

# A HISTORY of the SCOTTISH PEOPLE

## URBAN HOUSING IN SCOTLAND 1840-1940

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This is Chapter 4 of 10. The others are:

Summary of Economy & Society, Education, Employment, Health, Income, Leisure, Migration, Religion, Transport

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

From the early 19th century through to the mid-20th century Scotland's towns and cities grew. But most people had to endure appalling standards of housing. Overcrowding and poor sanitation provisions were rife. These problems were only slowly addressed and it was not until after the 2nd World War that living conditions changed dramatically for the great majority of Scotland's people. Large scale housing estates were built and today it is the quality of the planned environment that is the main issue to be faced.

### 2. HOUSING PROBLEMS 1840-1900

The housing problem stemmed from the mass influx of migrants to urban areas searching for work. Arriving in the first half of the 19th century in unprecedented numbers, the migrants swelled the population of the industrial towns of Scotland. Glasgow's population increased from 77,000 to 275,000 in the period 1801-41, while that of Dundee grew from 26,000 to 60,000 in the same period. The scale of the influx from the Highlands and Ireland and the poverty of the incomers inevitably led to overcrowding, as affordable accommodation was in short supply. So quickly did the urban environment deteriorate in Glasgow that Captain Miller, the Chief Constable, was moved to remark at a meeting of the British Association in 1840 that "in the very centre of the city

there is an accumulated mass of squalid wretchedness which is probably unequalled in any other town of the British dominions."

In spite of the sensational nature of contemporary comment, actual evidence regarding the degree of overcrowding and squalor was scanty and impressionistic. It was only when the Census was extended in 1861 to take account of these issues that hard evidence on what Victorian Scots called the 'housing question' was forthcoming. The Census returns painted a dark picture of the condition of Scottish housing. The data showed that one room homes comprised 34% of the housing stock of Scotland, and that a further 37% of homes consisted of two rooms. Thus, in 1861, 71% of Scottish homes consisted of not more than two rooms, and housed 64% of the population.

The one room home, or 'single end' as it was known in Glasgow, was small; the average size in Edinburgh was 14 feet by 11.5 feet. In spite of this some 226,000 families inhabited single rooms in Scotland. The number of people per one room home varied from place to place, and street to street. Nationally, the average number of people living in a single room was five, but a study in 1862 of the Canongate, Tron, St Giles and Grassmarket areas of Edinburgh showed that of the single room homes, 1,530 had 6-15 people living in each. The overcrowding was made worse by the practice of taking lodgers. The 1861 Census found that 1 in 10 one room homes had lodgers, while in two roomed homes the respective figure was 1 in 5. The amenities available to tenants were poor.

In 1861 with 91,664 inhabitants Dundee had only five WCs, and three of them were in hotels. All water in the city was drawn from wells of which the chief, the Lady Well, was heavily polluted by the slaughterhouse. Of the total housing stock of Scotland 1% had no windows, which meant that 8,000 families were without access to natural light. Conditions were summed up by one contemporary essayist who wrote in 1866 that: "Sanitary arrangements [are] of the most defective description. The absence of conveniences ... is a great preventive of that thorough cleanliness and purity ... as a consequence, the atmosphere is foully tainted, and rendered almost unendurable by its loathsomeness at those periods when offal and nuisance require to be deposited on the streets". [Symington, J. 1866 *The Working Man's Home*, Edinburgh pp158-9]

### **3. CONTINUING PROBLEMS 1900-1940**

Unfortunately, the housing problem showed little sign of being resolved by the early years of the 20th century. Although homes without windows had disappeared by 1881, overcrowding remained a serious problem. The 1911 Census showed that while the number of people living in one room homes declined to 13% of the total, the number of those living in two roomed homes was still high at 41%. Thus over half the population of Scotland in 1911 lived in one or two roomed homes, while in England the figure was only 7%. Moreover, 45% of Scots lived at a density of more than two people per room, while in England the respective figure was only 9%. Of course, in the great cities the situation was much worse. Glasgow had two-thirds of its population living in this type of cramped accommodation, and Dundee had 72%, compared to only 32% of London's population.

