

## RURAL HOUSING.

### THE TERRIBLE CONDITIONS UNDER WHICH OUR RURAL WORKERS HAVE TO LIVE.

#### APPALLING EVIDENCE OF SLUMS AND OVERCROWDING.

That there is a slum problem in our towns and cities everyone is agreed, but were it said that housing conditions in the rural districts are quite as bad, the probability is that the statement would at first hand be discredited. Yet, judging by the numerous reports that have appeared in periodicals of late, there exists a slum problem as acute, if not more acute, in our villages, as in the large towns and cities. The evidence is overwhelming and discloses a state of affairs that is appalling and nauseating to one's sense of decency.

#### Conditions in Essex.

Thus in his annual report for 1911, referred to in the *ESSEX WEEKLY NEWS* of August 23rd, Dr. J. C. Thresh, the Essex Medical County Officer, deals exhaustively with the housing problem in Essex. The continued fall of the birth-rate in the rural districts is a serious matter, he says, and sooner or later will have to receive the attention of the State, and the sooner the better. It will be found to be affected by the housing question. The dearth of decent cottages is reducing the marriage rate, and the increased attention given to the sanitary condition of cottages, the execution of repairs, &c., is causing cottage owners to object to tenants with large families—hence men who want decent cottages know that they must limit their families. The whole tendency therefore is to decrease the birth-rate among the more thrifty and intelligent working people—the very people whose reproduction ought to be encouraged. Many cottages, he continues, are barely fit for human habitation, there is a general want of cottages with three bedrooms, and in consequence of this overcrowding occurs, immorality is fostered, and infectious disease is spread. In many parishes young people are driven away because they wish to marry and cannot obtain a cottage in which to reside.

#### Cottage Famine in Wiltshire.

In the *DAILY MAIL* of August 29th, Mr. Archibald Marshall writes of housing conditions in Wiltshire. Relating his observations on tour round the villages, he says:—

I have seen cottages poor and insanitary and overcrowded to a degree that would have shocked me when I first set out on this journey of inquiry; but since then I have seen many that are worse. They are bad, but they are not so bad as they might be.

On the other hand I have seen scarcely any new cottages being erected anywhere, although I have gone over something like sixty miles of road.

I have made my investigations here under the guidance of the Rev. W. H. Hewlett Cooper, county organiser of the National Land and Home League.

#### Turned out into the Snow.

We went into a cottage occupied by a man who was evicted last January from his previous home, along with a neighbour. These two families of respectable people, with their young children—ten people in all—and all their household goods, were turned out by the police on January 26th, one of the coldest, snowiest days of the winter, and, in spite of the contentment previously expressed by the authorities at the supply of cottages, would have had to go to the workhouse if some of their poorer neighbours had not given them temporary accommodation. Their household possessions were left out in the snow. . . . They were turned out three days before they expected to have to leave by the action of the Wiltshire County Council. Their cottages had been bought by the Council and were to be converted into dwellings for small holders.

The cottage in which one of these evicted labourers now lives contains two bedrooms, one small, the other hardly more than a passage at the top of the stairs.

I should say that three-quarters of their floor-space is taken up with beds, in which sleep father and mother, two girls and two boys, ranging in age from seventeen downwards. It was all kept clean enough, and if they are allowed to stop there the family may consider themselves fairly fortunate as things go, although the father has now to walk nearly three miles to his work.

Whether many of those who read these words would consider themselves fortunate in having to bring up a young family in such a cottage as this, and spend an hour and a half every day in walking to and from their work—at fifteen shillings a week—is another question. If I may express my own opinion, it is a blistering shame on the fair name of England that such conditions as these should exist. But they do exist all over England; and worse than these.

#### Overcrowding and Epidemics.

Referring to another village he visited, Mr. Marshall says:—

In this large village, within a mile or two of a large town, there are 244 cottages belonging to 77 owners. Of these 29 have one bedroom only, 150 have two, 59 have three, and six have four. In 19 selected cases of overcrowding occur these:—

Husband and wife and five children, ages from nine to 28, two bedrooms.

Husband and wife and seven children, seven to twelve, and grandmother, two bedrooms.

Two husbands and wives, and lodger, two bedrooms.

