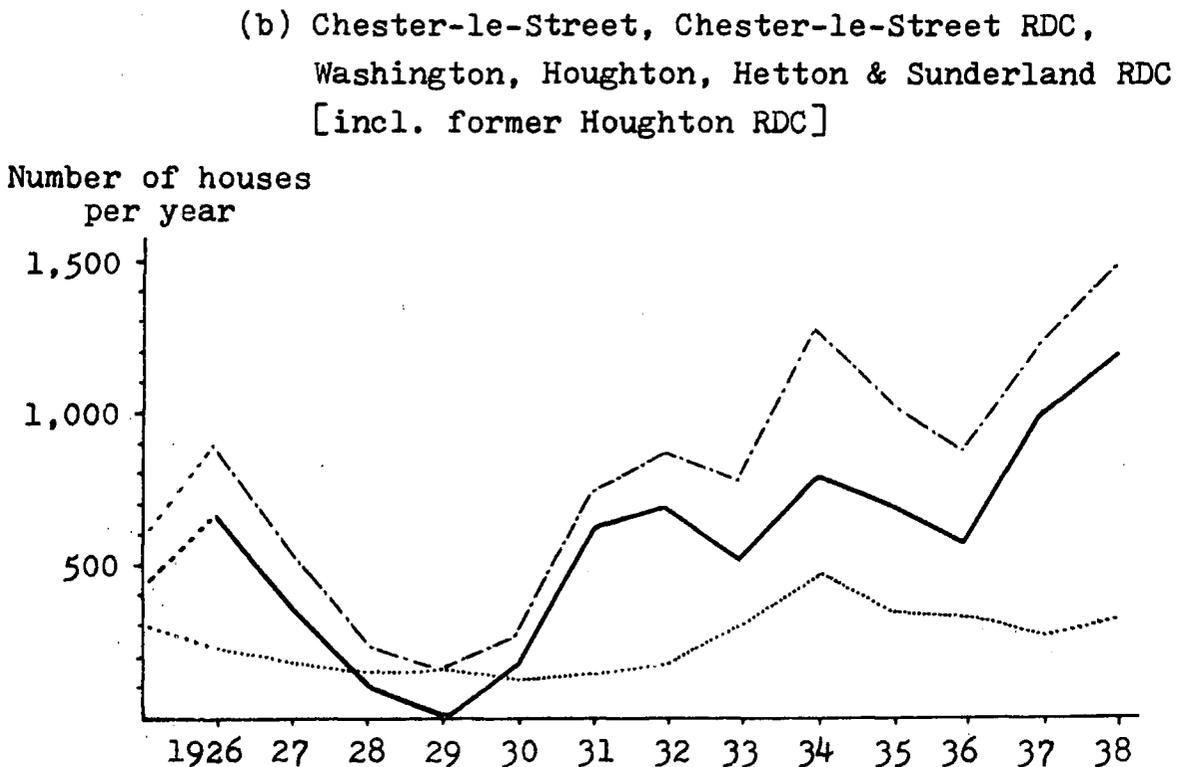
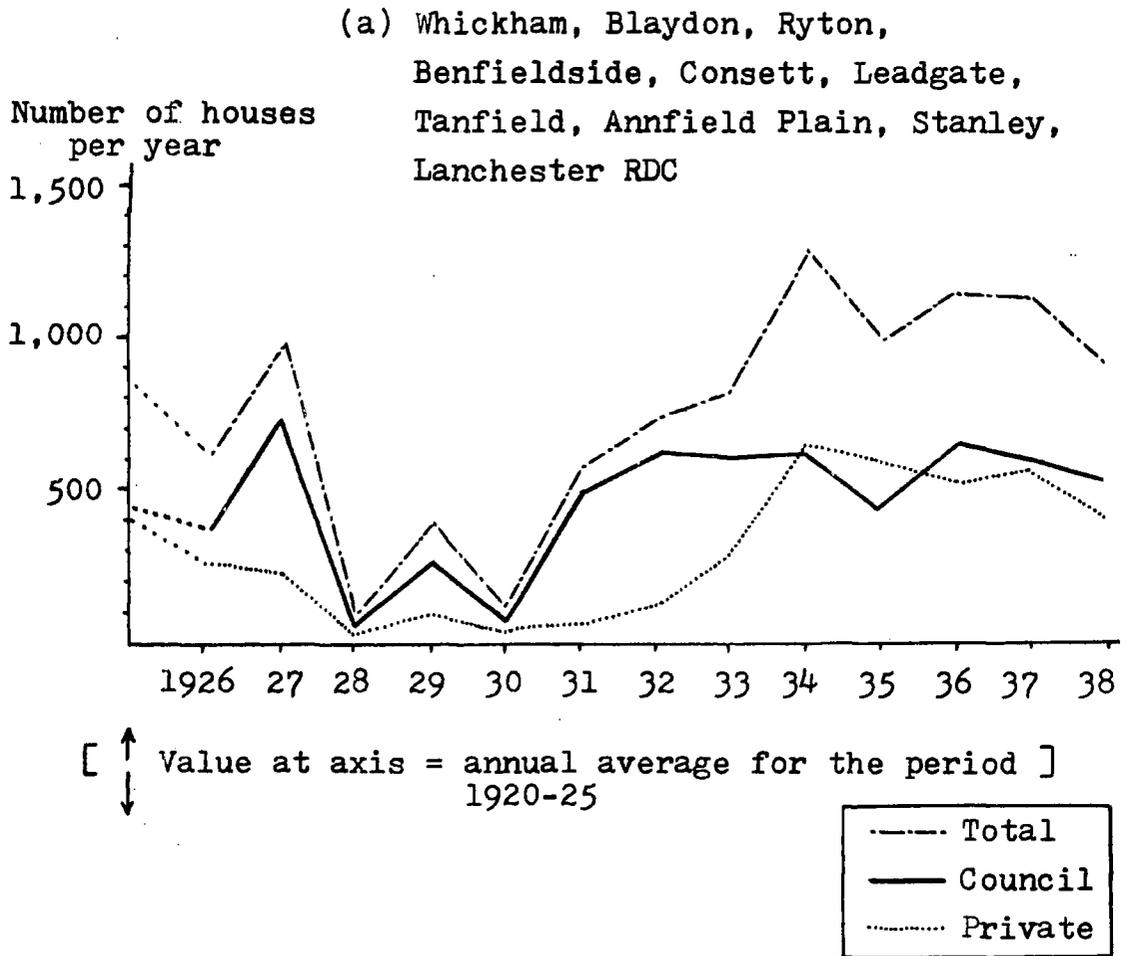
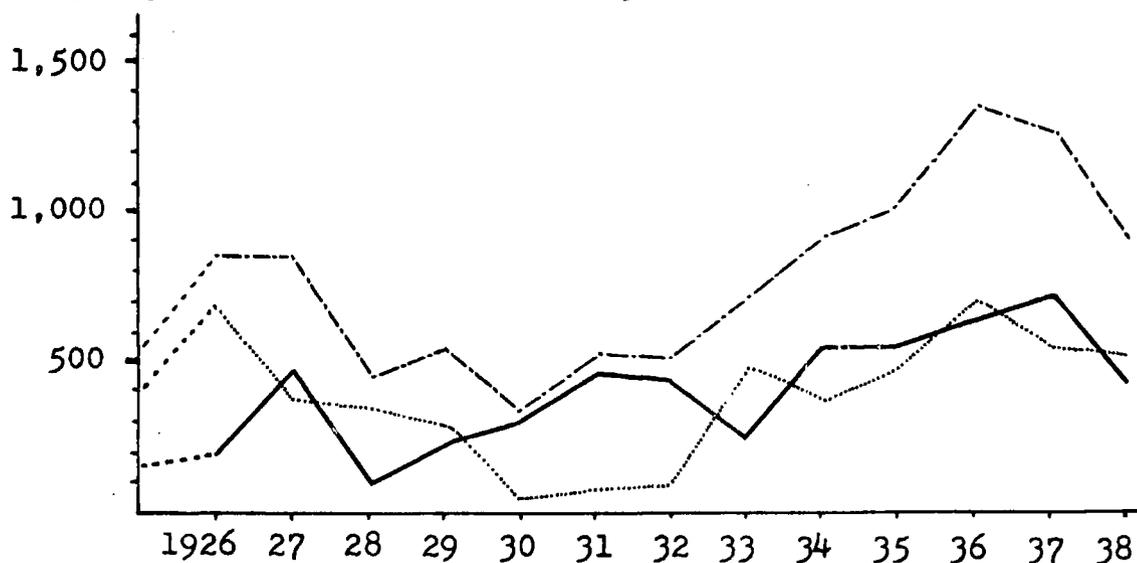


FIGURE 3-2 [continued]

## (c) Easington RDC &amp; Seaham

Number of houses  
per year(d) Durham, Durham RDC,  
Brandon, Crook, Willington,  
Spennymoor, Bishop Auckland, Shildon,  
Sedgefield RDCNumber of houses  
per year

[incl. former Auckland RDC]

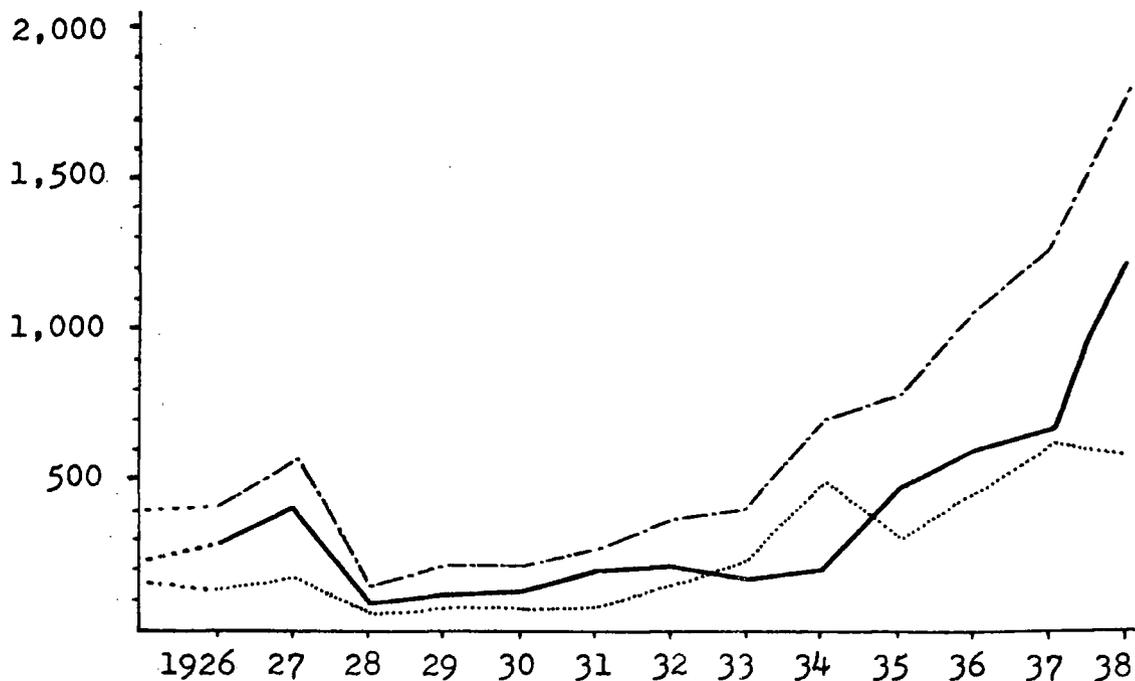
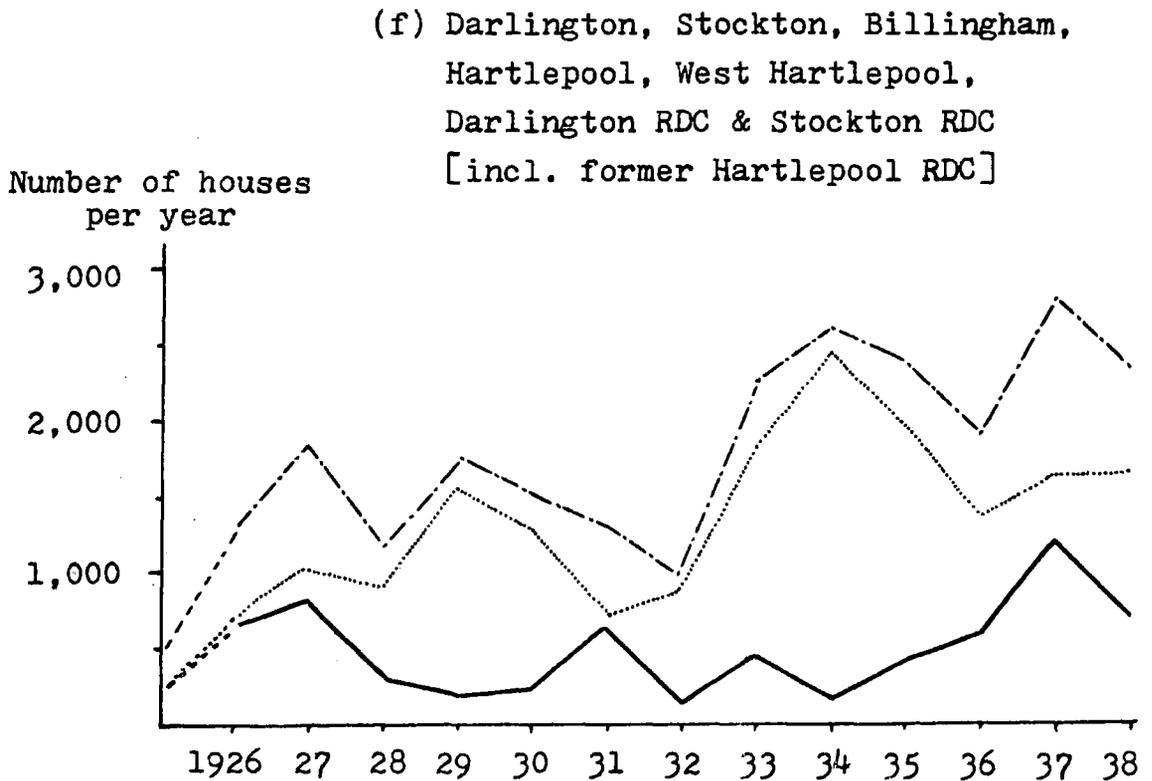
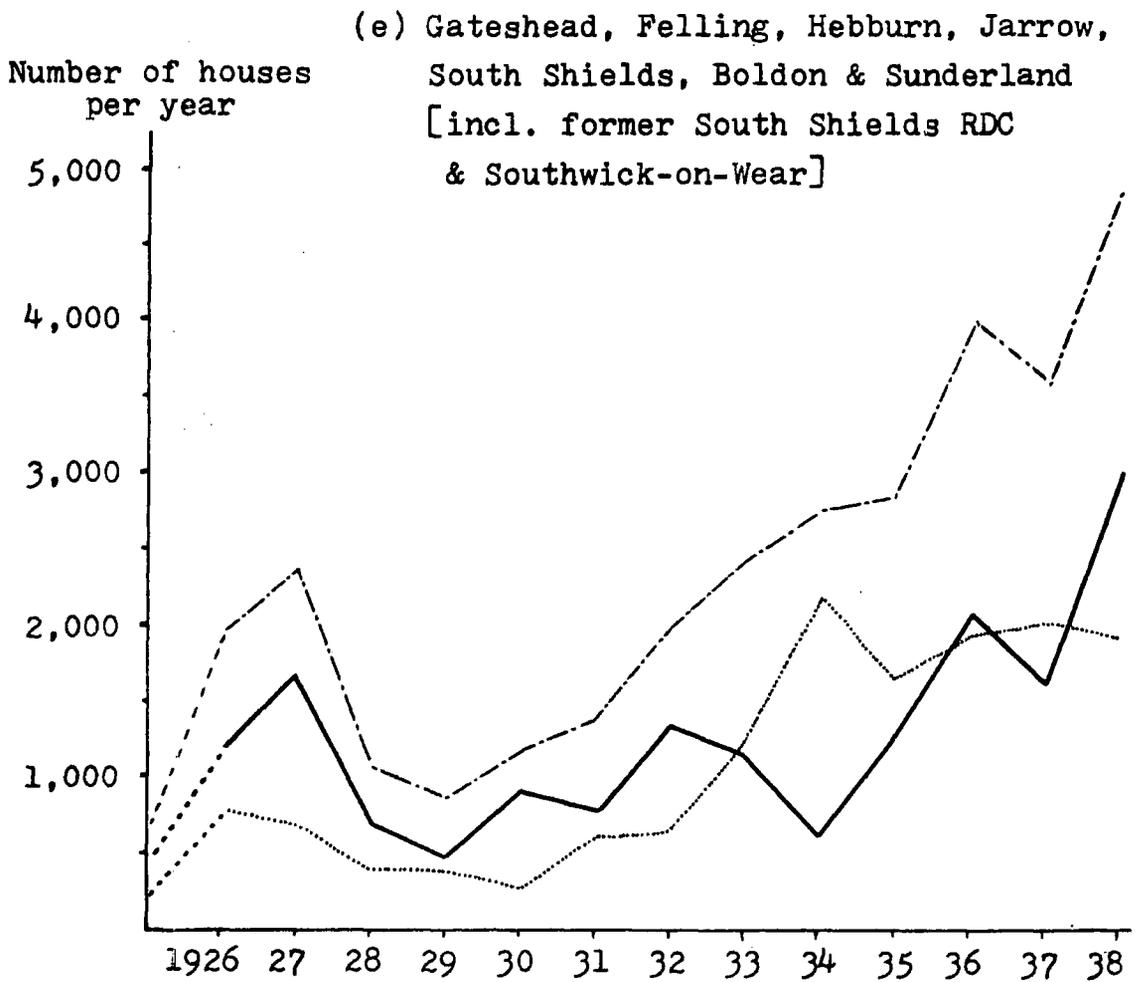


FIGURE 3-2 [continued]



housebuilding in the different areas of the county, and of the changing pattern of activity over the inter-war years, may be derived from the graphs in Figure 3-2.<sup>11</sup> The more striking features of the local authority building are the trough of 1928-30 and the peaks of the 1930s. Although the fall in council activity in the late 1920s was most severe in mining districts, where the effects of the Coal Dispute and the close grip of the Ministry of Health in 1926-28 meant that few houses came to be completed in 1928-30,<sup>12</sup> it was also noticeable in the larger towns (groups E and F). In the latter case this may have been due to the separate effect of cuts in the Chamberlain and Wheatley subsidies in 1927, which produced a fall in council building on a national scale. Except in the large southern towns of County Durham, the great increase in building by local authorities can be seen from about 1933-34, when most councils were making the transition from the Wheatley Act to slum replacement under the Greenwood Act of 1930. Only in the large towns of Tyne and Wear (group E) was there a significant drop in momentum in 1934, with insufficient rehousing schemes to make up for the demise of the Wheatley programme. Perhaps the most remarkable acceleration in building after 1934 was on the part of local authorities in the south and south-western coalfield (group D), an area of otherwise low building activity.

The most noticeable feature in the private housing sector was the peak of activity, coinciding with the national pattern, in 1933-35. The

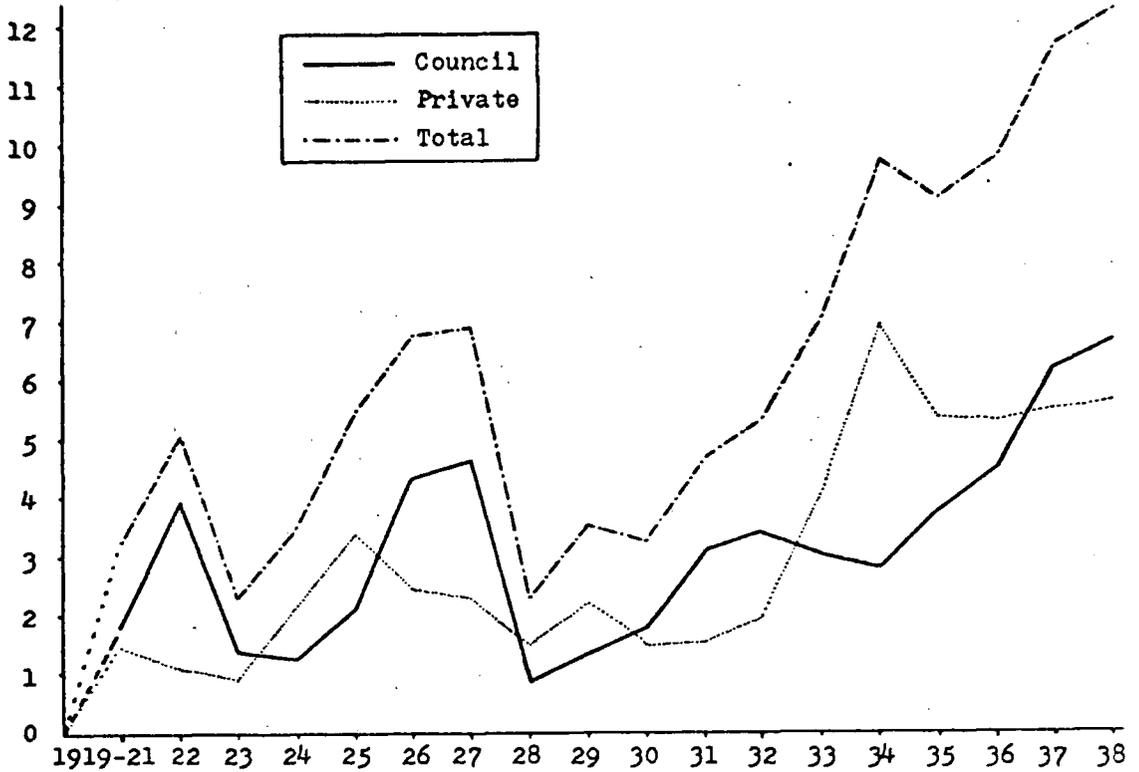
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11. It is unfortunate that reliable annual figures are not available for all individual local authorities before 1926: the graphs begin, therefore, with the average annual figure for the years 1920-25. The names of authorities which disappeared in the local government reorganisation of 1935-37 have been included. Details of the small authorities in the west, where the number of houses built was insignificant, have not.

12. See the following section of this chapter.

FIGURE 3-3 & TABLE 3-3 Annual Rate of Local Authority and Private Housebuilding in County Durham, 1919-1938

No. of houses  
per calendar year  
(thousands)



	Number of houses completed		
	Council	Private	Total
1919-21	1,811	1,431	3,242
1922	3,960	1,101	5,061
1923	1,380	952	2,332
1924	1,270	2,207	3,477
1925	2,135	3,371	5,506
1926	4,342	2,442	6,784
1927	4,638	2,301	6,939
1928	878	1,442	2,320
1929	1,370	2,199	3,569
1930	1,770	1,457	3,227
1931	3,120	1,546	4,666
1932	3,410	1,945	5,355
1933	3,047	3,982	7,029
1934	2,825	6,944	9,769
1935	3,780	5,381	9,161
1936	4,499	5,306	9,805
1937	6,244	5,540	11,784
1938	6,686	5,622	12,308
<b>Total</b>	<b>57,165</b>	<b>55,169</b>	<b>112,334</b>

most pronounced peak was in the southern towns of the county (group F), where private building showed the greatest overall similarity with the national picture. In most of the other areas the relatively high private building levels of 1933-35 were more or less maintained until the end of the period. One exception to the general pattern in County Durham was the Easington and Seaham area (group C), where private building in the 1920s had been fairly high - largely due to Easington RDC's policy of augmenting the Chamberlain Act subsidy to the private sector.<sup>13</sup> As in the south and south-west coalfield area (group D), which also was to receive help from the North Eastern Housing Association, the height of private building activity was reached in a second peak in 1936-37. Another exception to the general pattern in County Durham itself was the group of southern towns (group F), which, instead of experiencing a slight trough of private housebuilding activity in the late 1920s like most other areas, had a distinct peak in 1929-30. This coincided largely with the boom years of private housebuilding in Billingham.

The different levels and patterns of building activity described in the preceding paragraphs take on a little more significance when considered in conjunction with the statistics presented in Table 3-4. These figures deal with population movements over the period and the levels of overcrowding (measured by the standard of more than two persons to a room) in 1921 and 1931. Although population growth in the 1920s was very slow in the county as a whole (only 0.5% increase between 1921 and 1931), the falling birth rate meant that the increase in private families (14.7%) and thus the need for additional houses was still quite large. On top of this requirement was the need for extra housing to reduce the high level of overcrowding that existed in much of the county in 1921 (more than three times higher than in England and Wales as a whole).

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13. See the final section of this chapter.

TABLE 3-4 Population Movements (1921-39), Overcrowding (1921-31) and Shortfall of New Housing (1921-31) in County Durham  
[By districts as constituted in 1939]

	Population 1921	% population increase [or decrease (-)]		% population housed at more than two per room		Shortage of new dwellings compared with increase in no. of families 1921-31
		1921-31	1931-39	1921	1931	
(A) Ryton	14,263	-0.4	-4.0			
Blaydon	33,000	-2.3	-7.4			
Whickham	19,891	6.9	-0.7			
Consett	34,168	11.1	-0.5			
Stanley	57,511	-3.9	-11.4			
Lanchester RDC	19,365	-13.0	-3.7			
	178,198	-0.2	-5.6	33.3	18.7	378
(B) Chester-le-Street	16,725	-0.6	5.3			
Chester-le-Street RDC	47,487	-2.0	-10.8			
Washington	17,721	-0.1	-4.2			
Houghton	30,301	-0.2	-7.0			
Hetton	19,960	3.0	-7.4			
Sunderland RDC	24,320	1.0	-3.2			
	156,514	-0.2	-5.9	31.1	18.0	135
(C) Easington RDC	68,252	16.1	3.0			
Seaham	23,441	16.6	-6.7			
	91,693	16.2	0.5	31.8	20.6	1,166
(D) Brandon	23,918	-8.0	-10.0			
Durham	19,154	-5.3	1.6			
Durham RDC	34,184	-1.8	-0.7			
Crook & Willington	34,517	-9.9	-5.7			
Spennymoor	22,962	-1.0	-12.0			
Bishop Auckland	44,455	-12.4	-7.1			
Sildon	17,659	-11.4	-9.3			
Sedgefield RDC	34,639	-1.7	4.8			
	231,488	-7.5	-4.2	24.3	14.7	571
(E) Gateshead	126,629	-1.6	-18.3			
Felling	26,333	3.5	-14.2			
Hebburn	24,150	-0.1	-12.2			
Jarrow	36,734	-2.7	-24.8			
South Shields	118,560	-4.5	-14.8			
Boldon	15,846	6.7	-8.6			
Sunderland	182,231	2.0	-10.7			
	530,483	-0.5	-14.5	36.0	27.4	6,321
(F) Darlington	66,847	7.8	7.5			
Darlington RDC	8,988	2.1	8.0			
Stockton	64,126	5.6	-1.5			
Stockton RDC	8,010	-2.4	1.3			
Billingham	9,389	105.4	4.9			
West Hartlepool	69,577	-0.2	-7.5			
Hartlepool	21,085	-2.1	-24.7			
	248,022	7.3	-1.5	16.6	11.9	327
(G) Tow Law	4,071	-12.6	-9.0			
Barnard Castle	4,738	-18.0	22.5			
Barnard Castle RDC	22,214	-13.6	-1.5			
Weardale RDC	11,612	-7.8	2.0			
	42,635	-12.4	1.3	11.7	9.4	-177
<b>COUNTY DURHAM</b>	<b>1,479,033</b>	<b>0.5</b>	<b>-7.3</b>	<b>29.5</b>	<b>20.3</b>	<b>8,721</b>

It was for this reason, as well as to meet projected increases in the number of families, that local authorities in County Durham were officially set a target of 48,000 council houses to be built under the Addison scheme.<sup>14</sup> Even at the time of the 1931 Census, councils and private builders together had added only 37,000 houses over the decade - about 9,000 less than the number of new families created.<sup>15</sup> This led to an increase of 25% in the number of families which were obliged to share accommodation, but the fortuitous effect of the falling birth rate on family size (which in County Durham fell from an average of 4.61 in 1921 to 4.04 in 1931) was to bring about a great improvement in the general level of overcrowding (from 29.5% to 20.3%). In some districts, like Brandon, Crook and Shildon, the combination of a fairly modest Addison Act council estate, a larger than average drop in family size and a high rate of emigration, served to cut overcrowding by more than half between 1921 and 1931. In other districts, however, like the Tyne and Wear towns (group E in Table 3-4), which had a considerably higher rate of both local authority and private building, demographic movements were less obliging and the improvement in overcrowding was less spectacular.

Although there is no equivalent information about family size and overcrowding in the 1930s,<sup>16</sup> it is possible to reconstruct from the 1931 Census and the national registration figures collected in 1939 a reasonable indication of population movement over most of the decade. The picture is one of overall population decline, particularly heavy in

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14. Ministry of Health, Housing, 10 May 1920, p 293.

15. See Table 3-4, where this shortfall of houses is analysed by groups of districts.

16. The exhaustive overcrowding survey of 1936 was conducted on a basis entirely different from the Census 'more than two persons to a room' standard.



ILLUSTRATION 3-1 The Oval, Shildon  
(above)

This pleasant Addison Act estate of 126 houses in Shildon played an important part in relief of the district's housing shortages in the 1920s. Some of these buildings retain their coalhouses and original window frames.

ILLUSTRATION 3-3 Southland Gardens, Shildon  
(right)



ILLUSTRATION 3-2 The Oval, Shildon



the Tyne and Wear area. There was also migration from most parts of the coalfield, with only the Easington and Seaham area (group C) managing to maintain its 1931 population level. Given that the level of both local authority and private housebuilding was much higher in the 1930s in County Durham than in the 1920s (and even allowing for the greater number of demolitions after 1930), it is likely that overcrowding was further reduced by a substantial margin. If this was the case, then much of the improvement was again due to a combination of local government activity and wider population movements.

In view of the demographic pattern in County Durham between the wars - slow population growth followed by absolute decline - there was some sense in the implementation of a national policy which concentrated first on additional housing and then in the 1930s on slum replacement. There was a different picture in the rest of England and Wales, however, with population increases of about  $5\frac{1}{2}\%$  (1921-31) and  $1\%$  (1931-39): as we have seen in Chapter 1, the reasoning used to justify a move from an 'additional' to a 'replacement' housing programme on a national basis was that private enterprise was capable in the 1930s of meeting the entire need for 'additional' housing. It is arguable whether such reasoning could be held to apply in County Durham, where private builders were on the whole much less active than in the rest of the country, but the falling demand for 'additional' housing due to emigration and the urgent need to relieve unhealthy and overcrowded conditions in Durham were appropriate circumstances in which to place greater emphasis on a 'sanitary' policy.

A few of the older urban authorities in County Durham had actually embarked on a slum replacement policy in the 1920s, making use of the limited subsidy available under the 1923 Act. Between 1923 and 1928 the

Ministry of Health approved schemes in Hartlepool, Durham City, Gateshead, Stockton and Sunderland, involving the redevelopment of about 600 unhealthy town-centre buildings.<sup>17</sup> But the scale of demolitions after the 1930 Act was much greater - over 10,000 buildings were razed in the urban and rural districts and probably a similar number in the county boroughs.<sup>18</sup> This had the obvious effect of reducing the net addition to total housing stock made by local authorities, at the same time increasing the concentration of council property in the area. But the movement towards a policy of clearance and rehousing highlighted another feature, which is worth considering here for its significance in assessing the achievement of local authorities between the wars. This was the question of where new housing should be built.

In the 1920s, when by far the greater part of council building was to provide 'additional' houses, it rested on each local authority to decide (subject to the Ministry of Health's approval) to what extent overcrowding, the demand for new houses and the activity of private builders in the district required the council to take action. The position was rather different for most of the 1930s, when local authorities had a statutory obligation to root out the slums in their area and to make provision for the families displaced. At a time when the rate of natural increase of population in many parts of the county was slowing down and often being overtaken by a rising level of emigration, it was arguable whether replacement housing should always be provided in the same district - or whether instead it should be built in districts of equal or greater need, where decline and depression were less severe. The part of County Durham

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17. Ministry of Health, Annual Reports, 1923-24 to 1927-28. See also H Barnes, The Slum: Its Story and Solution (London, 1931) pp 384-7.

18. Durham County Council, op cit, p 95.

about which these questions were most often asked was the south west, with its decaying pit villages - or 'places without a future' as The Times termed them.<sup>19</sup> The concern of officialdom was mainly that any encouragement for people to live in these places would '... offer an undoubted attraction to that small section of the population which has no desire for work'<sup>20</sup> and that '... even if the more enterprising part of the population migrates in search of work, the vacant houses are soon re-occupied by persons whose morale is less creditable.'<sup>21</sup> Accordingly, the Commissioner for the Special Areas set up a limited company, the South West Durham Improvement Association, whose aim was '... towards a continued reduction of housing accommodation in these villages,'<sup>22</sup> which should be '... evacuated over not too long a period, then completely demolished, and the land returned to an agricultural condition.'<sup>23</sup>

This concern in the later 1930s to channel new building towards parts of the county where economic prospects were more promising resulted in pressure being brought to bear on some local authorities by the Ministry of Health, the South West Durham Improvement Association and the North Eastern Housing Association to refrain from rehousing displaced families in the more depressed villages of their district.<sup>24</sup> It also led to the

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19. This phrase was the title of three influential Times reports, 20-22 March 1934.
  20. Ministry of Labour, Reports of Investigations into the Industrial Conditions in Certain Depressed Areas, 1933, PP 1933-34 (Cmd 4728) vol xiii, p 313.
  21. Letter to Ministry of Health from Commissioner for the Special Areas, dated 6 July 1938, in PRO: HIG 52/807.
  22. Report of the South West Durham Improvement Association, dated 13 April 1938, ibid.
  23. Covering letter to Ministry of Health from Lord Barnard (Chairman of the Association), same date, ibid.
  24. For example, Lanchester RDC was persuaded to build houses in Lanchester itself, rather than in Cornsay and Quebec where the demolitions had taken place (letter to Ministry of Health from Commissioner for the Special Areas, dated 28 October 1937, in PRO: HIG 52/826) and Spennymoor UDC was persuaded to build in Spennymoor itself instead of in Byers Green (Ministry of Health minute dated 1 November 1938, in PRO: HIG 52/807).

question of whether certain whole districts should be denied new housing in favour of more viable local authority areas elsewhere. Tow Law was one place that came in for this treatment: the Commissioner for the Special Areas complained that if '... the rehousing programme is carried out at Tow Law, either complete nonsense is made of any planning, or else a good deal of public money is wasted.'<sup>25</sup> In fact, the North Eastern Housing Association eventually built some slum replacement houses there on behalf of the council, but in other instances the arguments for economic planning prevailed: when war broke out the housing association was about to build houses in Stanley and in the rural district of Chester-le-Street on behalf of several councils in the south west of the county where the slum clearance had actually taken place.<sup>26</sup> This was a good demonstration of how reliance on a wholly 'sanitary' policy could come unstuck, especially if conceived in narrow terms of local authority areas: in order to have the flexibility to concentrate council housebuilding in the districts where it was most required, there needed to be a continuing element in national policy for subsidising 'additional' housing. The problem of the more depressed areas also showed up the case for economic planning on a county, or wider regional basis. Although this was rarely achieved in the inter-war period, it was a feature of local government after the Second World War; and it is interesting to note that the Durham County Council was (with its designation of so-called 'Category D' villages) later to carry out the policy of the South West Durham Improvement Association by starving the more depressed districts of new housing and other resources.

Despite the possibility that the distribution of council housing in

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25. Letter to Ministry of Health dated 29 October 1937, in PRO: HLG 52/826.

26. See correspondence between Ministry of Health and North Eastern Housing Association for 1939, ibid.

the 1930s did not correspond ideally with the varying levels of local need, it is fair to conclude that the activity of local authorities over the inter-war period played a major part in bringing about a remarkable improvement in the quantity and quality of the county's housing stock. If we consider the four broad areas examined in Section A of the previous chapter, it is clear that the regions in which conditions had been worst - South Tyneside, Sunderland and the coalfield - were those where the improvement was most emphatic. The greater part of this overall improvement was due, particularly in the coalfield, to a high level of activity by local authorities. Conditions in Darlington, North Teesside and the Hartlepoons had been relatively good to begin with, but there had again been a marked improvement. In this case the greater credit belonged to private enterprise, whose building activity - at least by the standards of County Durham - overshadowed that of the local authority sector. In the agricultural districts of the south and west the improvements were less pronounced: housebuilding was again dominated by the private sector but - except for overspill development in the rural districts of Stockton and Darlington - was at a very low level.

In assessing the achievement of local authorities, we have seen that part of the overall improvement in the housing conditions of County Durham was due to demographic factors and part, of course, to the activity of private builders. By national standards, however, the contribution made by private enterprise was generally low and in some districts negligible. It is beyond the scope of this study to attempt to determine exactly why private enterprise was so inactive over the county as a whole or to speculate on the effect of such factors as the economic depression affecting many districts, the difficulty of building new houses to let at a profitable rent, and the apparently poor market for building for sale to owner-occupiers. It would appear, though, that the intervention of

local authorities in the housing market was not responsible for the comparatively low level of activity in the private sector, which was evident even in the 1920s when the rate of council housebuilding was no higher in County Durham than in the rest of England and Wales; nor when the rate of council building increased in Durham in the 1930s did it prevent there taking place a relative boom in the private sector. The achievement of local authorities in many districts of County Durham in the inter-war period appears very much, therefore, to have been in making good a substantial part of the deficiency both in the quality of working-class housing, for which private enterprise had previously been responsible, and in the quantity, which even between the wars the private sector was slow to correct.