In certain smaller burghs overcrowding and the lack of amenities were just as problematic as in these large cities. Overcrowding was most marked in Kilsyth and Coatbridge, with over 71% of the population of both burghs living in accommodation with more than two people per room. Conditions were much better in burghs situated in rural areas. Of all the major Scottish burghs Inverness had the least cramped housing, with less than a quarter of its population living at more than two people per room. Both Aberdeen and Edinburgh had dramatically lower levels of overcrowding than Glasgow or Dundee - about 35%. Most of the houses remained deficient with regard to the basic amenities. A survey in 1913 showed that there were 7,106 one room homes in Edinburgh, of which 94% shared a common WC and 43% a common sink. In Glasgow there were 44,354 such homes, with a population of 104,000. Of these 93% shared a WC, but most had their own sink.

The position was not much better in two room homes in Glasgow, with 62% of 111,451 homes in this category sharing a WC. Conditions in one room homes had hardly changed from the description given in Symington's essay of 1866: they were deplorable and constituted a health hazard. Medical evidence to the Royal Commission on Housing in Scotland (1917), showed that the death rate was much higher in one room homes as compared to two and more roomed homes, and this was especially true for infants between the ages of 0-5 years. In Edinburgh in 1910 infant mortality was 110 per 1,000 deaths for the city as a whole. In the 3-4 roomed homes of Merchiston it was 46 per 1,000 deaths, while in areas of two roomed homes, such as the Cowgate, it was 277 per 1,000 deaths.

The one room home was also more likely to contain more inhabitants on average than the two roomed home, the respective figures in 1911 in Glasgow being 3.196 as against 2.432. The environmental dangers were compounded by the keeping of dead bodies in the home for a period of three days until burial. The corpse occupied the family bed during the day and the table at night. There was also the problem of keeping the place clean and tidy. One witness to the Royal Commission stated that living in one room was "a constant succession of lifting, folding, and hanging up and if this regime is relaxed for even for a short time the confusion is overwhelming".

Living in such cramped and unhealthy homes had an obvious impact on the health of young children and their physical development. Children who lived in spacious accommodation were heavier and larger than their counterparts in one roomed homes. Also the incidence of rickets and other physical deformities were more marked. In Dundee, where overcrowding was significant, 44% of school children had impaired hearing and 48% had poor eyesight. Surveys also showed a long list of other illnesses and deformities. The period after the First World War saw a further decline in the numbers living in one roomed accommodation in Scotland, from 11% in 1901 to 7.1% in 1931. But the numbers in two rooms only saw a small decrease from 39.5% in 1901 to 36.9% in 1931. The improvement was due to the introduction of council housing after 1919.

Of the houses built in Scotland in the period 1919-39 67% were in the public sector, compared to 26% in England. These were generally at a higher standard than private rented accommodation and that meant that rents were relatively high, comprising between 52% and 46% of the average textile worker's wage in

Dundee. Only the better paid workers could afford the new council housing and for that reason overcrowding remained a problem throughout the inter-War period. The 1931 Census showed that 63% of Dundee's population occupied one or two roomed homes, compared to 62% in Glasgow and 31% in Edinburgh. In Dundee 50% of the homes shared toilet facilities.

#### **4. SOME CAUSES**

The reasons for Scotland's appalling performance in the area of housing can be viewed in terms of supply and demand. On the supply side, the system of feuing, in which the purchaser of land for housing or commercial development had to pay an annual fee to the original landowner, pushed up the price of building land to levels above those in England, with the exception of London. According to Board of Trade figures, in the 1890s building land in Glasgow was 30s per square yard, while in Liverpool it was 22s 6d. Building standards were also stricter in Scotland, which made the cost of construction 45% higher in Glasgow than in London. Faced with high land prices and construction costs, builders were forced to maximise their investments by building as densely as they could, hence the rise of tenement blocks. It was the subdivision, or 'making down', of these tenements which led to overcrowding and the creation of urban slums.

The property owner would attempt to offset the high costs of construction by passing them on to tenants in the form of higher rents. Indeed, rents were substantially greater in Scotland than in England, again with the exception of London. In 1908 the weekly rent for a two room home in Glasgow was 4s 2d, compared to 3s 3d in Leeds and 3s 1d in Sheffield. On the demand side, the low wages of Scots workers in comparison with their English counterparts, combined with higher rents and prices in general, meant that housing was only affordable by pooling resources. By doing this the poor could not only share their housing costs, but also bills for fuel and light. This encouraged overcrowding, which was compounded by the Scottish system of six or twelve monthly rentals payable in advance.

