

Housing

The *Rural Education Report 1923* reported on housing conditions that do not appear to have changed appreciably since Victorian times and in fact, housing conditions in

Chinnor continued to remain poor until after the Second World War. Pamela Horn noted that sanitary arrangements and rural living conditions were universally very poor with overcrowding and poorly ventilated homes, whilst Alun Howkins reflected on the images of 'cottages' in the interwar years with 'roses round the door' bore no relation to the realities of rural housing conditions. This was reiterated by his quotation from an Oxfordshire woman in 1925 who reports 'the bedrooms were very cold, very cold upstairs were two bedrooms one you had to go through to get to the other one.' Chinnor at the turn of the century had a total number of 280 houses sheltering a population of 1,200. Photographs of the time depict small picturesque cottages which were reported to have coal fire heating, no sanitation, and serious overcrowding with poor ventilation, conditions favourable to the spread of droplet infection.

Howdon-Chapman has reviewed housing standards, and their relationship with health, although set in a modern context, shows that many of the issues can be examined in the context of pre-war Chinnor and its impact on the occupants' health. For example, the structure and design as well as the building materials used. Internal conditions which would be detrimental would include damp, mould and fungus, cold and indoor contaminants such as coal smoke, tobacco smoke, all exacerbated by poor ventilation as well as overcrowding in large families.

Recurrent fires in Chinnor due to the open fires and thatched roofs has given rise to a variety of dwellings. From 1880-1929 fires had destroyed a row of thatched cottages and three parts of an old farmhouse in Bledlow road. The old Royal Oak public house, the old bake house near the pond in the high street and in July 1932 the Blackboy inn and on Whit-Monday 1939, a big thatched barn opposite the pond in the high street. Local houses were built depending on the building materials to hand. In Chinnor roofs were mostly thatched or Welsh slate. Typical of the area were houses of timber frames, originally wattle and daub, now brick or brick and flint or wychert houses made of a mixture of clay, chalk and pebbles, earth and straw. To give a flavour of this variety two homes are described.

The oldest cottage is Cromwell Cottage in the High street, which dates from the civil war. Originally thatched it boasts a priest's hole, a child's bone in an alcove and an outhouse in which a consumptive lived. In 1950 a conveyance clause instructed that access was to be allowed to the well water for neighbouring dwellers. In an article printed in an unnamed magazine between 1926-1930 the author notes that the cottage has electric light, electricity having come to the village 'a few weeks ago.'

The second house in Mill Lane was built in 1920 is a three bedroom house with reception dining room and lounge and boasted an inside non flushing lavatory but was again dependant on a well for water.

Under the *Rural Workers Housing Act 1926* (Financial Provisions) County Councils were enabled to give grants for improving existing properties for rural workers however, it is not known how far this was utilised nationally. Some council houses were built in Chinnor during the 1920s in station Road and in Lime Grove where, in

both cases, no indoor plumbing or sanitation was provided. Mabel Howlett remembered the wells being dug in Lime grove and the WI minutes report concern about the cleanliness of the wells in Station Road which is referred to elsewhere in the thesis. There was some improvement in housing in the inter-war period due to government grants but this was limited. Part of the problem was the deterioration of the existing housing stock. When Mabel Howlett was first married, she and her husband lived in a cottage which went back to the 1600s and although the land lord tried to get it modernised, he 'could not get the plans passed.' Sewage and piped water were not installed in Chinnor until 1952, up until then every house or row of houses had its own well. Wells were particularly susceptible to environmental pollution from seepage from manure heaps or cesspits whilst rainwater contains small quantities of dissolved atmospheric gases particularly for oxygen and weak acid form carbon dioxide. John Neighbour recalls that 'night soil' from the privy would be discarded in the garden often within 12 or so feet from the well.

Cyril Gibbs who was one of three brothers and four sisters, remembered sleeping two to a bed. Chinnor residents would not have had any modern protection against the weather but damp poorly heated cottages. In a series of articles in the *Chinnor Roundabout*, a predecessor of the *Chinnor Pump*, Mary Darmody described her childhood in the 1930s and 40s living in a cottage in Duck Square. She recalled that the cottages were a very simple thatched lath and plaster dwellings standing around three sides of the Square. They had no electricity and no sanitation but just a well in the middle of the square and the water was freezing cold. Meals were cooked over an open fire or the adjoining oven. The fire in the cottage had to be kept going all year as it was the only means of cooking and heating water but in spite of this often in winter, they had to keep their coats on to keep warm due to the wind blowing down the wide chimney. Although the main room was warm there was no heating in any other part of the house and she describes going to bed as 'agony'. She shared a bed and a hot water bottle with her sister to keep warm and if really cold went to bed clothed in cardigans and socks with her father's 'Home Guard' coat over the bed as well.

Most houses were heated with open fires although some, but by no means all, had a type of cooker called a 'Kitchener' which was a range cooker a prototype of the agar. The open coal fires would have resulted in a polluted atmosphere leading to upper airway irritation and an exacerbation of chest infections. Mary Darmody recalls that the amount of coal and wood needed to keep the fire going was incredible. Coal was delivered by Mr. Fortnum by horse and cart, the horse knowing his round and stopping at the right houses as required.

Mabel Howlett remembered that in the 1940s and 50s council houses were being built as the existing houses were deemed not fit to raise children in. Her own cottage did not have a bathroom until the 1970s and she reported that until 1952 she had no drains to her cottage and that she had an earth toilet; she also drew water from the well for washing and cooking. Someone had once asked her how many buckets of water she drew from the well on washday. The next wash day she counted them and it was 30.