

**HOUSING DEVELOPMENT IN THE BOROUGH OF SUTTON COLDFIELD AS
SHOWN IN THE ANNUAL REPORTS OF THE MEDICAL OFFICER OF HEALTH
1886 – 1937**

By Janet Lillywhite

When Sutton Coldfield became a Municipal Borough in 1886, one of the major responsibilities of the new council was to maintain and improve the health and sanitary condition of the town. The council therefore appointed a Medical Officer of Health (MOH) to oversee and report on matters of public health. The first to be appointed in 1886 was Alfred Bostock Hill M.D. who stayed with the council until 1918. His place was taken by J. H. Wright M.D. who remained until his retirement in 1945.

The MOH had to present an annual report to the Council's Health Committee and these reports are available from 1886 to 1929. There are no reports available after this date until 1936 and 1937 and there is then a further gap until 1945. (1) The reports are very comprehensive and include details not only on the state of health and sanitary conditions, water supply and sewage and refuse disposal, but also on building development in the Borough. Using information provided by the Borough Surveyor, they give details of the number of new houses, shops, public buildings and new roads built each year.

NEW BUILDINGS.

Mr. Mairston, the Borough Surveyor, has sent me the following in reference to these :—

“ During the year 1897, plans were approved for the erection of 252 new houses, 1 public building (Assembly Room), 8 retail shops, and 37 alterations and additions to existing premises (including the Grammar School, Hill School and the Princess Alice Orphanage). The total number of new buildings approved was therefore 298, or 114 in excess of any previous year.”

The following Comparative Statement shows the number of plans approved each year since 1889, and the remarkable increase during the past year will be apparent from these figures :—

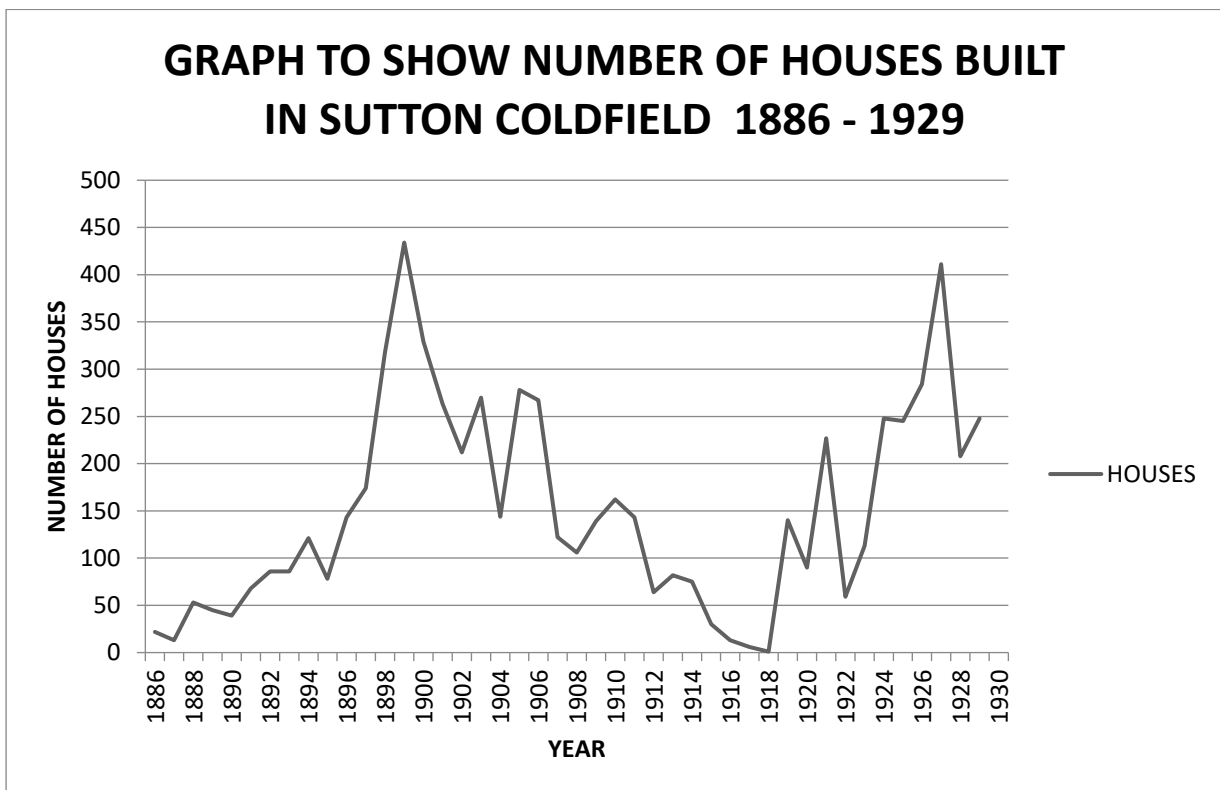
1889	1890	1891	1892	1893	1894	1895	1896	1897
53	65	85	135	113	168	106	184	298

