

The typescript (originally foolscap size), with manuscript amendments,
for Ernest Trobridge's article "The Housing Folly",
written in response to the Government's Housing Manual of 1919:

THE HOUSING FOLLY

Is the Government's waste of over £200,000,000^{on the first 500,000 houses} in the
Public Interest?

Why does Government oppose the £300 House?

There is no subject at present before the public more
urgently important than the housing of the working classes.

It is therefore with a sense of the gravest moral respon-
sibility that I declare myself an opponent of, and set out to
attack, the housing scheme to which the Government after a ^{large} ~~vast~~
amount of earnest if misguided work and with let it be admitted
a sincere recognition of its obligations to Society has pledged
itself.

Yet such an attack will surely be justified ^{to the full, if I can prove that a vastly superior result can be obtained} by employing
the very methods that the Government has ignored, namely - the
use of "home" materials as opposed to imports and the obser-
vance of the ancient, vindicated, building traditions of this
Country.

In light of what follows it is to be borne in mind that
the Government is endeavouring to perpetuate a degenerate style
of architecture which is ^{degenerate and} not only contrary to our own tradition
but is largely attributable to German influence; "Georgian" is
the label by which it is known and ^{the name} ~~it~~ stamps that abominable
method of construction that has given us slums as bad as any
in the civilized world.

I have said that the Government ^{has} ignored our traditions .
But whereas there are those who sincerely consider tradition
to be rather a cramping factor than otherwise, the Government
has professed no such principle of explicit antagonism to
old established things. On the contrary it ^{enthusias} ~~gashes~~ over them.
In the Tudor-Walters 1918 report ^{we read} ~~are made~~ on page 48 § 173 the
the following observations:

"No Country has a finer tradition in reference to the
"building of the small house than our own. Yet Cottage building

"during the last century came to be regarded as the easy job
"of the building trade requiring neither skill in design nor
"science in erection. ^{^ x x x ^} The industrial age when it needed to
"carry out Urban Housing on a wholesale scale and under
"quite new conditions entirely overlooked the accumulated
"traditions of centuries of local experience which had guided
"the design and construction of the old country cottages in th
"different districts and which had evolved those many beauti-
"ful local types that still excite the admiration of the
"world".

you see
It is admitted [^] that it was the very ignoring of the
ancient traditions and types that led to the unhappy produc-
tions of the speculative builders of that commerce -
shackled era - the 19th Century.

And yet in face of all that the Government has in its
decisions allowed absolutely no place for the ancient tradi-
tional constructions.)

The above quotation then would appear to be a piece of
flagrant hypocrisy . But we must, as patriots hesitate to
attribute such obvious duplicity to such a motherly-minded
institution as the British Administration.

Is it not rather that the long enslavement of the
architects to the laws compelled by fire insurance Companies
and other financial dep^ts who have hitherto controlled the
British Building Acts - practically since ^{disasters} the panic
legislation following the Great Fire of London - is it not
rather that this enslavement of the architects has utterly
stultified their taste and ingenuity, - deprived them, I may
almost say, of the right to call themselves architects ^{that is as far as housing is concerned} ~~at all~~.

Whatever the personal skill and discrimination of the
artisan the Master Builder has been Finance - Finance with
bricks on the brain and with antiquated inherited terrors

of fire in its completely selfish heart.

Subsistence to the dictates of the fire Insurance Co. is
As a matter of fact ~~therein lies the~~ one tradition which
whereas
has been revered ~~and~~ it is the very one which ought to
Thus ours continues to be
have been renounced. ~~This is~~ the only brick-made country in
the world.

And why? Because of the fear of fire - because of the
safeguard against fire that brickwork ^{supposedly} offers.

Yet it is significant to note that the fire insurance
premium on the wooden houses of Canada is less per cent
than the premium charged on the brick houses of England.
And while I admit that in my proposals there is a slight
increase in the fire risk I would point out that whereas
fire has counted its victims in hundreds rheumatism ^{induced} derived
~~from~~ damp brick houses, ~~and~~ counts its victims by hundreds
of thousands.

