

'We don't want to move'—cottagers

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Not squalid but not particularly attractive either—a row of four communal toilets at the Wick-lane cottages. Among the children who use them is six-year-old Mark Hendy.

"WE ARE NOT SLUM-DWELLERS AND WE DON'T WANT TO MOVE"—THIS IS THE REPLY OF THE FAMILIES AND WIDOWS LIVING IN NINE COUNCIL OWNED, COTTAGES IN WICK-LANE WHICH WERE CONDEMNED BY ONE MEMBER AFTER ANOTHER IN CHRISTCHURCH COUNCIL ON TUESDAY.

Writes Jack Dwyer : I went down to the cottages to check for myself after a horrifying picture had been painted of rising damp, stone floors, outside toilets and no bathrooms, of rickety staircases, faulty electric wiring, and general squalor. We had been told it was a scandal that in the year 1968 such slums should be in the ownership of Christchurch Council which would almost certainly have condemned them if they were privately owned.

And by a supreme irony, the terrace of white cottages standing at right angles to Wick-lane, with tiny backyards and long front gardens, occupy probably the most desirable piece of real estate left undeveloped in the area of the town quay.

They look across the well-kept verdure of Quomps to the Stour where the sailing boats and cruisers float by in the summer. Undoubtedly an aspect that would fetch a very high price on the open market.

Three of the cottages, which were bought some years ago for a possible car park and later handed over to the housing committee,

are now empty, and the council was asked on Tuesday to sell them.

But the housing committee was split from top to toe over an agonising human problem, for what everybody was really and sincerely thinking about was the future of the little people living in the cottages.

Should the cottages be pulled down against their wishes, forcing them into other council accommodation, probably on the big estates?

Or should, in some way or another, money be spent on the cottages to make them acceptable by modern standards?

I went down to see the occupants impressed by the arguments that no civilised society could allow anyone to live in conditions which are undoubtedly sub-standard.

I had personal memories of a grandmother who had also been reluctant to leave her little home under a slum-clearance scheme, but who had spent some of the happiest years of her life after she had been moved into a new flat.

NICELY FURNISHED

I met Mrs. Madeline Hayes, a widow of 71, who has lived many years in her little cottage. Her rooms are nicely furnished and homely and she's one of the lucky ones with an indoor toilet; her husband built extension walls and a roof to convert the outdoor toilet. I couldn't see any signs of damp.

"If they want me to go they'll have to carry me out feet first," she said. "All my memories are here, my memories of my husband."

As she spoke two of her great- grandchildren played happily around us. "All my family live near, and I see them every week. I couldn't if I was moved to Somerford or somewhere. I'm happy here. It's not a slum."

Mr. Derek Hendy lives with his wife and three small children in an end cottage and describes himself as a "refugee from Somerford." They were miserable when they lived on the estate, and when they asked for a change and were offered the Wick-lane cottage they jumped at the chance, despite its lack of amenities.

TOILETS CLEAN

"We don't mind the toilets being outside," said Mr. Hendy. "We're prepared to put up with it. The toilets themselves are quite clean."

Inside the house Mr. Hendy has papered the walls with plastic damp-proofing. "The walls were damp," he admitted, "but this seems to have cured it. I have to keep patching it up."

He added: "I'd do a lot more in the house if it weren't for the uncertainty. We just don't know what's going to happen. I'd hate to have to go back to an estate."

He admitted he'd need another bedroom soon, and it was then I had an idea. "If you were able to take over the cottage next door and knock it into this one, which would give you space for another bedroom, an indoor toilet, and a bathroom, would you take it?" I asked.

"I would if I could get the money," he said. I persisted: "If the council gave you a loan?" He brightened: "Yes, I would."

So I passed on the idea to the council which will certainly have to make up its mind what it wants to do, soon. Three of the cottages are empty; why not combine them with the properties next door and then modernise? The same could happen as and when other cottages fall vacant.

The back yards could be improved by demolishing the out-side toilets, and the front gardens could be turned into a public ornamental garden.

This way some very nice people, some with long memories, others young and willing to improve the properties if given the security of tenure, and all with an individuality which they feel would be smothered on the estates, could lead their lives untroubled by fear of eviction.

'NO SELLING' DECISION

Christchurch Council rejected a recommendation on Tuesday to sell three of nine council-owned cottages which members freely described as slums. It was a rare occasion when a chairman refused to move a recommendation of his own committee.

An ordinary member, Coun. Mrs. Irene Stevenson, had to put forward the housing committee's proposal to invite offers for Nos. 50, 56, and 64 Wick-lane.

Highways chairman Ald. William Morgan said the cottages were bought some years ago but were no longer needed for car-park requirements. He thought then they were due to be condemned, and he was glad the housing committee had decided not to renew the tenancies.

He was vehemently opposed to selling the cottages. The council would immediately lose control. Even as an open space, properly landscaped, it would be of great intrinsic value, but he hoped the cottages would be redeveloped as a whole.

DEFEATED

Coun. Maurice Lynk wanted the matter to go back to the housing committee, but his amendment was defeated. He said all the occupants should be rehoused as soon as possible and certainly within the next 12 months and redeveloped. It had a frontage of 140ft. and a depth of 150ft. it was a good site.

If the properties were sold separately he was certain the owners would apply for improvement grants, only part of which would be recoverable by the council.

The cottages were not part of what he called "old Christchurch" and must be one of the black marks of Christchurch. They must almost have been substandard when they were built.

Coun. Tom Staniforth said it was a very human problem. One of the occupants was an old lady of 91 who had lived there all her life. They did not want to be rehoused in modern homes; they were quite

happy and most of them had made the cottages into little homes which would impress members of the council.

Coun. Michael Pritchard said the cottages were an eyesore, and the council must not allow their tenants to live in sub-standard houses. There was nothing in the medical officer of health's report that was to the credit of the houses.

WHOSE FAULT?

Ald. Mrs. Dorothy Baker said if the occupiers were put on the top of the housing queue they would keep out people who had been waiting for a long time with no housing at all. If the cottages were municipal slums, whose fault was that? It was the highways committee's for turning them over to the housing committee.

Why not sell the three vacant cottages and let some couples be happy? she asked.

Coun. John Morgan said they were a disgrace and a reflection on the borough.

Housing chairman Coun. Hubert Bourke said the occupants should have decent places to live in. The cottages were nothing less than substandard. He was against selling the cottages singly because who could say that in four or five years' time planning permission might not be applied for?

The recommendation was defeated by 11 votes to five.