In one of these cases the "nuisance" was abated. Two of the children were "sent out"—that is to say, the family was broken up. But probably not for long. Here follows an illuminating question and answer:—

"Is it a fact that some of the children which have been put out to avoid overcrowding have since come back?"  
"I cannot tell you. It is quite possible. It is very often the case; usually the case."

Whichever way you look at it the cottagers are in a cleft stick.

This place is now just emerging from an epidemic of diphtheria. A few years ago there was another; and some years before that there was a very bad one, in which 36 children are said to have died in a few weeks.

#### Hovels in Somerset.

A special correspondent of the *DAILY NEWS AND LEADER* has been making investigations in Somersetshire, and his story, published in the issues of that paper on September 2nd, 5th and 9th, is revolting in its sordid details. Writing from Wincanton (September 2nd issue) he reports the Rector of a "neat-looking little village which nestled tranquilly in the hollow below the rectory eminence" as remarking: "I have no hesitation in saying that there is scarcely a cottage in this place which wouldn't be condemned if a Local Government Board Inspector came along." He then refers to the report on housing in the village of Meare, by Mr. A. G. Russ, Clerk to the Wells Rural District Council, and goes on to say:—

I drove out to Meare from ancient and placid Glastonbury between hedges bright with the scarlet glow of the hawthorn berry. There are a number of extremely nice houses in Meare, and I daresay that the tourist, driving through, would set it down as a normal example of a delightful English village. If he noticed the cracking of a house-wall here and there, a few broken windows, and the presence of a rhine or ditch filled with water at the same level as the house itself, he would regard it, no doubt, as merely a feature in the general picturesqueness of things.

#### Looked like an Outhouse in a Back-yard.

But many of the cottages described by Mr. Russ in his terrible report are not to be seen by the casual passer-by.

I had to search, for example, for a queer little hovel in which an old woman of over 70 lives alone. Nobody would have expected to find an English hearth and home in such a place. On the main road is a cottage, condemned and empty now, with its brick walls cracking and beginning to fall away. Behind this I saw what looked at first like an outhouse, in the back-yard, with chickens clattering about. I walked round the muddy path and a little way across the wide and sodden fields the better to view it. And there, stooping in the doorway and eyeing me with an expression in which only distrust was discernible, was the old woman. She suspected me of being another of "them inspectors."

"They've a-ben takin' my character away," she told me, reassured. "They said I slept on a bundle of rags, and it ain't fair to take away a woman's character like that."

I went inside, where a tiny turf fire glowed upon the open hearth—and I felt glad that the only door remained open. So low was the beamed roof that I could not stand upright, and the poor old woman eyed me again with acute suspicion as I looked through the opening in her rough partition and saw the bed which, in her opinion, had been maligned. Yet she had done her best, apparently, to maintain some semblance of home life in these dreadful surroundings, and she drew my attention to a grandson's photograph, with some pride. Until quite recently her son, his wife and three children lived together in this dwelling, sleeping, apparently, on the floor, for the only room upstairs had no bedstead, and was in so bad a condition that even in Meare it could not be used.

#### "Not Fit to House a Dog."

There are dwellings in Meare even worse than this—places where the walls have actually broken down, so that the living room is open partly to the street, places in which the water, running across the threshold, remains in little puddles on the floor, places that, as the vicar himself said in his letter, "are not fit to house a dog, much less human beings." Something like 60 are said to be unfit for human habitation.

With no other houses available, what is to become of these people if they are turned out?

#### "Arcady" as it really is.

The DAILY NEWS and LEADER correspondent continues his story in the September 5th issue:—

A cluster of stone or mud houses upon a hillside or in a pretty hollow may make a charming picture for the contemplation of the tourist. But the decay that so often gives the finishing touch of old-worldliness to the picture exists too frequently as a constant menace to the worker and his family; and the stream that seems to sparkle so nicely as you view it in passing may resolve itself into a more or less stagnant ditch when you take a closer look and endeavour to consider yourself as a permanent feature in the Arcadian scheme. I have seen enough to know that the real Arcadia is very far removed from the ideal of the poet's dream.