At the end of the ^{above quoted} passage ~~quoted above from~~ ⁱⁿ the Tudor
Walters report reference is made to the "absence of the
traditional skill and guidance which rapidly changing con-
ditions have largely destroyed."

(This is nonsense and in a future article I shall show
that it is not only within the realm of possible but within
that of practicable things to give back to England ^{the} those
glories of ~~the~~ ^{our} old traditional buildings with that extraor-
dinary beautiful depth of elevation ^{that is} now so lamentably
~~missing.~~ ^{missing}

In ~~the~~ ^{the} ^{I present} scheme there are again made realizable houses
wherein the atmospheric conditions are subordinated to human
requirements.

And at what cost? That the builder will be able to
employ the simple labour of the village and find in the
enviroument of the ~~the~~ ^{the} tenant the materials that are to
make his home. That the time of building and the cost will
be reduced by ^{two thirds} ~~2/3~~. That the local authorities will be
prevented from becoming the Landlords and will thus escape
the financial ~~ruin~~ ^{ruin} that would probably arise from

rent strikes. That the Government will loose nothing by ^{housing} its transactions ~~but will~~ ^{-ing} occupy only the position of ^{Temporary} initial administrator and mortgagee.

And conversely I propose to show that in all certainty the present Government's own proposals if carried into effect would absolutely obliterate these glorious traditions which it so effusively praises; that the charm of our beautiful villages would be sacrilegiously destroyed by the invasion of a Finance driven suburbia.

Perhaps it may be said that I am whipping a dead horse in that this Government has expressed its willingness to allow wooden houses has, indeed strongly advocated a return to ancient methods. But would such complaisance go very far if hobbled by a refusal to finance the movement?

Obviously not, yet this is just what the Government true to its colours is effectually doing. It is not very difficult to read between the lines of the official statement that although the Government would ^{gladly permit others} "just love" to erect wooden houses, it does not, in light of the ^{fact} ~~fact~~ that these would "last only 50 years" (sic) feel justified in using public money for the same.

The Government on the advice of its experts, must ^{this} know just as well as I do that ~~that~~ is a direct mis-statement ^{It most know} that 500 years is nearer the mark than 50. But, though the public has in its midst any number of ancient architectural witnesses still eloquent in strength and beauty, it is not trained to hear their living voice and so must put itself at the mercy of interpreters.

If these belie their sacred trust and misinterpret ^{by} saying 50 when they should say 500, and in face of evidence (albiet esoteric) proclaiming brick as the one and only adequate substance for house-building - then someone must come forward and guide the mis-directed public mind.

For whatever "smooth things" the Government may say

about wooden houses it is clear from the above that they have no intention of actively supporting any but their original preposterously expensive brick programme. Since writing this paragraph the new housing laws have been forecasted. They are so unreasonable as to cripple any conscientious attempt to solve the problem of the cheap house. The particular I most forcibly criticize is the very one on which they first insist; namely a foundation suitable for a brick house i.e. one capable of supporting 200 tons weight. The ridiculousness of this is manifest; since a foundation capable of holding up 200 tons is scarcely necessary for cottage walls weighing only 22½ tons. What, moreover, is the result? That the Government foundation (calculated up to a point 10 inches above the ground) would weigh 30 tons as opposed to the 2½ tons of the foundation I suggest; whilst the cost would be £55 as opposed to £10.12. 6.

In coming forward to interpret truly to the public the voice of architectural tradition I advocate only materials and modes of construction (save in the case of a comparatively new process of seasoning timber during erection) which rest on an imperishable basis of precedent

There are three absolutely incontrovertible arguments:-

1. THAT THERE ARE ABUNDANT EXAMPLES OVER 300 YEARS OLD.
2. THAT THEY EXIST TO-DAY.
3. THAT GREAT NUMBERS ENJOY LIVING WITHIN THEIR
COMFORTABLE WALLS.

I am not an architectural antiquarian enthusiast but a practical architect and I aver that, in the revival of these ancient methods, there will again be a satisfaction and joy for the tenant which the atmosphere of recent times has totally occluded.

