

*M. J. DAUNTON*

## MINERS' HOUSES: SOUTH WALES AND THE GREAT NORTHERN COALFIELD, 1880-1914

Accidents of personal biography are perhaps not the most sensible way by which to select topics for historical research, yet it was a fortuitous move from Cardiff to Durham which created an initial curiosity about the character of the coalfields in the two areas. No one could miss the difference of landscape between, on the one hand, the linear communities stretching along the deep and narrow South Wales valleys, amidst soaring mountains and spoil heaps and, on the other hand, the sprinkling of nucleated pit villages within the drab, undulating topography of County Durham. The belief that a comparison of these areas might be a topic of more than purely personal interest arose from two considerations.

The first was a growing dissatisfaction with much traditional labour history. The contrast between the South Wales and Great Northern coalfields had in fact been studied by a number of authors, but in an attempt to explain why South Wales was militant and the North-East moderate. It is not simply that this problem is misspecified for most of the nineteenth century, but that it neglects many other matters which, it could be argued, were of greater significance. There has been a general over-emphasis in British labour history upon the institutions of the organised workers, and particularly in circumstances of conflict. This has been true of no group more than the miners. The spate of histories commissioned by the miners in the various coalfields has been overwhelmingly concerned with the creation of the bureaucratic machinery, the struggle between moderates and militants for control, the analysis of strikes, and the changing political loyalties of the miners.<sup>1</sup> The result has been to neglect some of the most significant aspects of the life of the mining communities

<sup>1</sup> On these two coalfields, W. R. Garside, *The Durham Miners 1919-69* (1971), and R. Page Arnot, *South Wales Miners. A History of the South Wales Miners' Federation, 1898-1914* (1967). More recent studies do indicate a widening of approach: *Miners, Quarrymen and Saltworkers*, ed. by R. Samuel (1977), and *Independent Collier. The Coal Miner as Archetypal Proletarian Reconsidered*, ed. by R. Harrison (1978).

for an institutional and episodic approach. It has been suggested elsewhere that more important for an understanding of the life and concerns of the typical miner was how he entered the workforce and what his subsequent career pattern would be, how he carried out his everyday tasks below ground, and how he related there to his fellows. Although the South Wales and Great Northern coalfields had a basic similarity as export districts, they were shown to have two distinctive patterns of social relationships arising from the organisation of work.<sup>2</sup> And if work was central to the miner's life, so was his home; the suggestion of the present paper is that there were two diverging systems by which miners were supplied with accommodation.

This raises the second consideration which prompted the present study: a feeling of unease with many analyses of nineteenth-century housing. All too often the assumption is that somehow there had been a failure in the housing market, which makes the history of housing a study of the "housing problem" and the development of alternatives to the free market. The result has been to neglect the actual manner by which the bulk of housing was supplied, by what agencies and under what constraints, with what effects upon social relationships. It is instructive, therefore, to enquire how one occupational group, the miners, were provided with housing.

Such, then, is a justification for an analysis of housing in the South Wales and Great Northern coalfields. The fact of divergence between the two areas in this respect is conveniently demonstrated by statistics relating to 1913 which were collected by the Royal Commission on the Coal Industry of 1925. The coalfields may be divided into two groups: those with a higher and those with a lower proportion of company-owned houses than their proportion of colliery workmen. In the first group, the collieries were predominantly in previously undeveloped areas where the colliery companies might be expected, in the absence of other agencies of house provision, to play a significant role. But within this group, the method adopted in the North-East of England stands out, for the houses were predominantly rent-free: Northumberland and Durham contained 96.9 per cent of all free colliery houses in Britain in 1913. In the second group, coal mining tended to be interspersed with other industry so that an existing housing stock and alternative agencies were available. But South Wales is a notable exception, for areas such as the Rhondda valleys were remote and undeveloped until the rapid incursion of coal mining from the 1850's. So it is readily apparent that there were two different modes of financing hous-

<sup>2</sup> M. J. Daunton, "Down the pit. Work in the Great Northern and South Wales coalfields, 1880-1914", in: *Economic History Review*, forthcoming.

ing in South Wales and the North-East. In South Wales, the cost of housing was borne largely by the wage of the miners, who either bought their house, rented it on the open market, or paid a rent to the coal company. In the North-East of England, housing was largely provided from the funds of the companies, who either made houses available rent-free, or paid a rent allowance in their stead. Money wages reflected this divergence, being higher in South Wales than in the North-East — although in real terms it was a moot point who was better off. What, then, were the details of these diverging approaches to the provision of miners' housing? The next two sections outline the methods by which housing was supplied in the two coalfields.