In almost every part of the county are to be found cottages, in regular occupation, that would not be permitted to arise under any modern system of building. Nowhere else in Somerset, so far as I can discover, is there to be found such an appalling group of dwelling places as those I saw at Meare, near Glastonbury, the other day. Nevertheless, I have the highest confirmation of my opinion that, individually, there are cases of housing conditions even worse than those at Meare.

#### Ten in Two Rooms.

Meanwhile we have such discoveries as that a man and his wife and eight children are sleeping in two rooms at Castle Cary. This is by no means an isolated case. I hear of a man and wife, with their daughter and seven sons, living in a cottage with only two bedrooms. This case is in the neighbourhood of Yeovil. Generally, however, statistics indicate a much better state of affairs than this, so far as overcrowding is concerned.

What the town reader has to bear in mind is that four rooms in the occupation of an agricultural labourer and his family usually mean a low-ceilinged, shockingly

ventilated, and damp living room, with a miserably inadequate sort of scullery attached, and two stuffy bedrooms, with windows which will not open freely, and a roofing of thatch or tile which either lets in the wet, or produces an atmosphere in which only the hardiest can flourish.

#### The Biggest Difficulty of the whole Problem.

It is the most ordinary thing to find an entire absence of guttering. What this means in wet weather may be realised when one remembers that very few of these cheap old cottages have any sort of paving outside or any damp-course within. It follows that the water, collecting in puddles outside, penetrates into the interior. The damp rises, such wallpaper as there may be curls up protestingly, and the labourer, surviving astonishingly a condition of things that would horrify a town surveyor, becomes, with his wife, a martyr to rheumatics when the time is drawing near for the old age pensions to bring them a little relief from the State which they have so excellently, if so inconspicuously, served.

"But if we're turned out," says the average labourer, nervously, "where be they gwain to put us. We can't afford to pay dree or vour shil'ns a week in rent."

Unfortunately, that is so; and it brings the reformer face to face with the biggest difficulty of the whole problem.

#### "Tied" Cottages.

Writing of the "tied cottage" system in the issue of September 9th, the News correspondent says:—

Herein rises one of the great obstacles to progressive action on the part of the agricultural labourer. That a farmer should himself provide housing accommodation for his workers may appear the most reasonable thing; but reformers know that in actual practice the problem of the "tied cottage" is a serious one. The cottage that goes with the job has to be given up with the job also, and the married labourer who asserts any sort of independence runs the risk, not only of having to look for other work, but also of having his wife and family without a roof, except perhaps that of the workhouse, to cover them.

I am told of men who were discharged because they did not vote to order at parish council elections, and it is obvious that in such cases the "tied cottage" enhances for an unjust employer a power of coercion which is too great already.

#### A Hopeless Outlook.

A married labourer, unless he is a man of tremendous force of character, willing to expose those dependent upon him to the risk of hardships keener than they must undergo normally, cannot move to look for better work. He must stay where he is, accept the wages that are offered, and live in such dwellings as are considered good enough for such as he. He must be willing to live in dilapidated and unhealthy cottages, to herd with his kind under circumstances which give no encouragement to the ordinary restraints of decent living, which curtail even that privacy claimed by the humblest of town dwellers nowadays.

#### A Noxious State of Affairs in Norfolk.

The ESTATES GAZETTE of August 24th records a lecture delivered by Miss Annette Churton, Secretary of the Rural Housing Association, at Norwich. In the course of her lecture Miss Churton said that:—

Between eight and nine years ago one of the first districts to apply to the Rural Housing Association for help to make the conditions of their country cottages known was the rural district of Erpingham, in Norfolk. The then vice-chairman of the Sanitary Committee, after mentioning various cases of overcrowding reported by the Sanitary Inspector, described in detail his visit to one of the cottages—"one of the saddest sights he ever saw." He also said "there was no floor to the back kitchen; the occupants had nailed a sack over a large crack in the wall so as to keep some of the wind out; the paper had rotted on the wall through sheer damp; large pans had to be set about the sleeping room to prevent the children's beds getting wet when it rained; and the roof was partly broken in."