Extract from 1897 Medical Officer of Health Report

HOUSE BUILDING 1886-1937

An analysis of the data provided shows that a total of 10,131 houses were built between 1886 and 1937. Of these, 4,316 were built in the thirty two years between 1886 and 1918, which is an average of approximately 185 a year. A further 5,815 houses were built in the eighteen interwar years between 1919 and 1937 with over half of these (3,542) being built between 1930 and 1937 when an average of 507 houses were built each year.

For the years between 1886 and 1929 the MOH reports give the number of houses built or approved each year, so by plotting these on a graph it is possible to identify in more detail variations in the rate of house building during this forty three year period. (See notes). The graph below shows that from a relatively low point in 1887, there is a slow but uneven increase in the number of houses built between 1886 and 1896 and then a more rapid rise, reaching a peak of 434 houses built in 1899. During the following fifteen years, despite the fact that the population increased by 48% between the censuses of 1901 and 1911, there was a general falling off in house building. This was accentuated by the effect of World War One; only seven houses were built between 1917 and 1918. However, immediately after the war house building increased again reaching a peak in 1927 when 411 houses were built. The following two years showed a slight decline, but the MOH reports which are available for 1936 and 1937, show that 411 houses were built in 1936 and a further 680 in 1937.



The pattern of rise and fall that is found in house building in Sutton Coldfield was not confined to the local area. Recent studies show that there tends to be a twenty year cycle in house building nationally. During the nineteenth century there was a peak in house building in the 1870s, a trough in the 1880s and a peak in the late 1890s. This was followed by a long decline which terminated in the collapse of building during the First World War. The inter war years showed a further boom which ended with the Second World War.

The explanations for these cycles seem to reflect supply and demand. For example, in the 1890's there was an increase in demand for housing in the suburbs of large cities, (encouraged by the development of suburban rail services) especially among professional and business classes and at the same time low interest rates and favourable land prices encouraged speculative building for both owner occupation and rent. Eventually housing supply exceeds demand, credit becomes restricted and a slump occurs in the property market often accentuated by an economic downturn. (2)

DOCTOR ALFRED BOSTOCK HILL

The MOH reports, especially those of Alfred Bostock Hill, contain interesting comments on the nature of the development, and what he (and presumably the council) perceived as “desirable development”. He recognised that the town was growing rapidly, (between 1861 and 1911 the population rose from 4,662 to 20,132), and he was keen to promote Sutton Coldfield’s development as a health resort. In 1895 he was proud to say that there was not a single death from smallpox, scarlet fever, diphtheria, typhoid fever or measles and “*a sanitary condition has been obtained comparable with that of any health resort in the kingdom*”. His comments reflect his interests in public health; he was particularly interested in ways of reducing infant mortality and was an early specialist in this field. He was also a Professor of Toxicology at Birmingham University and Public Analyst for the county of Warwick and City of Coventry. He came from a medical background, his father having been MOH for Birmingham in the 1860’s.

In the years up to 1899 as house building is increasing, Doctor Hill’s comments are very positive. In 1892 he remarks on “*the considerable increase on last year, indicative of the continued prosperity of the Borough*”, and the following year, even though slightly fewer houses were built, of the “*important evidence of growth and prosperity in a year when trade and agriculture have suffered from considerable depression*”. In 1894, “*growth and prosperity is not only well maintained but increasing more rapidly year by year*” In fact, in these early years, the only thing which seems to have prevented house building is the weather! In 1895 he remarks that “*there has been a considerable falling off in the number of plans passed in the early part of the year, due no doubt to the severity of the weather ... the frost commenced on the 28th December 1894 and continued with more or less severity until the close of February. The point of greatest intensity was reached on the 8th February, on which day the temperature was 1° Fahrenheit on the screen and 10° below freezing on the grass*”.

The early years of the Twentieth century show a general decline in house building but initially Doctor Hill remains optimistic. In 1902, he refers to the “*considerable activity in the town ... the fact that plans for six new streets have been approved shows the intention, in the future, of owners to still extend further the house accommodation*”. However, by 1904 when house building was at its lowest for eight years, he does realise that there was a “*lull in the somewhat rapid development of the Borough which has occurred in the last few years, but this can be accounted for by the state of the home trade during the year, and there can be no doubt that in the very near future a very rapid increase in building and population will take place*”. However, by 1908, there had been “*a further falling off in the number of houses completed, undoubtedly to be attributed to general falling off in trade in the Midlands during the last year*”. This decline continued, and in 1912, when 64 houses were built compared with 143 in the previous year, Sutton Coldfield found that “*as in the rest of the country, the building trade has not been nearly so active*” and house building was showing “*a great falling off from the previous year*”.