Amen to your third
The houses which I ^{will} would build for you ^{will} are not ^{be} makeshifts, they are not mere wooden shanties achieving cheapness at the expense of the comforts, amenities and higher decencies of home-life. ^{but} They ~~are~~ such rather, as to bring under the poor man's roof that luxury of old beauty that is at present the monopoly of the rich. They are, in short, homes fit for heroes to live in even though they be socially of the race of Lazarus rather than of Dives, Yes and their influence will be to make them more content (should I say more divine in discontent) as all beautiful things must do.

In my scheme I begin as is obviously only sensible with the minimum requirements of the country; further requirements will claim recognition as we approach the case of the towns. This I think is a more rational course of procedure than the Government's policy of carrying tree-felling axes into the Sahara Desert.

The Government as I have said before, has pinned its faith to the bastard Hanoverian type and ignored the old truly English. Let us, with an open mind; examine one of these old English cottages and appreciate for ourselves its distinguishing qualities, and without *working* them the defects of its qualities as well.

We begin with the roof. In modern eyes the roof is the last consideration in house construction; ~~but~~ the ancient architects were more discriminating: they saw that inasmuch as a house existed to subordinate the atmosphere to the requirements of man, 90% of this function could be fulfilled by the roof. Ninety per cent of constructional substance was therefore put into the roof leaving only 10 per cent for the rest of the house. This explains largely how construction in the old days was so cheap. Practically the whole of what I may call the atmospheric problem was solved on the roof.

The material almost universally employed was thatch - the cheapness of which was only equalled by its all round excellence for the purpose. The deep-eaved thatch roof hung over the house like a protecting cloak, shielding the walls both within and without from rain and frost and ensuring a perfectly dry and warm interior. The thatch lay on rough scrap timber and the interior surface of the roof thus formed was levelled to permit of plastering. This roof was wonderfully durable and of such lightness that it could be supported by a few wooden posts.

Regarding the walls the susceptible reader may receive a shock on learning that these consisted ⁱⁿ many cases of plastered hurdles no more than an inch in total thickness.

Yet it is a fact that that inch-thick wall protected by the motherly roof of thatch above-described was immensely more efficient than a 9 inch brick wall would ~~be~~ *have been*

Stepping indoors, the first feature that would strike a modern householder would be the lowness of the ~~rooms~~ *rooms*. "Ah!" he might be tempted to say "they didn't like air in those old days. How dreadful. Thank goodness we belong to an age of hygienic enlightenment." The error would be excuseable. A high ceiling is a latter day fetish. But what of spaciousness? The old fashioned room had all the cubic extent that the authorities of to-day demand with this difference that the space was provided horizontally instead of vertically. The inhabitants of the old cottages knew what it was to ~~set~~ *set* apart; now a-days our rooms are so contracted that we perforce sit breathing into one another's faces. Breadth has been indiscriminately sacrificed to height; and height has not, as is popularly believed, compensated for all other dimensional shortcomings by providing automatically a high level receptacle for foul air. Everyone knows that the foul air in a room rises but how many have considered the fact that it creeps down the surface of the walls again?

We must recognise then that hygienic wisdom is not the discovery of to-day. Our wise forefathers pushed their walls away from them; whilst we prefer a constriction that positively compels us to breathe down one another's throats.

In regard to the woman's home life, ~~House-work~~ *House-work* tedious at best, was in the old days a much less complicated and exacting task than it is to-day. For one thing she was not burdened with the present multiplicity of stoves to clean nor with the necessity of excessive firing in the living room. The secret lay in this that the old fashioned fireplace was designed with a view to the conservation of

The family in the old days sat in the overhanging ^{anging} ingle-nook so fashioned that the heat rays were reflected and thus utilised to a maximum extent instead of being dispersed as they are in our own prodigiously wasteful system. For how much heat can the modern ceiling reflect.

Speaking of the old fireplace attention must be drawn to the wide-mouthed chimney which drew in the fresh air through the crevices of the door and windows, not, as with the modern stove, chillingly, at the level of the feet, but at such a height as to provide a continuous air-stream for the mouth, where it was wanted. The old gaping chimney, too, carried off the exhaled breath which with the modern low flue level cannot escape thus but simply goes to swell the collection of foul air.