*Colliery company housing, 1913*

	Workmen	Percentage of Great Britain total		
		Company free houses	Company rented houses	All company houses
<i>A) High proportion of company houses</i>				
Scotland	12.0	1.1	36.0	19.9
Cumberland	0.9	0.1	2.1	1.2
South Staffs., Shrops., Worcs.	0.4	—	1.1	0.6
Northumberland	5.9	23.4	0.1	10.9
Durham	17.1	73.5	0.4	34.2
<i>B) Low proportion of company houses</i>				
South Wales and Mon.	19.2	0.5	16.4	9.1
South Yorks.	9.5	0.3	14.3	7.8
West Yorks.	5.8	0.2	5.3	2.9
Notts. and Derbys.	9.2	0.2	12.4	6.8
Leics. and Warwicks.	2.6	0.1	2.1	1.2
Cannock Chase	2.2	0.1	1.4	0.8
North Staffs.	3.0	0.1	0.8	0.4
Lancs. and Cheshire	10.1	0.2	6.4	3.6
North Wales	1.2	—	0.5	0.3

Source: Royal Commission on the Coal Industry, 1925, Vol. III: Appendices and Index, Appendix 18, tables 13, 37. The information covered three-quarters of the industry by output.

I

The Monmouthshire and South Wales Coalowners' Association made a return of the housing of the employees of 163 companies to the Royal Commission on the Coal Industry of 1919, which showed that 23.3 per cent of the houses were owned or leased by colliery companies, 19.3 per cent by

colliery workmen, and the remaining 57.4 per cent by landlords.<sup>3</sup> But the relative significance of these types of ownership had varied over the coalfield, as was clearly indicated by H. S. Jevons.

In the western valleys of Glamorgan and also in Carmarthenshire a large portion of the houses were built to the order of the working men for their own occupation. Most of the building work is done by contract for one or two houses at a time (generally to the order of well-to-do miners) and speculative building is not extensively carried on. Only in a few places have building clubs been formed. In the valleys of East Glamorgan and in Monmouthshire, however, [the houses] have been erected mainly by speculative builders or by building clubs which are very numerous in this area.<sup>4</sup>

The level of owner occupation of houses varied, he thought, from about 5 per cent in Merthyr Tydfil to over 60 per cent in the Rhondda valley.<sup>5</sup> This was confirmed by the chairman of the MSWCA, who remarked:

I estimate that at least 60 per cent of the houses [in Tredegar] are owned by workmen, their widows and families. This equally applies to most of the mining districts in South Wales, and in the case of the Rhondda valleys, Carmarthenshire and the western portion of Glamorganshire, the percentage of houses owned by workmen I estimate to be in the neighbourhood of 70 per cent.<sup>6</sup>

Confirmation of these subjective impressions can be found in the analysis by P. N. Jones of a number of districts in Glamorgan. He studied the local-authority building-plans register and allocated each plan to one of four categories: colliery owners; building clubs; contract-built housing for owner occupation; and speculative builders or private investors. The first two categories are easily distinguished in the registers by name, but the final two are not. Dr Jones has assumed that contract building for owner occupation can be distinguished by plans containing three houses or less, and speculative or investment building by larger schemes. There are drawbacks with this procedure, for evidence from other areas suggests that speculative builders might also obtain only a few houses per plan.<sup>7</sup> The

<sup>3</sup> Royal Commission on the Coal Industry, 1918-19, Vol. III: Appendices and Index [Parliamentary Papers, 1919, XIII], Appendix 72, pp. 208-09.

<sup>4</sup> General Report on South Wales and Monmouthshire, H. S. Jevons Manuscripts IV 126 (first schedule), National Library of Wales, Aberystwyth.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, Merthyr and Cardiff files.

<sup>6</sup> Royal Commission on the Coal Industry, 1918-19, Vol. II: Minutes of Evidence [PP, 1919, XII], q. 25498.