## B. Constraints

Having looked at the level of housebuilding in various parts of the county between the wars, we now turn to some of the political and administrative influences that acted upon local authority departments, impelling them either to work faster or slow down. The first of the influences considered here is the activity of pressure groups, particularly noticeable in the early part of the period. The most common form of pressure was a written exhortation to the council to build as many houses as possible under the Government-assisted scheme and to do so as quickly as possible; the most frequent correspondent was the local Trades and Labour Council.<sup>27</sup> Occasionally, a deputation from the local organisation would be received in the council chamber to express the same views - stressing the '... urgency of the need for the provision of houses'<sup>28</sup> and begging '... the Council to put in force all the powers they possess to alleviate the position.'<sup>29</sup> This type of pressure on the council grew less common as the first flush of 'homes for heroes' enthusiasm faded and the number of Labour councillors increased, but the practice never disappeared entirely. In Darlington, for example, the Trades and Labour Council and a variety of engineering unions continued to send letters of exhortation which were sometimes debated in the Housing Committee.<sup>30</sup> In mining districts it was more common for the council to be approached by the local union lodge:<sup>31</sup> this was something which again continued beyond the early inter-war years and covered not only the level of local authority

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27. See, for example, Gateshead CB Housing Committee Minutes, 17 June 1919, GLS.

28. Darlington CB Housing Committee Minutes, 30 June 1919, DCRO: CB/Da.

29. South Shields CB Council Minutes, 3 September 1919, STLS.

30. Darlington CB Housing Committee Minutes, 22 December 1921, 21 September 1925 and 21 June 1932, DCRO: CB/Da.

31. See, for example, Lanchester RD Council Minutes, 16 January 1919, DCRO: RD/La.

building but also, as we shall occasionally see in the following chapters, general questions of housing administration. One feature of local interest in housing that did not survive the early stages of the inter-war period was the large public meeting: in Gateshead, for example, there were apparently no successors to a meeting in the Co-Op Hall organised by the Trades and Labour Council<sup>32</sup> and another in the Town Hall addressed by Seebohm Rowntree.<sup>33</sup>

A rather different form of pressure experienced by certain councils in the early years of the period was the embarrassment caused by the presence of squatters. This was a more direct pressure on councils than expressions of opinion made in letters and meetings, or by deputations, for the activities of squatters were much more difficult to ignore. Two large groups established themselves in County Durham shortly after the First World War, at Elizabethville (near Birtley, in the Chester-le-Street Rural District) and North Hylton (in the Sunderland Rural District). The Elizabethville buildings, which had been vacated after the war by a 'colony' of Belgian munitions workers, are described in Section B of the following chapter. As the families of squatters moved in, the council was obliged, for sanitary reasons, to administer the redundant Government site. The wooden huts were quite unsuitable for their new purpose<sup>34</sup> but the squatters could not be moved. Eventually the council was forced to replace the huts with a new housing estate, but the last residents could not be removed and the site cleared until the beginning of 1939.<sup>35</sup> The occupation of disused aerodrome buildings at North Hylton in 1921 by 38 families from the Washington and Usworth area caused similar problems.

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32. Evening Chronicle, 3 June 1919.

33. North Mail, 8 April 1919.

34. Annual Report of the County Medical Officer of Health, 1923, DCRO.

35. Chester-le-Street RDC, Architect's Report, 10 January 1939, CDC.

The action of the squatters was prompted not by homelessness but had an unmistakeable flavour of protest: the families had moved out from crowded accommodation in the mining villages and christened their new homes 'Liberty Villas'. Their justification was, in the words of their spokesman, that 'ninety per cent of us fought for our King and country and we were told by the politicians that they were going to make the country fit for heroes to live in .... they have done nothing yet.'<sup>36</sup> It is impossible to tell whether this stricture caused the council to press on with their Addison Act houses more quickly, but one immediate result was the takeover and conversion of the buildings by the council and the adoption of the squatters as rent-paying tenants.<sup>37</sup>

Throughout the period it is clear that a major local influence on housebuilding policy was the political composition of the council itself, for this could have a significant effect on its interpretation of responsibilities for housing. It was, of course, almost impossible for a local authority to escape completely from involvement in housebuilding: the Acts of 1919, 1930 and 1935 imposed clear obligations to prepare schemes for additional and replacement housing, whatever the council's own feelings were. If only for this reason, it is misleading to assume that Labour councillors alone were personally committed to direct local government involvement in housebuilding. In the county boroughs of Darlington, West Hartlepool, Sunderland and South Shields, which for much of the period were not under Labour control, the level of council building was fairly high, and certainly in keeping with local needs. Yet when South Shields fell to Labour control and Gateshead was regained by the socialists in the later 1930s, the councils' direct involvement in

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36. Sunderland RD Council Minutes, 7 April 1921, T&WCRO: SDR, and Sunderland Echo, 8 April 1921.

37. Sunderland RD Council Minutes, 14 June and 4 October 1921, T&WCRO: SDR.

housebuilding was actually reduced, for the task of building and running new estates was largely handed over to the independent North Eastern Housing Association.<sup>38</sup>

On the whole, however, it is generally true that councils under Labour control displayed greater enthusiasm for intervention in local housing provision. Sometimes this was seen in an acceleration of council housebuilding once Labour had obtained a majority: this was the case in the Blaydon Urban District after 1925<sup>39</sup> and in Jarrow after 1935,<sup>40</sup> when the socialists won control for the first time. In some of the earlier Labour strongholds the rate of council housebuilding was fairly high throughout the period - for example, in Felling (where by 1935 the council was composed of 19 Labour men, a communist and a 'progressive')<sup>41</sup> and in Stanley (where by 1934 every councillor was a socialist).<sup>42</sup> To analyse the movements of political control in the local authorities of the county between the wars would, like the pre-1914 situation mentioned in the previous chapter, require a lengthy study in itself; but fortunately the outline is fairly clear. There was overall a remorseless - though occasionally interrupted - shift towards Labour control, so that in 1936, as a ratepayers' paper reported gloomily, '28 out of 40 Councils in County Durham [were] in the hands of the Labour Party.'<sup>43</sup> The Labour councils were chiefly in the Tyneside area and the coalfield, where the level of local authority housebuilding was highest;

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38. The Association is discussed in the following section of this chapter.

39. D C Galleymore, The Effects of Economic and Social Development on Local Government in an Urban District of North East England (Blaydon) (unpublished Durham University MA thesis, 1970) p 29.

40. E Wilkinson, The Town that was Murdered: The Life-Story of Jarrow (London, 1939) p 247.

41. Northern Echo, 1 October 1935.

42. North Mail, 31 January 1934.

43. Gateshead and District Municipal News, June 1936.

the non-Labour councils were mainly in the towns and agricultural districts in the south of the county, where the level of activity (as well as the level of housing shortage) was considerably lower.

The final influence on the level of building to be considered here is that of the Ministry of Health, which was responsible ultimately for deciding whether the proposals for a council scheme should proceed or not. Except in the early stages of the Addison scheme, when it sometimes chivvied councils which it felt were not doing enough, the Ministry's influence upon the level of building was largely either passive or negative: it did not initiate, but either rubber-stamped proposals already drawn up by a local authority or turned them down. This was one reason for its general unpopularity with councils in County Durham. Another reason was the Ministry's delay in dealing with proposals during the Addison scheme. The Ministry of Health had, of course, grown out of the much-maligned Local Government Board, criticised as far back as 1903 for 'long, vexatious and unjustifiable delays, red tape and inquiries in excess',<sup>44</sup> and attacked in Parliament by the Conservative spokesman on housing, in the style of Dickens, as '... a veritable circumlocution office.'<sup>45</sup> Similar charges were made by local authorities about the Ministry of Health in its early days. The Darlington councillors, for example, were incensed by '... the constant issue of new instructions from the Ministry of Health [and] its frequent refusal to approve of the acceptance of tenders for the erection of houses ... difficulties and uncertainties [which] have up to the present been accentuated rather than removed.'<sup>46</sup> The Willington council went so far

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44. W Thompson, The Housing Handbook (London, 1903) p 12. This view is borne out by the experience of the councils which launched the first schemes in County Durham (see Section C of the previous chapter).

45. PD, 5th series, vol 35, col 1419, 15 March 1912.

46. Darlington CB, Housing Committee Report, 9 May 1921, DCRO: CB/Da.

as to condemn '... the action of the Ministry in their untruthful statements and unmanly and unbusiness-like attitudes.'<sup>47</sup> It is certainly true that the early administration of the Addison scheme was fraught with indecision and delays, but this was not surprising given the disrupted condition of the building industry, the shortage of materials and the sheer size of the State's first housing programme. For most of the period, in fact, the Ministry processed the requests and applications of local authorities in County Durham with speed and efficiency: it was the nature of the Ministry's response that was more likely to irritate the council.

The first confrontations came when the Addison scheme was being wound up and the Ministry was unable to sanction further loans. The cessation of the scheme was not, of course, the Ministry's fault, but it had to bear the brunt of complaints that the number of houses sanctioned before the axe fell was 'totally inadequate': in this example, Houghton RDC, despite its repeated requests for more houses and the presence of the local MP in its deputation to the Ministry, could point out that the 152 houses actually approved for the district represented only 14% of the accepted survey requirement and were exceeded tenfold by the number of tenancy applications.<sup>48</sup> More galling for councils was the fact that, even when Government assistance for local authority schemes had been revived by the Chamberlain and Wheatley Acts, the Ministry of Health appeared to discourage a rapid rate of building by refusing to grant councils sanction to raise loans for more than a few dozen houses at a time. Taking again the example of Houghton RDC, it can be seen that, in response to three separate applications in 1924 and 1925 for 125 houses and two batches of 200, the Ministry would approve

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47. Willington UD Council Minutes, 12 July 1921, DCRO: UD/CW.

48. Letter from council to Ministry, dated 18 July 1922, in PRO: HIG 48/123.

only 60 and two batches of 50.<sup>49</sup> This treatment was meted out even to the more substantial boroughs: Darlington also had an application for 100 houses cut down to 50 '... in order to avoid undue strain on building labour.'<sup>50</sup> Although this cautious approach might have been sensible during the Addison scheme, it was hardly necessary in the mid-1920s when the market in the building industry for both labour and materials was much more settled.

These altercations with the Ministry of Health were obviously not peculiar to local authorities in County Durham. A major cause of disagreement, however, and one that was of particular local importance, was the Coal Dispute of 1926 and its effect on local government finance. The effects in mining districts which concerned the Ministry most were the enormous increase in rent arrears, which made existing schemes vastly uneconomic, the rise in local rate levels and the threat to the long-term industrial prospects of the area. The result was that the Ministry was liable to reject out of hand any request for further housing provision made by a local authority seriously affected by the dispute or its aftermath. This was a complete reversal of the philosophy reigning at the outset of the Addison scheme, when the main consideration was the housing needs of a district rather than its resources or prospects. By the later 1920s the Ministry cast its priorities more in terms of sound local government finance than of the need to tackle housing deficiencies.

The first refusals of the Ministry to sanction new houses in districts affected by the Coal Dispute were couched in somewhat general terms. Washington UDC was turned down '... in view of the financial position of

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49. Letters from Ministry to council, dated 15 May 1924, 28 January and 8 September 1925, *ibid.*

50. Darlington CB Housing Committee Minutes, 12 April 1927, DCRO: CB/Da.

the area,<sup>51</sup> and Sedgefield RDC '... in view of the uncertainty of the present industrial situation.'<sup>52</sup> Gradually, however, the thinking of the Ministry officials responsible for schemes in County Durham was crystallising: '... the ratepayers are badly hit on account of the fact that large arrears of rent are still outstanding owing to the coal dispute ... if more houses are built and conditions do not improve there is a likelihood of still further arrears of rent being outstanding.'<sup>53</sup> It thus became quite common in the late 1920s for a council's application to be turned down on the grounds that arrears in the district were too high: even as late as 1932 this reason was given to a deputation from Easington RDC for the Ministry's decision not to allow more than a few aged persons' bungalows to be built.<sup>54</sup>

Another consideration about which the Ministry grew more specific was the industrial prospects of the mining district in question. Not only was there concern that industrial decay and unemployment would lead to greater pressure on local rates, but there was also the possibility that the closure of pits would be followed by migration and a falling demand for council houses.<sup>55</sup> Occasionally this prompted the Ministry to seek advice from the Mines Department - on such matters as the life expectancy of a particular pit, depression in the export trade and the current use of short-time working to prevent redundancies - before deciding whether or not to allow a housing scheme.<sup>56</sup> On at least one occasion the Ministry wrote in confidence to a coal company about a proposed housing scheme by the council, asking whether industrial

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51. Washington UDC Housing Committee Minutes, 31 August 1926, T&WCRO: SDR.

52. Sedgefield RD Council Minutes, 14 October 1926, DCRO: RD/Se.

53. Minute dated 26 February 1927, in PRO: HIG 48/792.

54. Easington RDC Housing Committee Minutes, 28 July 1932, DCRO: RD/Ea.

55. Minute dated 24 March 1927, in PRO: HIG 48/792.

56. Minute dated 6 May 1927, ibid.

prospects would justify the erection of further houses.<sup>57</sup> The manager of the company in question up-dated his advice in the following year, warning the Ministry about proposals by the council to build houses in villages where his pits were not so profitable, '... the reason being of course that each Labour [councillor] in his own area must "deliver the goods"... they must all have something for their constituents.'<sup>58</sup> The Ministry duly dealt with the council's application in almost the exact way recommended by the coal company.<sup>59</sup>

It was also at the time of the Coal Dispute that the Ministry developed another procedure which served to reduce the number of houses built by local authorities in County Durham. This was to allow a council to raise loans for a limited number of houses, but to stipulate that all or part of the amount had to be borrowed not from the Public Works Loans Board - the normal source of capital for most local authorities - but must be raised in the open market.<sup>60</sup> The purpose of this procedure was to demonstrate to local authorities in County Durham that if their district rates were high, commercial lenders would be suspicious of the council's administration and its financial security. It may have had that effect: it certainly meant that fewer houses were built than if the conventional channel to the Public Works Loans Board had been open. It took Willington UDC, which had been allowed to proceed with a small scheme if it could raise half the capital privately, nearly a year to borrow the £4,000 required.<sup>61</sup>

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57. Confidential correspondence between Ministry and Lambton, Hetton and Joicey Collieries (about a scheme proposed by Houghton-le-Spring RDC), dated 3 January and 11 January 1927, in PRO: HLG 48/123.

58. Letter dated 7 September 1928, ibid.

59. Sanction to raise loan, dated 27 September 1928, ibid.

60. See, for example, Washington UDC Housing Committee Minutes, 31 August 1927, T&WCRO: WGU, and Sedgfield RD Council Minutes, 5 August 1927, DCRO: RD/S

61. Willington UD Council Minutes, 10 January and 11 December 1928, DCRO: UD/CW.

The position eased in the 1930s and the level of council housebuilding - even in some of the poorest coalfield districts - began to climb again. It is impossible, however, to read the Ministry's papers on many local authorities in County Durham after 1926 without gaining an impression that these councils were held in suspicion by civil servants - suspicion of bad management and spendthrift policies: this may help to explain why, in the 1930s, the Government rejected the idea of giving extra financial assistance for housing schemes to these local authorities, but set up an independent body (the North Eastern Housing Association, which is discussed in the following section) to act in their place. Equally, many sets of local authority records convey an impression that the councillors had a low opinion of the Ministry staff- whom they appeared to suspect of arrogance and obstructiveness. Both sides could be wrong. A good example involves Chester-le-Street UDC, the general administration of which had become quite chaotic by the mid-1920s. By 1927 the Ministry had refused several times to allow any further housing schemes, because it believed the council incapable of running them properly. When, however, the Clerk submitted details of his housing accounts, they were inspected by Raymond Unwin - the expert behind the Tudor Walters report of 1918 and one of the most dedicated reformers of working-class housing standards - who was a senior member of staff at the Ministry. His verdict surprised everyone: 'it is unfortunate that financial reasons have brought this particular scheme to an end as the costs are very favourable both for labour and materials and suggest good and careful handling of the scheme.'<sup>62</sup> For most of the period, however, the housing activities of local authorities in County Durham were viewed by the Ministry in a less generous way, with the result that the more energetic councils were constrained to build fewer houses than they felt committed to do.

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62. Correspondence dated 6 April, 24 May, 10 June and 13 June 1927, in PRO: HLG 49/152.

### C. Alternatives

Before examining in detail the problems which local authorities in County Durham encountered between the wars in their role as builders and landlords, it is appropriate to consider here the forms of action which some councils took as an alternative to assuming the full responsibility of housebuilding and estate management themselves. In some cases, as we shall see, the alternatives were deployed by councils with the clear intention of relieving pressure on their own resources; in others the action was taken as a supplement to direct local government involvement, or simply to make the most effective use locally of policies determined by central government.

The first involvement which councils experienced in contributing to building projects other than their own was during the Addison scheme, when local authorities were required to certify whether privately built houses met the conditions for a cash subsidy from the Exchequer. This involvement was, of course, very limited, for the level of private housebuilding in the early post-war years was extremely low. More significant was the administration by local authorities of the subsidy to private builders established by the Chamberlain Act in 1923. Councils were again involved in deciding whether a privately built house satisfied the criteria for an Exchequer subsidy, but now the level of building activity was many times higher than under the Addison scheme. A further consideration was whether the council should exercise the option provided in the 1923 Act to supplement the Exchequer subsidy with a contribution from local rates. This was an option which allowed a local authority to boost its passive role of inspecting and certifying houses for subsidy into a more active one of stimulating private enterprise in the district.

From the records available, it can be determined that at least ten

local authorities in County Durham made it their policy to encourage private builders with a bonus from the rates.<sup>63</sup> In most cases the Exchequer subsidy of £75 (the capitalised value of annual payments of £6 over 20 years) was augmented by a contribution from the rates of £25, although Stockton and Leadgate offered less than that and Easington more.<sup>64</sup> In West Hartlepool the rate contribution was administered with a view to improved town planning: the amount paid on top of the Exchequer grant of £75 varied with the density of the development, so that the full bonus of £25 was only given if the overall density was less than 20 houses per acre.<sup>65</sup> Whatever the variations in cash and conditions imposed by councils, the logic behind adding to the ratepayers' burden was basically the same. As the Easington Clerk reported to his councillors, '... it is infinitely to the advantage of the Ratepayers to encourage Private Enterprise to build their own houses': if private builders were not tempted into action, the cost to ratepayers of the council erecting an equivalent number of houses would be much greater.<sup>66</sup> The local authorities which adopted this practice were, therefore, gambling limited amounts in an attempt to avoid larger debts later on. In the Easington district the amount staked was in fact quite large - about £56,000 in rate-borne contributions by April 1927 - but the policy was rewarded by a level of private building much higher than in most coalfield districts.<sup>67</sup>

Some councils went further in encouraging private builders than

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63. These local authorities were the boroughs of Jarrow, Sunderland, West Hartlepool and Stockton; the urban districts of Consett, Leadgate, Stanley and Washington; and the rural districts of Easington and Sedgfield.
64. Stockton paid £15 extra per house (Housing Committee Minutes, 16 October 1923, CCRO); Leadgate £10 (Council Minutes, 13 November 1923, DDC); and Easington £37 (Housing Committee Minutes, 20 September 1923, DCRO: RD/Ea).
65. West Hartlepool CB Housing Committee Minutes, 5 February 1924, HBC.
66. Easington RDC Housing Committee Minutes, 26 July 1923, DCRO: RD/Ea.
67. Ibid, 26 April 1927.

simply extending cash bonuses. Consett UDC had a particularly good working relationship with the Consett Iron Company and persuaded the Ministry of Health to allow Exchequer subsidies to be paid in respect of houses which had been built too soon to satisfy all the conditions of the 1923 Act.<sup>68</sup> This company, whose operations spanned several local authority areas, had evolved an unusually enlightened view of housing as a factor in industrial relations. By 1925 the company had built nearly 1,200 houses,<sup>69</sup> mainly in the Lanchester Rural District and Leadgate,<sup>70</sup> and had plans for 1,800 more, if subsidies were available: as they told the Ministry of Health, '... without being egotistical, we have shown very great enterprise in the way of Housing Schemes.'<sup>71</sup> There was a similar degree of co-operation between the Easington council and some of the coal companies in the district. In the case of larger developments the local authority's assistance took the form of work on water mains and sewers,<sup>72</sup> but the council also made its own house plans available to any private builder for a nominal sum.<sup>73</sup>

An interesting development which grew in the private sector out of enhanced Chamberlain Act subsidies was the building of houses for sale to their workers by certain collieries, in particular the South Hetton Coal Company. This company began a scheme in 1923 to build houses with the Chamberlain subsidy - made up to £112 by the council - and to sell them to employees over 14 years by deductions from pay of the normal rent

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68. Letter from Consett Iron Company to Ministry, dated 27 July 1923, in PRO: HLG 48/49.
69. A S Wilson, The Consett Iron Company Limited: A Case Study in Victorian Business History (unpublished Durham University M Phil thesis, 1973) p 333.
70. Annual Report of the County Medical Officer of Health, 1923, DCRO.
71. Letter dated 8 January 1925, in PRO: HLG 48/49.
72. Easington RDC Housing Committee Minutes, 22 March 1926, DCRO: RD/Ea.
73. Ibid, 17 April 1923.

allowance plus the balance up to 7/- per week.<sup>74</sup> Even with the large subsidy, these repayments did not cover the company's costs, but the management evidently saw this system as a better proposition than building estates of traditional 'free houses'. The Horden Coal Company tried several times to launch a similar scheme at Shotton, but were foiled, surprisingly, by the resistance of the miners' lodge, on the grounds that this would produce '... ownership of property by the men, [who] might lose their liberty and might be victimised by an unscrupulous management.'<sup>75</sup> The Easington Clerk dismissed this as 'humbug' and the council tried to promote the scheme by offering its own site at Shotton to the company.<sup>76</sup>

The possibility of encouraging private builders to ease the council's burden faded in the later 1920s as the Chamberlain subsidy was phased out. There was, of course, a revival of unassisted private building in the 1930s, which served to relieve the housing shortage generally, but this could not reduce the obligations imposed on local authorities by the Acts of 1930 and 1935. However, the opportunity to divest themselves of rehousing responsibilities was available to local authorities in County Durham from 1936, in the shape of the North Eastern Housing Association. This body was founded as a limited company through the Commissioner for the Special Areas, who was '... guided by the fact that, while the need for better housing in the North Eastern Area is exceptionally acute, the payment of the contribution out of the rates in respect of the new houses will involve a number of Local Authorities in this area in

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74. *Ibid*, 4 October 1923. See also A L Bowley and M H Hogg, Has Poverty Diminished? (London, 1925) p 173; W A Moyes, Mostly Mining: A Study of Easington Rural District since Earliest Times (Newcastle, 1969) p 139; and W R Garside, The Durham Miners, 1919-1960 (London, 1971) p 290.

75. Easington RDC Housing Committee Minutes, 4 October 1923, DCRO: RD/Ea.

76. Ibid, 22 January 1924.

grave financial difficulties.<sup>77</sup> The North Eastern Housing Association was designed to spare local authorities the expense of building houses under the 1930 and 1935 Acts: after the council had designated and dealt with its unhealthy and overcrowded areas, it could call on the NEHA to build and maintain the replacement housing. The Association could do this economically because, in addition to receiving the usual Exchequer subsidies for the houses it built, it was given a direct grant by central government equivalent to the standard contributions that the local authority would have been required to make from the rates.<sup>78</sup> Pressure on the local ratepayers - and thus on the council itself - was reduced at the expense of the taxpayer at large. The main disadvantage, from the council's point of view, was that it lost to an independent organisation its complete local control over building and estate management policies in the public housing sector.

The Association was given a mixed reception by local authorities in County Durham. Sixteen councils refused to co-operate with it at all, and the 19 that did were not always willing parties.<sup>79</sup> The establishment of the NEHA was described by the Chairman of the Stanley

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77. Circular letter to local authorities, dated 23 December 1935, quoted in Whickham UDC, Housing Committee Report, 14 January 1936, GLS. This point had been raised in the report on depressed areas in 1933 (op cit) and was also made in the Ministry of Health's Annual Report for 1935-36.
78. An odd administrative feature of this arrangement was that although the subsidy in lieu of rates was paid out of central government funds and handed over to the NEHA by the Commissioner for the Special Areas, the statutory Exchequer contribution was actually channeled through the accounts of the relevant local authority, which acted merely as a post office. (Ministry of Health, Annual Report, 1935-36.)
79. The sixteen local authorities which would not co-operate with the NEHA were Felling, Jarrow, Whickham, Ryton, Blaydon, Stanley, Chester-le-Street, Washington, Boldon, Houghton, Hetton, Brandon and the rural districts of Chester-le-Street, Sunderland, Durham and Sedgfield. The nineteen which did prepare schemes in co-operation with the Association were Gateshead, Hebburn, South Shields, Sunderland, Consett, Durham, Seaham, Crook and Willington, Spennymoor, Shildon, Tow Law, Bishop Auckland, Barnard Castle, Hartlepool, West Hartlepool, and the rural districts of Lanchester, Easington, Weardale and Barnard Castle. (NEHA Report, dated 12 July 1938, and undated Ministry of Health memorandum, in PRO: HIG 52/826; see also Sunderland Echo, 29 March 1939.)

Housing Committee as '... a dastardly attempt to transfer housing control from local authorities to a private concern,'<sup>80</sup> while the Durham County Federation of Labour Parties saw it as a more sinister '... menace to democratic control'<sup>81</sup> and '... an effort of the National Government to maintain, strengthen and develop its kid glove policy of dictatorship over public authorities in the interest of private profit makers, the class from which it derives its main financial support.'<sup>82</sup> It was this sort of reaction that led to an official recommendation to its members by the Durham County Urban District Councils' Association '... that they should not approach the North Eastern Housing Association Ltd. in the furtherance of their building activities.'<sup>83</sup> The resentment arose not from the Government's aim to spare the local ratepayer, but the way in which it was carried out: while the NEHA was not in itself 'undesirable', even some of the councils which co-operated with the Association thought that it would have been 'preferable' for the subsidy in lieu of rates to be paid direct to local authorities for them to do the job.<sup>84</sup> The National Government's action was not the calculated menace that many believed, but it followed the trend, which was discernible in the unemployment assistance policy and the first attempts at regional policy in the 1930s, of attempting to ease contentious matters of social policy out of the arena of national and local politics.<sup>85</sup>

As we have seen above, however, the Association became something of

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80. North Mail, 30 January 1936.

81. Northern Echo, 17 May 1936.

82. Sunderland Echo, 5 May 1936.

83. Felling UD Council Minutes, 5 May 1936, GLS.

84. West Hartlepool CB Housing Committee Minutes, 3 February 1936, HBC.

85. See A E Booth, 'An Administrative Experiment in Unemployment Policy in the Thirties', in Public Administration, vol 56, 1978, pp 139-57.

a political football in many of the local authorities in County Durham. In South Shields, for example, the issue was kicked around the Housing Committee and the full council, and back and forward between the two, for a whole year.<sup>86</sup> In Hetton the option to use the NEHA was eventually ruled out by a single vote,<sup>87</sup> even though the local ratepayers' association had tried to persuade the District Auditor to direct the councillors otherwise;<sup>88</sup> while the Seaham council held out until March 1939, when it finally agreed to approach the NEHA because of '... the poverty stricken circumstances under which people find themselves.'<sup>89</sup>

Other local authorities, no doubt just as mindful of the potential relief to ratepayers, co-operated with the Association more willingly. Sunderland set the NEHA to work at once on schemes already prepared by the Health Committee,<sup>90</sup> while Gateshead and Easington, although under Labour control, quickly saw the possibilities of working within the system: as well as reaping the gratitude of ratepayers, the council could usually maintain some control over the building and running of the NEHA estates. In Gateshead, for example, the first NEHA scheme was carried out on site under the council's supervision, the bills being passed on to the Association.<sup>91</sup> When the NEHA finally took the estate over, it was persuaded by the council to administer the same scheme of furniture rental as operated on the municipal estates.<sup>92</sup> In the Easington district the Association agreed to build only on sites directed

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86. See numerous references in South Shields CB Council and Housing Committee Minutes, January 1936 to January 1937, STLS.

87. Northern Echo, 25 October 1937.

88. Evening Chronicle, 17 September 1937.

89. Sunderland Echo, 29 March 1939.

90. Sunderland CB Council Minutes, 8 April 1936, SLS.

91. Gateshead CB Housing Committee Minutes, 25 February 1936, GLS.

92. Ibid, 11 March 1937. The rental scheme is mentioned below, p 255.

by the council and always in liaison with the council's architect,<sup>93</sup> who actually supplied the plans to be used on one of the NEHA estates.<sup>94</sup> In Hartlepool the Association was even prevailed upon to ensure that its contractors' labourers were drawn as far as possible from the local Labour Exchange<sup>95</sup> - a policy which, as we shall see in the following chapter, was dear to the heart of many a council.

The chief beneficiaries of the NEHA's work were mainly the local authorities mentioned above. Of the 7,500 Association houses which had been completed, or were under contract or out to tender by July 1938, 28% were in Sunderland, 16% in Gateshead, 12% in Easington Rural District, 9% in South Shields and 8% in the Hartlepoons.<sup>96</sup> Among the other local authorities to benefit, despite the reluctance of the Association and the Ministry of Health to promote rehousing schemes in the more depressed districts (see Section A of this chapter), were Tow Law, Bishop Auckland and both the urban and rural districts of Barnard Castle.<sup>97</sup> By the end of 1939 the NEHA had completed about 7,600 houses,<sup>98</sup> although some of these were in the Northumberland borough of Wallsend and in four local authority areas in Cumberland. The Association estimated that by building these houses instead of local government it had saved ratepayers over £ $\frac{1}{2}$  million.<sup>99</sup>

The third main option that a council could pursue in order to reduce

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93. Easington RDC Housing Committee Minutes, 2 April 1936, DCRO: RD/Ea.  
 94. Ibid, 30 April 1936.  
 95. Hartlepool MB Housing Committee Minutes, 9 February 1939, HBC.  
 96. NEHA Report, dated 12 July 1938, in PRO: HLG 52/826.  
 97. Ibid.  
 98. North Eastern Housing Association, The North Eastern Housing Association Ltd: 25 Years of Housing, 1935-1960 (Newcastle, 1960) p 24.  
 99. Ibid, pp 11-13.

its own direct involvement in housing matters was to sell the houses it had already built, thus ending its responsibilities as a landlord. To assess the value of the arguments for and against the policy of selling council houses would be a lengthy task and would not be justified here by the limited extent of the practice in County Durham between the wars. It is worth noting that the arguments used then were identical to those current today. Those in favour of the policy argue now, as then, that 'it fosters independence and facilitates mobility, and it does not breed bureaucracy';<sup>100</sup> its opponents claim that it is an unwarranted dissipation of public resources, which can never be justified if there is a waiting list for rented accommodation.<sup>101</sup> Examples of both arguments can be found in the inter-war period. On one hand there was the great belief of the West Hartlepool council, first expressed in 1923, in the desirability of owner-occupation<sup>102</sup> and the chance it gave the Borough Treasurer to simplify his book-keeping;<sup>103</sup> on the other hand, the South Shields council received petitions and letters about its decision to sell certain houses, '... drawing attention to the number of applicants for four-roomed houses on the waiting list,'<sup>104</sup> and the Ministry of Health actually turned down a plan for council house sales by Consett UDC '... as the need for the erection of houses for letting has not yet been met.'<sup>105</sup>

The chief exponents of the selling policy were the county boroughs of South Shields and West Hartlepool, the latter having disposed of about 340 houses, or 30% of its total stock, by 1939.<sup>106</sup> The practice seems to

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100. Times, 18 May 1976.

101. See, for example, New Society, 15 March 1979, p 616-7.

102. West Hartlepool CB Housing Committee Minutes, 29 October 1923, HBC.

103. Ibid, 20 September 1928.

104. South Shields CB Housing Committee Minutes, 8 March 1932, STLS.

105. Consett UD Housing Sub-Committee Minutes, 6 August 1931, DDC.

106. West Hartlepool CB Housing Committee Minutes, 23 March 1939, HBC.

have worked quite smoothly, although the South Shields council found the administrative advantages rather smaller than it had hoped: by 1930 the council had bought back a third of the 174 houses which it had previously sold, and was finding difficulty in disposing of them again.<sup>107</sup> Similar problems were experienced by Houghton UDC, one of the few mining districts to experiment with council house sales: the buyers were often unable to keep up with mortgage repayments or just wanted '... to be relieved of their liability' and move to rented accommodation elsewhere. The council was forced to repossess or repurchase many of the houses and to put them back on the rented market.<sup>108</sup>

A lesser form of local government activity, related to council house sales, for which the local authority itself provided loans to buyers, was lending to purchasers of small private houses in the district, or else acting as guarantor in respect of similar private loans. This function, which could contribute in some measure to the success of local private building, was assumed by several councils, although the overall level of activity was low and details cannot easily be obtained from the records available. Like the other options discussed above, it was an expedient which could mitigate to some extent the responsibilities for housing which local authorities were obliged to face in the inter-war period. These activities were, however, heavily overshadowed in most local authority areas by the direct involvement of the council in building and running large housing estates of its own. The character of this involvement is analysed in the following two chapters.

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107. South Shields CB Housing Committee Minutes, 14 January 1930, STLS.

108. Letter from council to Ministry, dated 10 November 1927, in PRO: HLG 48/792.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE COUNCIL AS BUILDER

As we saw at the beginning of the previous chapter, local authorities in County Durham were responsible for building about 60,000 houses between the wars - or about a sixth of the total number of houses standing in the county in 1939. This chapter examines the physical processes which lay behind these figures. Most councils would have been familiar before the First World War with the procedures involved in getting a building project off the ground, but the responsibilities imposed by inter-war housing schemes were of unprecedented scale. These schemes involved the raising of huge capital loans, the outright purchase of large tracts of land, the supervision of valuable building contracts or even the direct employment of building labour. Finally, it was now possible for the council, through its control of the planning and design of large new housing estates, to exercise a major influence on the landscape and environment of its district. As we analyse each stage of the council's involvement as a housebuilder between the wars, it should become apparent that the scope and scale of these functions marked a new era of local government responsibility.

## A. Finance

As we have seen in Chapter 1, the financial loss on all inter-war council housing schemes was borne by public funds. The subsidy was a mixture of Exchequer and local rate contributions which varied according to the terms of the housing act in question. While subsidies payable by the Exchequer were (with the exception of the Addison scheme) on a fixed scale of annual payments prescribed by statute, it was possible for local authorities to reduce their own financial liability by means of the building and estate management policies which they adopted. By using direct labour to build housing estates and by paring down the standards of design and amenity which were incorporated, councils could reduce construction costs. Net running costs could likewise be kept down by charging the maximum rents allowed by the Ministry of Health and by taking whatever measures were necessary to ensure that the amounts due were actually collected from the tenants.<sup>1</sup> As we saw in the previous chapter, a few councils tried to reduce both capital and current liabilities at a stroke by selling as many of their houses as possible to private buyers. Such policies could keep down demands upon local rates to a minimum, but it was almost impossible for councils to avoid the burden entirely. For reasons that will emerge in the remainder of this study, the burden on ratepayers in most districts of County Durham grew inexorably during the inter-war period.

The first burden which local authorities had to face was the raising of large loans to cover the full capital cost of each housing scheme. Although Exchequer subsidies went a long way towards meeting the annual

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1. The other elements in running costs were 'repair and maintenance' and 'management expenses', but little information is available about the scope for economy exercised in these areas. The maintenance budget was normally fixed at 15% of the gross income from rents and the management budget at 5%. (Ministry of Health, Housing Accounts: Assisted Schemes of Local Authorities (HMSO London, 1921) p xx.)

cost of council housing schemes, in financial terms they only represented contributions towards the repayment of capital and interest on long-term debts incurred by the local authority. Before housing sites could be purchased and construction could begin, the council had to seek the approval of the Ministry of Health to the raising of a loan to cover the estimated capital cost of the project. Although the Ministry's decision was in effect to allow or to refuse the building of houses, it was actually delivered in terms of an agreement or a refusal to sanction the council's borrowing of the necessary funds. If the Ministry's sanction could be obtained, the council would then attempt to raise a loan on the security of its power to levy district rates on local householders.

Loans could be obtained either in the public or private sector. The main source of funds in the former was the Public Works Loans Board, which usually lent to local authorities at slightly less than the market rate of interest. The PWLB would only agree to lend if the local authority's application had been recommended to the Board by the Ministry of Health. This second stage of Ministry approval was not always forthcoming: larger districts (with a rateable value of over £200,000) were usually debarred and the remainder had to convince the Ministry that they were unable to raise sufficient money in the open market. Even when a council's application had been officially recommended, the PWLB had to be satisfied that the loan would be a secure investment of its funds: districts in which the rate in the pound was already high, or where inefficiency was suspected, were liable to have their applications turned down. The only other means of raising loans in the public sector was by borrowing from other local authorities. This was unusual and only happened where a council's own scheme had fallen through and it was decided, in effect, to transfer any loans which had been raised to another council in a position to make use of the capital. One of the very few examples recorded in

County Durham was a loan of £40,000 to Easington RDC by the Corporation of Kingston-upon-Thames in 1922.<sup>2</sup>

The sources of private loans were much more varied, but they may be divided basically between corporate bodies and individual members of the public. A major attempt to tap the latter source was made during the Addison scheme. In order to reduce the competition for loans in the open market, local authorities were instructed to issue housing bonds for sale to the public and to mount popular campaigns to encourage subscriptions. Despite appeals which often went so far as to urge that housing bonds were not only a safe investment but also an insurance against Bolshevism, the response of the public was not very gratifying. Certainly, the results in County Durham were hardly worth the tub-thumping effort involved. After several months of appeals the councillors of Stanley managed to raise only £600 against 1919 Act schemes which were to cost over £250,000,<sup>3</sup> while in South Shields only £7,865 could be raised against schemes costing more than £500,000.<sup>4</sup> Once the Addison scheme had been brought to an end, no serious attempts were made to attract the investment of the small saver. For the rest of the inter-war period loans from individuals for housing purposes were rare, but one notable example is a loan of £30,000 made to Easington RDC in 1926 by George Bernard Shaw.<sup>5</sup>

Loans from corporate investors and other institutions constituted the major part of local authorities' borrowing in the private sector.