We see then that the housewife of old had on the ground floor but one small ^{wood consuming} fire to ^{feed} and perhaps a copper-fire; the only other fire would be in the parents room upstairs. To reach this how many treads would she have to climb (and incidentally clean) Nine or ten at the outside. The parent's room would open directly off the stair (i.e. without any intervening passage) and the children's bedrooms again would lie at either side.

In considering the woman's work we conclude with the outside wash-house - usually the only high room in the whole premises; for in these days they knew (according to their lights) where a high ceiling was required; they could not know that even here it was superfluous, the method of drawing off the steam by a flue not having ^{apparently yet} been ^{yet} thought of.

Let us now examine the floor of these upstairs apartments. On the Upper side it would appear as a plain wide boarded flooring often of elm. Looking at it from beneath one would see a massive bressummer crossing into the chimney breast and dividing the floor into two sections -

into this beam ran curious curved joists (levelled on the upper side only so as to take the flooring).

The average thickness of such a floor was only about 2 inches, but I never yet heard of one falling.

Now in the method of construction that I have roughly outlined for you there are innumerable good qualities revealing a high architectural wisdom and on the other hand but few defects.

Passing over the ^{characteristic} quality of perdurance (~~which might be considered a fault in that it deprived people of the necessity of acknowledging progress~~) I claim that we may eradicate these defects and still without any undue sacrifice of economy utilize to our own unqualified advantage the wisdom of simplicity as exemplified in these old buildings.

The defects though few were admittedly serious. Perhaps the worst was to be found in the brick base on which the super-structure stood.

Parantetically it is interesting to note that one of the first regulations laid down by the Government for the control of wooden houses insists on this ring of brick *being retained*

Bricks as I am never tired of emphasizing absorb and retain large quantities of moisture; and the result of such a base of brick was the formation of a damp ring all round the house. Another defect lay in the ground floor being composed of paving brick which is at once extremely cold, and trying and injurious to the feet. The sanitary arrangements too, were impossibly primitive.

One or two features might appear at first sight, though erroneously, to be defects. Thus exception is often taken to the ground floor in old buildings being below ground level. I do not mean that I would advocate this; because it is quite unnecessary. I only mention it to throw into relief the fact that the floor though directly in contact with the earth and even below ground level was perfectly dry. Sometimes

indeed the floor consisted of nothing more than beaten earth and that was marked by the same absence of moisture. Which facts can be taken as evidence that ground concrete is an expensive superfluity.

That again, it may be objected is impossible in congested areas. My first reply to this is "why congest"? The money wasted on tiling could much more profitably be expended on house grounds which would automatically separate the houses and thus act as a preventive against conflagration.

My second reply is that where necessary it is the simplest thing to set up a perfectly fire-proof thatch roof.

How then can we adopt these cheap durable and pleasing forms of construction - that old subtle style of planning - to the normal, admittedly more sophisticated requirements of modern life?

Where the cheapness of the land renders ^{spacious sites} spacing possible the spread of fire as above said, is not a menace. As to the greater risk of fire caused to the single house by the presence of a roof of thatch, ~~that~~ I claim, does not outweigh the advantages afforded by the latter substance.

Where congestion does exist and the risk of fire is thereby increased extra precautions can be taken such as:-

- (1) Where main water is available, the embedding of sparge pipes in the thatch, the supply being controlled externally. By this device the roof could be saturated in a few moments.
- (ii) Where ^{main} no water is available, ^{the substituting for open rafters of} a stout boarded practically air tight sub-roof ^{of elm} supported on purlins only (~~rather than open rafters~~) The Thatch when fired would in the absence of air merely smoulder.

If further precautions be considered necessary the straw of the thatch may previous to construction be dipped in slaked lime and thus rendered practically unburnable. This method indeed was employed in congested areas in former

There are also several chemical preparations for rendering
times. thatch uninflamable.

Whilst speaking of fire risk it is to be remembered that
in law two-storeyed buildings the risk to life by fire is
^{practically} ~~entirely~~ negligible.