#### **5. SOME REFORMS**

Various attempts to solve the problem of overcrowding were made during the 19th century. A system of ticketing was introduced in Glasgow in 1866 and extended to all Scottish burghs through the Burgh Police Act of 1903. Ticketing involved fixing a metal plate to the door of a house specifying the number of people allowed to inhabit it. In the period 1866-1900 there were 85,000 Glaswegians were living in 23,288 ticketed houses. Midnight raids were made by police and sanitary inspectors to determine the numbers occupying a ticketed house. However, the raids were failures as the occupants developed an early warning system and evaded the attentions of the authorities. Even so, a report on Paisley showed that in 1906 46.9% of ticketed houses inspected were overcrowded.

Local authorities also made various attempts to alleviate squalor. For example, a slum clearance programme was initiated in Glasgow in 1866 to demolish 88 acres of the inner city and replace it with 39 new streets and 12 altered ones. The programme was completed in 1902. Like other developments it did little to solve

the basic problem since the new houses were let out only to well-to-do artisans, earning 24-30s per week. The displaced slum dwellers were forced to move into the next oldest properties, where the problems of overcrowding and squalor re-emerged.

It was only in the area of public health that reforms proved successful in improving conditions for most house dwellers. The most beneficial was the bringing of clean drinking water from Loch Katrine to Glasgow in 1855. Edinburgh followed the example and began to draw its water supply from St Mary's Loch in the Borders. But many of the smaller burghs and villages were bypassed by reform. Lochgelly in Fife, for example, only had two WCs for a population of 2,000 in 1867. Sewage thrown onto the streets seeped into the mine well from where the drinking supply was drawn.

During the latter half of the 19th century it became increasingly obvious that the only way to solve the housing problem was to construct good quality accommodation at affordable rents. However, the dominance of local politics by property owners meant that little could be done, since to interfere in the housing market in such a profound way would have hit the pockets of the landlords. A solution had to be imposed from above. This came in 1919 with the passing of the Addison Act, which provided for state subsidised council housing. After this date the legislation for Scotland was little different to England. Various Acts were passed in the 1920s which encouraged public sector construction, but the onset of the Depression in 1929 saw the emphasis placed on slum clearance in the 1930s. The outbreak of War in 1939 put an end to housing programmes.

## 6. POST-WAR HOUSING ISSUES

With the election in 1945 of a Labour government committed to an extensive plan of housing construction the initiative was taken up again. The 1950s and 1960s proved a watershed as the problems of overcrowding and poor amenities were largely solved by the construction of massive housing estates and high rise buildings. By the end of the 1960s, 63% of housing in Glasgow, 57% in Dundee, and 48% in Aberdeen, was in the public sector. However, yesterday's solutions have become today's problems as disenchantment with the mass housing estates has set in. This serves to remind us that the housing question is on-going, changing its nature in line with economic and social changes.

In the 19th century it was one of matching people to affordable accommodation of a decent standard. Since 1950 it has been one of responding to rising expectations, as well as to changing tastes and lifestyles. WW Knox, Department of Scottish History, St Andrews University, 1996 MAIN HOUSING LEGISLATION  
The Glasgow Corporation Water Works Act (1855) This brought clean water to Glasgow from Loch Katrine at a cost of £1.5m. Other burghs followed this example. The Burgh Police Act (1866) This introduced the system of ticketing to Glasgow. It was extended to all Scottish burghs in 1903. The Artisans' Dwellings Act (1875) This empowered local authorities to raise rates to finance slum clearance programmes. The Rents and Mortgages Restriction Act (1915) This fixed rents at pre-1914 levels. As such it was the first important intervention by the state in the housing market. The Housing and Town Planning Act [Addison

Act] (1919) Named after the Minister of Health, the Act introduced state subsidies for council house building. The Housing (Financial Provisions) Act [Wheatley Act] (1924) Named after the Minister of Health, the Act greatly extended the building of council housing by improving the level of subsidy from the state. The Housing Act [Greenwood Act] (1930) This shifted the emphasis of state support to slum clearance. The Housing Act (1946) This began the construction of council housing in Britain for all citizens, not simply the poor. Four fifths of houses built between 1946 and 1951 were in this public sector.

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