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2. Easington RDC Housing Committee Minutes, 17 October 1922, DCRO: RD/Ea.
  3. Stanley UD Council Minutes, 17 August 1920, DCRO: UD/Sta.
  4. South Shields CB Finance Committee Minutes, 2 May 1922, STLS.
  5. Easington RDC Housing Committee Minutes, 22 March and 20 April 1926, DCRO: RD/Ea. Shaw tempered his concern for housing reform with good business sense: Easington secured the loan by offering him  $\frac{1}{4}\%$  more in interest than the London County Council.

The most orthodox source of loans was the local clearing or savings bank branch. But the local bank manager was not always disposed to lend to the council, or he might insist on hedging the transaction with certain conditions. For example, in 1927 the Stanhope council found that their own bankers (Barclays) were unwilling to grant a long-term loan for housing purposes and others (the Midland) would only agree on condition that the council's current account would thenceforth be placed in their hands.<sup>6</sup> A second major source of institutional capital were insurance companies and friendly societies wishing to obtain a steady rate of return through long-term lending to the public sector. Two good examples of this type of investment are the loan of £38,000 made to the Jarrow council in 1922 by the Hearts of Oak Benefit Society<sup>7</sup> and the loan of £51,000 made to Sedgfield RDC by the Prudential Assurance Company in 1926.<sup>8</sup> These loans were exceptionally large - the majority from such institutions did not exceed £10,000 at a time. Another source of private institutional loans consisted of bodies whose desire for a sound investment was clearly accompanied by a concern to help ameliorate housing conditions in the area. Such, one may assume, was the concern of the East Pontop Coal Company in lending £2,000 to Annfield Plain UDC in 1920<sup>9</sup> and of the Derbyshire Miners' Association in lending £40,000 to Easington RDC in 1925.<sup>10</sup>

Given this wide range of sources from which local authorities could borrow capital, it might be imagined that the initial financing of housing projects was a fairly simple matter. In fact, in County Durham it was merely the first in a series of serious obstacles on which a council's

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6. Stanhope UD Council Minutes, 21 February 1927, DCRO: RD/We.
  7. Jarrow MB Housing Committee Minutes, 14 September 1922, T&WCRO: JRJ.
  8. Sedgfield RD Council Minutes, 16 September 1926, DCRO: RD/Se.
  9. Annfield Plain UD Council Minutes, 17 August 1920, DCRO: UD/Sta. The Coal Company no doubt also saw this as a good public relations gesture.
  10. Easington RDC Housing Committee Minutes, 13 October 1925, DCRO: RD/Ea.

schemes could founder. The basic problem was that most local government districts in inter-war Durham not only lacked residents able to make substantial private loans, but were also without the potential to attract the investment of large commercial organisations based elsewhere in the country. No sensible capitalist would wish to invest in economically crippled areas like Brandon, the Auckland coalfield and (later) Jarrow, where there were few industrial prospects and where the high level of both local rates and rent arrears gave poor promise of security for a loan. If an investor particularly wanted to lend to local government, he could find far more financially attractive areas than County Durham - unless, perhaps, the local authorities there were willing to pay a higher rate of interest.

The difficulty of attracting private loans to the area was pressed home to local authorities in Durham by the Ministry of Health's policy in the later 1920s of refusing to recommend the Public Works Loans Board to provide the capital for new schemes unless the councils could themselves raise private loans to cover a proportion of the total cost.<sup>11</sup> The theory behind this policy was that if local authorities in Durham were forced to seek loans in the open market they would quickly come to appreciate that existing schemes should be managed more efficiently and that plans for future schemes would have to be more modest. The effect of the policy on the housing programme in County Durham was disastrous. The Coal Dispute of 1926 had caused the level of rates and arrears to soar and had reduced the already limited attraction which the area held for investors. When the Hetton council was told by the Ministry to raise privately the money for any new schemes, there came the despairing reply that it was '... useless to advertise for loans.'<sup>12</sup> The result in Hetton, and in nearly all mining

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11. See Section B of the previous chapter.

12. Hetton UDC Housing Committee Minutes, 22 November 1925, T&WCRO: HTU.

districts, was that the rate of council housebuilding slumped dramatically in the years 1928 to 1930.<sup>13</sup> The effect of the Ministry's policy was thus felt with most force by the badly-housed people whom the Government professed to help.

Even when the Ministry of Health did recommend the Public Works Loans Board to make a loan to a local authority, there remained, though to a much lesser extent than in dealings with the private sector, the same problem of security. Before they agreed to make a loan, the PWLB Commissioners had to satisfy themselves that the financial circumstances of the council concerned were sufficiently healthy. It appeared (though even the Ministry of Health itself did not have any official information) that the Commissioners worked by a rule-of-thumb that precluded lending to local authority areas in which the annual rate in the pound already exceeded 23/-.<sup>14</sup> Twenty-three councils in County Durham crossed this barrier in the inter-war period, on a total of 51 occasions.<sup>15</sup> A refusal by the PWLB might also have been influenced by any suspicion of mal-administration raised by the annual reports of the District Auditor or by any apparent sign of incompetence, such as the insolvency of the Brandon Urban District Council in 1928 which led to its bankers withholding an annual repayment of previous debts to the Commissioners<sup>16</sup> or the suspension of the Board of Guardians at Chester-le-Street and temporary rule by a Ministry of Health Inspector in 1927-28.<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless, apart from this brief period in the late 1920s, the Public

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13. See Figure 3-2.

14. Minute dated 3 January 1928 by J C (later Sir John) Wrigley, then a Principal at the Ministry of Health, in PRO: HIG 49/152.

15. Ministry of Health, Annual Statements of Rates and Rateable Values in England and Wales, 1913-44. The chief offenders were the urban districts of Chester-le-Street (on six occasions), Houghton, Brandon, Washington (four occasions each), Blaydon, Seaham Harbour, Spennymoor and Bishop Auckland (three occasions each). The lean years were mainly from 1926 to 1929.

16. See correspondence in PRO: HIG 48/54.

17. See Ministry of Health, Annual Report, 1926-27. The reason for this action was not so much the incompetence of the Board as its alleged over-generosity to miners involved in the Coal Dispute.

Works Loans Board was the source of loans most heavily used by local authorities in County Durham between the wars.

Once the raising of building capital had been achieved, the most important financial aspect of a council housing scheme was the net cost to the local community. As mentioned at the beginning of this section, there were many variables which affected the annual reckoning. Some went to determine the capital cost of the scheme and others the level of income to be off-set against the annual repayments of capital and interest. Some of the factors involved could be influenced by the policies of a local authority. It was up to the council to decide whether to undertake an ambitious housebuilding programme or whether to do as little as possible, to decide how far to strive for savings by economies in the building process and how far to seek high receipts of rent. These questions are dealt with in detail elsewhere in this study, but they should be mentioned here as factors which helped to determine the demands made on local ratepayers. Other factors were in the hands of market forces and Government policy.

The market was responsible for wide variations during the inter-war period in the cost of building a council house. As was shown in Figure 1-2, construction costs in England and Wales were twice as high in the summer of 1920 as they were ten years later. Similarly, the rate of interest payable on new loans was only half in the mid-1930s what it had been for loans sealed in 1920. Thus, when it came to calculating the annual loss on a 1919 Act housing scheme, the effect of high building costs was exaggerated by the more onerous terms of borrowing.

Government policy determined the level of Exchequer subsidy which councils could off-set against annual repayment of housing loans. As can be seen from the details in Appendix 1, the size of subsidy varied

considerably between the different housing acts. At one extreme, the Addison Act of 1919 provided for the total annual loss on a council's housing schemes - less the contribution of a penny rate - to be borne by the Exchequer. At the other extreme, council houses built for 'general needs' (as opposed to slum replacement) after the Housing Act of 1933 received no Exchequer subsidy at all. In between these extremes were the Chamberlain subsidy (1923 Act) of £6 per council house per year for 20 years, the Wheatley subsidy (1924 Act) of £9 for 40 years and the Greenwood subsidy (1930 Act) of £2.5/- for 40 years for each person rehoused. Thus a council's rate contribution could also vary considerably. For example, the ratepayers of the Brandon urban district only had to find 8/8 per year for each of their Addison Act houses;<sup>18</sup> but had the building of these houses been delayed for some reason and carried out under the Wheatley Act, the annual cost to ratepayers would have been at least £4.10/- per house, or more than ten times as much as it actually was. Unfortunately, statistics are not available to allow a satisfactory analysis to be made of the overall cost, both to the Exchequer and to local rates, of housing in County Durham under the different inter-war Acts. Nevertheless, a broad idea of the changing pattern of central and local government contributions may be obtained from Figure 4-1. If the profiles shown therein were typical of the whole county, it is clear that the proportion of total annual expenditure on council housing borne by the local authorities themselves grew steadily over the inter-war period.

The final factor to be considered in assessing the cost of a housing scheme to the ratepayers of a district is the capacity of that district to bear the debts of its council. The key to the question is the rateable

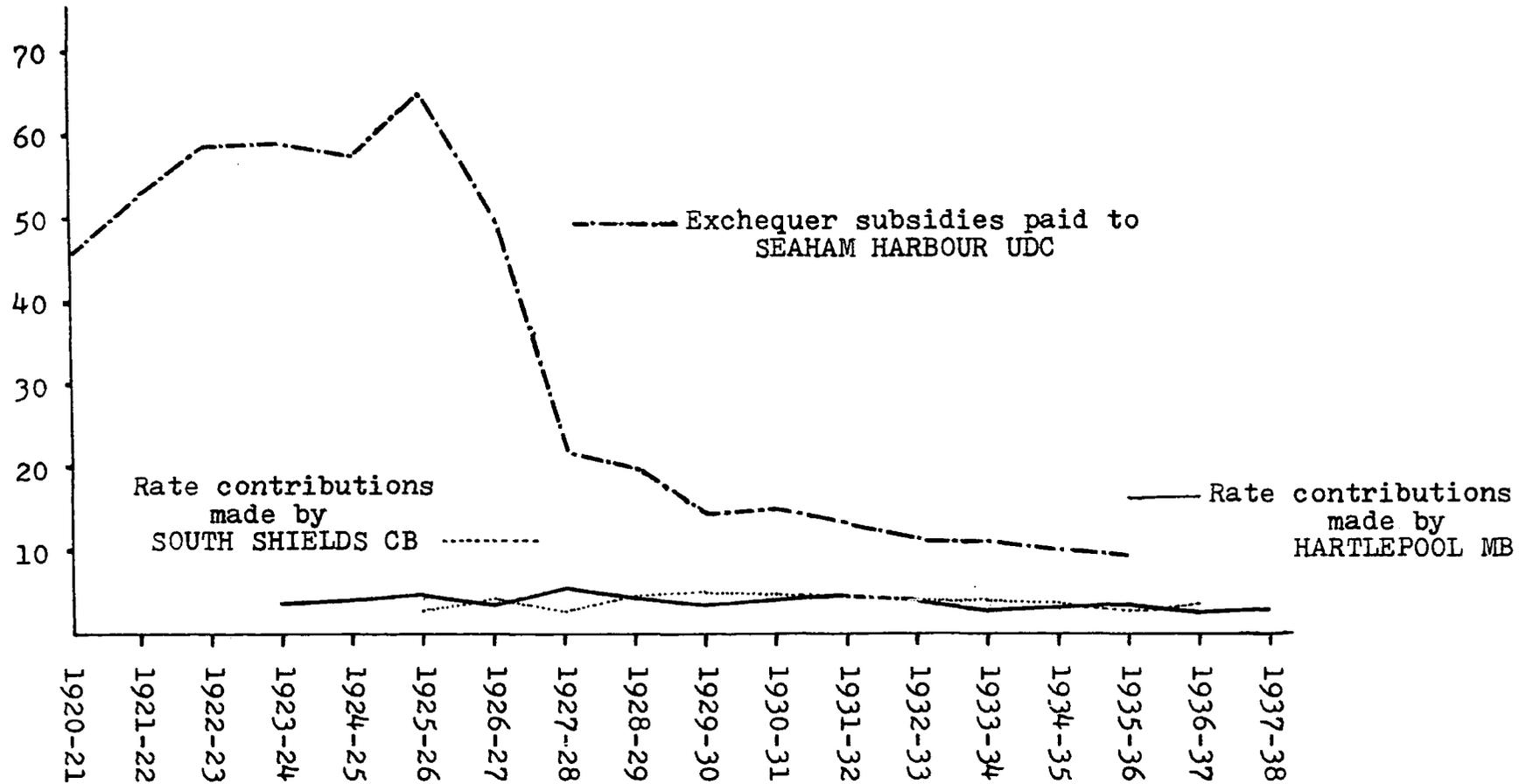
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18. Brandon UDC built 337 houses under the 1919 Act (Council Minutes, 4 February 1935, DCRO: UD/BB) and the product of a penny rate was £146 (Ibid, 3 September 1928).

FIGURE 4-1 Financial Contributions made by Central and Local Government towards Inter-War Council Housing Schemes

Average annual subsidy for each council house (£)

[Average subsidy per council house in various districts, financial years 1920-21 to 1937-38]



value of the area: a district with a high rateable value would obviously have less difficulty in bearing the cost of a given number of council houses than would a district of low rateable value. This would not be important if rateable value were related only to the population of the local authority area, for one would expect the housing programme of a small rural district to be far more modest than that of a large county borough. But rateable value is also related to the social composition and industrial prosperity of a district: if the residential property of the area is generally of poor quality and there are few commercial and industrial premises, the overall rateable value will be low. The differences that can arise under the rating system are sharply illustrated by the position in the Tyneside area in 1939 (see Table 4-1). The districts within this survey area having a low 'rateable value quotient' (particularly Felling, Hebburn and Jarrow) were those with a high proportion of working-class housing and little commercial property. As the Royal Commission on Local Government in the Tyneside Area reported in 1937, some of the South Tyneside districts were little more than working-class dormitory towns.<sup>19</sup>

The example of Tyneside serves to underline the inherent shortcomings of the local rating system. While working-class districts have the greatest need of expenditure on social services, they are also the districts with the least capacity for bearing such expenditure on the rates. Thus, while housing conditions in Felling were generally worse than in Newcastle,<sup>20</sup> the ratepayers of the former had by the financial year 1939-40 to pay a very high 2/- in the pound towards housing schemes;

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19. PP 1936-37 (Cmd 5402) vol xxiv, p 819. See also N McCord and D J Rowe, 'Industrialisation and Urban Growth in North-East England' in International Review of Social History, 1977, vol 22, p 55.

20. In 1936, 15.8% of families in Felling were living in overcrowded conditions, compared with 10.7% in Newcastle. (Ministry of Health, Housing Act, 1935. Report on the Overcrowding Survey in England and Wales, 1936.)

TABLE 4-1 Population and Rateable Value in the Tyneside Area, 1939

	(1) Registered population 1939	(2) Rateable value in April 1939 (£)	(3) % of total population	(4) % of total rateable value	(5) Rateable value quotient (4)÷(3) <sup>∅</sup>
<u>NORTHUMBERLAND</u>					
Newburn	19,936	98,818	2.8	1.8	.64
Newcastle	248,818	2,679,716	35.1	49.0	1.40
Gosforth	19,742	193,023	2.8	3.5	1.25
Wallsend	41,621	228,920	5.9	4.2	.71
Tynemouth	59,526	409,155	8.4	7.5	.89
Whitley & Monkseaton	27,623	282,036	3.9	5.2	1.33
<u>DURHAM</u>					
Whickham	21,405	139,953	3.0	2.5	.83
Gateshead	101,792	573,479	14.4	10.5	.73
Felling	23,405	97,102	3.3	1.8	.55
Hebburn	21,175	88,439	3.0	1.6	.53
Jarrow	26,865	119,712	3.8	2.2	.58
South Shields	96,484	564,961	13.6	10.3	.76
<b>TOTAL</b>	708,392	5,472,314	100.0	100.0	1.00

<sup>∅</sup> Note: Quotient of 1.00 - district of average rate resources  
 More than 1.00 - " " higher " "  
 Less than 1.00 - " " lower " "

the ratepayers of Newcastle paid only  $2\frac{3}{4}$ d in the pound.<sup>21</sup> As can be seen in more detail from Figure 4-2, where Felling is compared with the relatively prosperous borough of Darlington, this divergence in the demand made by housing on local rates existed for most of the inter-war period. It was an unfortunate feature of the rating system that the financial burden imposed by housing schemes was not only higher in proportion to the rateable value of towns like Felling, but that the burden also fell on ratepayers less able to bear it. Whereas in Felling the burden of a 2/- rate was visited upon a predominantly working-class community in the heart of a depressed area,<sup>22</sup> a rate of the same order in Newcastle or Darlington, even if it had been necessary, would have constituted a far less crushing demand on most members of the community.

This was the vicious circle built into the logic of the local rating system - and it meant that any national policy for social services which assigned financial liability to the local rates served in great measure to oppress the communities which it intended to help most. This anomaly can be seen within County Durham when comparing the general level of rates in various districts. As Figure 4-3 shows, for most of the inter-war period the rate in the pound prevailing in Darlington was only half that in the poorer districts of Blaydon and Hebburn in the north of the county. The same phenomenon can be seen on a wider scale by comparing County Durham with the rest of the country, for the level of rates in the county as a whole was consistently higher in the inter-war period than in any other county in England. In the financial year 1938-39, for example, when the average rate in the rest of England was about 12/-

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21. D M Goodfellow, Tyneside: The Social Facts (Newcastle, 1940) p 79.

22. In 1933 a Ministry of Labour report revealed that over 30% of the insured population of Felling were unemployed. (PP 1933-34 (Cmd 4728) vol xiii, p 117.)

FIGURE 4-2 Rates in the Pound Levied by Local Authorities for Housing Purposes  
 [Financial Years 1921-22 to 1939-40]

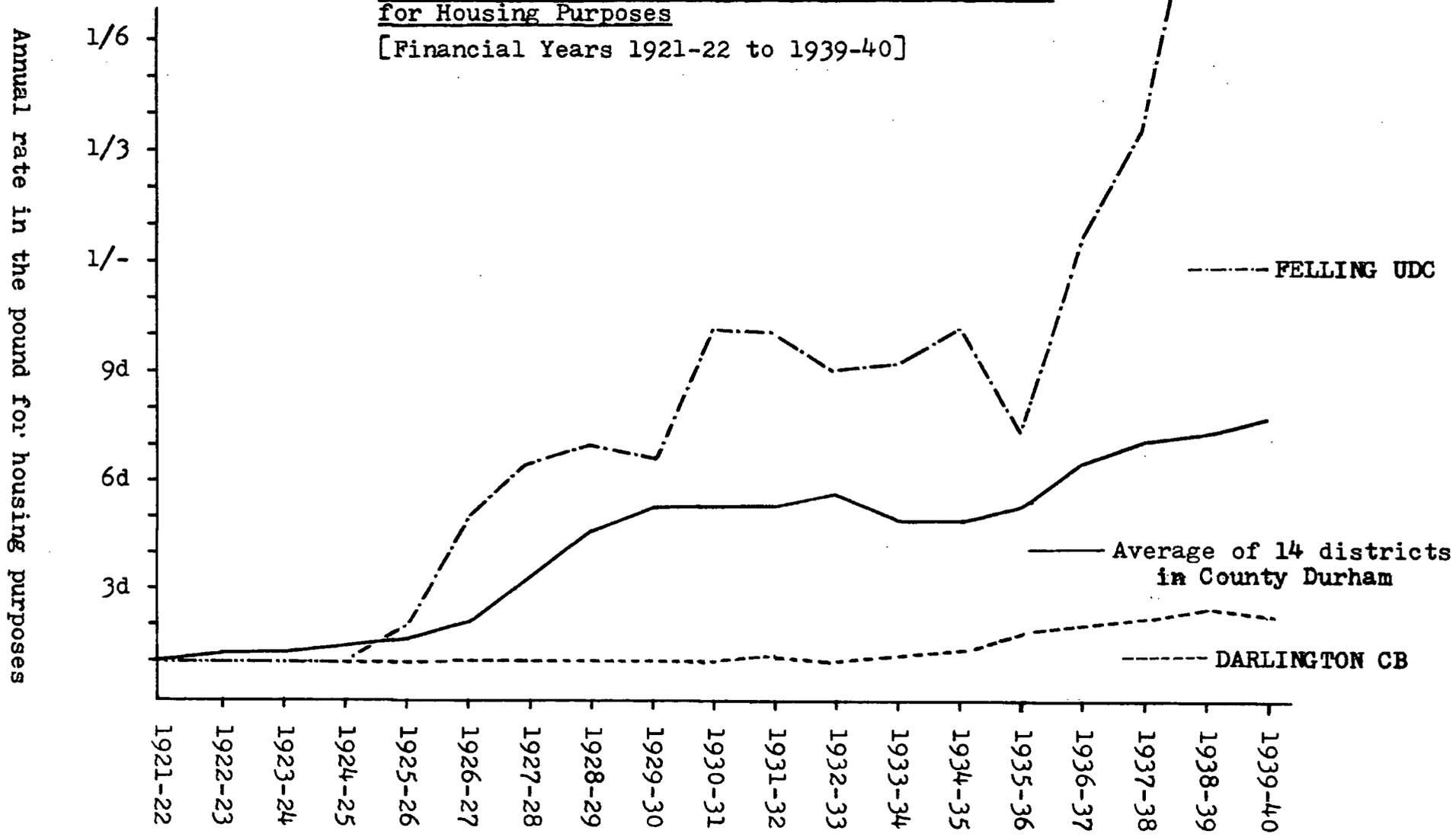
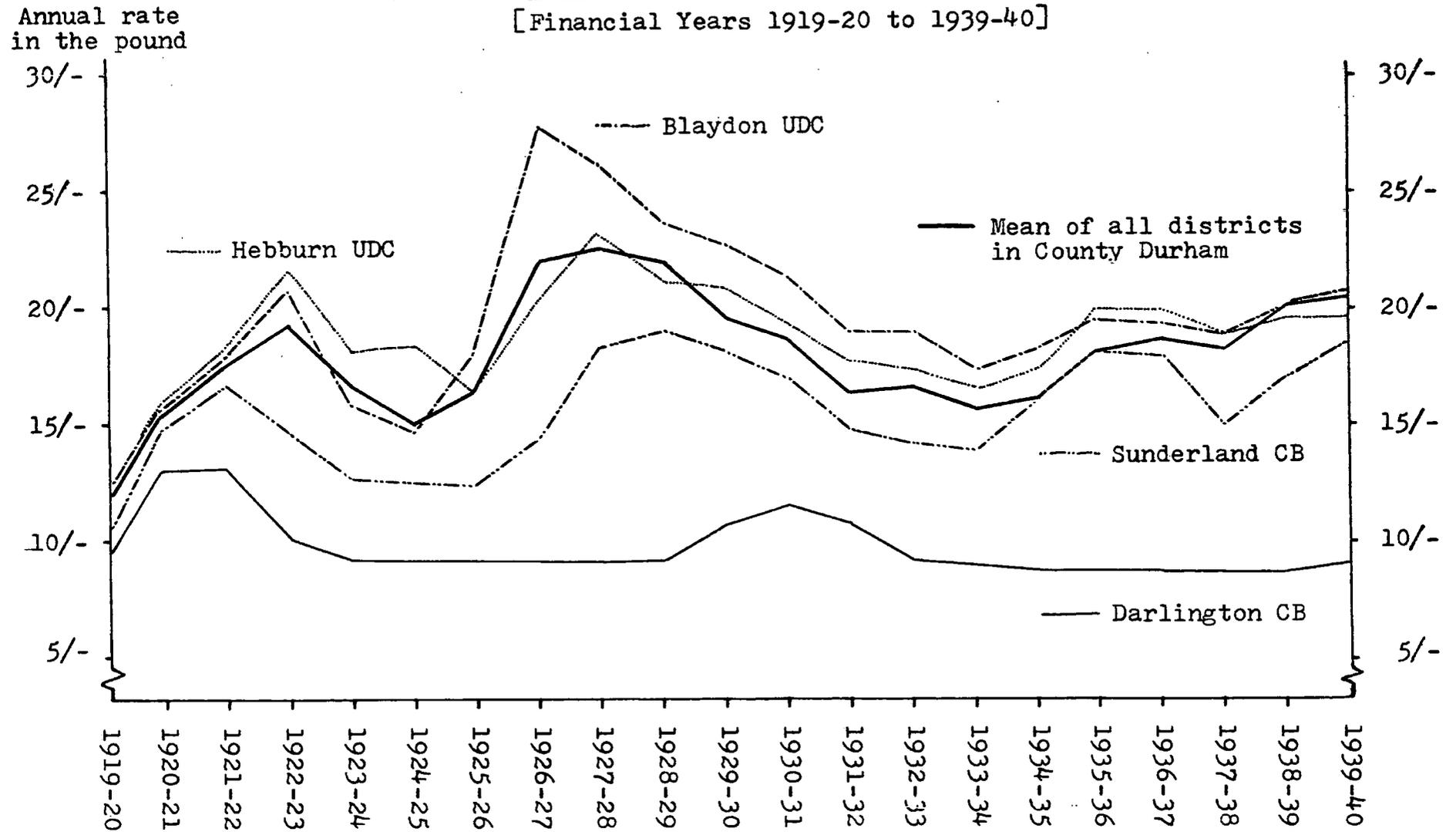


FIGURE 4-3 Local Rates Levied in County Durham  
 [Financial Years 1919-20 to 1939-40]



in the pound, the figure for the administrative county of Durham was 20/2.<sup>23</sup>

The only social policy between the wars which attempted on a significant scale to short-circuit the injustices of the local rating system was the Housing Act of 1919.<sup>24</sup> The size of a local housing programme under the Addison Act was roughly in proportion to the needs of the district (as expressed in its Survey of Housing Needs) and the cost to its ratepayers was roughly in proportion to their resources (as a fixed percentage of the rateable value of the district each year). The balance of the cost of an Addison scheme was met out of Exchequer funds, raised more equitably by taxation spread over the whole country - a principle now endorsed to a great extent by the system of 'rate support grants' to local authorities. Unfortunately, as related in Chapter 1, the subsidy provision of the 1919 Act was one of several elements unjustly blamed for the high cost of the Addison scheme. All other inter-war schemes were based on a system of flat-rate subsidies which rarely took account of the problems of the poorer local government areas. From this general criticism one can exempt in some measure the Housing Act of 1930. By offering subsidies calculated on the number of slum-dwellers rehoused, it tended to encourage action in the areas where it was most needed and, because these subsidies were fairly generous and coincided with a period of favourable building costs, it ensured that such action would not be unduly burdensome to local ratepayers. This is borne out by the high level of activity under the Act in County Durham in the 1930s.

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23. Ministry of Health, Statement of Rates and Rateable Values in England and Wales, 1938-39.

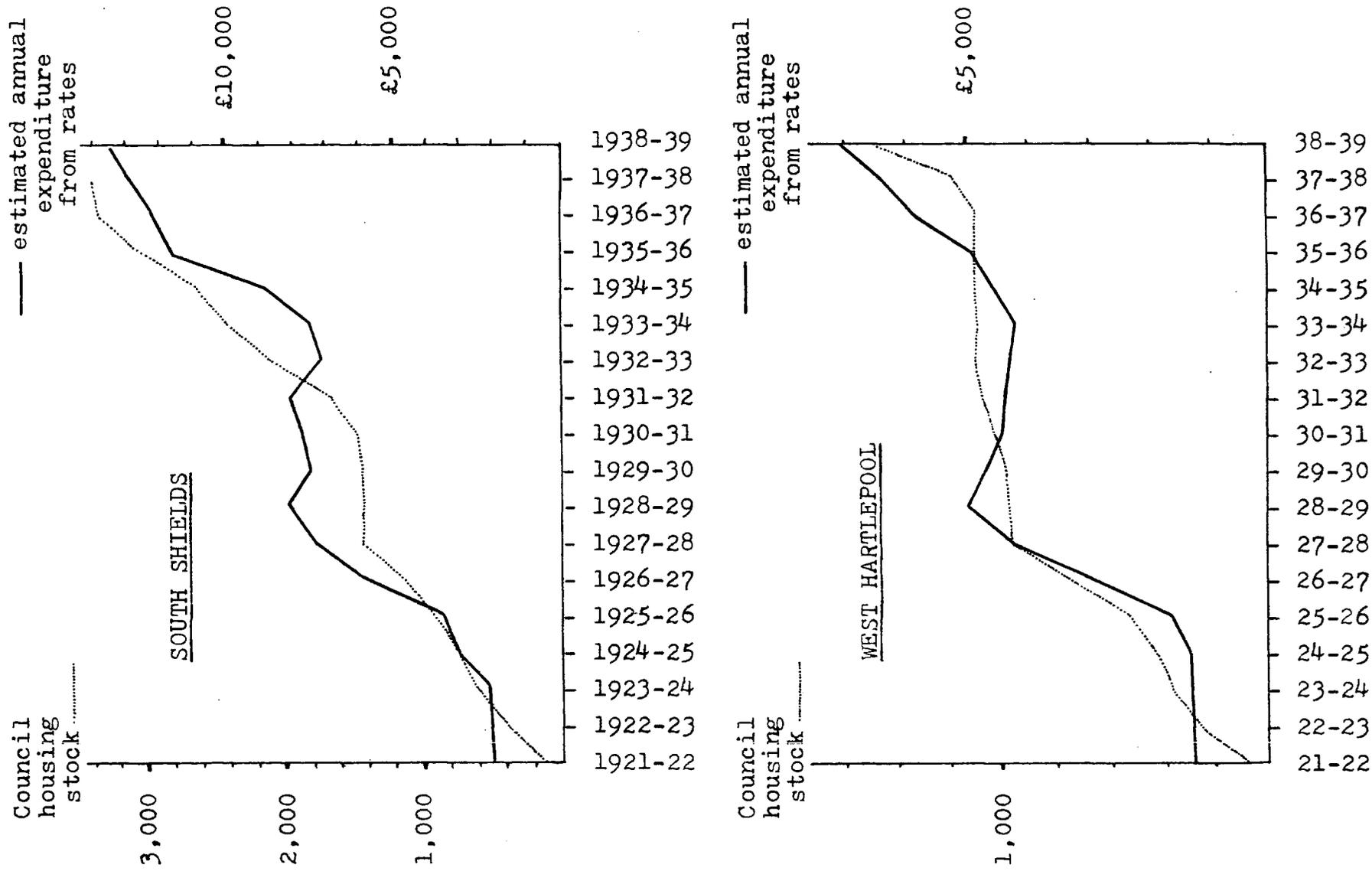
24. B B Gilbert argues, in British Social Policy, 1914-1939 (London, 1970) p 226, that the Rating and Valuation Act 1928 was conceived by Winston Churchill with the same intention. But the prime aim of this measure, under which industrial premises were largely relieved of rate liabilities and the Exchequer reimbursed local authorities by means of annual grants, was to increase the competitiveness of British exports.

Finally, it can be seen from a brief comparison between Figure 4-2 and Figure 4-3 that, by post-1945 standards, the proportion of local authorities' total rate income spent on housing was not particularly high. In the 1930s most districts earmarked between 2% and 3% of their total rate income for housing purposes. Nevertheless, as may be seen from the 'average' line in Figure 4-2, local government expenditure on housing grew considerably over the inter-war period.<sup>25</sup> A clearer impression of this trend of rising expenditure may be obtained from Figure 4-4, in which the estimated annual cost to ratepayers of council housing schemes in South Shields and West Hartlepool is plotted alongside the growth of the housing stock. From the financial year 1921-22 expenditure in both towns grew from the starting point of a penny rate by an average of about 10% per year up to 1939. The expenditure actually grew in two stages - in the late 1920s and from the mid-1930s. There was a more stable period in the early 1930s which followed a slackening of the building programme in the late 1920s and the gradual recovery of rent arrears accrued in those years. The most important feature, however, is that despite the policy decisions mentioned at the beginning of this section by which local authorities could reduce the cost of their housing liabilities - and both South Shields and West Hartlepool adopted such policies, the former in striving to reduce rent arrears, the latter in using direct labour and promoting extensive council house sales - rate-borne expenditure grew steadily throughout the period. This is just one indication of the growing impact made by the intervention of the public sector in the housing market after the First World War.

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25. The fourteen districts which make up this 'average' are Blaydon, Whickham, Gateshead, Felling, Hebburn, Jarrow, South Shields, Sunderland, Stanley, Seaham, Hartlepool, West Hartlepool, Darlington and Stockton.

FIGURE 4-4 Annual Expenditure on Council Housing in South Shields and West Hartlepool [Financial Years 1921-22 to 1938-39]



B. Land

The inter-war council housing programme involved an enormous increase in the amount of land owned by local government. Exact figures are not available, but by 1939 councils in County Durham had probably purchased more than 6,500 acres of land - about ten square miles or just over 1% of the whole county - for housing development.<sup>26</sup> This area would represent a building site about the size of the County Borough of Darlington or Sunderland in 1939; alternatively, to an unconventional town planner the image might resolve into a single row of square building plots about 750 miles long. All of this land was purchased freehold, since Ministry of Health policy refused to countenance leasehold. The overall cost to public funds may be estimated at about £1½ million.<sup>27</sup>

Most of the land acquired for council housing lay outside the limits of existing built-up areas. The significance of this in social and planning terms is examined in Section E below, but we should note here the fairly obvious point that building sites were generally easier and cheaper to come by the further they were from existing urban centres. Nevertheless, some local authorities found it very difficult to find any suitable land at all within their own district boundaries. Jarrow MB was particularly hard-pressed and had to buy the nineteen acres it needed for its 1919 Act scheme in the adjoining South Shields Rural District.<sup>28</sup> A major disadvantage in such a case was the loss to the developing council of the subsequent rate income from its own property.

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26. This is on the basis that about 60,000 council houses were built in County Durham between the wars at an average density of ten houses to the acre. In addition, when the Second World War brought building to a halt, local authorities held a certain amount of undeveloped land - perhaps a further 10% on the developed area.

27. This is on the basis of an average cost to local authorities of between £200 and £250 per acre purchased.

28. Jarrow Borough Engineer's report, July 1919, T&WCRO: JRU.

Jarrow's land problem arose mainly from its unrealistic boundaries, which were eventually extended in the local government revisions of 1936. A far more serious problem, however, and one which mere administrative changes could not solve, was the extent of disused mine workings under much of the county. In many areas of the coalfield the settling of old workings and consequent subsidence of streets and foundations occurred frequently. Councils in these districts were only permitted by the Ministry of Health to raise loans to buy new tracts of land if professional advisers (usually the District Valuer in consultation with a mineral valuer) were prepared to rule out the danger of serious subsidence. Very often such assurances could not be given: more than one council must have wondered '... whether it would be at all possible to secure a site in the District which would be absolutely stable and free from the effects of pit-workings.'<sup>29</sup> Even in the Consett area, on the western edge of the coalfield, councillors grumbled that the District Valuer '... always rejected the Council's sites' as unsafe for housing, and one member urged that they '... should take no notice of [the Valuer's] decision.'<sup>30</sup>

As a result of the unreliable sub-soil in much of the county, there were often unwelcome delays in the start of council housing schemes. An unfortunate aspect of this problem was that those districts where mining had been intense were often those where the need for new housing was high. As the Housing Commissioner for the North East reported to the Ministry of Health in 1921, 'it has been the case in County Durham that where houses are urgently required, sites have been difficult to obtain.'<sup>31</sup> In Tanfield, where 37% of the population in 1921 were living more than

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29. Tanfield UDC Housing Committee Minutes, 24 September 1919, DCRO: UD/Sta.

30. Consett Guardian, 12 July 1935.

31. Letter dated 16 November 1921 in PRO: HIG 48/238.

two to a room, the official estimate was that over 600 new houses were needed - yet the council was able to build only 24 under the 1919 Act because of the shortage of suitable land. Out of more than 30 acres in which the council had expressed interest only three acres were found to be sufficiently free from the risk of subsidence.<sup>32</sup>

Occasionally, the risk only became apparent after a site had been purchased. In 1921, shortly after the local council had bought 44 acres at Hetton, signs of subsidence were discovered which precluded any work on the site for five years. Even after the movement had stopped, the council were permitted to build only bungalows on the site.<sup>33</sup> The Shildon council faced a different problem: it had to intervene, on Ministry of Health instructions, to prevent possible undermining of a housing estate from taking place in the future. This involved the council purchasing exclusive mineral rights to the site and it raised the overall cost of the land from £169 to £672 per acre.<sup>34</sup> Similarly, the Gateshead council had to pay an additional £138 per acre for land at Lobley Hill so that the local coal company would not remove timber supports from the nearly exhausted workings below the site.<sup>35</sup> On the whole, it is fair to conclude that housing schemes in many districts would have started more quickly if the risk of subsidence had not been so prevalent. It is likely that this factor prevented a greater number of houses being built. It certainly added to the cost of some estates and affected the location of others.

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32. Ibid.

33. Hetton UDC Housing Committee Minutes, 20 April 1921 and 18 October 1938, T&WCRO: HTU.

34. Shildon UDC Housing Committee Minutes, 7 November 1921 and 7 April 1925, DCRO: UD/Sh.

35. Gateshead CB Housing Committee Minutes, 21 September 1938, GLS.

The landowners with whom councils did business fell into four distinct groups: there were the coal companies (of which there were over fifty at the end of the First World War), the church authorities (the Dean and Chapter of Durham and the Ecclesiastical Commissioners), the owners of large estates (like the Marquis of Londonderry and the Earl of Durham) and a host of smaller private landowners. Most conveyances were of between five and fifteen acres at a time, but this varied according to local circumstances: in some Tyneside towns, for example, land ownership was quite fragmented and few large sites were available, whereas in many coalfield districts the land belonged to a few major owners and was available in fairly large tracts. There were also several very big purchases: the acquisition of some 207 acres of outlying farmland by the County Borough of Darlington was one such case.<sup>36</sup> At the other end of the scale, councils sometimes had to bid for a few hundred square feet of land which would otherwise have blocked access to a larger site.<sup>37</sup>

Even within a particular district the price of land for council housing development could vary considerably. Few sites cost less than £100 per acre and few more than £300, with prices generally being lower in rural and coalfield districts than in the urban boroughs. The range can be illustrated by two extreme examples. It was possible for Brandon, a mining district, to buy all the building land it needed on sites virtually detached from the existing built-up areas; in all, the council bought 64 acres of farmland at prices between £54 and £76 per acre.<sup>38</sup> The borough council of Darlington, on the other hand, had to pay £1,600 per acre for a small site in the centre of the town, where

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36. Darlington CB, Report of Housing Committee, 9 May 1921, DCRO: CB/Da.