Now, as to the walls, those above described ^{could not certainly be decorated inwardly} invariably
in a manner compatible with our modern tastes. I suggest then
that for the occasional posts and hurdles there should be
substituted what is an adaptation of another ancient construc-
tion viz:- the stud-wall which is composed of a regular line
of upright timbers ^{about} 4 inches by 2 inches ~~thick~~.

To this could be added on the outside the modern improve-
ment of a vertical damp-proof course of stout roofing felt,
the wall thus formed being finally covered with plaster both
internally and externally. Alternatively the outer surface
could be weather-boarded or tile hung. There are thousands
of examples of such walls to be seen, which even though they are
well over 300 years of age and lack the aforesaid damp-proof
course, are still absolutely weather-tight. Ladderdale House
Waterlow Park London is a good instance and it dates from
the year 1600.

Regarding the bedroom or first floor it would be simple
to increase the sound and dust resisting qualities ^{of the old floor}

The principle improvement to be effected in the ground
storey is the making of it damp-proof, a feature in which
it will be remembered I said that the old houses were sadly
defective. A Lesson in this respect can be learnt from
continental countries. Along the reclaimed flats of Holland
may be found numbers of cottages resting clear of the ground
on piles. This has been adopted in our ^{own} country, at ~~New~~ Holland
in Lincolnshire ^{and elsewhere}. The passage of air beneath the cottages
gives the desired dryness. By employing this method it will
be unnecessary to dig foundations except for the chimney, all
that is needed to support the light weight of the structures

which I am contemplating being short piles of reinforced concrete. The soil moreover being undisturbed (except beneath the central chimney) ~~base~~ ground concrete will not be required.

From this same Dutch source I derive ^{what is one of} the principal ideas in my housing scheme. It is this - to ^{adapt} ~~adopt~~ their solid board construction to our own natural resources by utilising that timber which is so abundant in ^{our} ~~the~~ country and which has ^{both} ~~such~~ ^{great} ~~such~~ ^{and great fire-resisting} lasting qualities when ~~properly dealt with~~ ^{namely} common Elm. It is well known that elm when seasoned is difficult to work and ^{latterly} ~~formerly~~ this characteristic rendered it despite its many excellent qualities valueless for building purposes. ^{Methods} ~~Methods~~ have however now been invented whereby elm wood may be worked in a perfectly green state, the members being so designed and placed during construction as to ^{prevent} ~~eradicate~~ the twist and absorb the shrinkage - a sample adjustment during 7 weeks (in which period these processes are practically consummated) being all that is necessary for a final integration of the boards.

In this suggestion I believe lies the solution of our housing troubles. Elm grows practically throughout the Kingdom and thus we would be able largely to do away with carriage as our travelling saw mills etc. would reduce the trees to boards where they fell and where they would be actually converted into dwellings. It is to be noted that this mode of construction practically ^{eliminates} ~~excludes~~ plaster one of the most expensive constituents of the modern house.

Now a word as to plan, ^{Cunningly} as air requirements were met by the old low wide rooms, I fear that as far as living rooms and bedrooms are concerned the shape is not one that will prove acceptable to the modern tenant. The ingle-nooks ~~however~~, and those parts of the house inhabited by only one or at most two persons at a time may be kept at the old and by skilful planning, involving the inclusion of v

previously "outbuildings" under the main roof it will be possible for the ceiling of the low-level portion to be made to act as a platform sufficient in area to allow for three bedrooms. (which would be approached by a flight of only ten steps)

In this way we can retain much of the ancient construction and while ~~attaining~~^{achieving} a modernly acceptable height in living rooms and bedrooms still reduce the total height of the building by no less than 3 feet 3 inches, which means a reduction in the whole size of the structure by what is proportionately an immense amount and a corresponding diminution in the cost of erection and maintenance and in the work involved both structural ~~or~~^{and} domestic.

I trust then that I have suggested, in such a way as to convey the conviction that I myself feel, how we may securely retrace our steps from the complicated ugliness and inefficiency of the dwellings of ~~the day~~^{to-day} to ~~a~~^{the} simple beauty and perfect ~~efficiency~~^{acy} of our traditional country cottages.