Although, in Sutton Coldfield, house building was declining in the early years of the twentieth century, plans were still being made for the expansion of the Borough. In 1912 there was a proposal made to develop a scheme for Town Planning. The first Town Planning Act, which was passed in 1909, grew out of the continuing concern with public health, and its relation to sub-standard housing, which was highlighted at the time of the Boer War when many recruits were found to be physically unfit. But it was also seen as a means of improving the physical environment of the new suburbs by introducing open space, parks and recreation grounds and by regulating the density of housing development. (3) The scheme was supported by Doctor

Hill and the Borough Surveyor, Mr Clarry and in 1913 the Local Government Board sanctioned an application to prepare a scheme for the development of 6,400 acres.

“The area for which the application was made is a large one. The South side adjoins the boundary of the City of Birmingham and Perry Barr Urban District Council, on the West it is bounded by Sutton Park, on the north by the Lichfield Rural District Council and on the East by land that may be considered the purely agricultural proportion of the Borough”. The plan was approved in 1915, but, the war meant that *“no further progress could be made with the Draft Town Planning Scheme, owing to the necessity for economy and the depletion of office staff”.* However, by the end of the war, Doctor Hill was sure that *“With the cessation of hostilities and the necessity for housing development, no doubt the Town Planning Scheme will be seriously considered”.*

Doctor Hill retired in 1918. In his final report he says:- *“For 35 years I have been Medical Officer of Health for this Borough. It is no exaggeration to say that in this very long period I have seen the evolution of the town as it is now. When I was appointed the population was set down as 8,499 compared with 23,177. The town is rightly regarded as one of the most desirable residential places in the Midlands, and it may be fairly regarded as a health resort in the best sense of the word”.*

DOCTOR J. H. WRIGHT

Doctor Hill's place was taken by Doctor J.H. Wright, who was appointed initially on a part time basis, but from 1st January 1930 on a full time basis at a salary of £800 a year. (4) He continued to produce an annual report for the council and his main concerns during these inter war years are reflected in his comments in the 1924 report:- *“The need for adequate sanitary housing accommodation for the poorer classes is more pressing than ever. The houses so far provided are quite beyond the means of the class who are most in need of relief and who are living in damp, verminous overcrowded rooms”.*

In 1919, immediately after World War One, there was a national shortage of houses and rents were beyond the reach of the average working class family. The poor physical condition and health of many soldiers returning from the war brought a new social attitude, epitomised by Lloyd George's famous promise of “homes fit for heroes”. The Housing and Town Planning Act passed in 1919 attempted to remedy this situation by requiring councils to provide houses for those in need, and providing subsidies for building houses. (4)

Doctor Wright had estimated in 1919, that there was a shortage of 350 houses in the Borough and nine sites were identified under the Act for the erection of 254 council houses. The first applications to build 104 subsidised houses were made by the Housing Committee in July 1919, followed by a further 90 houses in May 1920.(5) In the following eighteen years 533 houses were built by the Local Authority. This was a very small proportion of the total number of the 5,815 houses built during this period and in 1937 Doctor Wright was still saying that *“more working class dwellings to let at a reasonable rate are urgently needed”.*

In 1946 Doctor Wright presented his 26th and final report. He remarked that *“My term of office has included the inter war period 1920 -1939 during which the population of the Borough increased by almost one hundred per cent. Shortage of housing remains the greatest social*

problem, although on the whole its adverse influence on health is probably less than that of food restrictions”.

References

1. Annual Reports of the Medical Officer of Health, 1886-1929 and 1936-1937. Sutton Coldfield Library
2. Kenneth C Jackson, *'The house building cycle: a neglected aspect of local history'*. The Local Historian August 2013.
3. A. Ashworth, *'The genesis of modern British town planning'* Routledge and Kegan Paul, London 1954.
4. John Burnett, *'A social history of housing 1815-1970'* Methuen, London 1983.

Notes

- Between 1888 and 1922 figures are given for the number of houses approved.
- For 1886, 1887, 1890 -1893, 1903 -1915, and 1919 -1929, figures are given for the number of houses built or completed.
- An analysis of the data shows that there is very little difference between the two sets of figures, and that the pattern of rise and fall in house building remains the same. Consequently, the graph in the article uses a combination of number of houses approved and number completed.