37. See, for example, conveyance details in the Statement made by Felling UDC in 1935 the Royal Commission on Local Government on Tyneside, GLS.

38. Brandon UD Council Minutes, 11 August 1919, DCRO: UD/BB.

roads and main sewers were already made up.<sup>39</sup> The wide range of prices payable within a single district is illustrated by the example of Gateshead. Whereas the council bought  $11\frac{1}{2}$  acres at Sheriff Hill for only £160 per acre, it had to pay nearly £550 per acre for 17 acres at Bensham and £1,280 per acre for a small site in a built-up area closer to the town centre.<sup>40</sup>

An important factor influencing the price of land, apart from its location, was the negotiating power of the vendor. A price was usually fixed by agreement, although from 1919 a local authority could more easily resort to powers of compulsory purchase. The fact that the council could fall back on such powers weakened the bargaining position of the vendor, because he knew that ultimately he could be forced to part with his land at a price determined by the District Valuer. The process of negotiating a purchase was frequently handed over to this official by local authorities, as it was assumed that his expertise and authority to fix a compulsory figure would expedite the transaction. It was unusual for the District Valuer not to be called in at some stage of the proceedings, if only because in most cases the Ministry of Health, before giving a council sanction to raise a loan, required his assurance that the agreed price was a fair one.

There can be no doubt that without the threat of compulsory purchase held in reserve, councils in County Durham would often have had to pay considerably more for building land than the official valuation price. There were a few instances of generosity on the part of landowners - notably the Consett Iron Company, which offered land to several councils

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39. Darlington CB, Report of Housing Committee, 24 March 1920, DCRO: CB/Da.

40. Gateshead CB Housing Committee Minutes, 11 August 1919, 9 February 1925 and 13 April 1928, GLS.

at the bargain price of £50 per acre.<sup>41</sup> But the general trend is illustrated by the prices asked by less public-spirited local landowners before the secondary legislation of 1919 came into force. For example, the Blaydon council had to pay the Earl of Strathmore £605 per acre early in 1919 for land at Rowlands Gill on which it was intended to build houses under the 1890 Act. The local Labour Representation Committee could justifiably complain to the Local Government Board that this was '... a monstrous price',<sup>42</sup> for land in the district was obtainable for only £100 to £200 per acre once the procedure for compulsory purchase had been established. Similarly, the Easington housing committee was offered agricultural land in 1918 by various owners at prices in several cases as high as £400 and £700 per acre.<sup>43</sup> The sites in question were eventually acquired, under threat of compulsory purchase, for £50 to £100 per acre.<sup>44</sup> The same problem was encountered by the Ryton council, which was moved to recommend to the Local Government Board that there should be legislation restricting the selling price of farmland solely to its agricultural value.<sup>45</sup>

This problem was not confined to the coalfield districts. Darlington was faced in 1919 with two owners of farmland, one asking £450 per acre and the other waiting for '... a tempting offer':<sup>46</sup> the eventual price was slightly over £100 per acre.<sup>47</sup> Nor was the Church above trying its luck with local councils. For instance, 'a suggestion of profiteering'

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41. Consett UD Council Minutes, 25 February 1919, DDC; Lanchester RD Council Minutes, 10 April 1919, DCRO: RD/Ia; Leadgate UD Council Minutes, 22 May 1919, DDC.

42. Letter dated 5 February 1919 in PRO: HLG 47/248.

43. Easington RDC Housing Committee Minutes, 19 December 1918, DCRO: RD/Ea.

44. Ibid, 6 April 1920.

45. Ryton UD Council Minutes, 9 October 1918, GLS.

46. Darlington CB, Report of Housing Committee, 13 June 1919, DCRO: CB/Da.

47. Ibid, 9 May 1921.

was made when the Ecclesiastical Commissioners asked nearly £600 per acre for land in the Sunderland Rural District valued at half the price.<sup>48</sup>

Some aristocratic landowners did not lag far behind. Lord Boyne, for example, sought a price from Auckland RDC related to the density of the proposed development - £80 per acre for eight houses to the acre, and £120 for twelve houses. The official valuation was only £36 per acre.<sup>49</sup>

In most of these cases under the Addison scheme the threat of compulsory purchase enabled local authorities to acquire building land at a reasonable price. Speculative offers continued to come the way of councils throughout the inter-war period, but the authorities soon developed the knack of dealing with them.

Nevertheless, a high proportion of the building land purchased by councils in this period was actually acquired under the Addison Act. Because they were required by the Ministry of Health in 1919 to make good the housing shortage in their districts within a limited period, many local authorities hastened to buy sufficient land to meet the whole of the foreseeable requirement. So when in 1921 the Addison scheme was brought to a halt, most councils owned considerably more land than was needed for the houses they had built or had obtained the Ministry's sanction to build. Some local authorities, like Darlington and the coalfield district of Brandon, found that they had no need to buy any more land before 1939 than they had acquired under the 1919 Act. In other districts, like Felling-on-Tyne, 1919 Act purchases might represent about 40% of the council's whole inter-war estate.

As councils were nearly always in possession of more land than they

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48. Sunderland RD Council Minutes, 20 March 1919, T&WCRO: SDR and Sunderland Echo, 21 March 1919. The Commissioners had been equally unhelpful before the war (see above, p 133).

49. Auckland RDC Housing Committee Minutes, 1 December 1919, DCRO: RD/Au.

were able to use for housing schemes actually approved by the Ministry of Health, they had to decide how best to use their potential building sites in the meantime. Often this was simply a matter of allowing the continuation of an agricultural tenancy until building was ready to begin. This was hardly a profitable arrangement - agricultural rents recovered by the Easington council, for example, were on average less than 1% per annum of the purchase price paid<sup>50</sup> - but was preferable to the alternative of dispossessing a tenant farmer prematurely. The main disadvantage of an agricultural letting was that if the council sought to take over the land at short notice it could face a heavy claim for loss of crops.<sup>51</sup> Other short-term uses of surplus land included the letting of fields to local sports clubs and the grazing of the council's own cart-horses.<sup>52</sup>

When a council's surplus 1919 Act land was eventually taken over for building under a subsequent Act, accounting transfers were made to credit the Addison scheme and debit the later scheme with the current value of the land. This was sound accounting practice, but because the transferred land usually adjoined a completed 1919 Act housing estate its market value was considerably enhanced. This meant that the 1919 Act programme (which was financed predominantly from the Exchequer) made a 'profit' at the expense of later schemes (which all imposed a much greater burden on the ratepayer than the 1919 Act scheme). In effect, therefore, such accounting transfers helped the Ministry of Health to reduce the embarrassing proportions of its recurring liability under the Addison scheme.

If local authority land became genuinely surplus (that is, if the

50. Easington RDC Housing Committee Minutes, 19 December 1918 and 6 April 1920, DCRO: RD/Ea.

51. Ibid, 1 June 1920.

52. Darlington RD Council Minutes, 10 July 1933, DCRO: RD/Da, and Stanhope UD Council Minutes, 28 February 1927 and 18 August 1930, DCRO: RD/We.

council had completely abandoned its own housing plans) or if the council decided that there were advantages in encouraging private builders, attempts were made to sell plots to any interested parties. Again, this often resulted in a profit being made by whichever housing account was involved, especially where the surplus land adjoined an existing council estate. The price fixed by the District Valuer for such plots could be nine or ten times more than that originally paid by the council. For example, Stanley UDC sold several plots to private builders for between £1,700 and £2,000 per acre from an estate which it had bought by compulsory purchase for £200 per acre.<sup>53</sup> Occasionally a council might sell the whole of an unwanted site to private builders. One of the few examples is Stockton Borough Council, which decided in 1938 that its land at Newham Grange was not needed for municipal purposes: streets and sewers were made up and 230 individual plots were offered for sale.<sup>54</sup> Disposal of land sometimes fitted into a wider pattern of town planning. At one end of the scale, land in Darlington was sold by the council for the building of a corner shop; at the other extreme, over 40 acres were sold for factory development.<sup>55</sup> Nor was the disposal of land without its occasional irony: the council of the depressed mining district of Brandon was procedurally obliged to sell land for a badly-needed estate of aged miners' homes at a valuation nearly ten times higher than the original price;<sup>56</sup> less seriously, the Jarrow council, having bought land from the Dean and Chapter of Durham at £200 per acre, moved in a mysterious way to sell the Roman Catholic authorities a building plot for a church on the site at £1,800 per acre.<sup>57</sup>

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53. Stanley UD Council Minutes, 8 June 1920 and 14 September 1926, DCRO:UD/St.

54. Stockton MB, Minutes of General Purposes Committee, 3 June and 22 July 1938, CCRO.

55. Darlington CB, Report of Housing Committee, 27 June 1922 and 13 September 1927, DCRO: CB/Da.

56. Brandon UD Council Minutes, 1 March 1920 and 4 August 1925, DCRO: UD/BB.

57. Jarrow Borough Engineer's report, July 1919 and February 1923, T&WCRO: JR

### C. Building

We have seen how the expansion of local authority housing activity presented councils with the responsibilities of fund-raising and land-owning on a completely new scale. An equally demanding role, and one in which most councils had also had relatively little experience before the First World War, was that of building manager. Although many local authorities were already familiar with the practice of appointing architects, dealing with tenders and managing the administrative aspects of particular building projects, the sheer size of housing schemes generated a far heavier burden of responsibility. The change in scale for, say, a rural district council - hitherto accustomed to the occasional letting of contracts for the building of a public convenience or wash-house but faced in 1919 with the prospect of having to supervise housing development over several hundred acres - must have seemed alarming to the councillors and officials involved. Moreover, many councils went beyond the minimum role of building management and assumed the additional responsibility of employing direct labour teams up to several hundred strong; but this is treated as a special aspect and discussed separately in the following section.

Before examining in more detail some of the problems which councils encountered in the building process, it will be helpful to look briefly at the various stages in that process. The first task was the appointment of an architect, either as an official of the local authority or on a commercial contract. The architect was responsible to the council, either as employee or consultant, not only for designing a housing scheme but also for supervising its execution as building manager. Design broadly followed Ministry of Health patterns<sup>58</sup> and was sometimes only a small element in the architect's duties. His more onerous work on site could only begin after

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58. See Section E of this chapter.

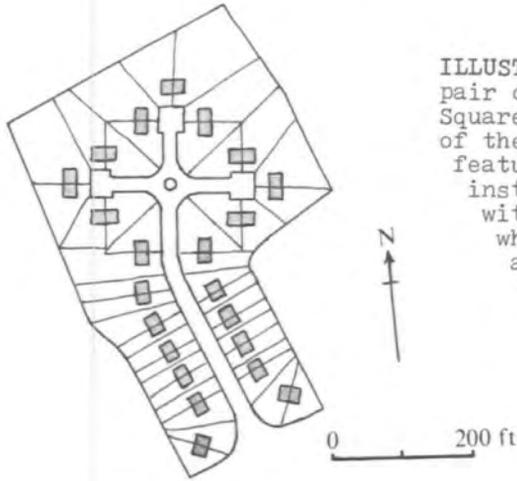


ILLUSTRATION 4-1 (above) shows a pair of 1919 Act houses in Addison Square, Coundon. The plain design of the houses (with unusual features like brick window arches, instead of lintels) contrasts with the estate layout (left), which makes full use of an awkward site in best Tudor Walters style.



ILLUSTRATION 4-2 Station Road, Esh Winning. The style of these Addison Act houses has a distinct Jacobean flavour - seen in the gables, the unusual fenestration and the tall chimney stacks.

several other stages of the process had been completed by the council. These involved obtaining the Ministry of Health's approval in principle to the number and (particularly under the 1919 Act) the design of the proposed houses; drawing up bills of quantities and invitations to tender; selecting a suitable contractor; obtaining the Ministry's approval of the tender price and with it the sanction to raise a loan; and finally the sealing of a contract with the chosen builder. Once the contractor had started work on site, the architect would make frequent inspections, examine claims against the council for payment on account, eventually approve the finished work and settle the contractor's final claim.

This ideal sequence was often disrupted or brought to a halt for various reasons. Undoubtedly the most irksome delays occurred in County Durham during the Addison scheme. This was a time when local government was relatively inexperienced and central government interference in matters of detail was at its greatest. It was also the time when labour and materials were in shortest supply, for the building industry had almost withered away during the war years and recovered only very slowly in the dislocated conditions which followed. Some idea of the labour position can be obtained from Census material for County Durham, which reveals that the number of men working in skilled building trades was significantly lower in 1921 than in 1911, and in most cases had been falling since 1901. There were, for example, 17% fewer bricklayers in the county in 1921 than in 1911, 22% fewer plasterers and 28% fewer slaters and tilers. In many trades a full recovery to the 1911 manpower levels was not achieved even by 1931.<sup>59</sup> The position was aggravated by the general policy of the unions in resisting the dilution of building trades by unskilled army-surplus labour.<sup>60</sup> In County Durham the already

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59. Census volumes for County Durham, 1901-1931.

60. See above, p 51.

high cost of building labour was increased by union demands for additional allowances, mainly for 'walking time' spent reaching a site, and the strong bargaining position of the skilled men was revealed by the occasional strike.<sup>61</sup> There is less information available on the scarcity of building materials in the county, but the indications are that difficulties were at least as great in Durham as they were in the country as a whole. The effect of these market factors on building costs may be seen in Figure 4-5.

A further problem in County Durham just after the First World War was the tendency of builders in the larger towns to form confederations in order to avoid competitive tendering. The most powerful confederations appear to have operated from Newcastle, Sunderland and West Hartlepool. By refusing to tender except on a collective basis within their own areas, these cartels attempted to push building costs even higher than the already inflated level. The Sunderland federation, for example, submitted a tender to the rural district council of about £1,300 per house, at the same time as a builder outside the group was quoting about £950 per house.<sup>62</sup> Similarly, the Newcastle federation, which had originally quoted the Gateshead council a figure of £1,300 per house, was prompted by fear of outside competition to drop its own price to £950 only a fortnight later.<sup>63</sup> Fortunately, although the action of the federated builders slowed down the process of letting a contract, it did not usually result in the payment of excessive prices. The Ministry of Health's Housing Commissioners would not sanction acceptance of unreasonable group tenders<sup>64</sup> and it was usually possible, after a time, for the council

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61. See, for example, South Shields CB Housing Committee Minutes, 30 November 1920, STLS.

62. Sunderland RD Council Minutes, 10 August 1920, T&WCRO: SDR.

63. Gateshead CB Housing Committee Minutes, 28 May 1920 and 11 June 1920, GLS.

64. See, for example, South Shields CB Housing Committee Minutes, 11 May 1920, STLS.

to find a willing non-federated builder in the locality<sup>65</sup> or even from outside the county.<sup>66</sup> Ultimately, the action of the federated builders returned on them with an unforeseen vengeance: not only did they lose work to outside contractors, but they also helped to promote the first direct labour schemes. As the Housing Committee of Stockton-on-Tees reported after a visit to the West Hartlepool direct labour scheme, the council there had taken the initiative because of '... the excessive prices at first put in by the Builders, and the apparent ease with which the same [were] reduced, at various meetings with the Housing Commissioner, to a sum per house considerably lower than the original price.'<sup>67</sup>

One interesting result of the shortage of labour and materials during the Addison Act period was the encouragement which it gave to the use of new methods of housebuilding. By far the most important break with traditional methods in County Durham was the use of the Dorman Long construction system. This had been developed by Dorman Long & Co in a housing estate built near Redcar for its own workers (and unimaginatively christened 'Dormanstown'). The company then began to make a commercial venture of the system, selling kits of steel girders to local authorities, who could have them bolted together on site and fitted out with walls and floors fashioned from concrete slabs.<sup>68</sup> Most of the more energetic councils in County Durham sent parties on guided tours of Dormanstown and most councillors were impressed with what they saw.<sup>69</sup> Consequently,

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65. In the example of Sunderland RDC quoted above, the contract went to a small builder operating in the rural district instead of to the larger federated firms based in the Borough itself. (Sunderland RD Council Minutes, loc cit.)
66. Easington RDC managed to break its deadlock with the Sunderland and West Hartlepool federations by negotiating separately with a builder from Leeds (see Housing Committee Minutes for March 1920, DCRO: RD/Ea).
67. Stockton MB Housing Committee Minutes, 12 November 1920, CCRO. The same considerations had prompted the use of direct labour by Easington RDC (see Housing Committee Minutes, 6 April 1920, DCRO: RD/Ea).
68. Ministry of Health, Housing, 22 December 1919, p 164.
69. Only the delegation from Stockton considered that the steel and concrete houses '... hardly appeared suitable' (Stockton MB Housing Committee Minutes, 21 November 1919, CCRO).



ILLUSTRATION 4-3 Pringle Place, New Brancepeth. A through-passage was the standard Tudor Walters method of improving rear access to blocks of four or more houses.



ILLUSTRATION 4-4 Dorlonco Villas, Meadowfield. This second example from the Addison Act stock of Brandon UDC shows a pair of the ill-fated steel and concrete houses assembled from kits supplied by Dorman Long & Co.

with encouragement from the Housing Commissioner, several councils erected 'Dorlonco' houses. Though no cheaper than more conventional dwellings built in this period, they could be completed in a much shorter time, the Ministry of Health estimate being nine weeks.<sup>70</sup>

Unfortunately, the Dorlonco experiment was not a success. As some councillors had observed on their visit to Dormanstown, the houses were liable to cracking and dampness.<sup>71</sup> The Ministry's Inspector conceded that there was '... a certain amount of "sweating"... which might be mistaken for dampness by unenlightened members of a visiting delegation.'<sup>72</sup> In fact the problem was far more serious than mere perspiration and ten to fifteen years later all the Dorlonco houses built in Durham needed extensive repairs. As the Surveyor to Chester-le-Street UDC reported in 1936, the cracking of the concrete slabs not only caused dampness but also exposed the steel frame to rust. The only lasting solution was to encase each house in a shell of traditional brick, at a cost of £120 a time.<sup>73</sup> Such drastic action had already become necessary to Dorlonco houses in Felling, Brandon and Auckland Rural District.

It was probably because of these early failures, and of the falling cost of traditional building methods, that no further attempt was made between the wars by councils in County Durham to experiment with new construction ideas. Although some large towns (notably London) built some low-rise blocks of flats in the 1930s,<sup>74</sup> it was quite rare even

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70. Minute dated 8 May 1920 in PRO: HLG 49/11. It was possible in the difficult conditions of 1920 for construction by traditional methods to take over a year.

71. Ibid.

72. Minute dated 14 May 1920 in PRO: HLG 49/11.

73. Chester-le-Street UDC Housing Committee Minutes, 1 October 1936, CDC.

74. See illustrations in H Quigley and I Goldie, Housing and Slum Clearance in London (London, 1934).

for the borough councils in County Durham to depart from the new 'Tudor Walters' tradition of two-storey houses. Nevertheless, there was one peculiarity of construction sometimes followed in the Durham coalfield areas. This was the special strengthening of foundations to minimise the effect of mining subsidence, and either involved reinforcement of brick foundations with concrete or the use of a ferro-concrete 'raft' on which a house could safely be perched.<sup>75</sup> Where the possibility of the subsidence of unconsolidated mine workings exists nowadays, the solution favoured by modern technology is to inject the sub-soil with a grout mixture.<sup>76</sup>

In the rush to press ahead with building schemes under the Addison Act, some councils tried to make ambitious use of the local railway system, extending it as near as possible to building sites in order to reduce delay in the supply of materials. Both Brandon and Stockton made such attempts: the former wanted to arrange with a colliery to use its private sidings, extended to the council's building site at Meadowfield,<sup>77</sup> and the latter had the bold idea of running a 700-yard track from the Haverton Hill line, ending in a 100-yard loop to allow the speedy return of empty trucks from the site.<sup>78</sup> Both plans were later dropped, because the prevailing shortage of labour and materials also affected railway construction and made it prohibitively expensive. More successful was the Borough Engineer of South Shields, who ingeniously arranged for sidings at Tyne Dock to be connected to the town's tramway system.<sup>79</sup> There were very few attempts to exploit the railways after 1920, presumably because

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75. See, for example, Easington RDC Housing Committee Minutes, 24 July 1919, DCRO: RD/Ea.

76. Master Builder, 1976, vol 21, p 13.

77. Brandon UD Council Minutes, 1 December 1919, DCRO: UD/BB.

78. Stockton MB Housing Committee Minutes, 9 July 1920, CCRO.

79. South Shields CB Housing Committee Minutes, 1 December 1919, STLS.

materials became more easily available locally and road haulage developed considerably in the 1920s and 1930s.

It was sometimes possible for a council to avoid the difficulties inherent in construction projects simply by buying and converting existing property. Only very rarely did this involve taking over inhabited buildings,<sup>80</sup> for the theory behind national housing policies of the 1920s demanded additions to the total housing stock. There were cases, however, of war-surplus buildings being converted for use by council tenants. One example is that of a block of disused barracks bought by Barnard Castle UDC in 1930 and converted to provide 25 dwellings.<sup>81</sup> Darlington and Ryton, on the other hand, purchased some less substantial ex-army huts which could be moved and re-assembled to provide temporary accommodation.<sup>82</sup> The most significant case, however, is that of the takeover of more than 600 two and three-bedroom dwellings contained in huts at Birtley.<sup>83</sup> These had been run up during the First World War to house a colony of Belgian refugees who had been put to work in the Birtley munitions factory. After the war, when the refugees had been repatriated, the huts were largely taken over by squatters.<sup>84</sup> Management of the buildings was apparently assumed in 1924 by Chester-le-Street RDC,<sup>85</sup> which eventually purchased the site from the Government in 1932 in order to demolish and rebuild.<sup>86</sup> By that time, according to one councillor, the dwellings were '... just wooden shacks, red hot in summer, freezing cold

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80. One example is the purchase of a bungalow by Easington RDC (Housing Committee Minutes, 11 October 1927, DCRO: RD/Ea).

81. Barnard Castle UD Council Minutes, 8 April 1930, DCRO: UD/BC.

82. Darlington CB, Report of Housing Committee, 24 March 1920, DCRO: CB/Da, and the Statement made by Ryton UDC to the Royal Commission on Local Government on Tyneside, July 1935, GLS.

83. I am grateful to Mr T S Marshall of the Gateshead Local Studies Department for the use of his unpublished article, Elizabethville, the Belgian Colony, 1915-18.

84. See Section B of the previous chapter.

85. Chester-le-Street RDC, Architect's Report, 1 May 1924, CDC.

86. Newcastle Journal, 22 July 1932.

in winter, damp, and with primitive cooking ranges'.<sup>87</sup>

Another way of avoiding the problems inherent in a major construction scheme was to persuade another body to do the building. No council in County Durham was able to convince the Ministry of Health in 1919 that the housing needs of the district could be met solely by the efforts of private enterprise. Thus no council could avoid all of the responsibilities imposed by the Addison Act. Nevertheless, one council - Hebburn - managed to pass responsibility for construction of its 1919 Act estates to another public body - the Office of Works.<sup>88</sup> This was a rare instance of central government assistance in project management. It was overshadowed in the late 1930s by the intervention of the North Eastern Housing Association, which (as we saw in Section 3C above) was set up by the National Government to relieve local authorities of the financial burden both of building and of running their own housing schemes. About half of the local authorities in County Durham relied to some extent on the Association, which built about 7,000 houses in their stead under the Housing Acts of the 1930s.

After the period of building under the Addison Act, when a number of contracts were let to firms based outside the county, the great bulk of contract business went to local builders. In fact it even became unusual for local authorities to let contracts to firms based at any great distance from their own particular area. This was mainly a reflection of the steady market, for in stable conditions most firms were reluctant to tender for contracts advertised in an inconveniently distant district and the inconvenience was likely, in any case, to dictate a tender price unacceptable to the council. Building contracts did not, however, necessarily go to the lowest bidder. Although the

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87. Northern Echo, 23 November 1932.

88. Hebburn UDC Housing Committee Minutes, 7 October 1920, T&WCRO: HBU.

Ministry of Health would not allow councils to accept, for example, the tender of a local builder in favour of a lower bid from an outsider,<sup>89</sup> local authorities still had to ensure that a contractor would be able to do the job properly. Not all successful tenderers were suitable contractors: for example, Easington RDC had to cancel two contracts because the building firms failed to produce securities<sup>90</sup> and Gateshead had the misfortune to engage a builder from Stanley whose creditors intervened after six months' work to prevent the contract being completed.<sup>91</sup>

There were cases, perhaps like the one just quoted, where builders submitted dangerously low tenders in order to clinch a contract. On the other hand, it was possible for someone with inside knowledge of current tender levels to play the system to his own advantage. One such person was the Chairman of the Durham City Housing Committee, whose finely-judged tendering earned his building firm at least one contract with the Durham Rural District Council.<sup>92</sup> Several other councils had members with business interests in building firms but in most cases their knowledge of the trade was put to positive use in housing committees. Only in Gateshead, it seems, did a private builder and landlord try to use his position on the council to prevent a housing programme getting off the ground.<sup>93</sup>

In the same way as the distribution of building contracts settled

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89. See Hetton UDC Housing Committee Minutes, 18 May 1932, T&WCRO: HTU.  
 90. Easington RDC Housing Committee Minutes, 7 December 1920, DCRO: RD/Ea.  
 91. Gateshead CB Housing Committee Minutes, 24 January 1929, GLS.  
 92. Durham County Advertiser, 9 September 1932. This gentleman was also leader of the 'Moderate' group on the County Council made some useful propaganda from this case by undercutting the RDC's direct labour estimate as well as those of other tenderers.  
 93. North Mail, 17 April 1919 and 3 July 1919.

down after the period of the Addison scheme, so did their size and form. Whereas 1919 Act contracts might cover from four houses<sup>94</sup> to one thousand,<sup>95</sup> the standard number in most medium-sized districts settled down later to about fifty houses per contract. This was partly due to the Ministry of Health's policy in 1921 of taking advantage of falling prices by only sanctioning smaller contracts - a policy to which the Ministry clung for several more years in a general attempt to control local authority programmes more closely. But it also emerged that smaller contracts were convenient for many councils in a practical sense; the councils' only fear was that changes in Government policy might preclude later instalments of housing. Similarly, the conditions of contracts also hardened into a form which generally suited most parties. After some attempts during the Addison period to ride out the vagaries of the market with forms of prime-cost contracts (in which the council and the contractor would share any savings or any extra costs on an agreed price), the standard form soon became that of a simple fixed-price agreement.

Some idea of the course of building costs in County Durham may be obtained from Figure 4-5, in which the average contract price for a three-bedroom 'non-parlour' house<sup>96</sup> is compared with national figures. Unfortunately, as the letting of housing contracts became an increasingly routine matter after 1919, there is insufficient local evidence after about 1926 to allow worthwhile comparison with the national averages. In the early 1920s, however, it is clear that contract prices in County Durham were generally higher than in the rest of England and Wales. This is particularly noticeable in the early stages of the Addison scheme. It

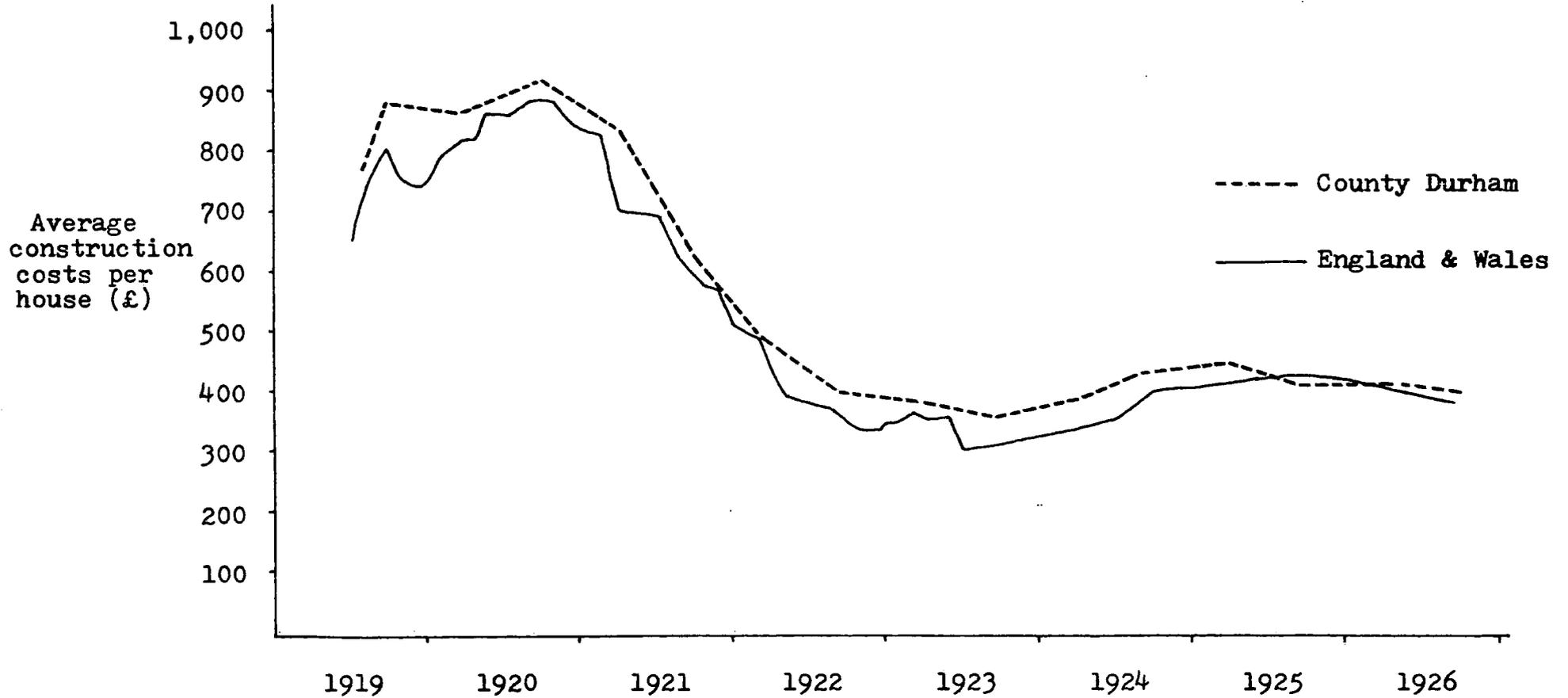
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94. Barnard Castle RD Council Minutes, 15 December 1920, DCRO: RD/BC.

95. South Shields CB Housing Committee Minutes, 10 August 1920, STLS.

96. The most common type of council house for most of the inter-war period (see Section E of this chapter).

**FIGURE 4-5 Cost of Building a Three-Bedroom 'Non-Parlour' Council House by Private Contract, 1919-1926**



is difficult to speculate on whether or not the scarcity of labour and materials was any more acute in Durham than in other regions at this time, but one factor may have been the involvement of contractors from outside the county: their prices may have included a 'long-distance' element which would have been absent if tenders had been submitted by local, non-federated builders. The evidence which is available for the late 1920s and the 1930s suggest that prices in County Durham grew closer to the national averages but still remained slightly above them. A possible, though again speculative, explanation for this may be the pattern of urban settlement in the Durham coalfield. The scattering of small mining villages, which were in fact urban in character and had a high demand for council housing, was in contrast with the concentrated larger settlements usual in most other regions, where the larger building firms were more conveniently centred. Thus in many parts of County Durham it is possible that building firms attracted greater overheads than elsewhere in getting skilled men, building materials and plant onto site. Unfortunately, there is not enough evidence to test this possibility with a satisfactory comparison between the Durham coalfield and the towns of South Tyneside.

In conclusion to this section, it is interesting to consider further an aspect of the building process mentioned near the beginning - the role of the architect. Useful insights into this topic have been obtained from a previously unused source - the papers of John Wilson Hays, senior partner of the firm of Hays and Gray based between the wars at Wingate (in the Easington Rural District) with branches in Hartlepool and North Shields.<sup>97</sup> Hays was by far the most widely employed architect of council housing in the County Durham area. He worked mainly in the Easington

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97. The Wilson Hays papers are in the Durham County Record Office and were uncatalogued at the time of use.

district but also designed schemes for the councils of Stockton, Tanfield, Spennymoor, Brandon and Willington (as well as Whitby, in North Yorkshire).

Hays' main housing post was a salaried position with Easington RDC, which in 1927 was earning him £900 per year and an annual allowance of £150 for office and travelling expenses.<sup>98</sup> Such an arrangement was unusual; it was more common for architects to be commissioned for a specific scheme and paid for completed work on standard rates negotiated between the Ministry of Health and the Royal Institute of British Architects. All of Hays' other engagements appear to have been on the latter basis. Some of the larger districts, however, actually conferred housing duties on an existing member of staff - usually a Borough Engineer or Surveyor. This was successfully done in Sunderland, South Shields and Jarrow,<sup>99</sup> but did not work for Brandon, who had to call in Hays after the housing work of the council's own Surveyor had proved unsatisfactory.<sup>100</sup> Plans to set up an Architect's Department in Darlington were only dropped when a committee of local architects lobbied the Housing Committee and offered to work for less than the RIBA rates.<sup>101</sup>

It is perhaps understandable that architects engaged on commission and who appeared to owe their comfortable circumstances to the housing needs of poor districts were held in suspicion by the more radical members of local councils. Professional fees, though on a scale approved by the Ministry of Health, were often questioned: for example, Hays was criticised by a Willington councillor (himself a building contractor)

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98. Note dated 11 October 1927 in Wilson Hays papers, DCRO.
99. Sunderland CB Council Minutes, 9 July 1919, SLS; South Shields CB Housing Committee Minutes, 20 March 1919, STLS; and Jarrow Borough Engineer's Reports in T&WCRO: JRU.
100. Brandon UD Council Minutes, 4 July 1921 and 25 July 1921, DCRO: UD/BB.
101. Darlington CB Housing Committee Minutes, 28 July 1919, DCRO: CB/Da.

for claiming management expenses of £300 when '... the amount of time spent [by the architect] on the housing scheme is not more than two and a half days a month.'<sup>102</sup> The councillors of Tanfield were equally sceptical, since Hays' fee for 24 Addison Act houses of £1,400 was greater than the actual costs of the council's own Surveyor (£1,306) in supervising the construction of a subsequent 570 houses.<sup>103</sup>

In the Easington district itself, Hays appears from about 1934 to have been under heavy, though usually clumsy, attack from several councillors. In 1934 an attempt was made to implicate him and his building manager in a short-measure fraud perpetrated by a contracted builder's merchant: these accusations ended in one councillor having to pay damages in the Assize Court.<sup>104</sup> Hays had clearly been justified in telling the council he had '... not deserved such expressions as "Damned Liar", "Larceny", "Duping", and "Horatio Bottomley".'<sup>105</sup> In 1935 a highly implausible accusation of malpractice was made by another councillor, concerning the building by the council (on an agency basis) of an estate of aged miners' homes.<sup>106</sup> Hays was eventually given notice in 1938 in such peculiar circumstances that the Minister of Health himself expressed displeasure with the council.<sup>107</sup> In his eagerness to obtain business Hays was not above negotiating with a council faction prior to accepting a commission from the official housing committee,<sup>108</sup> but no credible evidence of dishonesty was ever brought against him. To his

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102. Durham County Advertiser, 17 April 1931.

103. Northern Echo, 20 July 1937. It is probable, however, that Hays' fee also covered a certain amount of nugatory work.

104. Letter from Hays to NALGO Headquarters, 7 September 1937, Wilson Hays papers, DCRO.

105. Statement by Hays to Easington RDC, 26 November 1934, in Wilson Hays papers, DCRO.

106. Letter from Hays to NALGO Branch Secretary, 14 August 1935, in Wilson Hays papers, DCRO.

107. Easington RDC Housing Committee Minutes, 10 November 1938, DCRO: RD/Ea.

108. He accepted such an invitation from the Labour councillors of Spennymoor (letter dated 14 April 1934, in Wilson Hays papers, DCRO).

credit stand over 4,000 good inter-war council houses, or about 7% of the total stock in County Durham. His papers reveal a certain feeling of personal victimisation, but he was, rather, the victim of a wider process in the local government of County Durham which had in fact been accelerated by the development of council housing - the movement away from part-time, self-employed consultants to corporate local authority organisation, from the private architect to the public official and, as we shall see in the following section, from the private building firm to the direct labour team.

#### D. Direct Labour

The direct employment of building labour by district councils was in one sense an extension of the philosophy behind council housing itself. Just as State intervention in the housing market had broken the hold of private developers and landlords, direct labour took the principle of circumventing the profit motive right down to the construction process. One argument for the use of direct labour was that, assuming a saving of the profit element charged by a private builder on contract, houses would be built more cheaply and thus either council tenants would pay lower rents or tax-payers and ratepayers would pay less in subsidies. But sometimes councils had the further aim of ensuring that local labour would be employed on housing schemes. Some councils in County Durham actually developed a systematic policy of using direct labour to reduce local unemployment and to increase the welfare benefit entitlements of the unemployed. Sometimes, as we shall see below, this function of direct labour was inconsistent with the original concern to keep construction costs to the minimum: the element of contractor's profit was increasingly replaced by the cost of an additional, though not unjustifiable, social policy.