<sup>7</sup> P. N. Jones, "Aspects of the population and settlement geography of the South Wales coalfield, 1850-1926" (Ph.D. Birmingham, 1965). The relevant information is on pp. 298-301. The material is presented graphically; Dr Jones has very kindly made available the statistics. P. J. Aspinall, *The Size Structure of the House-Building Industry in Victorian Sheffield* [Centre for Urban and Regional Studies, University of Birmingham,

figure for contract building is thus overestimated, and for speculative building underestimated. Nevertheless, his results on contract building for owner occupation do agree with Jevons. The highest level of contract building was in the anthracite district of West Glamorgan, where it was the most important single agency of house provision. Much more reliable are his findings relating to building clubs and colliery companies. The table presents the figures for Jones's study area during the decade 1900-09, with the addition of Merthyr Tydfil.

*Housing agencies in South Wales, 1900-09*

	% of house plans obtained by	
	Colliery companies	Building clubs
Neath Rural District, East	22.8	27.3
Neath Rural District, West	23.1	14.7
Glyncorrwg Urban District	8.4	25.2
Maesteg Urban District	1.1	16.5
Garw valley	2.0	19.0
Ogmore valley	—	3.6
Rhondda Fach valley	3.5	35.8
Rhondda Fawr valley	1.3	14.6
Llantrisant & Llantwit Fardre Rural District	—	31.0
Merthyr Tydfil County Borough	—	57.6

Source: Merthyr Tydfil from Richards, "Fluctuations" (cf. note 8), table XLVII, p. 266; other areas from Jones, "Aspects" (cf. note 7), pp. 298-301, and private communication from Dr Jones.

The contribution of building clubs was greatest in the Rhondda Fach valley, Merthyr Tydfil, and Llantrisant and Llantwit Fardre Rural District, accounting for between 31 and 57.6 per cent of the houses erected. Overall, building clubs provided about a quarter of the houses erected in Jones's study area. Their method of operation can be seen from the Garth Building Club of Merthyr Tydfil. The first meeting was held in February 1897, when the club was formed to build 17 houses. Although the building clubs have been called associations of potential owner occupiers,<sup>8</sup> at least in the Merthyr area they could also be used by potential landlords, for membership included an accountant, contractor, architect and grocer, as well as a signalman, weigher and carpenter.<sup>9</sup> Each member held a share, and from

Working Paper 49] (1977), shows that in Sheffield between 1865 and 1900, 50.2 per cent of builders obtained three houses or less per plan.

<sup>8</sup> J. H. Richards, "Fluctuations in house-building activity in the South Wales coalfield, 1815-1914" (M.A. Cardiff, 1956), p. 191.

<sup>9</sup> Rules of the Garth Building Club, Merthyr Tydfil, Glamorgan County Record Office, Cardiff, D/D Vau Box 4.

February 1897 to November 1899 paid a monthly subscription of £1 per share, plus £5 when the first money was due to the builder. The member was entitled to one house for each share held. The club borrowed from a bank on the security of the ground and the houses which were to be erected. In July 1897 tenders of £209 and £246 per house were accepted. When the houses reached the joists, lots were drawn to assign a house to each shareholder in September 1897. When the houses were finished, rents were fixed in September 1898 at 25/- and 30/- per month. These rents would then be paid until the whole of the capital was paid off, when the shareholder was assigned the lease to his house. The club itself was wound up before this stage, in November 1899, and a commission of 2½ per cent was paid to an agent to collect the rents. It would take about 13 years before the capital was fully repaid. The details varied — there might be as many as 50 members or the rents might be higher to shorten repayments —, but the general procedure was the same.<sup>10</sup>

The contribution of the colliery companies was certainly less: they provided under 10 per cent of the housing in Jones's study area. Their relative importance — like contract building for owner occupation — was greatest in the anthracite district of Neath, where the companies provided around 23 per cent of the houses erected between 1900 and 1909. In the other areas, the companies provided under 5 per cent of the houses erected; in Merthyr Tydfil, the Ogmore valley, and Llantrisant and Llantwit Fardre, none at all in this decade.<sup>11</sup>

It is often argued that the significance of the colliery companies had varied by time as well as by location, being of greater importance up to the 1870's and again after 1910, when building clubs, affected by rising costs, were "beginning to prove quite unsound from a financial point of view".<sup>12</sup> Any attempt to test the first part of this contention confronts a lack of evidence.<sup>13</sup> The re-entry of companies (if such it was) is noted by Jones in some areas after 1900, although the figures collected by J. H. Richards

<sup>10</sup> Glamorgan County Record Office, D/D Vau Box 4, Ra 14/48 and BJ/V/168-185 contain information on building clubs. South Wales Daily News, 17 June 1907, has an interview with the solicitor of 19 building clubs in Merthyr Tydfil. The clubs are discussed by H. S. Jevons, *The British Coal Trade* (1915), pp. 646-48, and Richards, "Fluctuations", *op. cit.*, pp. 191-97.

