

Survey And Valuation In Ethiopia

By Frank Lund, F.R.I.C.S., from an article in
Rating and Valuation

I HAVE been appointed to advise on an appropriate system of local rating, land survey and land registration in Addis Ababa. Not for me the chaos of sorting out numerous Acts of Parliament from 1601 and onwards, with so many quirks and inconsistencies brought about as a result of pressure on the legislature of political and business groups; rather here to try to evolve a system, virtually from scratch, which is equitable and easily understood by people who have come to regard land as the greatest asset they can possess.

A draft town plan has been prepared with the assistance of an English architect and town planner seconded from the British civil service, and the city's finance department is now under the control of Reg. Coble, F.I.M.T.A., who has done a stirring feat in two years in sorting out complete chaos.

At present the city council is empowered to levy numerous taxes; so much per cow, goat, sheep, etc. slaughtered; so much for a business licence to sell cloth, another licence to make clothes, a licence to sell petrol, another to repair cars, another to paint cars, another to sell dairy produce, another for dry goods, and so on and so on *ad infinitum*. A rental value tax, was levied in the past on the rent an owner declared as having received, if indeed he was good enough to declare anything, but friend Coble has insisted that the tax be levied on rental value, which assessment albeit still rather arbitrary does make the tax a little more equitable. But still there is no tax resulting from the presence of buildings where the buildings are owner-occupied. Also there is a land tax based on the "value" of lands as arbitrarily assessed by the council. In practice the result has been to assess a level of value to a locality and all land is valued at the same rate in that rather large locality, irrespective of shape, position, road frontage, etc.

Another practical difficulty is that in order to levy the land tax the city should be able to prove that the person taxed is in fact the owner. As about 80 per cent., of such title deeds as exist are not accurate, with boundaries overlapping the adjoining plot of land in many cases, and as there are numerous plots without title deeds, or with title deeds mislaid, many owners refuse to pay this tax.

Many expediencies which might be possible, say in England, such as presuming title and throwing the onus on the assessed "owner", would not be countenanced here. Correct surveys and accurate title deeds must be produced.

The English system of rating *rebus sic stantibus* would not be desirable because large areas of land in the centre of the city which are so valuable are nevertheless occupied by shanties and hovels. It is our desire to bring in a system of rating that will take into account the potential value of the land and also to endeavour to encourage owners to develop this land with good buildings. The shanties attract very low rents, thus producing a low rental value tax, and land ownership is at present suspect so that land tax is often avoided. A system of taxation based on market values of the property, with a rate poundage levied on the vacant site value, and a lower rate poundage levied on the difference between the full value and the vacant site value (the improvements value for want of a better term) will have just the effect which is desired, as the better the development, the lower will become the aggregate rate in the pound.

However without proof of title no valuation roll can be prepared; the initial task therefore is to sort out such title deeds as exist (they can only be filed in chronological order of issue or alphabetically by names of owners at present as there are very few street names, no street numbers and no plot numbers). This method might be all very well for Puddlecombe-in-the-Marsh but it makes life a little difficult in a city of this size. As a title deed will often carry the name of a person who died many years ago, and as the land was probably appropriated by the Italians anyway and then passed on to someone else to settle a debt, readers will realise that the garden is not all a bed of roses. The only effective method of settling who is the owner and where the plot boundaries are is to arrange a meeting of the "elders" of the district under a big tree near the land in question and to solve the problem more or less by a process of elimination. Some plot boundaries have been marked in the past by placing a pile of loose stones at the corners but this is rarely of any value now as in the course of time the stones have been used either to build a wall, chock a car or quarry on a hill or merely to throw at small boys. It is my desire to arrange for all boundaries to be beacons as surveys can be carried out.

Eventually, it will be possible to number all plots in a strict geographical order, and then prepare a roll of plot numbers with the respective owners' names. This will form the basis of the valuation roll.

There are so many things to be done that it is necessary to look to one of the virtues of the Emperor, patience, and to copy his example. Rome wasn't built in a day and a complete and up-to-date valuation roll will not be prepared for Addis Ababa in a year. It is my hope however, given the co-operation of the Ethiopian staff, to have the survey completed and a valuation in operation by the end of 1964. No doubt the troubles will then start, with objections and appeals (which reminds me . . . in the spare time we must get around to drafting the legislation under which we hope to operate; it just does not exist at present).