As mentioned in the previous section, the first impetus to the use of direct labour in County Durham was given by the attempt of certain local builders in 1919 and 1920 to operate cartels. The Ministry of Health had at first been rather sceptical about direct labour, informing its regional Housing Commissioners that 'it is not at present intended that a Commissioner should suggest recourse to this method ....'<sup>109</sup> The Ministry was forced to modify its attitude when it emerged that councils which were obliged to negotiate with a federation of builders could rarely

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109. Ministry of Health memorandum to Housing Commissioners, No 34, 21 August 1919, PRO: HIG 31/1.

obtain a tender acceptable to the Housing Commissioner. The first council compelled to take the initiative in seeking approval for a direct labour scheme was West Hartlepool, which decided to approach the Ministry in March 1920.<sup>110</sup> In the next few months several other districts followed suit. Seaham Harbour UDC, for example, decided to build fifty houses by direct labour, 'after considering tenders received and conferring with the local Builders' Federation [and] having failed to get a price fixed which the Housing Commissioner could approve....',<sup>111</sup>

After several early successes, direct labour was established in some districts as an important element in the housing programme for the rest of the inter-war period. In other districts it made no appearance at all. None of the genuinely rural districts ever used direct labour on its (necessarily limited) housing schemes. But of the larger towns, only Stockton appears to have rejected the method out of hand.<sup>112</sup> Most of the main urban centres and nearly all the coalfield districts used direct labour, although in widely varying degrees.<sup>113</sup> Details of the number of houses built by this method and the number of men employed are only available for a few districts, but at least an impression can be formed of the scale of activity over the whole county. In the Easington district, where direct labour was much favoured, 547 of the council houses standing in 1927 (or 47% of the total built since 1919)

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110. West Hartlepool CB Housing Committee Minutes, 31 March 1920, HBC.

111. Seaham Harbour UDC, Report of Housing Committee, 8 June 1920, DCRO: UD/S

112. Stockton MB Council Minutes, 7 October 1924, CCRO.

113. The following councils are known definitely to have used direct labour at some point in the inter-war period:- the boroughs of Gateshead, Jarrow, Sunderland, Stockton and West Hartlepool; the urban districts of Whickham, Felling, Hebburn, Blaydon, Benfieldside, Tanfield, Annfield Plain, Stanley, Chester-le-Street, Washington, Houghton, Seaham Harbour, Willington and Spennymoor; and the rural districts of Lanchester, Chester-le-Street, Houghton, Durham, Easington and Sedgelyfield.

had been erected by this method. The proportion of the direct labour contribution in the district had risen steadily over the period: it accounted for 16% of the houses built under the 1919 Act, 39% under the 1923 Act and 70% under the 1924 Act.<sup>114</sup> In Chester-le-Street Urban District, where direct labour had got off to a slower start, 211 houses in 1932 (or 32% of the total) had been built by this method,<sup>115</sup> but in Felling the number by that time was 453 (a proportion of 56%).<sup>116</sup> Some idea of the numbers employed is obtained from the fact that in 1926 Jarrow had 67 men working on direct labour schemes (or 80% of the total workforce engaged on council house building)<sup>117</sup> and in 1927 Gateshead was employing 400 (and no private contractors).<sup>118</sup>

There was rarely any doubt in the 1920s but that the use of direct labour achieved considerable savings over private contracts. As can be seen from Figure 4-6, the savings were greatest during the time of the Addison programme, a period of unstable building costs when contractors were obviously inclined to include a wide safety margin in their tenders. In West Hartlepool houses completed by direct labour in 1921 were more than 25% cheaper than the contract price, but for schemes completed in 1922 the saving had narrowed to 13% on 'parlour' houses and 6% on 'non-parlour' houses.<sup>119</sup> By 1926 the Washington Housing Committee found that the average saving on recent schemes was about 7%.<sup>120</sup> As Figure 4-6 indicates, savings in the mid-1920s were on average between 5% and 10% of current contract prices. One recorded case in the 1920s

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114. Easington RDC Housing Committee Minutes, 11 October 1927, DCRO: RD/Ea.

115. Letter dated 7 November 1932 from the Clerk of the council, in PRO: HLG 49/152.

116. Felling UD Council Minutes, 3 August 1932, GLS.

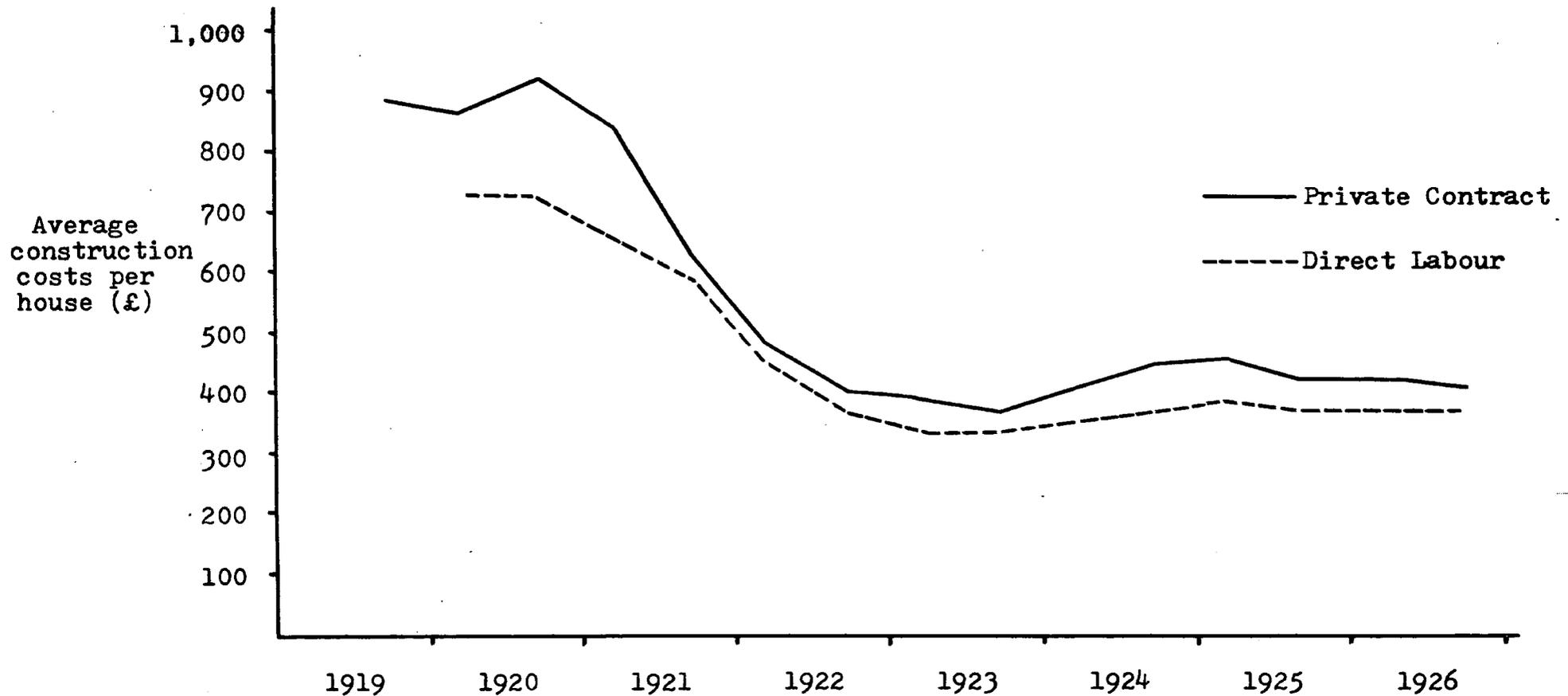
117. Jarrow Borough Engineer's report for May 1926, T&WCRO: JRU.

118. Gateshead CB Housing Committee Minutes, 20 May 1927, GLS.

119. West Hartlepool UDC Housing Committee Minutes, 26 February 1924, HBC.

120. Washington UDC Housing Committee Minutes, 6 April 1926, T&WCRO: WGU.

FIGURE 4-6 Cost of Building a Three-Bedroom 'Non-Parlour' Council House  
by Private Contract and Direct Labour  
[County Durham, 1919-1926]



of direct labour costs exceeding the lowest tender price for the job concerns the Carr Hill estate in Gateshead. Following a complaint by the National Federation of Building Trades Employers, the Ministry of Health found that costs for one batch of houses were '... about £1,500 more than the lowest tender received.' In fact this only represented an overspending of about 3% and the council had, in any case, been '... doubtful about the contractor's capacity to carry out the work.'<sup>121</sup> The only other recorded case of overspending in the 1920s concerns Blaydon UDC, which exceeded its own direct labour estimates during the Addison scheme by an average of £176 per house.<sup>122</sup> This was viewed by the Ministry with more concern, but it is now impossible to ascertain by how much (if at all) the final direct labour costs exceeded the lowest private tender figures.

In the 1930s cases of overspending on direct labour schemes were much more common, though it cannot be disproved that the system still produced savings overall. Unfortunately, as with details of local building costs generally, there is very little information on direct labour prices in the 1930s. This is largely because building both by contract and direct labour had by then become so much more of a routine matter that a decreasing amount of detail was included in records of council and committee meetings. Because ~~cases~~ cases of overspending were not routine they received disproportionate attention, in council records as well as in the press. The general position, however, is probably well represented by the example of Chester-le-Street UDC. This was a council which the Ministry of Health viewed with some suspicion of financial and administrative incompetence.<sup>123</sup> But, as the

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121. Ministry of Health minute dated August 1926, in PRO: HIG 49/200.

122. Note of Meeting, dated 21 May 1924, in PRO: HIG 48/49.

123. See, for example, minutes dated 6 April and 21 December 1927, in PRO: HIG 49/152.

council's figures for 232 direct labour houses showed in 1935, there had been a saving of 11% on original estimates, which themselves had necessarily been less than the lowest tender prices.<sup>124</sup>

On the other hand, a number of cases of overspending could be cited, but probably the most serious involved Felling UDC. By 1939 the council realised that it had exceeded its direct labour estimates by £33,782 over a total of 1,129 houses - equivalent to an overspending of about 9%.<sup>125</sup> The result of this rather belated realisation was a further increase in what was already the highest local rate levied for housing purposes in the whole county. This example, and no doubt several others, may have arisen from administrative inefficiency (that is, from bad estimating) rather than from inefficiency on the part of the direct labour team itself. But a problem common to all councils using direct labour was the great revival in the building industry from the early 1930s. Tender prices became much keener and, since councils could obtain Ministry of Health approval for direct labour only by submitting an estimate lower than the best private tender for an individual scheme, this put more pressure on direct labour managers to submit unrealistic estimates. Another problem which the building boom created for direct labour organisations was the difficulty of retaining the most skilled and productive workmen. Given a staff management policy traditionally less flexible than in the private sector, local authorities could not compete with the offers of overtime, bonuses and other concessions made by private contractors with plenty of business. Thus it was that Easington RDC, for example, found itself in 1936 with an acute shortage of bricklayers and was forced to transfer responsibility

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124. Chester-le-Street UDC Housing Committee Minutes, 7 February 1935, CDC.

125. Felling UD Council Minutes, 4 April 1939, GIS.

for a hundred new houses from its direct labour department to a private contractor.<sup>126</sup>

A more serious problem in Easington, however, was a fall in the productivity of its direct labour team on those houses which it was able to build. As the Ministry of Health observed, the labour hours spent on building one of the council's two-bedroom houses had risen from 413 in 1933 to 796 in 1935-36.<sup>127</sup> The council could not dispute that this was due to '... the employment of men who had been out of work for a long time.' There had been a deliberate policy of picking the requisite number of unskilled men from the Labour Exchange lists of unemployed, engaging them for a period of eighteen weeks (the minimum period needed to establish entitlement to State unemployment benefits) and then replacing them with a new batch of local unemployed from the Exchange. Having received a deputation of councillors from Easington,

... the Ministry expressed the view that it was impossible to combine the relief of unemployment with housing schemes. In one or two other places where this had been tried the Ministry had been obliged to stop the practice owing to the increased cost of houses, e.g. Blaydon. At Felling the cost had risen to such an extent that the Council could not compete with the contractor's prices. (128)

Another example which the Ministry might have cited was that of Jarrow, where the Borough Engineer was directed in 1933 to 'employ labourers who have not been on the job before.'<sup>129</sup> It was undoubtedly true that this policy did not promote efficiency in building, but it was understandable that some councils should strive to kill the two birds of bad housing and unemployment with one of the few stones to hand.

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126. Easington RDC Housing Committee Minutes, 24 August 1936, DCRO: RD/Ea.

127. Report of deputation to Ministry, in Easington RDC Housing Committee Minutes, 6 February 1936, DCRO: RD/Ea.

128. Ibid.

129. Borough Engineer's report for September 1933, T&WCRO: JRJ.

There were other ways in which a council might attempt to mitigate local unemployment. Brandon had been operating on its road work schemes the system described above - whereby the Surveyor's Department would hire local men long enough for them to obtain the requisite number of insurance stamps to claim unemployment benefit - some years before it appears in any housing records.<sup>130</sup> It was also possible for a council to reach an informal agreement with a private contractor as to the proportion of local men employed on housing schemes. Hetton UDC even managed to have a clause written into one private housing contract which provided for '90% of local labour on all classes of work.'<sup>131</sup>

Even on their own direct labour teams, however, councils did not have complete control of who could be employed. There were some teams in the 1920s in which union membership was obligatory (for example, at Annfield Plain)<sup>132</sup> and there were problems in the 1930s when unionised labourers in some teams resisted dilution by the temporary non-union men drafted from the Labour Exchange. A local union branch in Dunston (in the Whickham urban district) complained bitterly about '... the pernicious filching of the loveliness [sic] of our members'<sup>133</sup> and eventually, after a week's strike, forced an agreement that the council would 'unofficially arrange' for all temporary labourers to join the union.<sup>134</sup> Some councils had a longer tradition of conciliating their direct labour forces: Chester-le-Street RDC, for example, was content in 1924 to grant workers' demands for a guaranteed 44-hour week and a special holiday each May Day.<sup>135</sup>

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130. Brandon UD Council Minutes, 3 November 1930, DCRO: UD/BB.

131. Hetton UDC Housing Committee Minutes, 27 April 1931, T&WCRO: HTC.

132. Annfield Plain UDC Housing Committee Minutes, 17 August 1926, DCRO: UD/Sta.

133. Letter quoted in Whickham UDC Housing Committee Minutes, 19 March 1935, GLS.

134. Whickham UDC Housing Committee Minutes, 3 March 1937, GLS.

135. Chester-le-Street RDC, Minutes of the Housing Workers Control Committee, 16 May 1924, CDC.

It is reasonable to conclude that the direct labour system worked well for most of the councils which used it in the inter-war period. It usually produced savings from which tenants or local ratepayers as a whole derived benefit.<sup>136</sup> Even when, in the 1930s, some councils distorted the financial picture by using direct labour to reduce the distress caused by high unemployment, the system can still be said to have worked to the advantage of the local community. There were some, like the 'Moderate' or ratepayers' group on the Gateshead council, who objected to direct labour on principle, to avoid '... the usual tangle of affairs when the cobbler leaves his last and the miner wants to oust the builder from his legitimate calling.'<sup>137</sup> The Moderates' official view of the direct labour team, propagated in their free newspaper, is captured in the cartoon reproduced overleaf: the directly employed bricklayer dozes contentedly as the cobwebs gather around his trowel. It is not surprising, therefore, that the Moderates, having gained control of the Gateshead council in 1926, would only allow direct labour on schemes which had already started; by September 1927 about 400 men were to be laid off and the building plant put up for sale.<sup>138</sup> It is quite likely that this policy reflected the longstanding interest of private builders on the Gateshead council, but it is interesting that there is no record - in any district of County Durham - of official complaints from builders themselves that direct labour was forcing them out of business.

One serious criticism which did sometimes emerge, however, was that direct labour broadened the scope for corruption in local government, by increasing the number of jobs which councillors and officials might hold

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136. In the case of savings under the Addison scheme it was, of course, the taxpayer who gained most.

137. Gateshead and District Municipal News, April 1930.

138. Gateshead CB Housing Committee Minutes, 30 September 1927, GLS.

ILLUSTRATION 4-5



'GATESHEAD SOCIALISTS  
will  
RE-START "DIRECT LABOUR"  
if YOU let them'

Cartoon reproduced from the  
Gateshead & District Municipal News  
(August 1935 issue)

in their gift. The building manager at Easington reported that 'he got notes from Councillors and other people about workmen and he asked the Labour Exchange to include them' (on the list for temporary direct labour work).<sup>139</sup> In Stanley the question of 'jobbery' created far greater excitement: in one debate on the power of the building manager to engage and dismiss workmen, 'Mr Kelly, standing up and waving an arm, challenged Mr Pearson to come outside and settle it.'<sup>140</sup> It is not clear whether councillors believed that the building manager was acting dishonestly or whether he was merely standing in the way of their own patronage, for Stanley was notorious in the 1930s for blatant cases of jobbery.<sup>141</sup> In such cases, of course, the fact that some people may have abused the direct labour system is a condemnation of their dishonesty rather than of the system itself.

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139. Easington RDC Housing Committee Minutes, 24 June 1938, DCRO: RD/Ea.

140. Northern Echo, 20 July 1932.

141. For instance, councillors once found a hostile crowd of 600 waiting for them outside a meeting at which twenty posts in the Health Department had been distributed mainly among their own relatives. (Durham County Advertiser, 16 August 1935.)

### E. Planning and Design

The quality of inter-war council housing schemes represented an enormous advance on the standards of earlier working-class housing. This improvement was particularly marked in the North East of England, for the existing standards in this region were (as we have seen in Chapter 2) so much lower than in the rest of the country. Some idea of the improvement can be obtained by considering simply the average number of rooms in a dwelling at this time: in County Durham this figure was 3.89 at the 1921 Census (5.14 in England and Wales as a whole), while the Addison houses then being erected were mainly of five and six rooms. As well as being generally superior to the existing working-class housing in the private sector, inter-war council schemes were an improvement on the estates built by local authorities before the First World War. Some of the pre-war council houses - the estate at Ryhope is a good example<sup>142</sup> - were designed very well, but they generally followed the traditional terrace style and were smaller and more densely packed than the inter-war variety. Apart from any differences of architectural treatment, the pre-war houses were usually of four rooms and built to a density of between 20 and 25 per acre;<sup>143</sup> standard inter-war council houses were of five rooms and stood about ten to an acre.

This great improvement in quality was largely the result of a report in 1918 by a Government Committee chaired by Sir John Tudor Walters.<sup>144</sup> The details of the report have been adequately described elsewhere,<sup>145</sup>

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142. See Illustration 2-24.

143. Average density of schemes in County Durham approved by the Local Government Board in 1913-14. (Local Government Board, Annual Report, 1913-14.)

144. Report of the Departmental Committee on Questions of Building Construction in Connection with the Provision of Dwellings for the Working Classes in England, Wales and Scotland. PP 1918 (Cd 9191) vol vi p 391.

145. For recent examples, see C Powell, 'Fifty Years of Progress: the Influence of the Tudor Walters Report on British Public Authority Housing' in Built Environment, 1974, pp 532-5, and J Burnett, A Social History of Housing, 1815-1970 (Newton Abbot, 1978).

and it is sufficient here to note that its approach drew heavily on the example of model towns and the garden city movement before the First World War. The planning ideals of such progressive housing architects as Raymond Unwin - himself a member of the Tudor Walters committee - clearly emerged in the report, with its emphasis on light and spacious house designs, low-density development and healthy out-of-town sites. The report was forward-looking in nearly every respect, its recommendations covering such matters as the co-ordination of public transport with estate growth and such technical points as the manufacture of standardised and interchangeable building components and the use of waste energy from power stations to run district heating schemes. The standards of house design recommended by the report (and subsequently incorporated in the Ministry of Health's Manual for local authorities)<sup>146</sup> stand up favourably to comparison with the recommended standards of the 1960s<sup>147</sup> and were actually better, in terms of living space per person, than standards 40 or 50 years later.<sup>148</sup> The Tudor Walters recommendations became, as we have seen in Chapter 1, part of the feverish 'homes for heroes' movement at the end of the war: the Government was willing to adopt these high standards in the same way that it was prepared to render generous financial assistance. It was unfortunate, however, that one effect of applying these standards was to accentuate the high cost of building under the Addison programme - and, like the subsidy itself, the full Tudor Walters ideal fell a casualty to the Government's waning enthusiasm for housing its heroes. The recommended standards for the rest of the inter-war period, which were imposed on local authorities

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146. Manual on the Preparation of State-Aided Housing Schemes (HMSO London, 1920).

147. Powell, op cit, p 533-4.

148. Ministry of Technology, Houses and People: A Review of User Studies at the Building Research Station (HMSO London, 1966) p 48-9.

by the conditions attached to an Exchequer subsidy, were pared down considerably from the original Tudor Walters recommendations.<sup>149</sup> In essence, however, they were only reductions of the 1918 designs - not fundamental revisions.

One of the major influences exerted by the Tudor Walters report was on the use made of land after the First World War. Apart from the slum redevelopment schemes of the larger towns, most inter-war council houses were built on the edge of existing settlements, or away from them entirely. An obvious reason for this was the lack of building space within the limits of existing settlements, but there were also financial and environmental factors. Peripheral sites, usually on agricultural land, were advocated because land was cheaper, and because conditions were more pleasant and physical restrictions on planning fewer, than in the case of central sites. In the mining districts of County Durham, where existing settlements were small and scattered, this policy had little impact: the limited schemes required could be grafted onto these villages and the settlement remain fairly compact. Even in the smaller towns there was no remote 'council suburb'. In Chester-le-Street, for example, where earlier residential development had taken place along a strip of land between the main street and the railway line, the local authority built its inter-war estates along the same axis on the other side of the railway: the most distant council house was still only half a mile from the town centre.<sup>150</sup> In the case of the large conurbations, however, council estates tended to be more remote. In Sunderland, for example, the main inter-war schemes were about two miles from the town

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149. Ibid.

150. See maps of urban growth in G A Nadur, Some Aspects of the Urban Geography of Chester-le-Street and Houghton-le-Spring and Other Small Urban Settlements in North Durham (unpublished Durham University PhD thesis, 1967).

centre,<sup>151</sup> while Gateshead and South Shields both had detached estates, at Wrekenton and Cleadon Park respectively. It was in these more distant estates that the low level of amenities common to much twentieth-century residential development - the lack of schools, shops and pubs - was of most significance: in 1951 Gateshead admitted that '... comparatively new housing estates are grossly uncatered for.'<sup>152</sup> The isolation of families even on these estates was not so great, however, as in the case of the largest English towns<sup>153</sup> - while in most of the mining districts of County Durham it was still but a short walk from a council estate to get a pound of liver or a pint of beer.

The Tudor Walters report also influenced the use of land within council estates themselves. Instead of following the grid-iron patterns of wide streets engendered by the old building byelaws, local authority architects were shown (by the Ministry of Health's Manual) how to lay out an estate more imaginatively, exploiting the physical configuration of the site and arranging minor roads in an interesting way. Some examples of how this advice was used in practice in County Durham are given in the accompanying estate plans (Figure 4-7), which range from the unconventional to the strictly geometrical. The houses themselves were generally laid out in blocks of two or four, although blocks of six or eight were sometimes used. The arrangement of blocks was also held to be important, in order to maintain visual interest and to make the best use of land for gardens, allotments or open spaces.<sup>154</sup> Again,

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151. See B T Robson, Urban Analysis: A Study of City Structure with Special Reference to Sunderland (Cambridge, 1969) p 97, and D A Burgess, Some Aspects of the Geography of the Ports of Sunderland, Seaham and the Hartlepoons (unpublished Durham University MA thesis, 1961) p 59.

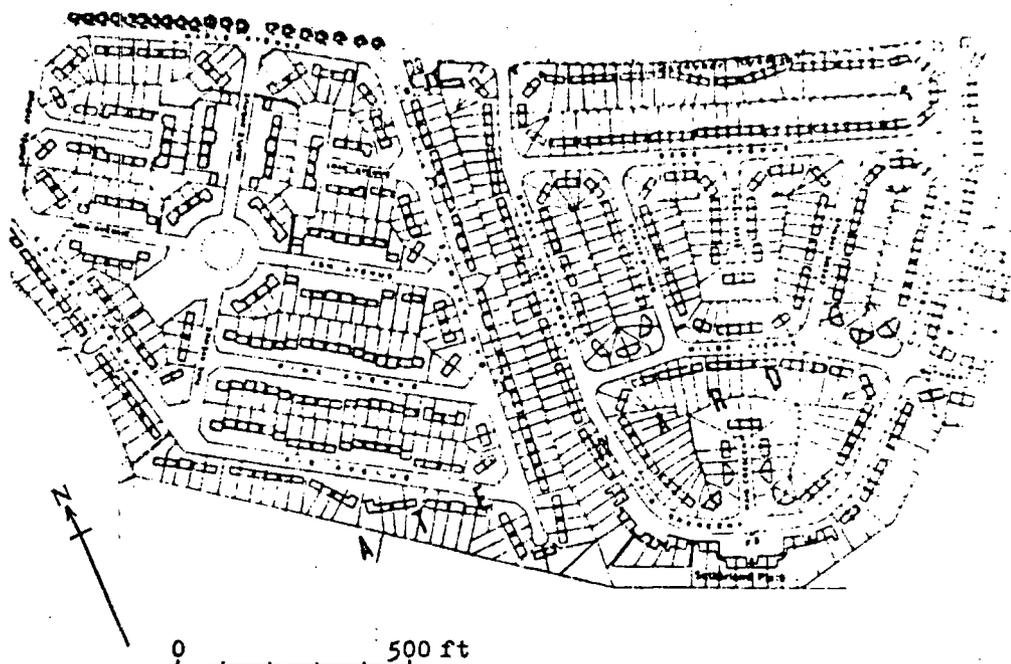
152. County Borough of Gateshead, Gateshead Development Plan, 1951 (Gateshead, 1951) p 59.

153. See R Durant, Watling: A Survey of Social Life on a New Housing Estate (London, 1939) for a study in the alienation of families on a London estate.

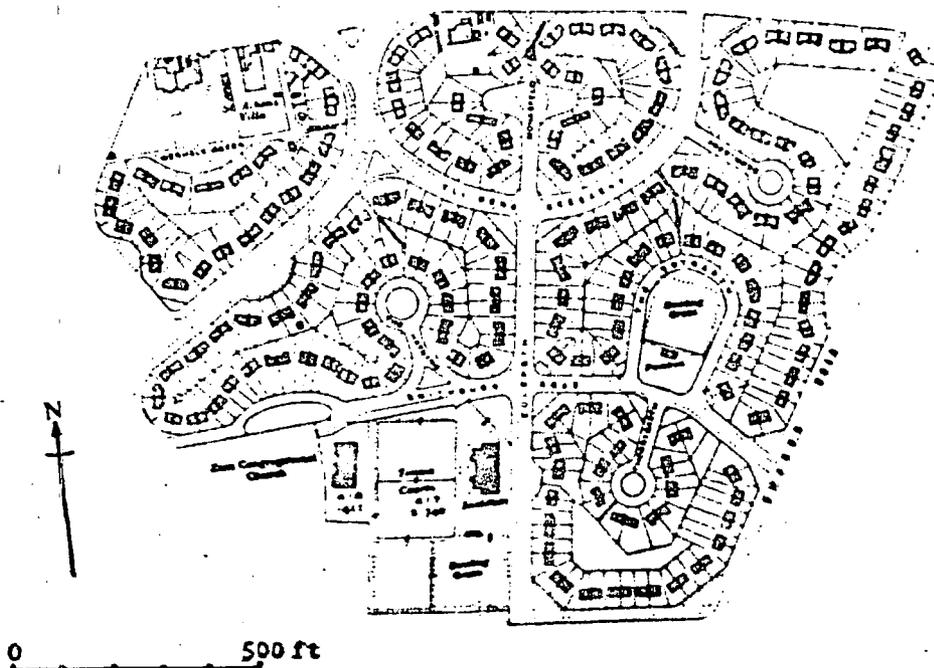
154. Even in 1938 the Ministry of Health might remind a council of the need for varied grouping and layout of house types in a particular scheme. (Letter from Ministry to Stanley UDC, dated 13 July 1938, in PRO: HLG 49/1120.)

FIGURE 4-7 Examples of Council Housing Layout in Durham and Felling

This example to the east of Durham City shows two stages of estate development - onto a geometrical council layout (in the left of the illustration) has been grafted a strictly symmetrical North Eastern Housing Association estate of the late 1930s.



This example from Felling shows a far more imaginative estate layout. Note the less formal arrangement of houses and the incorporation of open spaces and public buildings.



the extent to which this was achieved in practice may be judged from the accompanying illustrations.

The most common type of council house erected in County Durham between the wars was of the A3 variety - consisting of three bedrooms, living room, kitchen-scuttery, bathroom and water-closet. Houses of the B3 type (which had a parlour as well) and sometimes of the B4 type (which also had a fourth bedroom) were fairly common in schemes under the Addison Act and might comprise more than half of the total on a particular estate.<sup>155</sup> Under later housing schemes, however, the parlour was rarely included and the A3 type came to the fore, followed by the A2 (which was similar, but had only two bedrooms). Although the latter type of house was not favoured by the Ministry of Health,<sup>156</sup> it was widely used in County Durham because of its relative cheapness for both the council and the tenant.<sup>157</sup> Another house type more common in Durham than in most of the country was the A1 - a single-bedroom, one-storey dwelling for 'aged persons'. We have already seen in Chapter 2 that the problem of housing the elderly was particularly marked in the mining areas of the county, given the interaction of the colliery 'free house' system and the general fall in mortality from the last quarter of the nineteenth century.<sup>158</sup> The bungalows which local authorities in the county built for the benefit of the elderly owed some of their design

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155. For example, in Stockton's Addison Act estates 57% of the houses were B3 and the remainder A3. (Stockton MB Housing Committee Minutes, 14 January 1927, CCRO.)

156. See, for example, Stockton MB Housing Committee Minutes, 10 December 1920, CCRO, and Easington RDC Housing Committee Minutes, 17 November 1932, DCRO: RD/Ea.

157. For example, in four estates built in the urban district of Felling between 1929 and 1933, 69% of the houses were A2 and the remainder A3. (Felling UDC, Register of Houses 1929-33, GLS.)

158. See above, p 124. The Ministry of Health accepted that '... in many parts of the country there is a real need for dwellings of this type.' (Annual Report, 1934-35.)

to Tudor Walters principles, but they also drew on the example of the aged miners' homes which had been provided through union initiative since about the turn of the century. The least common dwelling type used by councils in County Durham between the wars was the multi-storey flat: this only made an appearance in a few town-centre slum redevelopment schemes in the later 1930s.

The facilities within council houses generally improved over the inter-war period. The installation of electricity, for example, became more common and the gas cooker was slowly taking over from the solid-fuel kitchen range. And though a post-Addison house was not likely to have a parlour, it usually sported a separate bathroom. There was no rule about fixed baths under the Addison Act, although 'when there is an adequate water supply and the structure of the house makes it practicable, the Ministry consider that baths should be provided.'<sup>159</sup> Tenants were finally denied the pleasures of the zinc tub by Neville Chamberlain, whose Act of 1923 laid down the enduring condition that houses must contain a fixed bath to qualify for subsidy. Toilet facilities were serviced, except on the more remote rural sites, by the water carriage system and were generally inside the house. Even in the 1930s, however, some local authorities were building houses with outside toilets: commenting on proposals by Lanchester RDC in 1934 for 17 new houses to be served in this way, the Ministry of Health's adviser wrote, 'I don't much like the detached w.c.'s in new housing but it is a pretty well established local method.'<sup>160</sup> In fact, not everyone was happy with an indoor toilet, especially if it was upstairs. The local Trades and Labour Council complained to the Ministry about council houses in Stockton being erected

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159. Ministry of Health, Housing, 19 July 1919, p 2.

160. Minute dated 3 October 1934, in PRO: HLG 49/1120.

with this feature: '... a workman returning from his work in his dirty clothes and boots who desires to use the w.c. should have it downstairs.' With unconscious humour the correspondents begged the Ministry to ensure in future '... that the convenience of workmen will be considered.'<sup>161</sup>

While the internal facilities of council houses tended to improve over the period, the dimensions and overall living space - as we remarked above - gradually shrank. In the 1920s the county Unionist association declaimed to the local electorate about the extravagance of 'palatial dwellings' erected under the Addison scheme<sup>162</sup> and the Ministry of Health was sometimes concerned that a few councils, like Easington, were building houses of up to 20% greater superficial area than the national recommendations. Although Easington was criticised by the area Housing Commissioner for this policy, the council stoutly refused to compromise its own high standards.<sup>163</sup> The point which the local authorities and the Ministry appreciated - but the Unionist association did not - was that the Exchequer, rather than the local ratepayer, actually footed the bill under the Addison scheme for any standards above the average. The Gateshead ratepayers' organisation was cheered, however, by the smaller houses erected under the Chamberlain and Wheatley Acts and did '... not agree with all this twaddle talked at Conferences at Newcastle and elsewhere by Gateshead Aldermen and others.' After describing one of the new council houses, which had been criticised by the local Labour party for their smallness, the ratepayers' publication concluded, 'not much like a kennel or slum house, is it? ... the tenants are delighted.'<sup>164</sup>

In the 1930s, however, the further economies of design required by

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161. Letter dated 19 December 1925, in PRO: HIG 48/227.

162. Durham County Unionist Association, Circular No 2, November 1923, DCRO: D/MCF 27.

163. Easington RDC Housing Committee Minutes, 9 December 1920, DCRO: RD/Ea.

164. Gateshead and District Municipal News, August 1929.

the Ministry of Health and dictated by the pressures of local government finance led to some rather more serious criticisms of new council houses. In 1936 the Medical Officer of Health for Houghton-le-Spring complained vehemently to the council about

... the inadequacy of the size of the bedrooms. In the smaller houses they are nothing more or less than boxes and will not take ordinary sized furniture .... There is better accommodation in some ships at sea than these rooms provide. I would advise as a minimum that bedrooms should be of regular shape and of such a size as will take ordinary furniture and leaving enough room to move about without having to jump over the bed to get from one side of the room to another. (165)

A similar complaint was made to the Ministry by the Conservative MP for Wallsend about Chester-le-Street RDC's estate at Birtley, where

'... some perfectly appalling new council houses have been erected ... they are highly unsuitable and it is impossible to get a double bed into the bedroom without putting the head of it into a cupboard.'<sup>166</sup> The MP imputed a sinister motive to the Labour-controlled local authority: 'knowing that district very well I do not put it beyond the council, either themselves or through some other method, to arrange for this unsatisfactory type of house to be built in order to demonstrate against the National Government.'<sup>167</sup> In fact, the problems were caused by a combination of economic pressure and bad design: the council had amended its plans for more recent estates.<sup>168</sup>

The standard of architecture applied to council housebuilding between the wars can be seen from the accompanying illustrations to vary considerably between districts and between individual schemes. There is no doubt that

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165. Copy of report by Medical Officer of Health to Houghton UDC, dated 16 May 1936, in PRO: HIG 48/792.

166. Letter to Ministry from Irene Ward, MP, dated 12 June 1935, in PRO: HIG 49/532.

167. Ibid.

168. Undated comments by Ministry staff, ibid.



ILLUSTRATION 4-6 Second Avenue, Chester-le-Street. Homes on a heroic scale - four-bedroom 'parlour' houses built under the Addison scheme.



ILLUSTRATION 4-8 The Crescent, Chester-le-Street. A flowering of garden city under the Addison scheme.



ILLUSTRATION 4-7 Third Avenue, Chester-le-Street. The less generous terms of the Chamberlain subsidy are reflected in the smaller size of these houses and their repetitious grouping in blocks of six.



ILLUSTRATION 4-9 Whitehill Crescent, Pelton Fell. More workaday housing by Chester-le-Street UDC under the Wheatley Act.

many Addison Act houses were designed to a high standard of domestic architecture - drawing heavily, of course, from the Tudor Walters models, but often showing good individual treatment of style and proportion. The financial constraints upon architects under other schemes, however, are only too apparent from many of the houses produced under the later housing acts. There are exceptions, of course, but in comparison with Addison Act houses many other inter-war council dwellings appear box-like, with uninteresting proportions and unrelieved features: the correspondent of The Times stressed the need in County Durham for '... more taste and less unnecessary ugliness.'<sup>169</sup> Nevertheless, local authorities maintained a great degree of pride in their achievements throughout the period. Ceremonies were frequently conducted for the ritual of 'sod-cutting',<sup>170</sup> and at the opening of the 1,000th or 2,000th house, or at any other suitable stage.<sup>171</sup>

This sense of pride can sometimes be detected in the naming of streets on council estates, which occasionally lapsed into a catalogue of flowers, trees and rural beauty-spots, but often commemorated the councillors themselves; and in a few districts there was tribute paid to the political thinkers most respected by the councillors - Marx, Engels, Lenin and Keir Hardie formed one quartet in Stanley.<sup>172</sup> The MP for Hartlepool was even moved to send the council a begging letter, asking for a new street or square to be named after him '... in view of his long association with the Borough.'<sup>173</sup> It is not surprising, perhaps, that some civic figures enjoyed being celebrated in this way, for council housing schemes were a

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169. Times, 22 March 1934.

170. See, for example, Leadgate UD Council Minutes, 12 April 1921, DDC.

171. For example, Jarrow MB Housing Committee Minutes, 16 June 1936, T&WCRO: JRU, and Felling UD Council Minutes, 8 June 1938, GLS.