<sup>11</sup> Jones, "Aspects", *op. cit.*, pp. 298-301; Richards, "Fluctuations", tables XLVII-XLIX, pp. 266-68.

<sup>12</sup> Jevons, *British Coal Trade*, *op. cit.*, p. 648; Ministry of Health, *Report of the South Wales Regional Survey* (1920); Jevons Manuscripts IV 126 (first schedule), Rhondda file; Royal Commission on the Coal Industry, 1918-19, Vol. II, qq. 25500-02.

<sup>13</sup> Few building registers survive before 1880, but see Select Committee on Coal [PP, 1873, X], q. 1563, which stated that "owners as a rule have never found houses".

*Housing agencies in Merthyr Tydfil, Rhondda  
and Llantrisant and Llantwit Fardre*

	House plans obtained by			
	Building clubs		Colliery companies	
	No	%	No	%
<i>Merthyr Tydfil</i>				
1856-69	243	18.7	20	1.5
1870-79	165	22.2	249	33.6
1880-89	289	27.0	72	6.7
1890-99	1,060	37.0	—	—
1900-09	2,413	57.6	—	—
1910-14	981	72.0	—	—
<i>Rhondda valleys</i>				
1889-99	1,583	22.8	241	3.5
1900-11	1,539	18.4	162	1.9
<i>Llantrisant and Llantwit Fardre</i>				
1891-99	2	0.4	—	—
1900-09	481	43.8	—	—
1910-14	225	19.2	200	17.0

Source: Richards, "Fluctuations", tables XLVII-XLIX, pp. 266-68.

would limit it specifically to 1914.<sup>14</sup> The variation over time may best be seen in the series provided by Richards for three areas: Merthyr Tydfil 1856 to 1914, the Rhondda valleys 1889 to 1911, and Llantrisant and Llantwit Fardre 1891 to 1914. The colliery companies played no role in Merthyr Tydfil from 1856 to 1868; they provided housing spasmodically from 1869 to 1885 and then disappeared completely, not re-emerging before the First World War. Building clubs had provided some housing between 1856 and 1860, but were inactive for the rest of the 1860's, excepting 1867. In the 1870's, their contribution was limited to three years, in the 1880's to five years. It was from 1889 that they had a continuous role, and they increased their contribution to housing in the area right up to the First World War without any sign of a break. In the Rhondda, the colliery companies had supplied some housing from 1890 to 1903, and had then disappeared; the contribution of the building clubs had also declined, leaving 79.7 per cent of housing to other agencies between 1900 and 1911, predominantly speculative builders. In Llantrisant and Llantwit Fardre the proportion of houses erected by colliery companies did increase to 17 per cent in the period 1910-14, but this had come entirely in the one year of 1914. The significance of 1910 as a watershed may be doubted, for in 1912 the building clubs obtained 41 per cent of total plans in this area. Building clubs certainly collapsed *after* the war; the significant point about the

<sup>14</sup> Richards, "Fluctuations", pp. 201-02 and table LXX, p. 292.

pre-war period was that there had been a cycle of building-club activity. The clubs tended to increase their share of plans at times of boom and to decrease their share at times of low activity in the building cycle.