### Houses Falling Down.

In response to the request of Mr. George Edwards, now a County Councillor, the Rural Housing Association sent a trained representative to visit the various villages and see for himself the condition of the cottages. The report then drawn up was handed to Mr. John Burns at the time when the first Rural Housing Bill was before Parliament. At Edgefield, near Melton Constable, during the course of an inquiry a few months ago, the rector stated that in the past 50 years there had been, to his personal knowledge, a decrease of from 30 to 35 houses in the parish. They had simply ceased to exist. The population in the meantime had only decreased by five persons. He added that the houses mentioned had simply fallen down during the last 50 years. The result of that scarcity was that when young people grew up and wished to marry, a house could not be found for them. They had to leave the village or live in their father's house. In the recent inquiry by a Local Government Board Inspector at Pentney, two of the applicants for new cottages stated that they were living with their father, one of them stating that he had "got a wife, and did not know where to put her." She herself, added Miss Churton, came across cases of whole families being lodged in the workhouse because there were no cottages for them to occupy, and before people willingly submitted to such a step as entering the workhouse they were willing to submit to almost anything in the way of overcrowding and wretched conditions.

### Humanity Herding.

Further evidence from Norfolk is afforded in an article in the DAILY NEWS AND LEADER of September 17th. The writer says:—

Wells-next-the-Sea, pretty as is the picture presented by its mottled red walls and its time-mellowed red roofs, as one views it from the middle of the long banked pathway that leads to the sea, offers a compact example of almost all the evils that are to be found in our housing conditions to-day.

There are only three short streets, in the ordinary sense, in Wells, and one of these is not an ambitious example of highway making. Most of the working-class dwellings are squeezed into alleys and yards and passages that give anything but a secure footing to the pedestrian.

Occasionally (by daylight) one comes across a backyard, shared by a number of cottagers, in which the rearing of a few flowers affords a pleasant air of brightness by its contrast with the undiluted ugliness of the rest. For many of these huddled cottagers the only land which they can claim as exclusively theirs is the doorstep.

### A Beautiful Open Landscape.

In these deplorable surroundings, with the marshes and the tidal waters on one side and a beautiful open landscape stretching away for miles on the other, are the miserable habitations in which that honoured institution, family life, is being preserved.

A large number of the cottages are only two-roomed. Often one fairly large bedroom is partitioned into two, usually with the frailest of partitions, sometimes only by a cloth or a stretch of canvas, and as many as eight or ten people may sleep in these two "rooms."

Downstairs is the kitchen, and across the outside passage (down which thoroughfare the stranger walks with a feeling of intrusion) is sometimes a kind of outdoor washhouse, which may be shared with other families.

### Dustheaps and Disease.

Mostly the alleys are not more than three or four feet wide; if one comes to a broader space its dominant character is that of a dustheap.

One turns, as one supposes, into somebody's backyard and discovers another group of cottages. All are packed so closely together that if it were not for the wind that blows in from the sea the air must be stifling.

Inside the dwellings, damp, stuffiness, peeling wall-paper, and cracking ceilings are the chief features. Floors are of flagstones, covered usually with cocoanut matting or some similar material, and, though the roofs are guttered, there is nothing below to prevent flooding in case of a serious storm.

Privacy, in Wells, is not to be commanded by the poor man. From six to twelve families may share the pump from which the water supply is obtained; one lavatory for six houses is quite frequent, and there are cases in which one has to serve for twelve families.

I was told of a case in which some time ago 35 people were living in a house in the outer part of the town with three bedrooms. In another case father, mother, and six children had one bedroom.

The collection of household refuse is conducted on a system whereby the cottager who wants filth removed must pay a special rate of a shilling a quarter. If he cannot or will not pay he does the best he can with the refuse. From one backyard, where some eight or ten families live, seven loads of household refuse were removed after an outbreak of scarlet fever six months ago!