172. Stanley UDC Housing Committee Minutes, 28 March 1933, DCRO: UD /Sta.

173. Hartlepool MB Housing Committee Minutes, 11 February 1932, HBC.

most tangible expression of local government achievement, large enough to transform the landscape of a district. Nor is it surprising that councils, in the same way as any other builders, could stand back and view their work with a certain professional pride. It was no doubt in just such a frame of mind that the Felling council particularly called the attention of the Royal Commission on Local Government on Tyneside to its '... beautiful Housing Schemes which have been very artistically laid out with gardens, open spaces and grass plots and are much admired.'<sup>174</sup>

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174. Statement made by Felling UDC to the Royal Commission on Local Government on Tyneside, dated November 1935, GLS.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE COUNCIL AS LANDLORD

By 1939 about 300,000 people in County Durham, or about 20% of the population, were officially resident in council houses. Bearing in mind the unusually high incidence of sub-letting in the county (which is discussed in Section B of this chapter), the actual number of occupants may have been considerably higher. Between the wars most councils had to cope with responsibilities to which they were even less accustomed than to those encountered in the role of builder. The role of landlord involved the council in selecting tenants, overseeing their behaviour and collecting their rent. Apart from the sheer scale of these responsibilities, the council often had to face a dilemma that did not exist for the private landlord. The problem was expressed quite well in the Ministry of Health's Annual Report for 1929-30, in which it was recognised that local authorities could not

... be governed by the same considerations as other property owners. The latter naturally select the most eligible, i.e., the most respectable and prosperous, tenants available and may even take into account the absence of children who may knock the house about. Local authorities on the other hand have to provide for those tenants, amongst others, who are least eligible in the eyes of the private owner.

Taking the argument a little further, should the council of a district where there was severe housing shortage actively prevent sub-letting of its property? Or in trying to recover arrears of rent, should the council take legal proceedings against tenants who were out of work or on strike, or against widows? Whatever his personal predisposition, a private landlord was not expected to be philanthropic; the council, on the other hand, had not entered the housing market for commercial purposes and was expected to follow considerations apart from the purely economic. The consequent difficulty of reconciling estate management with social policy is a theme which underlies the rest of this chapter.

## A. Tenants

The first task of the council as landlord was to select its tenants. This was by no means easy, for the number of applicants was always many times greater than the number of vacant houses.<sup>1</sup> In Darlington, for example, there were 1,368 applicants in June 1922, but even by the end of 1924 the council had not built more than 300 houses.<sup>2</sup> In Chester-le-Street there were over a thousand names on the waiting list by 1935, but the council's rate of building was only about 70 houses per year.<sup>3</sup> With such a high degree of competition for tenancies it was clearly essential for the council to apply systematic procedures and priorities in selection.

It was necessary first to establish who would be responsible for setting the priorities and for applying them. Most councils delegated responsibility to a housing committee or its equivalent, but some delegated further to a sub-committee of local men for each parish, others to a housing manager, and one (Chester-le-Street UDC) to a private firm of estate agents.<sup>4</sup> In most cases, however, the decision to award a tenancy rested with councillors, who consequently found their goodwill to be much in demand. The proffering of bribes, though rarely mentioned in council records,<sup>5</sup> was probably quite common - one councillor from the Durham Rural District complained to the press that he had habitually to run for his bus to avoid the solicitations of

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1. This was invariably true overall, but there was occasional difficulty in finding takers for the more expensive 'parlour' houses (see below, p 253).
  2. Darlington CB, Report of Housing Committee, 27 June 1922; Report of Streets Committee, 20 January 1925. DCRO: CB/Da.
  3. Chester-le-Street UDC Housing Committee Minutes, 19 May 1935, CDC.
  4. Nowadays the largest local authorities, like the Greater London and Greater Manchester Councils, delegate the task to a computer. (New Scientist, 15 December 1977, p 705.)
  5. One example may be found in the Easington RDC Housing Committee Minutes, 7 September 1933, DCRO: RD/Ea.

desperate applicants.<sup>6</sup>

The influence of councillors in the selection process sometimes produced questionable decisions: for example, one of the parish sub-committees in the Easington district awarded a council house to its own chairman.<sup>7</sup> Whatever the merits of individual cases, this kind of decision could not fail to arouse suspicion. As one applicant of four years' standing commented to a reporter in Gateshead, 'the fact that three members of the Committee occupy Council houses does not inspire confidence.'<sup>8</sup> Gateshead was, in fact, the only place where allegations of organised corruption were made. In October 1925 the local Moderate party claimed that one Labour alderman and three councillors were living in council houses;<sup>9</sup> six years later they claimed that this had grown to eight councillors '... and over 40 "Labour" delegates, ward officials and leading workers of the Gateshead Labour party and I.L.P.'<sup>10</sup> Propaganda evidence must be treated cautiously and it should be noted that for the most of the period in question the Gateshead council was in fact under Moderate control, but the substance of these allegations was apparently never challenged in print. On the other hand, in the whole of the county there is not a single case where the District Auditor found that a tenancy had been granted improperly.

In most districts all applications (including those of councillors) were officially considered according to a predetermined set of priorities.

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6. Durham County Advertiser, 5 July 1935. The district rent collector, even though he had no part in selecting tenants, was also solicited for support: he occasionally received the odd ten-shilling note through the post. (Ibid, 6 September 1935.)
  7. Easington RDC Housing Committee Minutes, 31 August 1921, DCRO: RD/Ea.
  8. Evening World, 5 December 1931.
  9. Local election poster, GLS: Accession No 66497.
  10. Gateshead & District Municipal News, October 1931.

These photographs of council houses in Gateshead, taken shortly after opening, give an impression of the physical appearance of a new estate in the 1920s.



ILLUSTRATION 5-1 Friars Dene Road, Gateshead, in the 1920s



ILLUSTRATION 5-2 Broadway, Gateshead, c 1924



ILLUSTRATION 5-3 Gardens at rear of Park Road, Gateshead, in the 1920s

During the period of the Addison scheme the highest priority was generally given to the applications of ex-servicemen and their families. This policy was encouraged by the Government<sup>11</sup> and the underlying idea of 'homes for heroes' was administered almost literally by many councils in County Durham, with preference usually given above all to men who had served in the forces overseas. An equal consideration was that applicants should be residents of the particular district, either at the time of the application or (in a few districts) before the outbreak of war. This residential qualification was not required by law, but the administration of the 1919 Act was conceived in terms of local authority areas and councils were thus inclined to tackle the housing problem on a rather parochial basis.<sup>12</sup>

A fairly typical composite of these considerations was the statement of priorities laid down by the Hebburn council, where top of the list came 'men from Hebburn who have served in H.M. Forces, preference given to men engaged overseas, and to those who gave up their houses when joining the Forces, or whose houses were given up subsequently, and to the widows of ex-servicemen in Hebburn.'<sup>13</sup> Jarrow went so far as to entertain no other applications than those made by local ex-servicemen,<sup>14</sup> but most councils did apply the notion of housing need (usually measured in terms of family size) as well as that of military service. Gateshead, for example, while giving priority to ex-servicemen over 'civilians',

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11. Commons Written Reply, PD, 5th Series, vol 121, col 943, 19 November 1919, and Housing, 8 December, p 164.

12. This is still a valid criticism of the local authority housing programme today and has the continuing effect of impeding the labour mobility of council tenants (see D Gleave and D Palmer, 'Mobility of Labour: Are Council Tenants Really Handicapped?', in CES Review, May 1978, pp 74-6).

13. Hebburn UDC Housing Committee Minutes, 2 May 1921, T&WCRO: HBU.

14. Jarrow MB Housing Committee Minutes, 10 November 1921, T&WCRO: JRU.

recognised within these categories the superior claim of applicants with large families.<sup>15</sup> Similarly, while Felling gave top priority to applicants who had served in the forces overseas, it would consider no claim where the family numbered fewer than six.<sup>16</sup> It was unusual in these early stages, however, for a council to make the relief of overcrowding its sole criterion in allocating council houses: this appears only to have happened in Ryton and in the rural districts of Easington and Sedgfield.<sup>17</sup>

The preference allotted to ex-servicemen by most councils in the early post-war years gave way by the mid-1920s to criteria directly related to housing need. Priority came gradually to be given to families whose existing accommodation was judged inadequate. The most systematic demonstration of this principle was in Darlington, where applicants were graded on a 'points' table: a family scored 30 points if its members were living more than three to a room, and a further ten points for each member above that level.<sup>18</sup> Some councils, like Washington, also gave priority to applicants on medical grounds - particularly where there were cases of tuberculosis in a family.<sup>19</sup> A married couple invariably had a stronger claim than a single person and this evidently was an inducement to marriage: in order to deter nuptial opportunists the Washington council required applicants to furnish proof of at least five years' wedlock.<sup>20</sup>

In the 1930s councils were faced with a new obligation in connection

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15. Gateshead CB Housing Committee Minutes, 28 December 1920, GLS.
  16. Felling UD Council Minutes, 3 November 1920, GLS.
  17. Ryton UD Council Minutes, 30 June 1920, GLS; Easington RDC Housing Committee Minutes, 16 September 1920, DCRO: RD/Ea; Sedgfield RD Council Minutes, 26 August 1921, DCRO: RD/Se.
  18. Darlington CB Housing Committee Minutes, 15 June 1926, DCRO: CB/Da.
  19. Washington UDC Housing Committee Minutes, 2 September 1925, T&WCRO: WGU.
  20. Ibid.

with the clearance of slums and overcrowded areas. As the building of council houses for 'general needs' declined, it was mainly the families displaced by clearance schemes which went to the top of the waiting list. A fairly typical list in the 1930s was based on priorities such as those observed by the Darlington council: first came families displaced by the council, with preference going to the larger families, then tuberculosis sufferers living in unsuitable accommodation, then childless couples displaced by the council, followed by single persons displaced by the council.<sup>21</sup> There was, however, an important proviso to this order of precedence, in that a tenancy would be given only to those families which satisfied the Medical Officer of Health that they were 'desirable' and the Borough Treasurer that they were able to pay the rent and rates.<sup>22</sup> Or as the council of Sunderland Rural District decided, 'preference shall be given to the applicants whose previous rent record is satisfactory and who are known to be clean and tidy.'<sup>23</sup>

The concern to select tenants who were able and willing to pay the rent was evident in some councils much earlier than in others. Felling made it a factor in its selection procedures as early as 1921<sup>24</sup> and Hetton made it a condition in 1924 that applicants had to present the Clerk with a current rent book as evidence of their previous record.<sup>25</sup> But this concern became much more widespread in the 1930s, partly because the accumulation of rent arrears (particularly during the 1926 Coal Dispute) was a reason given to many councils by the Ministry of Health for refusal to sanction the building of additional houses, and partly

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21. Darlington CB Housing Committee Minutes, 11 December 1936, DCRO: CB/Da.

22. Ibid.

23. Sunderland RD Council Minutes, 15 October 1935, T&WCRO: SDR.

24. Felling UD Council Minutes, 2 November 1921, GIS.

25. Hetton UDC Housing Committee Minutes, 11 February 1924, T&WCRO: HTU.

because councillors came to appreciate that arrears had to be balanced by unpopular increases in local rates. The inspection of applicants' previous rent books consequently became standard practice in many districts.

An interesting indication of the factors considered by local authorities in selecting tenants is given in the 'Instructions to Enquiry Officers' which the West Hartlepool council issued in 1932 to officials responsible for investigating applications.<sup>26</sup> Some of the instructions were designed to establish the financial standing of the applicant. Enquiry Officers had to 'inspect the rent book and enquire at Rates Office as to rates outstanding' and to ask 'whether applicant is employed or unemployed at date of visit, and, if employed, where - amount of income.'<sup>27</sup> Other procedures were used to assess the general 'suitability' of an applicant. As well as having to call on the applicant's landlord and referees, the Enquiry Officer was instructed to interview the applicant at home and to report on the 'condition of rooms - whether clean and tidy or otherwise' and 'whether furniture sufficient or only partly sufficient for a Corporation house.'<sup>28</sup>

Unfortunately, the effect which different selection policies exercised on the social composition of housing estates is difficult to assess from the limited evidence available. In some districts one can calculate the composition of one or two estates: for example, in the parish of Tunstall in the Sunderland Rural District 90% of the council houses in 1931 were occupied by miners and their families, whereas in the Wearside parish of Castletown the proportion was only 50%.<sup>29</sup> Or in

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26. West Hartlepool CB Housing Committee Papers, 17 November 1932, HBC.

27. Ibid.

28. Ibid.

29. Sunderland RD Council Minutes, 28 July 1931, T&WCRO: SDR.

two streets in Hetton (which were examined by the council in detail in 1928) one can see that out of a total of 31 tenants there were 24 miners (including a deputy and a disabled pitman living on compensation), four unemployed, a blacksmith, a rent collector and a billiard-hall attendant.<sup>30</sup> Although detailed information is lacking, the indications are that the proportion of working-class tenants was relatively high in County Durham; in London, by contrast, tenancies in the 1930s were held predominantly by '... small clerks and tradesmen, artisans and the better-off semi-skilled workers....'<sup>31</sup>

An interesting feature suggested by the available evidence is that councils often made social distinctions between applicants when vacancies arose for the larger, 'parlour' houses. In the Easington district, for example, a batch of six new parlour houses was allocated to five schoolmasters and a senior pitman.<sup>32</sup> A later example from the same district shows that vacant parlour houses were awarded to a schoolmaster, a butcher and a cinema manager, while the non-parlour houses went largely to miners.<sup>33</sup> The justification for this was probably financial, for the rent of a parlour house was usually about 25% higher than that of a non-parlour house. The Darlington Housing Committee found it particularly difficult to find 'suitable' tenants for its parlour houses and had to place special advertisements when vacancies arose: the Borough Accountant personally decided whether or not an applicant's resources were adequate.<sup>34</sup>

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30. Hetton UD Council Minutes, 14 February 1928, T&WCRO: HTU.

31. J Burnett, A Social History of Housing, 1815-1970 (Newton Abbot, 1978) p 233. His conclusion is based on surveys of six major ICC estates in the 1930s, details of which may be found in R Durant, Watling: A Survey of Social Life on a New Housing Estate (London, 1939) p 124.

32. Easington RDC Housing Committee Minutes, 14 February 1922, DCRO: RD/Ea.

33. Ibid, 26 January 1927.

34. Darlington CB Housing Committee Minutes, 17 January 1928, DCRO: CB/Da. Crook UDC was also forced to advertise for families to fill its parlour houses (Housing Committee Minutes, 22 November 1927, DCRO:UD/CW) and South Shields was forced to split some of its B4 houses into three-room flats (Housing Committee Minutes, 20 November 1928, STLS).

The danger of this approach was that, if carried too far, help was given to people who could already afford adequate housing in the private sector. The Ministry of Health was aware of this danger and at one point considered a recommendation that applicants should be disqualified if their income exceeded certain limits: for example, it was suggested that a married man with two children should not be given a council house at a rent of 10/- per week if his income exceeded £4 per week.<sup>35</sup> In County Durham, only West Hartlepool took the initiative of fixing official limits: the waiting list was restricted in 1933 to applicants whose annual income did not exceed £300.<sup>36</sup>

The difficulty which councils experienced in catering for the poorest applicants was relieved considerably by the 'sanitary' housing acts of the 1930s. Their emphasis on the rehousing of slum-dwellers, together with lower building costs and higher Exchequer subsidies than had obtained in the late 1920s, meant that families with the greatest housing need could be given help in a more direct way. But though council house rents grew more accessible to the lower-income groups and more applicants could thus satisfy housing officials of their ability to pay, there usually remained the requirement for a family to establish its 'suitability' in wider terms. This generally came to mean satisfying the local Medical Officer of Health that the family's furniture and effects would not constitute a health hazard when moved to a new estate. Many families failed to do this at the first attempt: in Sunderland, for example, 103 out of the 179 new tenants in 1934 needed to have their furniture and bedding disinfested before they were accepted.<sup>37</sup> Some local

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35. Ministry of Health, 'Strictly Confidential Report ... re. Letting of State-Aided Houses to Persons of the Working Classes', dated October 1932, in PRO: HIG 52/853.

36. West Hartlepool CB Housing Committee Minutes, 23 March 1933, HBC.

37. Annual Report of the Medical Officer of Health for Sunderland, 1934, SIS.

authorities had to equip themselves with fumigation chambers for this purpose, while others relied on the issue of disinfectant and kerosene soap sprayers: 'it is wonderful how effective the simple methods are, backed up by hot water and supervision,' the Medical Officer for South Shields enthused zeugmatically.<sup>38</sup> A few councils took a more positive approach to the problem and followed the example of Gateshead, where 1930 Act houses were made available with essential items of new furniture which tenants could buy from the council at 3/- per week over three years.<sup>39</sup>

Once tenants had been selected and installed, the attitude adopted by councils towards them could vary considerably. Some councils, like Stockton, felt it necessary to make regulations circumscribing, for example, the keeping of pigs or the improper use of water closets.<sup>40</sup> Others had a more enlightened approach, issuing tenants with handbooks of advice rather than with instructions. A particularly good example is the book given by South Shields to its tenants in the 1930s:<sup>41</sup> as well as a light-hearted reminder to keep pets under control (see the cartoon reproduced on the following page), it contained a selection of recipes for cheap, high-protein meals. Many councils fell back on the lame public relations device of the best-kept garden competition, but some were more positive and encouraged discussions with tenants' associations.<sup>42</sup> The points most often raised with councils by these associations were connected with rent levels, but there were cases where a council might be lobbied, for example, to adapt its older

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38. Annual Report of the Medical Officer of Health for South Shields, 1934, STLS.

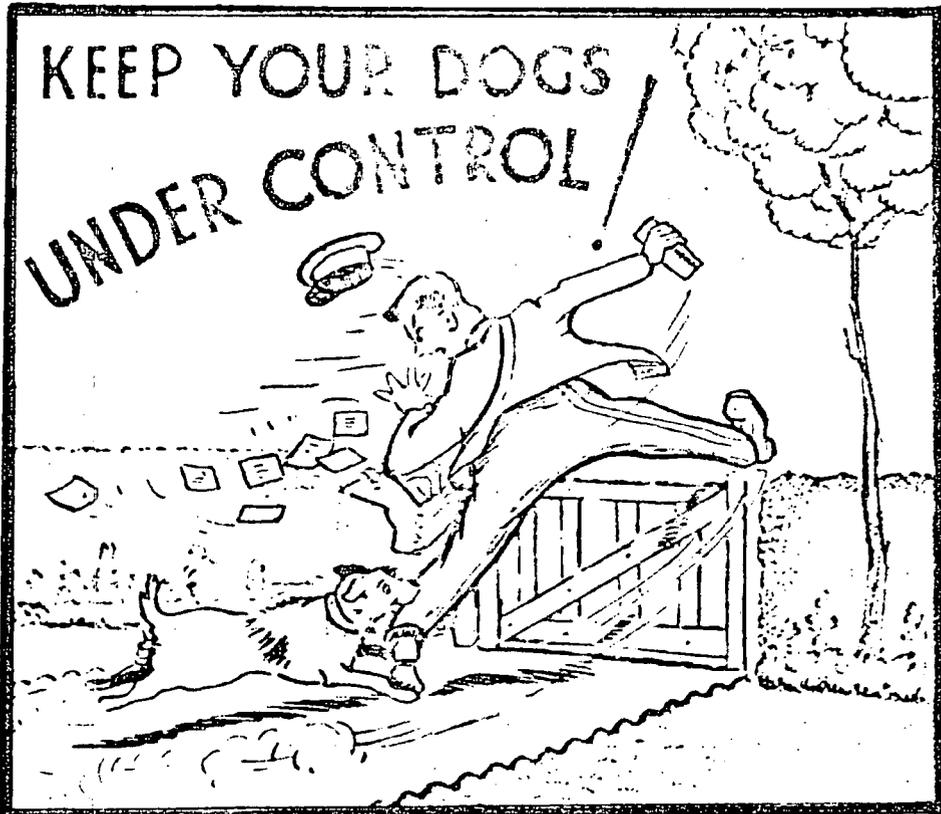
39. Gateshead CB Housing Committee Minutes, 4 October and 22 November 1934, GLS, and Gateshead Herald, November 1937 issue.

40. Stockton MB Housing Committee Minutes, 10 September 1920, CCRO.

41. A copy is retained in STLS.

42. For example, Gateshead CB Housing Committee Minutes, 21 June 1923, GLS.

ILLUSTRATION 5-4



Your Pets

This cartoon is reproduced from  
the South Shields CB Tenants' Handbook  
of the 1930s

houses for electricity.<sup>43</sup> Occasionally, a council might take a stance on certain aspects of estate management which would nowadays appear quite odd. For example, was it to preserve a local tradition or the healthy image of its new housing estates that the Chester-le-Street Rural District Council forbade tenants to conduct funeral arrangements through the front entrance of a house?<sup>44</sup> More seriously, what prompted the Borough Council of South Shields to recommend, on the motion of a Labour alderman, '... a scheme for the erection of a different type of house for the housing of the coloured population displaced from the Holborn Clearance Areas'?<sup>45</sup> Although in this case the Council eschewed building mud huts and reverted to its original plans, it did decide two years later to earmark one of its new estates solely for the rehousing of immigrant families.<sup>46</sup>

Of all the difficulties which councils were caused by the conduct of tenants, the greatest arose from the sub-letting of property and the non-payment of rent. These questions are examined separately in Sections B and D of this chapter. By comparison the other problems were slight, but there were two broad classes of objectionable behaviour with which councils had to deal - the anti-social (causing offence to other tenants) and the destructive (causing damage or undue wear to the property). As an example of the former, one may adduce the case of two neighbouring tenants in Washington who were, after mutual complaints, instructed by the council to refrain respectively from holding unruly spiritualist meetings and from keeping a disorderly goat.<sup>47</sup> Equally

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43. For example, Jarrow MB Housing Committee Minutes, 12 May 1936, T&WCRO:JRU

44. Chester-le-Street RDC Housing Committee Minutes, 7 July 1924, CDC.

45. South Shields CB Council Minutes, 6 February 1935, STLS.

46. Ibid, 12 October 1937.

47. Washington UDC Housing Committee Minutes, 13 September 1927, T&WCRO: WGU.

anti-social was the tenant at Wingate who, for some arcane reason, kept a shed full of dead rabbits.<sup>48</sup> Damage to council property was generally just a matter of broken window panes, although one Washington tenant did manage to destroy his front door in a brawl.<sup>49</sup> Concern for property led most councils to forbid tenants to carry out a trade on the premises; this was taken so far in one district as to prevent a doctor from seeing patients in his council house.<sup>50</sup> By far the most outrageous recorded misuse of council property was perpetrated by a Consett man who, in addition to sub-letting parts of his house, removed the bathroom window, replaced it with wire mesh and converted the room into an aviary.<sup>51</sup>

Apart from a few serious cases, however, the general behaviour of tenants caused few problems, and, needless to say, 'the old bogey about the baths being used for the storage of their coals has about as much truth in it as the battalions of Russian soldiers coming through Newcastle Station during the War with snow on their boots.'<sup>52</sup> Indeed, the arch-Conservative publication which bore this comment had been moved to swallow its earlier regurgitation of the familiar argument<sup>53</sup> that 'you cannot convert a brutish and soulless being into a gentleman by putting him in a garden city.'<sup>54</sup> In 1936, under the headline 'slum tenants rise to it', the paper was pleased to note that families from condemned areas, no doubt overcoming their innate brutishness, '... have developed a house-proud and garden-proud attitude' when rehoused on a council estate.<sup>55</sup>

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48. Easington RDC Housing Committee Minutes, 6 March 1923, DCRO: RD/Ea.

49. Washington UDC Housing Committee Minutes, 1 November 1926, T&WCRO: WGU.

50. Chester-le-Street RDC Housing Committee Minutes, 7 August 1924, CDC.

51. Consett UDC Housing Committee Minutes, 31 March 1932, DDC.

52. Gateshead & District Municipal News, March 1936. The origins of the myth that the working classes would inevitably mistake a bath for a coal bunker are obscure. It was apparently first propagated in Parliament by means of an ill-founded Written Question (PD, 5th Series, vol 13, col 1534, 22 June 1909).

53. See above, p 27.

54. Gateshead & District Municipal News, December 1928.

55. Ibid, March 1936.

## B. Sub-Letting and Overcrowding

One of the most difficult problems which faced the council as landlord was what to do about tenants who sub-let their houses. It is necessary, before going further, to make clear the distinction between 'lodgers', who within certain limits councils were prepared to tolerate, and 'sub-tenants', to whom they usually took exception. In the present context, a lodger was a single person whose rent paid for a furnished room and often for meals taken with the family of the council tenant; a sub-tenant paid for accommodation which was more self-contained and usually unfurnished, and in which he lived with a wife and children.

The practice of taking in lodgers had the broad approval of the Ministry of Health, which agreed in particular that in seaside towns, '... where the working classes practically all take in visitors', local authorities should be allowed to build a higher proportion of four-bedroom houses.<sup>56</sup> No doubt the ways of the seaside were more familiar to the Ministry than those of the coalfield but, as mentioned in Chapter 2 above, lodging was traditionally very common in mining districts, because of the high level of labour migration in the industry. The usual rule applied by councils in County Durham to tenants wishing to take in a lodger was that (a) the written approval of the council should first be sought, (b) the addition of a lodger to the household would not create overcrowded conditions and (c) the lodger should have a furnished bedroom.<sup>57</sup> Under such conditions the practice was to the advantage of all parties: the council had the satisfaction of seeing its accommodation occupied to an optimum level, while the tenant and lodger in theory enjoyed an arrangement of mutual benefit. The council rarely interfered in such

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56. Ministry of Health, Housing, 19 July 1919, p 2.

57. See, for example, Stanley UD Council Minutes, 21 February 1922, DCRO: UD/Sta.

arrangements - although there was an intriguing case in which the Washington Housing Committee required a tenant to remove a couple of lodgers whom it discreetly described as 'lady theatricals'.<sup>58</sup> In most cases, however, local authorities were prepared to look on the arrangements benevolently and at least one council took the lenient view that 'young married couples' should be regarded as lodgers.<sup>59</sup>

On the other hand, most councils took a stronger line on the question of sub-letting. Their objections were threefold. In the first place, the presence of an extra family in a council house very often led to overcrowding - an aspect of the problem which is examined later in this section. Secondly, the separation of unfurnished bedrooms to serve as 'bed-sitters' not only created undesirable living conditions, but also led to undue damage and deterioration of the council's property. During a Ministry of Health inquiry into housing defects in Hetton, much of the blame for dilapidations was attributed to the widespread practice of sub-letting.<sup>60</sup> A particular problem was the use of bedroom fireplaces for cooking and continuous heating - purposes for which they had not been designed and constructed. This often resulted in the smouldering of surrounding floorboards and joists.<sup>61</sup> The third objection was that sub-tenants, once installed with their own family and furniture, were very difficult to shift. This caused grave problems when, for whatever reason, the official tenant moved away; for unless the council took legal action to remove the sub-tenant, it could not allocate the house to anyone on the official waiting list. The Easington council had encountered this problem at an early stage, in connection with its 1890 Act houses at

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58. Washington UDC Housing Committee Minutes, 12 July 1926, T&WCRO: WGU.

59. Easington RDC Housing Committee Minutes, 25 April 1922, DCRO: RD/Ea.

60. Hetton UDC Housing Committee Minutes, 18 October 1938, T&WCRO: HTU.

61. Easington RDC Housing Committee Minutes, 28 November 1922, DCRO: RD/Ea.

Murton, and had apparently taken a hard line with the squatters,<sup>62</sup> but other councils chose a line of less resistance and recognised these families as the new tenants in preference to those on the waiting list.<sup>63</sup>

It would be quite wrong, however, to imagine that sub-tenants were themselves the cause of the problem. The root of the evil was the severe shortage of working-class housing that prevailed in most of the county. Few families would choose to live in a room or two within someone else's home if a structurally separate dwelling were available nearby. The question of money does not affect the argument: sub-tenants, as we shall see in the following paragraph, paid as much in rent for bed-sit accommodation as they would have had to pay for a larger, self-contained dwelling in the same district. The problem arose because there was a dearth of separate dwellings and because many existing tenants, some with generous motives but most with an eye to profit, were prepared to open their doors to families which would otherwise have 'doubled-up' somewhere else or moved right away from the district.

As this implies, sub-letting was not a practice confined to council estates. An impression of its general extent can be obtained from a study of the working-class housing in the South Shields Rural District made by its Sanitary Inspector in 1924.<sup>64</sup> This was predominantly a mining district, situated between the Tyneside and Wearside conurbations, and overcrowding there (about 25% at the 1921 Census) was slightly lower than the county average. The Inspector's report to the council took in just under 2,700 houses (about three-quarters of the total housing stock of the district), of which council housing represented about 6%. The report showed that just over 10% of the houses inspected had one or two

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62. Ibid, 25 May 1922.

63. See, for example, several instances in the Hetton UDC Housing Committee Minutes for 1927, T&WCRO: HTU.

64. Copy of Report dated 8 December 1924 in PRO: HLG 48/367.

rooms sub-let. It also showed that sub-tenants paid over 30% more in rent than tenants who occupied the same space in a separate dwelling. On average, the cost of renting two rooms as a sub-tenant (about 7/6 per week) was the same as the rent for a separate dwelling of four rooms. This trend was more marked in the parish of Boldon Colliery: there the rent for one and two sub-let rooms (6/6 and 7/6 per week) was respectively the same as the rent of separate dwellings of three and five rooms.<sup>65</sup>

There are no figures to show how the incidence of sub-letting in council houses compared with the level in the remainder of the housing stock. It is evident, however, that the inducements to sub-letting were at least as strong for the council tenant as for the private tenant. Council houses were generally larger than existing working-class dwellings and their rents were higher than those prevailing in the private sector for the same number of rooms. Thus it was easier to absorb a sub-tenant in a council house than, for example, in a colliery house, and the financial constraints to do so were often greater. A possible result of financial pressure on tenants was that sub-letting may have increased during and after the Coal Dispute of 1926. Unfortunately, only one local authority - Easington RDC - conducted surveys at the relevant times, but its figures show that the incidence of sub-letting rose from 16% of council houses in February 1926 to 26% in February 1930.<sup>66</sup>

The most detailed source of information which still survives on the sub-letting of council houses is the report of a survey conducted by Hetton UDC in January 1931.<sup>67</sup> The main purpose of the report was to illustrate a drop in the level of sub-letting (from 30% of houses to 18%)

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65. Ibid.

66. Easington RDC Housing Committee Minutes, 23 February 1926 and 25 February 1930, DCRO: RD/Ea.

67. Hetton UDC Housing Committee Minutes, 23 January 1931, T&WCRO: HTU.

following a campaign of legal threats against offending council tenants, but the details provided of individual households enable other interesting conclusions to be drawn. For example, the rents paid by sub-tenants ranged from 2/6 to 8/- per week;<sup>68</sup> the mean 'sub-rent' of 5/2½ per week was approximately half that of the rents payable to the council, which ranged from 10/1 to 11/5 per week (including rates). An intriguing feature is that a very high proportion (over 90%) of the tenants sub-letting were themselves in arrears with their rent to the council; the average arrears per sub-let house were also about 7% higher than the average for other council houses in the district. This is open to two interpretations: either the tenants who sub-let were desperately in need of more money or they had an entirely casual attitude to their responsibilities to the council. Neither alternative can be proved to be the general case, though it should be noted that about one in seven tenants who sub-let was in turn owed arrears of rent by his sub-tenant. In households where this was the case, an average of just over 30% of the arrears owed by the official tenant to the council was in turn owed to him by the sub-tenant.

It is also possible to derive from the survey of sub-letting in the Hetton district some idea of the overcrowding which the practice caused. The average family of 'sub-landlords' in Hetton was of roughly the same size (about five persons) as the average family of all council tenants in the district; the average family of sub-tenants contained about 3½ persons. In about two-thirds of the houses which were sub-let there lived eight or more persons, and in about a third there were ten or more persons. Taking the common overcrowding yardstick of more than two persons to a room, one can estimate that about half of the people

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68. This compares quite favourably with the Leadgate area, where rents paid by sub-tenants were said to range from 4/- to 10/- per week. (Leadgate UD Council Minutes, 14 April 1925, DDC.)

living in sub-let houses were living in overcrowded conditions. This compares with an overcrowding figure of 16% for the whole of the Hetton district at the Census of 1931.<sup>69</sup>

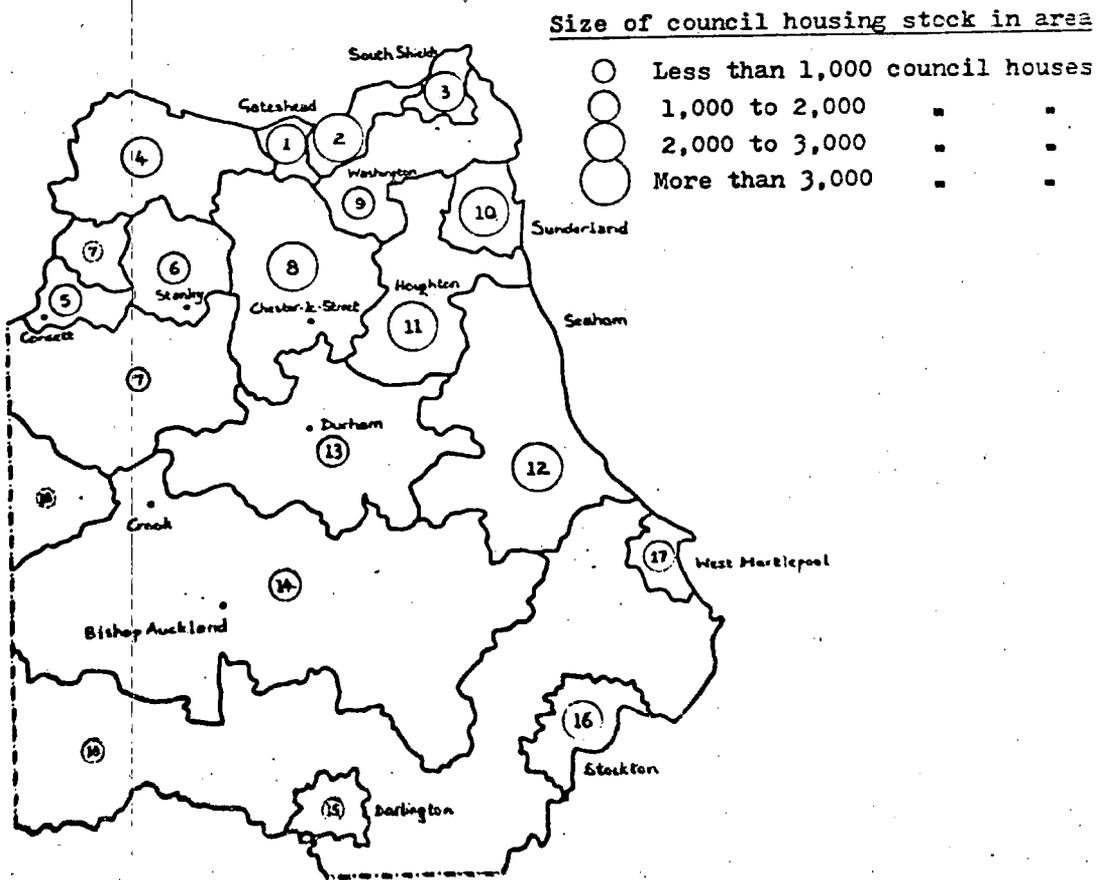
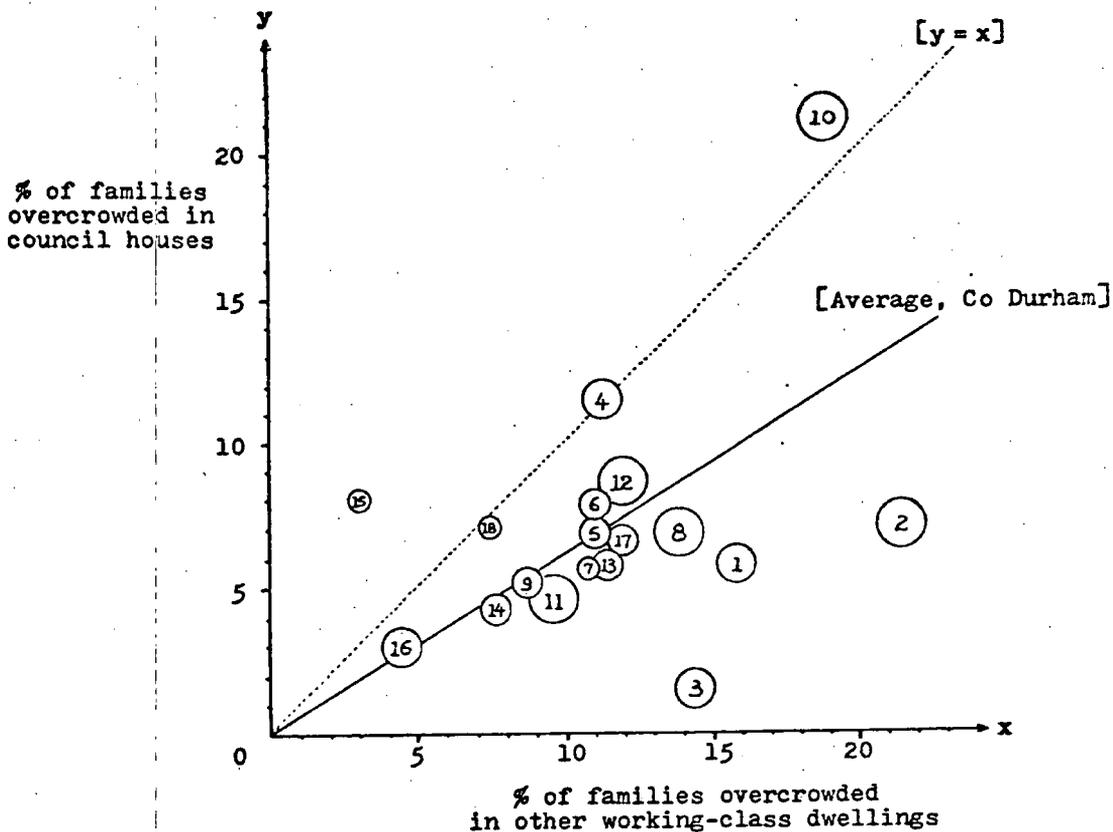
In general, however, there was significantly less overcrowding in council houses in County Durham than in other forms of working-class accommodation. It can be seen from the major survey of working-class housing conducted throughout England and Wales in 1936<sup>70</sup> that only 7.7% of families in council houses in County Durham were overcrowded, compared with 12.4% in other working-class dwellings.<sup>71</sup> Only in Darlington and Sunderland was overcrowding proportionately more common in council housing than in the private sector; while at the other extreme there were towns like Jarrow and South Shields where overcrowding was five times more common in the private than in the council sector.<sup>72</sup> A comparison between different areas of the county is illustrated in Figure 5-1, from which it can be seen that council housing usually represented a considerable improvement over conditions which existed in the private sector in the same district. This was true even of the mining districts where sub-letting of council property was most common.