The houses supplied by the colliery companies in South Wales were let at close to market rents. The general level of rents of company-owned houses in South Wales was slightly higher than in the rest of the country. In comparison with other houses in South Wales, the rents of colliery houses were in the lower categories, though this was mainly because company houses were smaller and cheaper than the average, rather than that the companies were charging appreciably less than market rents. When the Glamorgan Coal Company sold off a large number of its houses in the Rhondda in 1908, the rents were 16/- to 17/- per month for houses fetching around £80. The more usual price for a house of the same age was £180, with a rent of 26/- per month, which does suggest that the company had been obtaining a market rate of return.<sup>15</sup>

*Rentals of company-owned houses, 1913*

Rent per week	South Wales	Rest of England and Wales	Rest of Britain
Under 4/-	21.8%	30.7%	53.0%
4/- to 7/-	73.8%	66.5%	45.3%
Above 7/-	4.3%	2.8%	1.7%

Source: Royal Commission on the Coal Industry, 1925, Vol. III, Appendix 18, table 37, p. 247.

Clearly the problem has become more complicated than the original specification of a general contrast between the two coalfields. For there was a marked variation within South Wales, and it will become apparent that the same applies to the North-East. Nevertheless, whatever the variation within the two areas, it cannot be contained within a single continuum covering both coalfields. South Wales did not have free company houses; those houses built by the companies made a close-to-market return. The North-East had no equivalent to the building clubs which were so important in parts of South Wales.<sup>16</sup> It is true that the speculative

<sup>15</sup> Western Mail Record of Property Sales for 1908.

<sup>16</sup> Co-operative societies did provide some houses and mortgages, but on a very small scale. E. Lloyd, *History of the Crook and Neighbourhood Co-operative Corn Mill, Flour and Provision Society Ltd., 1865-1915* (1915), pp. 191-94; A. B. Ross, *Jubilee History of Pittington Amicable Industrial Society Ltd., 1874-1924* (1924), pp. 22, 73, 80-81; J. W. White and R. Simpson, *Jubilee History of West Stanley Co-operative Society Ltd., 1876-1926* (1926), pp. 68-72, 224; T. Ross and A. Stoddart, *Jubilee History of Annfield Plain Industrial Co-operative Society Ltd., 1870-1920* (1921), pp. 92-93; W. Simpson, *A Short History of the Cramlington District Co-operative Society Ltd., 1861-1911* (1911),



builder and landlord were found in both areas, but the system of rent allowances to the tenants was peculiar to the North-East. The variations within the two areas took place within two different systems. What exactly was this system in the North-East?

## II

The investment by colliery companies in housing in the Great Northern coalfield was substantial. By 1914, there were 48,791 company houses in County Durham and 15,465 in Northumberland, accommodating respectively 261,703 and 82,376 people. In ten years since 1904, £1,713,498 had been spent on new houses in Durham and £377,294 in Northumberland. In addition, £339,270 was spent on improving old houses in Durham and £139,505 in Northumberland. For this, since no rent was charged, the colliery companies received no direct financial return. The colliery companies had, to give some idea of the scale of their role in the housing market, built a town substantially larger than Newcastle, which had a population of 266,603 in 1911. The provision of housing was clearly not a peripheral, slight additional cost for the colliery concerns, but a matter of central significance.<sup>17</sup>

*Underground and aboveground workers in Durham and Northumberland receiving a free house or rent allowance*

	1894		1896		1912	
	No	%	No	%	No	%
<i>Durham</i>						
House	33,226	41.3	32,372	38.6	39,103	29.3
Rent	7,160	8.9	8,685	10.4	30,341	22.8
Neither	40,009	49.8	42,794	51.0	63,800	47.9
<i>Total</i>	80,395	100.0	83,851	100.0	133,244	100.0
			1900		1911	
			No	%	No	%
<i>Northumberland</i>						
House			10,485	33.5	14,573	27.1
Rent			6,642	21.2	13,082	24.3
Neither			14,214	45.3	26,116	48.6
<i>Total</i>			31,341	100.0	53,771	100.0

Source: DCRO, NCB 1/CO/86 348, 366, 642; NCRO, NCB/C 189, 293-94.

pp. 168-72; T. Readshaw, *History of the Bishop Auckland Industrial Co-operative Flour and Provision Society Ltd., 1860-1910* (1910), pp. 193-215.

<sup>17</sup> Return to Durham and Northumberland Coal Owners' Associations of houses owned or leased by colliery companies, May 1919, Durham County Record Office, Durham (hereafter DCRO), NCB 1/CO/86 778; Return for Coal Industry Commission, Northumberland County Record Office, Newcastle (hereafter NCRO), NCB/C 366; Census of England and Wales, 1911.