### The Mockery of Modern Civilisation.

There is no gainsaying evidence such as this. These cases are not isolated examples; similar ones are repeatedly being brought to light in the Press, in the reports of medical officers and sanitary inspectors and in other ways. We often hear and read of the "march of Progress" or the "wonderful growth of Civilisation." In face of such sickening and deplorable housing conditions one is almost tempted to the conclusion that "civilisation" is a mockery and a sham. What is the gain to humanity of "modern improvements" and the like when they are available only to a small privileged class? Conditions in pre-historic times could have been no worse than in some of our villages in these present much-vaunted "enlightened times." The savages of darkest Africa, with only the most primitive means of building at their disposal, are little, if any, worse off. As a Wiltshire clergyman—the Rev. W. H. Hewlett Cooper—wrote in a recent epistle to a local paper:—

The housing of our working classes, urban or rural, is one problem at bottom. It engages all classes of the national community to some share in its solution. It stands before all minds, all hearts, all ranks, all sorts and conditions of men, all British citizens of high and low degree alike—appealing to the commonsense, patriotic feeling, humanity, Christian conscience of England, for its prompt solution.

In the light of so deplorable a state of affairs encouragement can be gleaned from the knowledge that many well-intentioned people, inspired by the crying need for redress, are devoting their energies and abilities to seeking a solution of the problem. Many schemes are from time to time being brought forward and though we cannot, in our faith, believe that any improvement can be brought about by the majority of these, we can hope that with such a fund of well-intentioned effort and goodwill existing, we shall eventually—at no distant date—we are sanguine enough to believe—bring home to the majority of them the conviction that the solution of the housing problem—in both town and country—lies, first and last, in a solution of the land question.

### Clearance Schemes.

In most of the housing reform schemes put forward, the governing principle is that the local governing body should demolish all slum property and erect dwellings through the medium of rate-aided or State-aided funds. In the lecture delivered by Miss Churton at Norwich to which we have referred, she says:—

How were they to get new cottages built and the existing ones kept in a healthy and sound condition? The Housing and Town Planning Act of 1909 made it far more possible for housing to be improved than formerly. If only the Act was well administered, and its provisions loyally carried out, the evils they had been considering would be to a very great extent remedied. The difficulty of the shortage of cottages could, under the new Act, be met by the Rural District Council building cottages. It was encouraging to note that a beginning had been made in Norfolk, at Hethersett and by the Smallburgh and Erpingham Rural District Councils, and that some five others had schemes under consideration:—Wayland, Downham, Freebridge Lynn, Depwade, and Blotfield. Unfortunately, the wages of the country labourer were in most districts too low to allow him to pay an economic rent for his cottage—a rent that would give any return on the cost of building.

If enough cottages were to be built, then to meet the need many landowners themselves were admitting that it would have to be done by the Rural District Councils, but they, too, had a difficulty how to build for the agricultural labourer without burdening the rates. It must be allowed that in most districts this was an impossibility, unless a rise in the amount of his cash wages enabled the labourer to pay a higher rent for his cottage.

Miss Churton is not alone in her belief in this method of dealing with the housing problem. Whenever the question of coping with the dearth of decent houses arises at the meetings of local authorities, the schemes put forward—when any scheme at all is advocated—are invariably of the State-aided, demolish and rebuild type.

**The Reason of Failure.**

There is one overwhelming reason why this type of "reform" is useless. It has been tried for many decades now and yet the housing evil is more acute than ever. It has been proved a failure. Many hundreds of slum areas have been cleared—especially in the towns—and new dwellings have been erected out of State-aided loans. But faster than the old slum-areas have been cleared away, new slum-areas have come into being. There is no reason why a method that has proved worse than futile in the towns should prove successful in the villages.

The reason of failure is not far to seek; it lies in ignoring the basic causes of slums—high rents and the poverty of the slum dwellers. When a local authority clears out a slum area, and erects dwellings, the people who are displaced cannot afford to pay the rents that, under present conditions and circumstances, must be charged for the new dwellings. The dispossessed go elsewhere, overcrowd in another district and create further slums. Even where the rents are kept low by means of State-aided funds, the evil is not abated—its sphere of operation is merely changed.

**The Minimum Wage.**

Many reformers have got so far as to recognise that the question of low wages has a strong bearing on the question and are now busily advocating the establishment of a "minimum wage." Will this take us any nearer the solution of the housing problem? Low wages, it can be granted, is one of the chief factors in the problem, but wages cannot be raised by Act of Parliament. Minimum Wage Acts may be passed and money wages may be raised, but economic law, alike with experience, goes to show that prices and rents will keep pace with such advances, other conditions remaining as they are.