Nevertheless, most of the coalfield local authorities maintained a persistent campaign against tenants who sub-let their houses. For legal and practical reasons the council's efforts could only be levelled at the official tenant and not directly at the sub-tenant. The methods used to deal with the problem ranged in the early stages of a case from

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69. Hetton UDC Housing Committee Minutes, 23 January 1931, T&WCRO: HTU.
70. Ministry of Health, Housing Act, 1935. Report on the Overcrowding Survey in England and Wales, 1936. The criteria used in this survey to determine overcrowding were far more refined than the earlier 'two-to-a-room' standard (see above, p 73 ) and the results were expressed in terms of families overcrowded, rather than persons overcrowded.
71. In the rest of England and Wales 5.0% of families in council houses were overcrowded, compared with 3.3% in other working-class dwellings. (Ibid.)
72. Ibid.

**FIGURE 5-1** Overcrowding in Council Houses and Other Working-Class Dwellings  
in County Durham, 1936

[By areas as in numbered map below]



calling a tenant to the council offices for an interview<sup>73</sup> to sending him a solicitor's letter of warning.<sup>74</sup> Eventually, the council might issue the offending tenant with a notice to quit<sup>75</sup> and, as a last resort, obtain a possession order from the courts.<sup>76</sup> Few councils were prepared to pursue a case through to the stage of eviction and many, indeed, were satisfied by a partial response to an intermittent campaign of threats. The Hetton council, for example, issued 110 tenants on one estate (half the total number) with letters threatening eviction, but was content to drop all action a month later when it emerged that 36 of these tenants had responded by ejecting their sub-tenants.<sup>77</sup>

Although sub-tenants were the cause of one problem - the overcrowding and misuse of council property - they were, as we have seen above, the victims of a much wider problem - the serious overall shortage of separate dwellings. Councils which took a wider view of their housing responsibilities tended, therefore, to be somewhat ambivalent in their attitude towards sub-tenants. The Easington council, for example, was moved at one stage to give nearly 400 tenants six months' notice to remove themselves or their sub-tenants, but then let the campaign peter out when a local miners' lodge politely enquired what provision the council was making for the families which would be displaced.<sup>78</sup> At least two councils, Brandon and Willington, actually encouraged sub-letting for several years as the most beneficial way of putting their

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73. For example, Leadgate UD Council Minutes, 14 April 1925, DDC.

74. For example, Tanfield UDC Housing Committee Minutes, 5 July 1922, DCRO: UD/Sta.

75. For example, Hetton UDC Housing Committee Minutes, 24 July 1933, T&WCRO: HTU.

76. For example, Easington RDC Housing Committee Minutes, 20 April 1926, DCRO: RD/Ea.

77. Hetton UDC Housing Committee Minutes, 22 December 1930 and 26 January 1931, T&WCRO: HTU.

78. Easington RDC Housing Committee Minutes, 20 May 1930, DCRO: RD/Ea.

housing stock to the service of the community. The economic depression which plagued Brandon between the wars meant that council tenants could not afford the rents prescribed by the Ministry of Health and that no new private houses were built to help reduce the overall shortage of accommodation. As early as 1922 the council realised that the introduction of 'half-tenancies', or the doubling-up of families (each with its own council rent book), was a sensible answer to the problem.<sup>79</sup> During the Coal Dispute the council actually pressured tenants into doubling-up if they could not find the rent for a house on their own<sup>80</sup> and by 1930 about a quarter of its housing stock was being shared.<sup>81</sup> Although the Ministry of Health tolerated this policy in the short term as the only way to stop the accumulation of rent arrears, it was also concerned about the overcrowding which resulted. By the 1930s it had persuaded Brandon - and Willington, which had followed the example of its neighbour - to phase out the existing half-tenancies and to allow no new ones.<sup>82</sup> But whether they intended it or not, these two councils had demonstrated to the Ministry of Health the dilemma of local authorities in depressed areas. Their experience also helps to place Durham's record of high levels of sub-letting in a clearer perspective.

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79. Brandon UD Council Minutes, 6 November 1922, DCRO: UD/BB.

80. Ibid, 6 September 1926.

81. Ministry of Health note of a meeting with a deputation of Brandon councillors in November 1930, in PRO: HLG 48/54.

82. Brandon UD Council Minutes, 5 November 1934, DCRO: UD/BB, and Willington UD Council Minutes, 9 July 1935, DCRO:UD/CW.



ILLUSTRATION 5-5 South View, Sherburn Hill. Though large and solidly built, these 1930 Act houses have a depressingly box-like appearance.



ILLUSTRATION 5-6 Slum replacement housing in the Commercial Road area of South Shields. An unfortunate siting for these 1930 Act houses - on a bleak plateau surrounded by railway lines, industrial premises and dockland.



ILLUSTRATION 5-7 The Garths, Sunderland. This unhappy illustration of Art Deco gone wrong comes from the stock of the North Eastern Housing Association. It compares very badly with the 1890 Act dwellings which it faces (see Illustration 2-22) and is an early example of public sector building losing sight of the human scale in housing design.

### C. Rent

From the tenant's point of view, the most important element in his relationship with the council as landlord was the level of rent charged for the accommodation. But rent levels were also of fundamental concern to central and local government, because of the obvious connection between current income and repayment of capital expenditure: lower rents meant higher subsidies. Against the financial implications of rent policy both central and local government had to weigh the espoused social aim of providing good houses for a weekly sum that working-class tenants could afford. A local authority had to balance its concern to improve housing conditions in the area with another to keep local rates within reasonable bounds. Similarly, the Ministry of Health, while promoting the social policy of housing improvement, kept a sternly critical eye on the implications for Exchequer subsidies and - as part of its wider responsibilities as watchdog over local government - on the level and acceptable deployment of local rates. On balance, however, it will be seen that local authorities in County Durham were more favourably disposed towards the tenant than were the agents of central government: an area of conflict was thus created.

The conflict between the two tiers of government was most apparent in the case of housing schemes under the 1919 Act. Because the liability of local authorities was normally fixed at the product of a penny rate and the Exchequer had to make good the remaining loss, councils had nothing to lose in pressing for lower rents. On the other hand, the high capital cost of Addison Act schemes intensified the pressure on the Ministry of Health to keep the level of Exchequer liability under control: each local authority proposal to reduce rents threatened to aggravate the financial embarrassment which the programme was generating in central

government. In fact, the original intention of the Ministry's policy was a staged increase in council house rents until the full economic cost was being recovered by 1927.<sup>83</sup> In Stockton this would have meant an increase in the rent of a standard A3 house from 10/- to 26/6 per week (excluding rates) over a period of seven years: the troubled Housing Committee was doubtful whether tenants would be able to pay even the amount suggested for the first year.<sup>84</sup> It must quickly have become apparent to the Ministry that, if Addison Act houses were to be occupied at all, this policy could never be implemented; so that in 1921 it was actually on the insistence of the Ministry that Darlington's own plan to increase rents by annual stages of a shilling per week up to 1927 was dropped.<sup>85</sup> Therefore, while rents in the private housing sector gradually became 'decontrolled' as tenants moved on, it was soon accepted that, with the heavy costs of building under the 1919 Act, economic rents in the local authority sector could never be envisaged.

Far from rising towards the economic level, rents charged for Addison Act houses were to fall considerably in the 1920s and 1930s. This trend was due largely to pressure from the local authorities, reacting in turn to representations from their tenants. It owed little to the Ministry of Health, which resisted for as long as possible any reduction from the minimum rents (10/- per week for an A3 house, exclusive of rates, and 12/6 for a B3) which it laid down in 1920 for council houses in urban areas and mining villages.<sup>86</sup> Only Sunderland

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83. Ministry of Health, Annual Report, 1919-20. As with the theory behind rent control in the private sector, the Government's belief was that 'normal' market arrangements could gradually be resumed as economic conditions stabilised after the war.

84. Stockton MB Housing Committee Minutes, 28 June 1920, CCRO.

85. Darlington CB, Report of Housing Committee, 9 May 1921, DCRO: CB/Da.

86. Ministry of Health memorandum dated 9 August 1920, in PRO: 48/13.

cheered the Ministry by charging significantly more than the minimum (about 35% more overall);<sup>87</sup> nearly all the other local authorities in County Durham were at some stage concerned to negotiate rents below the 1920 minimum. Most cases were resolved by negotiation or by reference to a rent tribunal, and it was rare for a council to take unilateral action. But when this did happen, the Ministry acted firmly to impose financial liability on the local authority by refusing to subsidise the additional losses arising from the disputed rent reduction: this sanction was used against the Hetton council in 1923 for charging rents below the level recommended by a tribunal.<sup>88</sup>

The case for lower rents under the Addison scheme was made by local authorities in County Durham on the basis of what working-class families themselves might expect to pay and what they could reasonably be expected to part with. It is clear that Addison Act houses were considerably more expensive to rent than older houses in the private sector. As part of the 'Survey of Housing Needs' which councils were required to make under the 1919 Act, information was sought on the rents prevailing in each district for accommodation of equivalent size (A3, B3, etc) to the proposed council houses. This information survives for a useful cross-section of local authority areas - South Shields, Hebburn, Ryton, Consett, Benfieldside and Houghton Rural District.<sup>89</sup> It shows that the average rent for an A3-size house in the private sector was about 7/1 per week inclusive of rates, and for a B3-size house about

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87. Rents of 17/- per week for B3 houses in Sunderland were fixed in 1920 and were kept up for several years. (Sunderland CB Council Minutes, 13 October 1920, SIS.)

88. Hetton UDC Housing Committee Minutes, 23 May 1923, T&WCRO: HTU.

89. Copies of Ministry of Health Form D89, in PRO: HIG 48/118 (Hebburn); 48/70 (Consett); 48/69 (Benfieldside); 48/123 (Houghton RD); and in South Shields CB Housing Committee Minutes, 20 October 1919, STLS, and Ryton UD Council Minutes, 8 October 1919, GLS.

9/2 per week. This means that the Ministry of Health's minimum rents of 10/- and 12/6 per week for A3 and B3 council houses would, after the addition of rates, have represented at least double the prevailing level in these districts. Even the reduced rents which were eventually adopted in these areas were at least 50% higher than levels prevailing in the private sector. Of course, Addison Act houses would have been far superior in quality to any existing working-class accommodation. As well as being anything from ten to a hundred years newer than other dwellings, these council houses probably had larger rooms and certainly were laid out in greater space and designed to a much higher standard. Nevertheless, the resentment on the part of councils and tenants towards the considerably higher rents was understandable: it is, after all, a limited form of progress that makes an improved product available, but only at a greater real cost to the consumer.

The argument for lower rents in the 1920s was more compelling when related to working-class wage levels. In 1912, the average rent of a four-room house in the South Tyneside towns of Gateshead, Jarrow and South Shields was about 5/9 per week, including rates. This represented between 15% and 25% of the gross weekly income of the average worker.<sup>90</sup> In the 1920s, however, the evidence adduced by some of the mining districts in County Durham shows that even those council house rents which had been fixed below the Ministry of Health's original minimum made demands on an uncomfortably high proportion of tenants' income. In the Easington Rural District, for example, the main class of applicant was said to be the colliery surface worker, who was not entitled to a colliery house and whose gross weekly earnings averaged

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90. Board of Trade, Report of an Enquiry into Working-Class Rents and Retail Prices, together with the Rates of Wages in Certain Occupations in Industrial Towns in the United Kingdom, PP 1913 (Cd 6955) vol lxvi, p 393.

64/6.<sup>91</sup> This meant that the inclusive rents which the council was obliged, after nearly a year's negotiation with the Ministry, finally to charge such tenants represented about 23% of their gross earnings for an A3 house and about 27% for a B3 house.<sup>92</sup> This was in a relatively flourishing mining area, but in the Auckland Rural District, where the pits were rapidly becoming unviable, a worker was lucky to receive 30/- per week. This meant that the rent which the council had to charge for an A3 house, including rates, took 45% to 50% of the miner's income. The unlucky tenants in this district were the ones who had no work at all: in October 1922 the council reported that nine out of 21 pits in West Auckland had closed over the previous 18 months. The overall result was that '... whenever a house happened to be empty other than those provided by the Council, the Council's tenants left and went to the other house because the rents are so much less.'<sup>93</sup>

None of the negotiations between councils and the Ministry of Health before 1923 produced significantly lower rents than those which had been set in the early stages of the programme. In January 1923, however, the Ministry and the dissatisfied local authorities persuaded the Annfield Plain council '... to accept an arrangement for a test case ... on behalf of local authorities in the County of Durham.'<sup>94</sup> The matter was duly referred to a rent tribunal, which operated under powers granted by legislation secondary to the 1919 Act. Details of the reduction in rents recommended by the tribunal in this test case are not available, but it can be seen that a year later the average rents in a selection of mining districts were (at 7/- per week for an A3 house and 8/- for a B3, exclusive of rates) 30% to 35% lower than the rents originally advocated by the

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91. Easington RDC Housing Committee Minutes, 28 September 1920, DCRO: RD/Ea.

92. Ibid, 26 July 1921.

93. Auckland RDC Housing Committee Minutes, 23 October 1922, DCRO: RD/Au.

94. Annfield Plain UD Council Minutes, 16 January 1923, DCRO: UD/Sta.

Ministry of Health.<sup>95</sup> A clearer indication of the trend is available for the industrial towns of South Tyneside, thanks to summaries prepared by officials of the Jarrow and Gateshead councils. These summaries show that the average rents of A3 and B3 council houses in the conurbation stretching from Whickham to South Shields were respectively 10/4 and 12/4 per week (exclusive of rates) when first negotiated with the Ministry of Health in the middle of 1921.<sup>96</sup> By the middle of 1922 there had been a slight fall in rent levels of about 5% (down to an average of 9/11 and 11/6 per week),<sup>97</sup> but by April 1924 - after stronger appeals to the Ministry and the Annfield Plain test case - there had been a dramatic reduction of a further 20% (to an average of 7/8 and 9/8 per week).<sup>98</sup>

This was a substantial victory for the local authorities, particularly as the cost of the further rent subsidies was being borne by central government funds. Unfortunately, the economic conditions that had originally prompted the campaign for lower rents did not improve sufficiently to eradicate the difficulty of letting houses at a sum within the reach of working-class tenants. Councils like that of Hetton continued to press for reductions, claiming that 'wages have generally decreased'<sup>99</sup> - although economic conditions there were much better than in the south-west coalfield and council house rents (at 9/6 and 11/6 per week, including rates) were among the lowest in the county. Even so, in 1925 the rent of an A3 house claimed 15% to 20% of the average

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95. Summary of council house rents as at April 1924 in various districts, in Gateshead CB Housing Committee Minutes, 1 May 1924, GLS. The mining districts in question were Stanley, Tanfield, Chester-le-Street, South Shields RD, Brandon, Crook, Willington and Shildon.

96. Summary of rents in Jarrow Borough Engineer's Report for July 1921, T&WCRO: JRJ.

97. Summary of rents in Gateshead CB Housing Committee Minutes, 20 July 1922, GLS.

98. Summary of rents, ibid, 1 May 1924.

99. Hetton UDC Housing Committee Minutes, 18 February 1924, T&WCRO: HTU.

weekly income of employed tenants in Hetton and the rent of a B3 house some 20% to 25%.<sup>100</sup> In the second half of the 1920s, however, the Ministry of Health dug in its heels to resist further reductions in the rents of Addison Act houses. A request from the Brandon council was given a particularly dusty reception: in response to descriptions of the effect of severe economic depression and of the protracted Coal Dispute on tenants' incomes the Ministry made the astonishing statement in February 1927 that 'there would not appear to have been any material change in the position of the working classes for the whom the houses were erected since the time when the present rents were fixed [in January 1924]'.<sup>101</sup> As we have seen in the previous section, this led the council to sanction the 'doubling-up' of families; in the following section it will be shown how economic depression interacted with unrealistic rent levels to produce arrears and further immiseration.<sup>102</sup>

Under the Chamberlain and Wheatley schemes it was much easier for the council to determine its own rents policy. As the liability of central government was limited to an annual flat-rate sum per house, any further reduction from an economic rent had to be subsidised by local rates. But though the Ministry of Health was unable to prevent councils charging rents which it considered undesirably low, there were other constraints acting on local authorities. A good example is the case of Sunderland RDC, which in May 1928 decided on a 25% reduction in the rents of its Chamberlain and Wheatley Act houses.<sup>103</sup> This clearly

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100. Ibid, 23 February 1925.

101. Brandon UD Council Minutes, 28 February 1927, DCRO: UD/BB.

102. It is worth noting that the Ministry did eventually agree to a 12½% reduction in rents - but only in 1931, when most of the damage had been done. (Ibid, 4 May 1931.)

103. Sunderland RD Council Minutes, 8 May 1928, T&WCRO: SDR.

enraged many local ratepayers and resulted in an official complaint to the Ministry of Health by one of the parish councils; the Ministry responded by telling the district council that its reductions '... had been drawn up without any proper consideration.'<sup>104</sup> Next to join in was the District Auditor, who '... declared that the council had no power to subsidise the wages of a particular few at the expense of the remainder of the mining community and other ratepayers.'<sup>105</sup> The Auditor returned to the fray in the following year and gave the opinion that '... those Members of the Council who are responsible ... render themselves liable [to a] surcharge.'<sup>106</sup> The councillors were eventually saved from having to dig into their own pockets by the intervention of another party - the rent tribunal. The arbitration of this body resulted in the original rents being restored and the council spared.<sup>107</sup>

More important than constraints such as these was the sheer cost of building. Given the relatively modest flat-rate Exchequer contributions on the one hand and the level of working-class incomes on the other, only a drastic fall in building costs would have enabled councils to achieve their aim of charging lower rents without intolerable demands being made upon local ratepayers. A further problem was the simple fact that council tenants themselves had to pay rates. Most councils took advantage of the system whereby large landlords could 'compound' the rates due for the whole of their estate and gain a discount on the sums which would have been due for the individual parts: the council's saving was then passed on to the tenant. Even so, the element for rates which council tenants paid (in the 'inclusive' rents

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104. Ibid, 5 June 1928.

105. Sunderland Echo, 6 November 1929.

106. Sunderland RD Council Minutes, 21 October 1930, T&WCRO: SDR.

107. Ibid, 13 January 1931.

charged by local authorities operating this scheme) usually represented about 50% to 55% on top of the purely 'rent' element: being new and relatively spacious, council houses attracted higher rating assessments than other working-class accommodation in a particular area. The combination of factors such as these finally moved the South Shields Rural District Council to complain in 1930 that council houses at Boldon Colliery were standing empty,

... because the people cannot pay out of their wages the rent (including rates) which the Council is compelled to charge. At the present time, if further houses were erected at Boldon Colliery, owing to the condition of the Mining Industry and high rates levied in the area they are not likely to be occupied. When the rates are reduced and the rents of the Council Houses reduced accordingly to a figure which the Working Classes in this area can reasonably pay, further houses could be built, and overcrowding abated. (108)

The problem is further exemplified by a study made of estates in Stockton by the Medical Officer of Health.<sup>109</sup> By analysing the health records of families which had been moved in 1927 from a slum clearance area (Housewife Lane) out to a large new council estate (Mount Pleasant) he showed that there was a significant increase in the death rate (from 22.9 to 32.5 per thousand) in the five years following the move over the previous five years spent in the slums.<sup>110</sup> This had nothing to do with housing and environmental standards, which were vastly superior on the new estate; nor was it the result of any epidemic or upsurge in the common infectious diseases. The phenomenon was put down to dietary deficiencies which had been aggravated by an increased proportion

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108. Report of South Shields RDC to Durham County Council, 1930, DCRO: CC/H/90.

109. G C M M'Gonigle and J Kirby, Poverty and Public Health (London, 1936).

110. Ibid, pp 108-113. Another interesting observation was that there was a slight increase in the birth rate on the new estate over the same period, when fertility in the rest of Stockton had fallen.

of family income being taken by rent.<sup>111</sup> In families where the husband was employed the proportion of family income taken by the council house rent was 20.5%; this rose to 31.3% in families where there was no wage-earner. In the latter case, where the rent level was obviously critical, an average of only 2/11 per week was available to feed each member of the family; back in the slums the figure was 3/10 per week.<sup>112</sup> The same conclusions about poverty and health had already been reached by the Medical Officer for West Hartlepool:

it has not been found possible to build [council] houses for letting at an economic rent to meet the great bulk of distressed people who are living on unemployment benefit or transitional benefit. It is hopeless to demand a rent of even 6/- out of an income ... of 23/- to 25/-, and expect at the same time to retain their health and character. (113)

It was only after the Greenwood Act of 1930 that it became possible for councils to build houses at rents which most low-income families could afford. The combination of more generous Exchequer subsidies with lower building costs and interest rates in the 1930s meant that slum replacement housing could be let at low rents without undue strain on the local rates. The effect of these more favourable circumstances is illustrated by information collected in 1936 by Seaham Harbour UDC from every other urban district council in the county.<sup>114</sup> This shows that in the mining districts the average rent of an A3 house built under the Addison and Chamberlain Acts was then 6/9 per week, excluding rates; for a Wheatley Act house it was 6/6; but for an A3 house built under the

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111. The mean rent in the slums had been 4/8 per week, including rates; on the new estate it was 9/-. (Ibid, p 117-8.)
112. Ibid, p 120. A factor which became important in towns where council estates developed further away from the industrial centre was that of travel costs. This was not, however, a problem in Stockton, where the average spent on transport by an employed man was 1/2 per week (ibid, p 201); but it may have been more significant in some of the later estates on South Tyneside.
113. Annual Report of the Medical Officer of Health for West Hartlepool, 1931, WHR.
114. Seaham Harbour UD Council Minutes, 27 October 1936, DCRO: UD/Sea.

Greenwood Act it was only 4/6. Similarly, on Tyneside in 1936 an Addison or Chamberlain house averaged 7/4 per week and a Wheatley House 7/-; but the average weekly rent for a Greenwood house was only 5/3.<sup>115</sup>

This represented substantial progress, although tenants of the older council houses did not receive any immediate benefit. The Housing Act of 1935 did, however, cut through some of the knots of accounting practice which had previously tied most councils to separate accounts for each housing scheme and, as we have just seen, to different rents for similar accommodation. Many councils moved to an arrangement whereby housing accounts were consolidated and rent income 'pooled'. Thus it became possible for a district like Consett to fix a graduated scale of rents, ranging from 5/3 for an A2 house to 6/11 for an A6 house, based entirely on the size of accommodation provided.<sup>116</sup> On the other hand, at least two councils introduced income-related scales of rent, though only for tenants who had been forced to leave their previous (slum) accommodation. As early as 1933 the Gateshead council agreed to a sliding scale which provided that, for example, a couple with six or more children would pay an inclusive rent for an A4 house of 6/- per week if their income was no more than 26/-, but 14/6 per week if their income exceeded 50/-.<sup>117</sup> And in Felling, 60% of rehoused tenants started off on the new estates with a rebate of between 1/6 and 3/6 per week.<sup>118</sup>

In the 1930s, therefore, there were greater opportunities for councils to charge rents which were low enough for even some of the

115. Ibid.

116. Consett UDC Housing Sub-Committee Minutes, 17 December 1940, DDC.

117. Gateshead CB Housing Committee Minutes, 5 January 1933, GLS.

118. Felling UDC, Register of 1930 Act Houses (2 vols), GLS.

poorest working-class families to afford, and to make more flexible arrangements for families in special need. Conversely, there was less reason for councils being '... forced in a large number of cases to let houses to a class of tenants who could reasonably have found their own accommodation.'<sup>119</sup> A measure of the progress made is that in 1936 the average 'exclusive' rent of a council house in County Durham was 6/- per week<sup>120</sup> - which, even in a region of high rate contributions, gave an inclusive weekly sum well under the 10/- which had become accepted in the 1930s as the reasonable limit for working-class families.<sup>121</sup> The fact that by 1939 many families might hope to obtain decent new housing, at a rent which left them with sufficient income for other necessities, was an important breakthrough in the standard of living.

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119. Gateshead CB, Report of Letting Sub-Committee, 12 September 1929, GLS.

120. Calculated from Ministry of Health, Rents of Houses and Flats owned by Local Authorities (England and Wales), 1937. The average in the rural districts of Durham was 5/4½ per week, in the urban districts and municipal boroughs 5/11, and in the county boroughs 6/6½ - all exclusive of rates. These rents were 10% to 12% lower than for the rest of England and Wales.

121. This figure was enshrined in the report by Political and Economic Planning, Housing England (London, 1934) and was confirmed by the experience of the Unemployment Assistance Board (B B Gilbert, British Social Policy, 1914-1939, (London, 1970) p 201).

#### D. Arrears

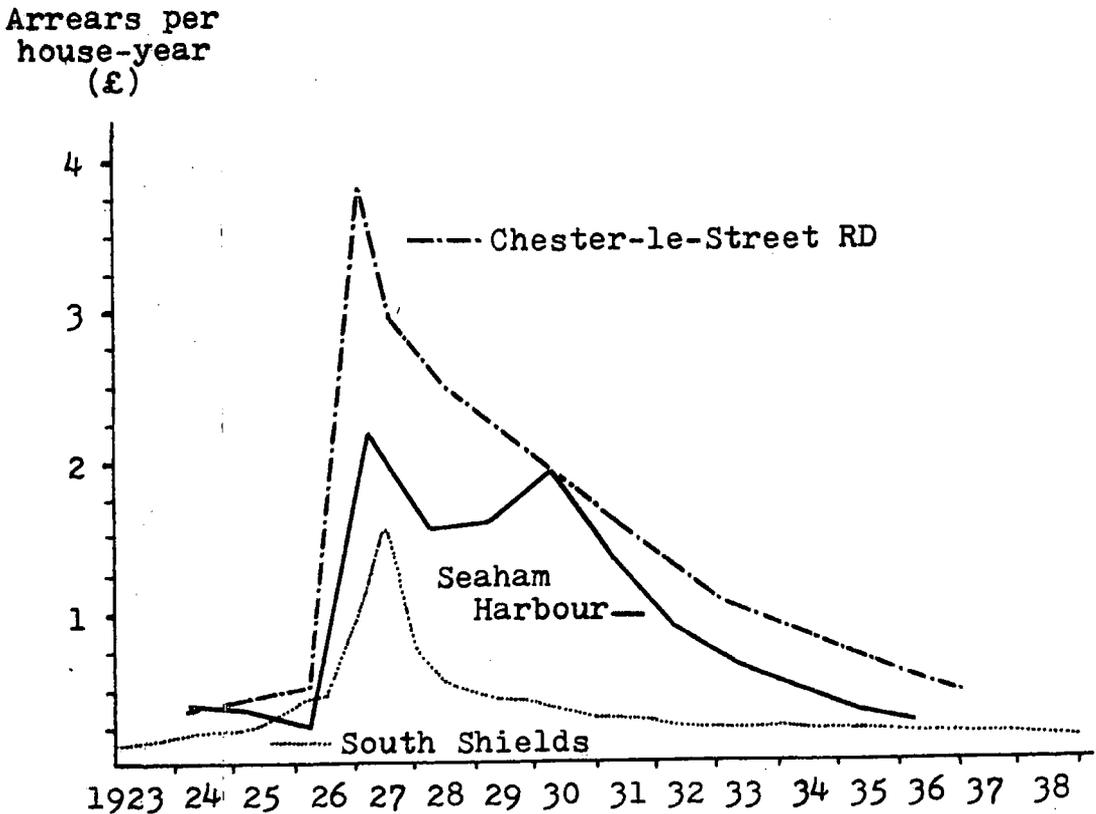
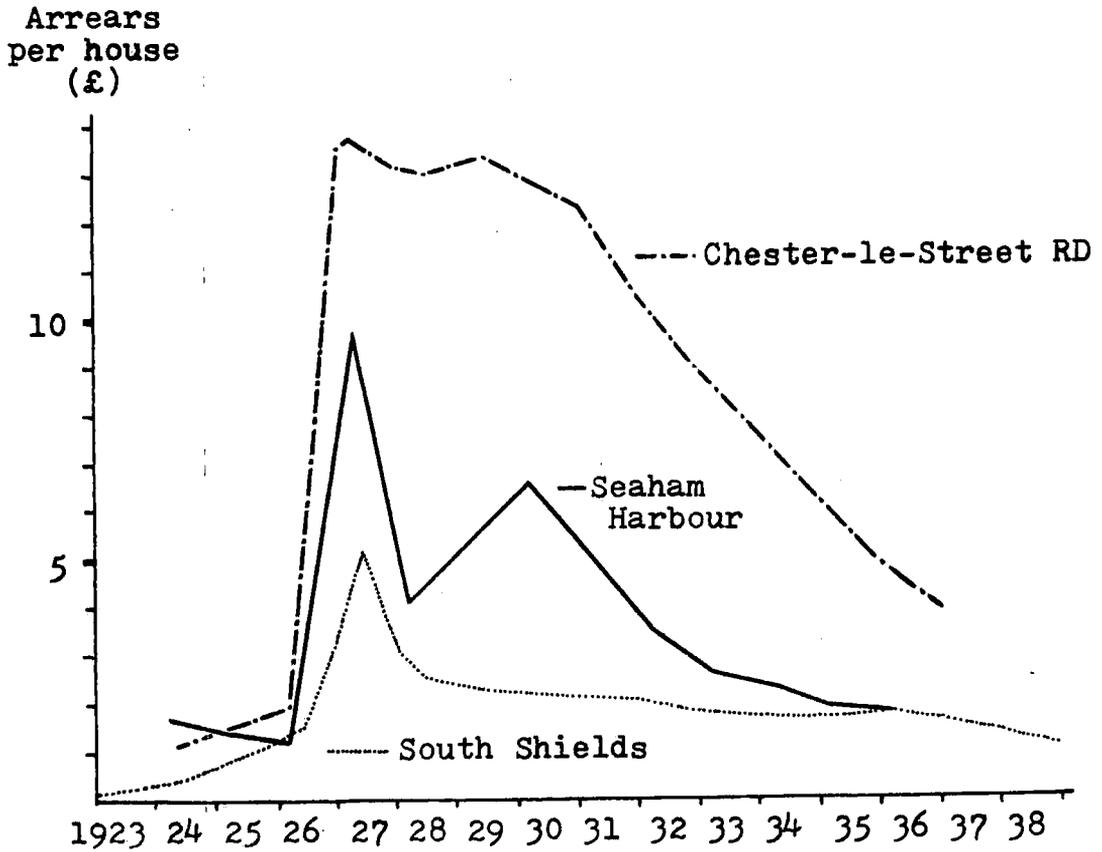
The greatest single obstacle to good relations between the council and its tenants was the problem of rent arrears. The cost of an individual tenant's arrears had to be borne by the rest of the ratepaying community;<sup>122</sup> moreover, the sum total of arrears in a particular district could (as we have seen in Chapter 3) influence the Ministry of Health to refuse to sanction the building of additional council houses. Thus it was clearly in the interests of both the council and the local community for regular recovery of rent to be established, but there were major difficulties in actually achieving this. Most significant of these was the industrial depression which blighted the county for much of the inter-war period: as we shall see below, councils found it difficult to recover rents from families whose income had been cut by falling wages, by high unemployment or industrial disputes. Sometimes the problem was aggravated by the fixing of rents which, as we have seen in the previous section, were not in reasonable keeping with working-class incomes. There is also the possibility, examined below, that some councils did less than they might in pursuing the arrears owed to them.

The general course of rent arrears in the county is well illustrated by the examples of South Shields, Seaham Harbour and Chester-le-Street Rural District - the three local authorities for which most precise information exists. In Figure 5-2 this information is expressed in terms both of the average amount outstanding at a particular time for each year of a council house's life, and of the average cumulative amount overdue in respect of each house actually standing at a given

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122. Exceptionally, under the Addison Act, the cost would be sustained by the Exchequer, but the Ministry of Health had to be satisfied by the District Auditor that all reasonable efforts had been made to recover the debt.

FIGURE 5-2 Rent Arrears in South Shields, Seaham Harbour and Chester-le-Street RD, 1923-1938



time. Both methods show very clearly the pattern of indebtedness and recovery being influenced by economic conditions. Most striking is the case of Chester-le-Street Rural District, where a fairly low level of arrears (about 2% of the total rent due each year) climbed steeply during the 1926 Coal Dispute, at the end of which the council had received only about 30% to 40% of the rent due for the financial year. From the beginning of 1927 the level of arrears fell quite steadily, so that by the late 1930s most of the debt from 1926 had been recovered. Similar trends may be seen in the case of Seaham Harbour and South Shields, although the lower proportion of miners resident in the latter meant that the Coal Dispute had less impact on the overall level of arrears. It is interesting to note that the recovery in South Shields was fairly quick and that by the end of the period over 98% of the rent due to the council had been collected. In Seaham Harbour, however, there was a second peak of arrears in 1930 before the recovery really began.

Nevertheless, the basic pattern is apparent in all districts on the coalfield for which evidence survives. The salient feature in all cases is the Coal Dispute, which in the Sunderland Rural District, for example, gave rise to a tenfold increase in rent arrears between March 1926 and February 1927.<sup>123</sup> An analysis of the arrears accumulated in different parts of the district by 1931 shows that in the parish of Ford, where there were only two miners in council houses, the arrears stood at £3.61 per house; but in the predominantly mining parishes of Ryhope, Tunstall and Hylton the figures were £11.56, £11.74 and £12.57 respectively.<sup>124</sup> The same overall pattern can be seen in the mining area of Hetton, where the total amount owed to the council rose from

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123. Sunderland RD Council Minutes, 16 October 1934, T&WCRO: SDR. The total amount owed to the council had risen from £432 to £4,199.

124. Ibid, 28 July 1931.

£144 in November 1925 (a mere £0.72 per house) to £3,087 in January 1927 (£9.50 per house).<sup>125</sup> A further factor in the general course of arrears, reflected possibly in the figures for Seaham Harbour, may have been the wider economic depression from 1929 to 1931. This appears to have been the case in Darlington, where the council, having ascertained from the town's five largest employers that the average wages paid had fallen by 24% between 1929 and the beginning of 1932, discovered by interviewing tenants who had recently fallen in arrears that their average weekly income had dropped by 26% (from 62/8 to 46/2) over the same period.<sup>126</sup>

Before looking at the various methods by which councils attempted to recover arrears from their tenants, it will be useful to consider the means by which rent payments normally changed hands. The standard procedure was door-to-door collection on a weekly basis: this meant that much depended on the rent collector who regularly came into personal contact with tenants over a 'round' of between 300 and 500 houses. He was generally a salaried employee of the council, earning £4 to £5 per week (substantially more than most council tenants). Some of the more rural districts, where the number of houses did not warrant a full-time collector, farmed the job out on a commission - usually 4% to 5% of total receipts. In more urban areas, with a greater concentration of council houses, it was more economical to employ salaried staff: the average cost to the council was about 3% to 4½% of the rent recovered.<sup>127</sup> Some councils may have regarded the

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125. Hetton UDC Housing Committee Minutes, 23 November 1925 and 24 January 1927, T&WCRO: HTU.

126. Darlington CB Housing Committee Minutes, 19 April 1932, DCRO: CB/Da.

127. By the mid-1930s this represented an average annual cost of about £0.40 to £0.60 per house. These estimates have been calculated from county-wide summaries found in the Sunderland RD Council Minutes for 15 September 1931 and 11 December 1934, T&WCRO: SDR.

'commission' method as an incentive to sharpen the rent collector's approach. It may have been for this reason that Chester-le-Street UDC took the unusual step of hiring a firm of estate agents to handle all collection on a commission of 3%; this arrangement, which lasted throughout the 1930s, was undoubtedly a financial success for the council.<sup>128</sup>

Because most rent collectors handled over £5,000 per year each, it was usual for councils to insist on some kind of insurance against the risk of embezzlement. Either the council made arrangements of its own or, as was quite common, the collector had to deposit with the council a 'bond' issued by his own insurers. This was no mere formality - there are several cases on record of a collector having gone astray. The Easington council, after experiencing problems with the Wheatley Hill collector, who was made to disgorge £25 on pain of being reported to his insurers,<sup>129</sup> eventually had to take proceedings against the Shotton collector who had pocketed £96 and represented it as tenants' arrears.<sup>130</sup> In another case, one of Chester-le-Street RDC's rent collectors was acquitted of theft by a court of magistrates, but his insurers had to pay the council £207 which had been lost due to 'bad accounting'.<sup>131</sup> Other cases did not reach court: an action against one of Sunderland RDC's collectors was dropped when, after 'negotiations with relatives', the outstanding sum of £384 was to be repaid in full.<sup>132</sup> Despite the responsibilities and temptations, the job evidently still had its attractions, for the applications to replace this collector numbered 282 by the following month.<sup>133</sup>

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128. Chester-le-Street UDC Housing Committee Minutes, 14 November 1940, CDC.