Of course, the role of the companies in providing housing in the North-East was not static as is suggested by the “snapshot” of 1913, any more than it was in South Wales. There was a wide variation by time and area. As a starting point, the undifferentiated aggregate of colliery workmen – above and below ground, single and married, for all areas within each county – is presented in the table. The proportion of workmen receiving no assistance remained more or less constant, at just under a half of all workers, or, if boys were excluded, about a third of adult workers. What did change was the type of assistance provided; in Durham between 1894 and 1912 the proportion receiving rent allowances rose by 13.9 per cent, while the proportion provided with houses fell by 12 per cent.

*Proportion of each class of workmen in Durham  
receiving a free house or rent allowance, 1894-1913*

		1894	1896	1912-13
<i>Married</i>				
Underground	House	78.1	73.8	51.9
	Rent	17.2	20.8	45.4
	Neither	4.6	5.4	2.6
	<i>Total</i>	100.0	100.0	100.0
Aboveground	House	45.6	43.7	40.9
	Rent	9.2	9.5	23.8
	Neither	45.2	46.8	35.3
	<i>Total</i>	100.0	100.0	100.0
<i>Single</i>				
Underground	House	2.2	2.5	1.1
	Rent	0.2	0.1	0.6
	Neither	97.5	97.4	98.3
	<i>Total</i>	100.0	100.0	100.0
Aboveground	House	1.9	1.3	0.5
	Rent	0.4	0.4	0.1
	Neither	97.7	98.3	99.4
	<i>Total</i>	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: DCRO, NCB 1/CO/86 348, 366, 642, 668.

The statistics can unfortunately be disaggregated only for Durham. This can be done initially by the class of workmen. One trend was that married underground workers were becoming less likely to have a free house and more likely to receive a rent allowance: in the 1890's, about three quarters were in receipt of a free house; by 1913 this had fallen to just over a half. In 1894, the ratio between married underground workers receiving a house and those receiving rent had been 1 to 4.5, but in 1913 it was 1 to 1.1. The second trend was that whilst the proportion of aboveground married workers receiving a free house had declined slightly, there was a greater

increase in the proportion receiving a rent allowance, so that fewer aboveground workers were without any assistance. These two trends taken together explain the increase in the aggregate proportion of workers receiving a rent allowance by a combination of married underground workers switching from free houses, and a net gain by married aboveground workers who had previously received nothing. So far as the single workers are concerned, their position was virtually unchanged. The great majority received no help of any kind, and were mostly housed by their parents if in their home village, or as lodgers if they were migrants. Indeed, each free house accommodated about two workmen. The figures for Craghead and Holmside collieries show that in 1892, 280 company houses provided accommodation for 639 workmen, or 2.3 per house; of these 503 were family members and 136 lodgers.<sup>18</sup> This pattern should be linked with the career structure of the Durham coalfield. Boys would enter the pit as haulage workers – the drivers and putters – and would expect to become face-workers or hewers at about the age of 21. Haulage workers had no entitlement to a free house or rent allowance, and neither did single men of *any* class. It would, of course, be rare for any haulage worker to be married; in 1896 the proportion was only 2.7 per cent. Thus around the age

*Married underground workers in Durham receiving free houses  
in 1894 and 1913*

Percentage receiving free house	Number of collieries	
	1894	1913
Under 10	2	12
10-19.9	3	7
20-29.9	2	12
30-39.9	1	22
40-49.9	1	21
50-59.9	6	26
60-69.9	12	18
70-79.9	21	27
80-89.9	37	12
90 and above	40	14
Not available	1	—
Total	126	171

Source: DCRO, NCB 1/CO/86 347, 667.

<sup>18</sup> Durham Coal Owners' Association (hereafter DCOA), Summary of returns re houses and house rent, October 1894, and Returns as to houses or rents and coals (underground workmen only), August 1913, DCRO, NCB 1/CO/86 348, 668; Viewer's Reports for Thomas Hedley Bros., *ibid.*, 3/62.