**The Real Factors in the Problem.**

The real factors in this housing problem are high rents and low wages. Rents are high because land on which houses can be built cannot be secured except at prohibitive and even extortionate prices, and because the prevailing system of rating and taxation imposes a perpetual fine on houses as soon as they are erected—the better the house the bigger the fine.

To remove slums and solve the housing problem we must cut deeper into economic tendencies; we must invoke new laws which will tend in the direction of making it easy for workers to have the use of land, and to do this we must bring the monopoliser of land into the field of competition. Just now capital competes with capital, labour with labour, and capital and labour with each other. We must bring the landowner into this circle, and we can do this only by asking him the value of the land he monopolises, so that he may be rated and taxed on this value. In such altered circumstances landowners would be readily persuaded to improve their "property" or allow others to do so. The rate collector fines the house-builder for erecting houses. We must give this public servant another job. We must send him after the man who stands in the way of houses being erected. And when we do this—the only way—by the Taxation of Land Values, at that moment a fresh demand for labour will set in and wages will advance naturally, without the help of ill-devised laws for the payment of a minimum wage, which so far as we can judge signifies a mere cut above the starvation wage now in vogue.

S. J. P.

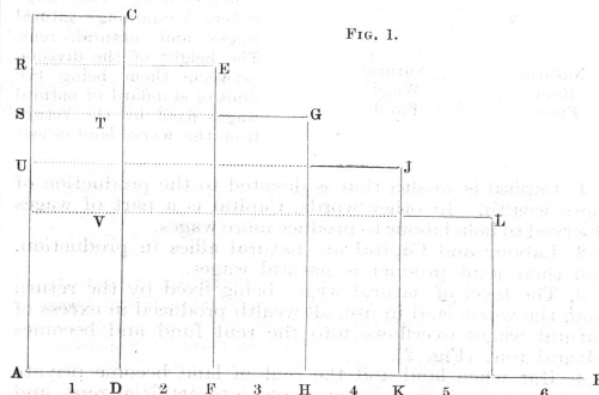
**THE TRUTH ABOUT RENT, WAGES, AND TAXATION.**

BY ALEX. W. JOHNSTON, M.A.

**Ch. I. Natural Wages and Natural Rent.**

1. Wealth is produced by labour applied to land.
2. Under equal conditions equal labour applied to equal areas of land of the same quality must produce equal returns of wealth, and the returns from areas of different qualities must be unequal.
3. The area which yields the smallest return must be the worst area in use, and other areas are better in proportion as their returns are greater.
4. The entire return from the worst area is the natural wages of the labour applied to that area, and an equal portion of the return from each better area is the natural wages for that area.
5. The difference between the return from any better area and the return from the worst is the natural rent of that better area. That is, the natural rent of any area is the amount by which its return exceeds that of the worst area in use.
6. For example, if the return from the worst area is £100 a year, the natural wages for all areas is £100 a year, the natural rent of any area is the amount by which its return exceeds £100 a year, and the worst area in use yields no natural rent.
7. Natural rent is therefore the equalisation of natural opportunities and of natural wages.
8. When better land is not available, an increase of population forces inferior land into use, and thus causes natural rent.
9. Therefore, as population increases, natural rent must rise and natural wages must fall.

**Diagram of Natural Wages and Natural Rent.**



1. Let the line AB represent land. Let this land be divided into equal areas, 1, 2, 3, &c. Let area 1 be first class land; area 2, second class land, and so on. Let equal labour be applied to each area in use. Let the parallelograms AC, DE, FG, &c., represent the wealth annually produced from areas 1, 2, 3, &c., respectively.
2. So long as area 1 is the only land in use, the entire return AC is the natural wages of the labour applied to area 1. But when the increase of population forces area 2 into use, the return DE is the natural wages for area 2, and the return AC is divided into two parts, viz., RC, the natural rent, and DR, the natural wages for area 1. This division is the natural distribution of wealth into natural wages and natural rent.
3. The successive increments of natural rent, CR, RT, TU, &c., and the consequent decrements of natural wages, are caused by the increase of population forcing into use the inferior areas 2, 3, 4, &c., and the same process is repeated when other inferior areas are forced into use.
4. Therefore, as population increases, natural rent must rise and natural wages must fall.
5. Natural rent is public property, and natural wages is private property.