129. Easington RDC Housing Committee Minutes, 26 June 1923, DCRO: RD/Ea.

130. Ibid, 19 December 1929, 9 January and 21 January 1930.

131. Northern Echo, 13 June 1936.

132. Sunderland RD Council Minutes, 22 July 1924, T&WCRO: SDR.

133. Ibid, 19 August 1924.

Nevertheless, the occasional problem of the knavish rent collector was fairly small in comparison with the widespread persistence of tenants' arrears. The prevalence of debt (in some districts nearly half of the council tenants might be behind with their rent at any time) and the severity of individual cases (sometimes involving more than a year's unpaid rent) forced local authorities to develop an armoury of devices by means of which money could be recovered. The basic methods were much the same as those still in operation today. Most common was a written 'notice to quit', often allowed to lapse if payment was made by the effective date. The next stage in the process was obtaining a court order for repayment of the debt by instalments. If a tenant failed to keep up with these payments, the council could obtain a distress warrant and, with the help of bailiffs, seize furniture and effects to off-set the debt. The final step, which rarely befell council tenants in County Durham, was eviction. In fact, it was more common for tenants in arrears to move out of council houses in the early stages of debt recovery; indeed, the ease with which council tenants could slip into arrears was probably the most important factor in determining the rate of removals. At different stages of the period it can be seen that for every ten council houses in a district there might be anywhere from two to six erstwhile tenants who had moved out and were still being pursued for rent arrears.<sup>134</sup>

A method adopted by some councils, particularly in pursuit of debts owed by previous tenants, was to hire a firm of professional debt collectors. The leading exponents of this business were the Northern Guild of Commerce and Trade Protection Society, whose recorded dealings were with the councils

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134. See, for example, Stanley UD Council Minutes, 24 July 1928, DCRO: UD/Sta Brandon; UD Council Minutes, 4 February 1929, DCRO: UD/BB; and Sunderland RD Council Minutes, 31 December 1939, T&WCRO: SDR.

of Blaydon, Felling, Stanley, Washington and Auckland.<sup>135</sup> These debt collectors had some success, but their services cost about 15% of the arrears actually recovered.<sup>136</sup> Another agent, hired by the Hetton council, operated on a commission of 20%.<sup>137</sup> There was thus some justification for the unusual experiment in Chester-le-Street, during which tenants and ex-tenants with arrears of more than £5 were allowed a discount of 5% if they settled the sum in full.<sup>138</sup>

There were other methods, apart from straightforward debt collection, by which councils could reduce their overdue accounts. The most effective was an agreement with a tenant's employer to deduct a certain amount from his wages and pay it direct to the council. There appears only to have been one recorded case where this happened - involving a colliery in the Stanley area<sup>139</sup> - and no case at all where the now familiar arrangement of direct deductions from State benefits was used. A more common arrangement was the contribution of strikers' rent allowance from the Durham Miners' Association.<sup>140</sup> After the 1926 dispute miners in the Easington district were allowed £3 each towards rent arrears<sup>141</sup> and in a strike at Ryhope which had started in 1932 each man was allowed 2/- per week.<sup>142</sup> Not all lodges were prepared to hand over the allowance direct to the council but, when pressed, they

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135. Auckland RDC Housing Committee Minutes, 28 November 1933 (including reference to Blaydon UDC) DCRO: RD/Au; Felling UD Council Minutes, 5 July 1933, GLS; Stanley UD Council Minutes, 24 July 1928, DCRO: UD/Sta; and Washington UDC Housing Committee Minutes, 29 May 1934, T&WCRO: WGU.
136. Auckland RDC Housing Committee Minutes, 28 November 1933, DCRO: RD/Au.
137. Hetton UDC Housing Committee Minutes, 6 November 1933, T&WCRO: HTU.
138. Chester-le-Street UDC Housing Committee Minutes, 19 July 1932, CDC.
139. Stanley UD Council Minutes, 12 July 1927, DCRO: UD/Sta.
140. The first recorded instance of such an arrangement in County Durham was a payment made to Sunderland RDC by the Silksworth Miners' Lodge in 1912. (Sunderland RD Council Minutes, 18 May 1912, T&WCRO: SDR.)
141. Easington RDC Housing Committee Minutes, 14 June 1927, DCRO: RD/Ea.
142. Sunderland RD Council Minutes, 31 January 1933, T&WCRO: SDR.

might agree to disclose a statement of individual allowances, so that the council could pursue tenants who had failed to hand over the full amount.<sup>143</sup> The DMA's contribution would have had a considerable effect in reducing strikers' arrears in mining districts: in Sunderland RD, for example, its payment of £1,570 served to clear 42% of the arrears that had accumulated in the district during the 1926 Coal Dispute.<sup>144</sup> The final solution for dealing with arrears was the accounting expedient of writing them off. Inevitably there were debts which could never be recovered: for example, if a tenant disappeared from the area, or if he died penniless. Quite a large proportion of arrears was, therefore, just never recovered: in Chester-le-Street, for example, out of a total of £7,423 outstanding at September 1930, £2,545 (or 34%) had been written off by September 1940.<sup>145</sup>

Of course, some councils were better than others in preventing arrears from piling up and in clawing back the debts which did arise. Jarrow, for example, managed to recover 99.8% of the rent due up to the end of 1927<sup>146</sup> and Durham City had no arrears at all by the middle of 1932.<sup>147</sup> In Blaydon, on the other hand, rent arrears stood for some time at an alarming £15,000.<sup>148</sup> The County Medical Officer of Health was moved to include in his report for 1925 a statement that 'in some districts in the county, housing schemes ... have not involved any serious losses [whereas] in others the arrears of rent have reached very considerable sums, but whether this loss of money is a result of

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143. See, for example, Brandon UD Council Minutes, 7 November 1927, DCRO: UD/EB.

144. Sunderland RD Council Minutes, 16 October 1934, T&WCRO: SDR.

145. A further 49% had been recovered direct from tenants and ex-tenants; the remaining 17% was still being fought over. (Chester-le-Street UDC Housing Committee Minutes, 16 October 1941, CDC.)

146. Jarrow MB Housing Committee Minutes, 19 January 1928, T&WCRO: JRJ.

147. Sunderland Echo, 2 June 1932.

148. North Mail, 17 July 1929, and Northern Echo, 15 July 1932.

laxity or inefficient management is not for me to say.<sup>149</sup> The official whose job it was to make such judgments was the District Auditor: in his report on the affairs of the Brandon council, for example, he asserted that 'the Council is a Labour Council and I think has failed to take all possible and reasonable steps to collect rents from the tenants of the Council houses.'<sup>150</sup> The same Auditor made similar claims about Hetton UDC in 1936, which prompted one councillor to remark that the matter had become 'a political vendetta'.<sup>151</sup>

The value of the Auditor's claims can be assessed by a closer examination of the situation in the Brandon Urban District. The main problem here was the poverty of the tenants; the majority were dependent on the mining industry and suffered badly because of local pit closures in the 1920s as well as the 1926 dispute. Nevertheless, the council had carried through its first eviction as early as 1923 and resolved to issue notice to all tenants more than 30/- in arrears.<sup>152</sup> Other sanctions included cutting off the electricity supply and seeking court orders for repayment<sup>153</sup> - although, as the Clerk observed, the latter step usually meant a year before even the court costs were recovered.<sup>154</sup> The pressure of debt and of council sanctions forced many families out into cheaper accommodation, sometimes to another district; many council houses at New Brancepeth stood empty (as a result of the poverty caused by pit closures) and lost the district over 5% of its total rental capacity.<sup>155</sup>

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149. Annual Report of the Medical Officer of Health to Durham County Council for 1925, DCRO.

150. District Auditor's report, dated January 1928, in PRO: HLG 48/54.

151. Northern Echo, 26 May 1936.

152. Brandon UD Council Minutes, 5 February 1923, DCRO: UD/BB.

153. Ibid, 4 June 1923.

154. Note of meeting with council deputation, dated November 1930, in PRO: HLG 48/54.

155. Report by Clerk of council to Ministry of Health, dated April 1930, ibid.

From a total stock of 337 Addison Act houses, over 200 tenants had moved out by 1929 and were still being pursued for rent arrears.<sup>156</sup> As we saw in Section B of this chapter, the council was forced to condone sub-letting on a large scale, in order to bring rents more within the reach of tenants.<sup>157</sup> In 1930 the council decided on a policy of giving every new tenant notice to quit on the first occasion a weekly payment was missed<sup>158</sup> and in 1931 it hired debt-collecting agents to recover arrears from former tenants.<sup>159</sup> One policy for which the councillors could be criticised was their refusal to give tenancies to applicants from outside the district who were better able to pay the rent, on the grounds that '... they preferred to keep the houses for their own people who were of the working class, for whom the houses were intended.'<sup>160</sup> It was this approach, together with the council's repeated requests for lower rents, that led the Ministry to remark that '... assisted scheme houses were not "poor law houses".'<sup>161</sup>

It can be seen, however, that the Brandon council did about as much as could reasonably be expected to prevent the accumulation of arrears - but the debts still mounted and stood in the way of any new housing schemes in the district for over ten years. There were undoubtedly cases - in several districts - where bad management crept in: the occasional instances of tenants owing over £50 (or, in Blaydon, sometimes over £100)<sup>162</sup> indicate poor control. It is also likely that councils were generally more lenient than private landlords in their attitude towards tenants in arrears of rent. Evidence is not available

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156. Brandon UD Council Minutes, 4 February 1929, DCRO: UD/BB.

157. See above, p 265-6.

158. Brandon UD Council Minutes, 2 June 1930, DCRO: UD/BB.

159. Ibid, 1 June 1931.

160. Note of meeting with deputation, dated October 1934, in PRO:HLG 48/54.

161. Note of meeting with deputation, dated November 1930, ibid.

162. Northern Echo, 6 October 1932.

to allow direct comparison with the private sector, but clearly the small landlord, whose operating margins (particularly if the rent was 'controlled') were very narrow, would be less favourably disposed to the defaulting tenants than a large institutional landlord like the district council, which could easily bear a shortfall in receipts. It also behove the council more to apply considerations other than the purely commercial in its dealings with tenants. Thus while the council's attitude to tenants laid off from work was generally sympathetic, institutions like the coal companies were more hard-hearted; for example, a miner's free colliery house would often become subject to a market rent while he was involved in a strike or lock-out, or when he was made redundant.<sup>163</sup> It is possible that some tenants were inclined to take advantage of the council's more lenient attitude; so that in opening a new estate at Chilton Moor the Chairman of Houghton-le-Spring UDC appealed to the tenants, 'because you have a Labour Council that does not mean you have not to pay rent.'<sup>164</sup>

On the whole, however, councils did a reasonable job in dealing with a very difficult problem. There was little action they could take against tenants affected by the Coal Dispute, when in many districts the vast majority of the population was affected. It was difficult, too, in areas of general economic depression, to find working-class tenants whose budgets would always be adequate to cover all of their liabilities. In the Sunderland Rural District, for example, even after the Coal Dispute (when 87% of tenants had fallen in arrears)<sup>165</sup> the proportion

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163. See, for example, the Holmside and South Moor Collieries Ltd House Rents Book, 1928-31 (DCRO: NCB 3/69). This shows that rents of between 4/6 and 5/10 per week were charged for a total of 127 houses in the Stanley and Annfield Plain area.

164. Northern Echo, 10 September 1936.

165. Sunderland RD Council Minutes, 10 February 1931, T&WCRO: SDR.

of tenants in debt to the council was still high in the 1930s - a fairly constant 40%.<sup>166</sup> Even districts like Stockton, where the level of arrears was generally low, had problems on the poorer estates: in the slum rehousing estate of Mount Pleasant, mentioned in the previous section, arrears were three times higher than in the rest of the borough.<sup>167</sup> It is likely, therefore, that even in the more favourable conditions of the 1930s, when rents were lower and incomes more stable, the rent for a council house could still be beyond the comfortable reach of some of the poorest working-class families.

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166. Ibid., 15 October 1935 and 31 December 1939.

167. Stockton MB General Purposes Committee Minutes, 11 November 1938 and 5 May 1939, CCRO.

CONCLUSION

In this study we have considered some of the ways in which councils in one region of the country responded to local housing needs during the period 1900-1939 and some of the problems which they encountered in the process. As we saw in Chapter 2, the scale of both qualitative and quantitative housing deficiencies in County Durham at the beginning of this century was virtually unknown in England outside the North East. A few councils made an attempt before the First World War to tackle these problems by building additional houses themselves, but after the war they entered the market on a massive scale. Indeed, as we saw in Chapter 3, in some districts between the wars the local authority almost eclipsed private enterprise in the building of new houses. In the last two chapters of this study we looked at some of the more important developments which this intervention entailed - in particular, the responsibilities for building and estate management on an unprecedented scale.

Although it has been possible to draw conclusions about the housebuilding activity of the different local authorities in County Durham and about their experience as builders and landlords, it must be admitted that the breadth of significance is limited very much by the framework of national policy within which the activity and experience occurred. Much of this study has been concerned with the enormous growth of local government responsibility for housing between the wars, but this was generated to a great extent, of course, by the development of central government policy. The development of this policy was hastened, as we saw in Chapter 1, by the effects of the First World War - and once central government had decided on large-scale intervention, local authorities followed a course largely determined for them. Although some councils might proceed more eagerly than others, or might favour a slightly different route from others, they were all obliged to march

in the same direction.

The course of national policy has been fairly well charted elsewhere and there is nothing in this study to suggest the need for a fundamental revision of the picture. Indeed, none of the present generation of historians specialising in the study of national housing policy has managed - even with the aid of Cabinet and other official papers that have become available in recent years - to disturb the broad analysis made in the near-contemporary work of Marion Bowley. The aim of the present study, however, has been to examine the relevance of central government policy to local conditions and to piece together the story of how this policy was carried out in practice and with what effect on a particular region. The area chosen for this approach was particularly interesting in several respects - the high level of housing shortage, for example, and the high level of building activity by local authorities in response - but no more than any other region could it provide a picture typical of the whole country. Most of the conclusions reached in this study on a local basis do have a wider significance, but they would assume a greater value if set alongside comparable research into regions of a quite different character - for example, South East England, where housing shortage was much smaller and where relative prosperity was reflected in the high level of immigration from other regions and in the greater activity of private housebuilders.

Not only might it be useful to carry out further research into council housebuilding on a regional basis, but it would also be of value if local authority activity were considered in relation to all the other important developments which took place in the housing market during this period. As was stated in the Introduction to this study, the local authority contribution was only part of the story: other

aspects of the housing market still await analysis on a detailed local basis. One important question which could usefully be tackled on such a basis is the extent to which investment in private housebuilding was declining before the First World War, and the reasons for any shift of capital away from this market. Another interesting area for detailed study would be the effect of rent control legislation on the attitude of investors. A more ambitious topic for local research would be the role of the private builder between the wars, which raises a number of interesting questions. For example, to what extent was private enterprise in a particular area stimulated or depressed by the new building activity of local authorities? How successful were the subsidies for private housebuilding under the Acts of 1919 and 1923 in reviving the interest of investors and construction firms? Or more generally, just how did builders and developers organise their operations during the private housing boom of the 1930s? Only by considering questions such as these in local detail will it be possible to construct a full picture of the effects and the efficacy of national housing policy between the wars.

It should also be pointed out that even within the realm of local government responsibility this study leaves two developments of the inter-war period untouched. The first is the advent of large-scale slum clearance in the 1930s. The aim of this study has been to concentrate on the question of new building by local authorities, whether as an addition to the housing stock or by way of replacement for the slum sector. It would be possible, however, if one wished to pursue research into the history of public health, to examine the growing role of local authorities in enforcing qualitative standards in the private housing sector. The second development is the rise of statutory town planning since the beginning of the century. This is a separate question from

the rise of public sector housing, although it stemmed from similar motives and was nominally linked by several pieces of legislation. But it is a less promising field for further study, having already been ploughed and furrowed by many yokes of geographers and planners.

It is also necessary here to emphasise the continued growth of the public sector in housing after the Second World War. The inter-war period is still very important, not only from a historical point of view: even 40 years later its legacy represents over 20% of the total public sector housing stock. Nevertheless, the addition of some 4.3 million public sector houses since the Second World War (at an average annual rate of about 130,000 per year, compared with about 60,000 in the inter-war period) has meant a further great expansion of local authority responsibility. There is therefore plenty of scope for a sequel to the present study; but it would be difficult to pursue the local authority viewpoint in detail until such time as official records are deposited in a public archive.

Returning to the inter-war period, we have already remarked that this study has had to look at local conditions in the context of the policy actually decided by central government; but a final point for thought is the significance of what did not happen in the formulation of policy between the wars. The housing market has been transformed by the State from a position in the nineteenth century in which, as was stated in the Introduction, the vast majority of families obtained accommodation on a rented basis from private landlords to the present position in which most families either own their accommodation or rent from a local housing authority. A crucial stage in this transformation was the State's commitment at the end of the First World War to overcome housing shortage by sinking money into the building of new houses under

public ownership. Was this an ideal policy, or could this money and that which followed it have been employed more effectively to achieve the aim of improving the nation's housing conditions? The growth of a large sector of subsidised council housing has, after all, created certain new social problems and, alongside the growth of owner-occupation (subsidised by means of tax concessions), has tended to underline social divisions.

It is difficult to see what other policies could have been successfully adopted in the circumstances. It was politically impossible at the end of the First World War to abandon the policy of rent control, so the market for private letting was bound to stagnate: subsidies to private tenants would have been a possibility, but it is arguable whether such a step could have reversed the trend in this sector. Subsidies to private builders - another alternative - were, of course, an important element in the Housing Acts of 1919 and 1923, but were of no direct help to the worst-housed section of the population. Politically, Lloyd George's Government had little option, amid the promises and fears swirling around at the end of the war, but to hold its breath and dive into a policy of housebuilding executed by public authorities and subsidised by public funds. Once such a fundamental commitment to State intervention had been made, it was extremely difficult for subsequent Governments to extricate themselves entirely from continuing involvement. Fortunately, it is beyond the scope of this thesis, and indeed of any historical study, to hypothesise about how events should have turned out. It is a fair conclusion, however, that the policy of firm State intervention - in the form of both 'additional' and 'sanitary' housing policies - was of vital importance in dealing with the particular problems of County Durham.

In fact, the significant improvement in the housing conditions of

Durham between the wars sounds a cheering note in what is otherwise a dirge of decline and depression in that region; and the lamentable failure of 'free' market forces in tackling the county's economic problems in general since the First World War gives little ground for thinking that they would have been more successful in meeting the particular need to improve its housing supply. At the very least, the local implementation of national housing policy since the early twentieth century marked the first recognition in County Durham of the principle that improvement and recovery in an economically declining region requires that the State should step in to make up for the shortcomings of private enterprise.

## APPENDIX 1

A Summary of Major Housing Legislation, 1890-1938**Housing of the Working Classes Act, 1890**

[53 &amp; 54 Vict, c 70]

This Act consolidated and amended earlier legislation on Artisans' and Labourers' Dwellings and the Housing of the Working Classes.

Part I gave local authorities (with the exception of rural sanitary authorities) power of compulsory acquisition in respect of land and property which constituted an 'unhealthy area'. Authorities in the city or county of London were obliged to provide accommodation for at least the number of persons displaced, but other borough and district councils were not. Houses built under this provision were to be sold by the local authority within ten years of completion.

Part II made it the duty of a local authority to have the houses in its district inspected periodically and to issue a 'statutory notice' to the owner of any 'unhealthy dwelling house' to make good the deficiencies. A landlord's failure to comply could result in the service of a closing or demolition order.

Part III could be adopted by local authorities (but only by rural sanitary authorities in certain circumstances) to enable them to build working-class dwellings on land within their own boundaries. As with Part I of the Act, housing schemes were to be financed entirely by local rates.

**Housing of the Working Classes Act, 1900**

[63 &amp; 64 Vict, c 59]

This allowed local authorities (except rural district councils) to build under Part III of the 1890 Act on land outside their own boundaries.

The procedure by which rural district councils could adopt Part III of the 1890 Act was made slightly easier, but consent was still dependent on the decision of the appropriate county council.

**Housing, Town Planning &c Act, 1909**

[9 Edw VII, c 44]

Part III of the 1890 Act was no longer to be adoptive but was to '...extend to and take effect in...' every local authority area, including rural districts. The Local Government Board was given more power to enforce action by local authorities under Part III and could set a time limit for such action.

A county council was permitted to act under Part III instead or in default of a rural district council. The housing scheme could then be financed out of county rates or responsibility transferred to the rural district council.

The procedure for compulsory purchase of land was made slightly easier and the obligation to sell houses erected under Part I of the 1890 Act was removed.

**Housing, Town Planning &c Act, 1919 ('The Addison Act')**

[9 &amp; 10 Geo V, c 35]

This Act made it the duty of local authorities to conduct, within three months, a survey of the housing needs in their district and to submit plans for the provision of dwellings to remedy any shortage. The work was to be supervised by the Ministry of Health through a Housing Commissioner in each of eleven regions.

The financial liability of local authorities was limited to the product of one penny in the pound on the rates: the residual cost was to be borne by the Exchequer. Public utility societies were also eligible for an annual subsidy.

**Housing (Additional Powers) Act, 1919**

[9 &amp; 10 Geo V, c 99]

Under this Act, houses built by private enterprise in compliance with certain building conditions were eligible for a lump-sum subsidy, which in practice was to range from £130 to £260. (The average subsidy for the 39,186 houses built was £242.)

**Housing &c Act, 1923 ('The Chamberlain Act')**

[13 &amp; 14 Geo V, c 24]

Houses built by private enterprise and certified by the appropriate local authority as complying with certain standards of size and amenity were to qualify for a subsidy (usually in the form of a lump sum of £75) paid by the Exchequer through the local authority. Councils were allowed to make an additional grant to private builders themselves.

If a local authority could satisfy the Ministry of Health that it was preferable for the council to build houses itself, each house would qualify for a subsidy of £6 p a for 20 years. The subsidy clauses of this Act were to apply only to those houses completed before October 1925, but were extended for 15 years by the Act of 1924. The subsidy was reduced in 1927 by a third for houses completed after September of that year and was finally withdrawn for houses completed after September 1929.

**Housing (Financial Provisions) Act, 1924 ('The Wheatley Act')**

[14 &amp; 15 Geo V, c 35]

This Act granted local authorities a subsidy of £9 per house per year for 40 years (£12.10/- p a in agricultural parishes) in respect of all houses complying with standards similar to those set by the 1923 Act and completed within the next 15 years. In most cases the local authority would contribute £4.10/- p a from the rates towards each house.

Houses built by private enterprise qualified for a subsidy only if they were to be let at an approved rent.

The Exchequer subsidy was reduced in 1927 to £7.10/- and was finally withdrawn in 1933.

**Housing Act, 1930 ('The Greenwood Act')**

[21 &amp; 22 Geo V, c 39]

This Act gave local authorities power to acquire 'clearance areas' of slum property (requiring total demolition) and 'improvement areas'. Before clearance began, local authorities had to provide accommodation for the people displaced.

The Exchequer subsidy was to be £2.5/- p a for 40 years

for each person rehoused in an urban district and £2.10/- p a in an agricultural parish. There were extra allowances available where the site was particularly expensive or where rehousing involved the erection of flats. The local authority rate contribution was in most cases £3.15/- p a per house.

#### Housing (Financial Provisions) Act, 1933

[23 & 24 Geo V, c 15]

This Act abolished the Wheatley subsidy for all housing schemes not approved by the Ministry of Health by December 1933.

#### Housing Act, 1935

[25 & 26 Geo V, c 40]

Local authorities were to conduct a detailed survey into overcrowding in their district and were empowered to declare 'redevelopment areas' where the extent of overcrowding was particularly serious.

The basic subsidy was up to £5 p a for 20 years for each dwelling erected to relieve overcrowding, with extra allowances for expensive sites and the building of flats. There were elaborate conditions for the level of local rate contributions.

The Act also allowed local authorities to consolidate their accounts for housing schemes subsidised under earlier legislation, thus giving greater scope for councils to adjust the rents of individual dwellings.

#### Housing Act, 1936

[26 Geo V & 1 Edw VIII, c 51]

The main purpose of this Act was to consolidate the legislation already in force (principally the Acts of 1930 and 1935). Subsidy arrangements were not affected.

#### Housing (Financial Provisions) Act, 1938

[1 & 2 Geo VI, c 16]

This Act introduced a uniform scale of subsidy for all new schemes. The basic subsidy was to be £5.10/- p a for 40 years for each house (£10 p a in agricultural parishes) and a minimum of £11 p a for flats on expensive sites. It was

possible for some of the poorer urban areas (municipal boroughs and urban districts) to claim from the Exchequer an extra £1 p a for each house: the county council would then be required to contribute a further £1 p a. The Act also established a new scale of local authority contributions from the rates.

## APPENDIX 2

Sources and Notes for Maps, Figures and Tables

## MAPS OF LOCAL AUTHORITY AREAS (p 11 and p 12)

Source See Section 2 of Bibliography

Note The map of County Durham in the 1920s (p 11) takes account of three major boundary changes during the decade - the creation of Washington UD (from Chester-le-Street RD) in 1922 and of Billingham UD (from Stockton RD) in 1923, and the absorption of Southwick-on-Wear UD by Sunderland CB in 1928.

## FIGURE 1-1

Source Local Government Board, Annual Reports.

## FIGURE 1-2

Source Ministry of Health, Private Enterprise Housing (1944)

## TABLE 1-1

Source Ministry of Health, Annual Reports;  
Ministry of Health, Private Enterprise Housing;  
Bowley, Housing and the State (1945)

Note The figure of 'c 30,000' houses built by private enterprise without subsidy between January 1919 and September 1922 is a Ministry of Health estimate.

The figures for private building under '1919 Act' include 4,545 houses built by public utility societies under the main Act and 39,186 by private enterprise under the Additional Powers Act.

Until the year 1929-30, separate figures were not collected by the Ministry for houses built by local authorities without subsidy. Therefore the figures in the Table for unsubsidised private houses include up to 1929 a relatively small number of local authority houses.

## FIGURE 1-3

Source As for Table 1-1

Note As with other 'frequency polygons' presented in the Figures of this study, the area between a particular line and the horizontal axis represents the total volume of houses built, etc.

## TABLE 2-1

Source Board of Trade Reports, 1908 and 1913

Note These Reports relate to data collected in 1905 and 1912

The alteration by the Board of Trade of the index base from London as a whole (1905) to the 'middle zone' of London (1912) means that the later figures would have to be revalued by about 5.4% to be strictly comparable with the earlier in terms of conversion to cash.

TABLE 2-2

Source 1911 Census volume for County Durham

Note The number of 'two-flat' dwellings and other statistics used have been calculated from the Census Tables on 'tenements' in each district.

TABLE 2-3

Source DCRO: NCB 1/CO/86/511 and NCB 1/CO/86/641 (individual housing returns from collieries, November 1903 and April 1912)

Note These returns have been processed and summarised by the three broad divisions made by the Coal Owners' Association (shown in the accompanying map). Unfortunately, the 1903 figures were collected for householding miners only, while the 1912 figures were for all mineworkers.

TABLE 2-4

Source DCRO: NCB 1/CO/86/511 (see Table 2-3 above);  
DCRO: NCB 1/CO/86/512 (summary made by Durham Miners' Association of average rents paid by miners in 149 lodges, November 1903);  
1901 and 1911 Census volumes for County Durham;  
Dowding, Durham Mines (1972);  
Moyes, Contracting Coalfield (1971)

Note Individual collieries (NCB 1/CO/86/511) and miners' lodges (NCB 1/CO/86/512) were identified and allocated as far as possible to a local authority district (with the help of Dowding and Moyes). The fact that many coal companies and miners' lodges covered more than one district meant that the county had to be divided up into broader groups of local authorities.

Taking these wider areas, the number of 'free houses' (as at November 1903) has been expressed as a percentage of the total housing stock at the 1901 Census. The relative percentages of householding miners given free houses and rent allowances were obtained by further analysis of the source material used in Table 2-3.

The index of rents was obtained by calculating first of all the average dwelling size (number of rooms) in each of the areas at the 1901 Census. For each area this figure was then measured against the average weekly rent paid by members of miners' lodges in 1903. Finally, the results were matched against the rent

levels in the 1908 Board of Trade Report (in which London rents in 1905 = 100). For obvious reasons, this comparison of rent levels cannot be critically accurate; but it should give a fairly reliable picture of variations within the county.

#### TABLE 2-5

Source As for Table 2-4 above

Note The index of rents paid by miners in these smaller groups of local authority districts was obtained by the same processes as for Table 2-4; but the figures are likely to be less reliable, because of the greater risk of overlapping of boundaries by both collieries and lodges. For the same reason it would be impossible to sub-divide further the rest of the information in Table 2-4.

#### FIGURE 2-1

Source Data from Table 2-5

Note In each graph the four numbered areas of worst 'fit' are enclosed in smaller circles.

#### FIGURE 2-3

Source Kenwood, Residential Building Activity in North Eastern England (1963); Kirby, The Geography of Inter-War Tyneside (1970) [Kirby's figures were obtained privately from Kenwood]; Gateshead CB, Statement of number of houses approved (prepared by Borough Surveyor's Department, 1951), GLS; Darlington CB, Annual Reports of Borough Surveyor to the Streets Committee, DCRO: CB/Da.

Note The diagrams follow Kenwood in using an index in which the annual average for the period 1900-10 = 100.

#### TABLE 2-6

Source 1911 Census volume for County Durham

Note Districts have been arranged into the broad groups discussed in Sections 1A to 1D of Chapter 2.

#### TABLE 2-7

Source DCRO: NCB 1/CO/86/778 (summary of houses held by individual coal companies as at 1 January 1904, 1914 and 1919; by size of house); Dowding, Durham Mines; Moyes, Contracting Coalfield

Note The Coal Owners' statistics were apparently drawn up for the purposes of the Royal Commission on the Coal Industry in 1919.

It has not been possible to produce a summary by local

authority areas, because many of the coal companies in the return covered a number of districts.

### TABLE 3-1

<u>Source</u>	Population figures as stated in footnote; Figures for England and Wales housebuilding taken from Table 1-1; County Durham housebuilding figures taken from local authority records, where available
<u>Note</u>	The distribution between Acts for council housebuilding in County Durham cannot be entirely accurate because comprehensive statistics are not available. Nevertheless, the figures projected from local authority records are broadly reliable.

### FIGURE 3-1

<u>Source</u>	As for Table 1-1 above (figures for England and Wales); As for Table 3-3 below (figures for County Durham); 1921 Census for population and housing stock figures
<u>Note</u>	Because this Figure gives a year-by-year account (rather than an Act-by-Act account, as in Table 3-1) the expression of new building in relation to population and total housing stock has been confined to the base figures for 1921 (unlike Table 3-1).

### TABLE 3-2

<u>Source</u>	Annual Reports of the Medical Officers of Health for the county and the county boroughs (housebuilding figures for County Durham); Table 1-1 for England and Wales housebuilding figures; National Registration (1939) for population figures; 1921 Census for 1921 housing stock
<u>Note</u>	A slight discrepancy arises from using housing figures correct as at December 1938 and population figures collected in September 1939.

### FIGURE 3-2

<u>Source</u>	Annual Reports of the Medical Officers of Health for the county and the county boroughs
<u>Note</u>	Unfortunately, there are no reliable separate figures for municipal boroughs and urban and rural districts for individual years over the period 1920-25. However, the total figure for this period is available for each local authority and so, to convey an impression of housebuilding activity between 1920 and 1925, values at the vertical axis in these diagrams represent the annual average for this period.  The scale on the vertical axis is the same for areas (a) to (d) and half that scale for areas (e) and (f).

## TABLE 3-3 &amp; FIGURE 3-3

Source As for Figure 3-2

Note In this case annual totals can be presented for the years 1920-25, because county-based statistics are available from the source material.

## TABLE 3-4

Source 1931 Census volume for County Durham (vol 2, published 1937) for 1921 and 1931 population figures; National Registration for 1939 population figures; 1931 Census volume for County Durham (vol 1) for 1921 and 1931 overcrowding figures, family figures and dwelling figures

Note Population figures are presented by districts as constituted in 1939; figures for the equivalent districts in 1921 and 1931 are available because the General Register Office reprocessed its population data.

Figures for overcrowding and 'new dwelling shortage' are only available on an equivalent basis (ie, 1939 areas) by wider groups of districts: this is because the General Register Office's reprocessing did not cover families and dwellings. Over the wider areas selected, however, the effect of boundary changes is nullified.

The crude shortage of new dwellings, 1921-31, is obtained simply by subtracting the number of dwellings built in that period from the number of families created (net of demolitions and emigration, respectively).

## FIGURE 4-1

Source Exchequer subsidy figures from Seaham Harbour UD Council Minutes, 27 October 1936 (DCRO: UD/Sea); Rate contribution figures for South Shields and Hartlepool from Preston Borough Council's annual publication, Rates Levied in Various Towns, and the Ministry of Health; Annual Statements of Rates and Rateable Values; Housing stock figures from annual reports of the Medical Officers of Health for the county and for South Shields CB

Note Unfortunately, there is no single local authority for which information of both Exchequer and rate contributions exists.

## TABLE 4-1

Source Ministry of Health, Rates and Rateable Values, 1939-40; National Registration, 1939

Note The 'quotient' in the final column of the Table is simply another, more graphic way of presenting 'rateable value per head of population'.

The general points shown in this Table were first demonstrated by the Royal Commission on Local Government on Tyneside (1936-37) and Goodfellow, Tyneside: The Social Facts (1940).

**FIGURE 4-2**

Source Preston Borough Council, Rates Levied in Various Towns

Note The 'average' line is the mean value of the housing rate levied in the fourteen districts listed in footnote 25, p 198.

**FIGURE 4-3**

Source Ministry of Health, Rates and Rateable Values

**FIGURE 4-4**

Source Ministry of Health, Rates and Rateable Values (for assessable values);  
Preston Borough Council, Rates Levied (for level of housing rate in the £);  
Annual Reports of the Medical Officers of Health for South Shields and West Hartlepool (for housing stock figures)

Note Values for both housing stock and annual expenditure have been scaled on the vertical axes by means of an index (in which, notionally, the average annual value for the period in both cases = 100).

Since local authority rates are levied not to recover actual costs but to meet estimated commitments for the coming year, 'annual expenditure' in this Figure has been calculated by means of a three-year moving average, so that some account is taken of over-spending or under-spending in the previous year and adjustments made in the following year.

**FIGURE 4-5**

Source Figures for County Durham - from council records of tenders approved;  
Figures for England and Wales - Ministry of Health, Housing and Annual Reports

**FIGURE 4-6**

Source Council records of private tenders approved and direct labour costs certified

**FIGURE 4-7**

Source 25" Ordnance Survey Maps: Sheets VII 1 (1938, Felling) and XXVII 2 (1939, Durham)

**FIGURE 5-1**

Source Ministry of Health, Report on the Overcrowding Survey (1936)

Note The Report also gives the size of each council's housing stock (represented in this Figure by scaled circles).

Some neighbouring districts have been grouped together to facilitate presentation.

#### FIGURE 5-2

Source Council records (for arrears of rent outstanding); Annual Reports of the Medical Officers of Health for the county and for South Shields CB (for housing stock figures)

Note These three local authorities have been chosen not only because their records are substantially complete, but also because the arrears figures are available gross of amounts written off as bad debts (ie, there are no 'hidden' arrears).

#### APPENDIX 3 : Tables A to D

Source Ministry of Health, Report on the Overcrowding Survey (1936)

## APPENDIX 3

Overcrowding in the North East, 1936TABLE A Most Overcrowded Counties in England and Wales

	% of families overcrowded	No. of families overcrowded
Ø DURHAM	12.0	39,639
NORTHUMBERLAND	11.2	20,846
Anglesey	9.5	677
London	7.0	70,731
Caernarvon	6.2	1,239
Denbeigh	5.9	1,887
Shropshire	5.1	2,333
Brecknock	4.9	374
England & Wales	3.8	341,606

TABLE B Most Overcrowded County Boroughs in England and Wales

	% of families overcrowded	No. of families overcrowded
Ø SUNDERLAND	20.6	8,649
Ø GATESHEAD	15.2	4,729
Ø SOUTH SHIELDS	13.1	3,581
TYNEMOUTH	13.0	2,246
Ø WEST HARTLEPOOL	10.9	1,445
NEWCASTLE	10.7	8,552

Note: Ø CAPITALS - district in County Durham  
 CAPITALS - district in North East England

TABLE C Most Overcrowded Urban Districts and Municipal  
Boroughs in England and Wales

	% of families overcrowded	No. of families overcrowded
Ø HEBBURN	25.2	1,360
PRUDHOE	19.6	375
MORPETH	18.7	324
BERWICK	18.3	630
Ø JARROW	17.5	1,350
Ø FELLING	15.8	951
Ø TOW LAW	15.4	143
BEDLINGTONSHIRE	15.2	1,071
Drighlington [West Yorks]	15.1	196
Heckmondwike [West Yorks]	14.6	397
Birkenshaw [West Yorks]	14.0	106
Bilston [Staffs]	13.7	984
Ø ANNFIELD PLAIN	13.7	486
Ø BENFIELD SIDE	13.6	284
Ø HARTLEPOOL	13.4	597
AMBLE	13.2	170
WALLSEND	13.1	1,342
Ø BLAYDON	12.6	973
Ø DURHAM	12.6	541
Billinge [Lancashire]	12.6	106

Note: Ø CAPITALS - district in County Durham  
CAPITALS - district in North East England

TABLE D Most Overcrowded Rural Districts in England and Wales

	% of families overcrowded	No. of families overcrowded
NORHAM AND ISLANDSHIRES	22.2	332
Ø CHESTER-LE-STREET	13.2	1,556
Valley [Anglesey]	12.3	222
Ø EASINGTON	12.0	2,422
Ø SUNDERLAND	11.8	616
CASTLE WARD	11.5	227
HEXHAM	11.2	374
ALNWICK	10.8	285
GLENDALE	10.8	210
Aethwy [Anglesey]	10.3	193
Ø LANCHESTER	10.1	780
BELFORD	10.0	134
Ø DURHAM	9.9	675
Twrcelyn [Anglesey]	9.8	90
MORPETH	9.3	313

Note: Ø CAPITALS - district in County Durham  
CAPITALS - district in North East England

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