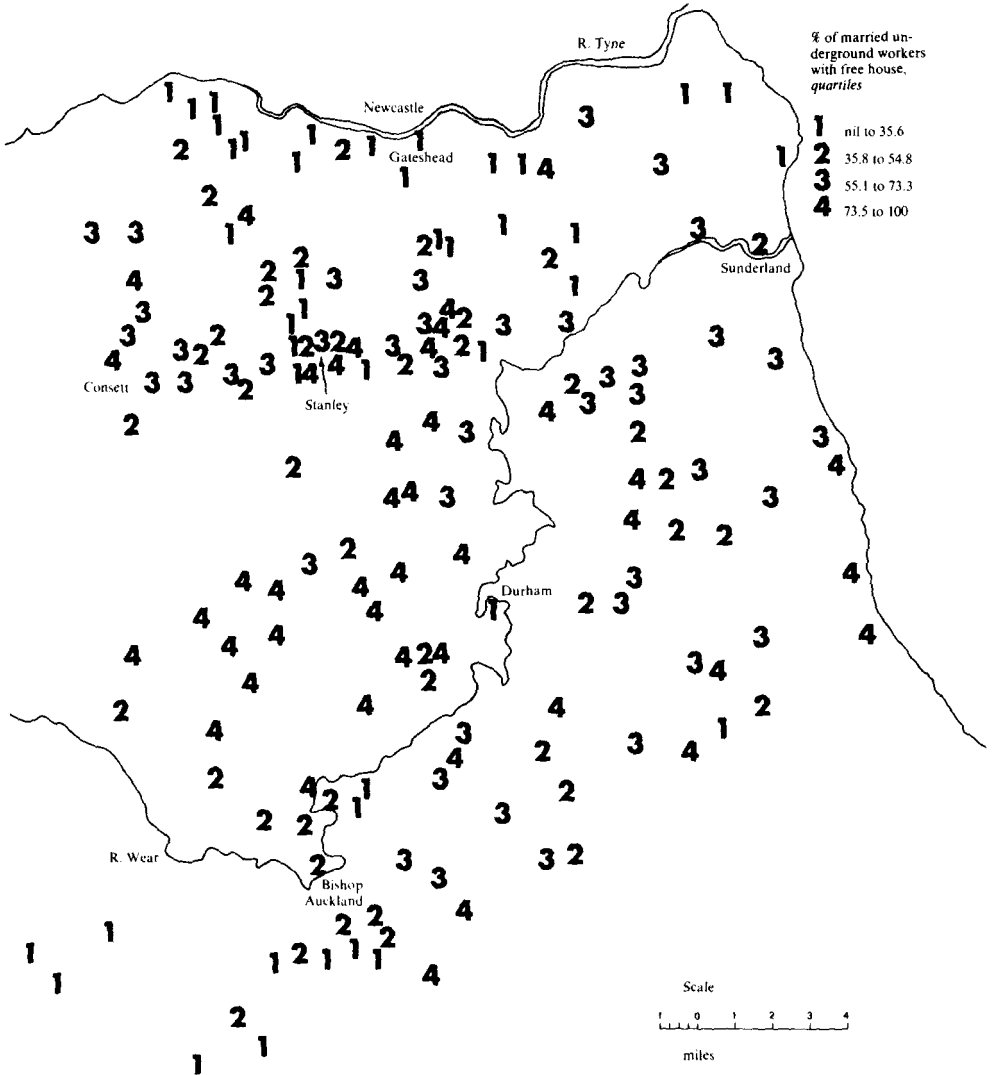
of 21 a pit-lad would attain his highest status at work, becoming a fully-fledged hewer with all that entailed; but only in the next few years when he married would he gain entitlement to a free house or rent allowance and become a fully-fledged member of the community.<sup>19</sup>

The figures for Durham can also be analysed by individual collieries and their location. The contribution of some collieries in Durham to housing their workers was as low as some areas of South Wales – Redheugh colliery in 1913 had none of its married underground workers in company housing. But at the other extreme, Fallowsby and Wardley colliery in 1913 had 99.5 per cent of its married underground workers in free houses.<sup>20</sup> The aggregate figures therefore hide a wide range of experience, as the distribution of collieries by their degree of involvement in housing provision in 1894 and 1913 clearly indicates.

The collieries may be allocated to four ranges of house provision as shown in the map. The collieries with the *lowest* proportion of married underground workers receiving a free house (quartile 1) cluster in two areas. One was along the Tyne where the pits were part of the industrial conurbation. The collieries were close to or interspersed with the towns which stretched along the South bank of the Tyne. The collieries were quite large, but their workers did not need company housing in an area where there was an existing housing stock and building industry. For example, Redheugh colliery in Gateshead had 674 married underground workers, none of whom had a free house; St Hilda colliery in South Shields employed 992 married underground workers, of whom only 32 had free houses. (It must be said, however, that Wardley colliery was at the other extreme and in this area.) The other area of low company involvement was south of Bishop Auckland. Some of the pits were in remote and sparsely populated areas, but were small and needed no sudden massive influxes of workers which required a company initiative: Langleydale had only 21 married underground workers, Crake Scarr 16. The pits south of Bishop Auckland were larger – Shildon Lodge 473, West Auckland 279 –, but were in established centres which were not entirely dependent upon mining and where miners could presumably be housed through available channels. Less explicable are the two most southerly pits of Randolph and Gordon House, which were large (449 and 355 married underground workers respectively), in remote areas, and yet had a low level of company housing. There do not seem to have been any associated pit villages, so that it can only be assumed that the workers travelled from the nearest large

<sup>19</sup> See below, p. 159; Daunton, "Down the pit", loc. cit.; DCOA, Houses and house rent, November 1896, DCRO, NCB 1/CO/86 366.

<sup>20</sup> Returns as to houses or rents and coals, August 1913, DCRO, NCB 1/CO/86 667.



*Colliery housing in Durham, 1913*

Source: DCRO, NCB 1/CO/86 667; for locations, see B. Dowding, "Durham Mines. Names and Dates of Coal Workings in County Durham" (1972, typescript in University Library, Durham), and W. A. Moyes, *Contracting Coalfield* (1971).

centres of Bishop Auckland and Shildon. Obviously, these pits would have railway connections which would make commuting possible.

The most concentrated area of *high* company provision of housing (quartile 4) was south of Stanley and west of Durham City. This was a sparsely populated area of high land, with settlement in small dispersed villages. The pits were middling to large in size – 380 married underground workers at Bearpark, 240 at Cornsay, 253 at Hamsteels, 598 at Brandon, 675 at Brancepeth – and the strain placed upon housing in the absence of any other agency meant that there was no option but company provision. The area immediately to the north, but south of the Tyneside conurbation, exhibited a mixed pattern. In part it was like the area just described, of dispersed settlement on sparsely populated high ground, but there were also some larger settlements with clusters of pits – Stanley, Chester-le-Street, Birtley – where company housing was less apparent.

The final area is the district south and east of the river Wear. The pattern here is confusing, for there was a fairly even spread between quartiles 2, 3 and 4. A number of factors were at work. The opening of large new pits on the concealed coalfield near the coast in previously unsettled areas forced company initiative in providing housing: Dawdon with 751 married underground workers, Horden with 1,102 and Easington with 539 had respectively 83.0, 95.1 and 96.1 per cent in free houses. This contrasts with 9.4 per cent of the 1,205 married underground workers at the similar pit at Whitburn to the north, which was close to the Tyneside conurbation. The inland area was of a mixed character: pits were both dispersed across sparsely populated high ground and clustered around the larger villages of Ferryhill, Houghton-le-Spring and Hetton-le-Hole. Further, the two largest owners in this section of the coalfield had been the Marquis of Londonderry and the Earl of Durham, who might have a paternalistic attitude to housing.

*Rent allowed and paid, Durham Miners' Association lodges, 1903*

Differential between rent and allowance	Number of lodges
1/- and under	8
1/3¼d to 1/6d	26
1/6¼d to 2/-	39
2/¼d to 2/6d	43
2/6¼d to 3/-	18
3/¼d to 3/6d	8
3/6¼d to 4/-	4
	<hr/> 146

Source: DCRO, NCB 1/CO/86 512.

The obverse of the level of free houses was the payment of rent allowances in lieu. The rent allowance paid in Durham was substantially less than the market rent of a house. In 1906, most allowances were in a range of 2/- to 2/9d, with a mean of 2/4d.<sup>21</sup> In 1903 the Durham Miners' Association carried out a survey of allowances received and rents actually paid. The differentials varied between extremes of 6d and 3/11d per week, but in something over half of the lodges was between 1/6d and 2/6d per week. Quite clearly it was in the interests of the workmen to take a free house in preference to the rent allowance, if only the colliery companies would make the house available – which they were increasingly disinclined to do.

### III

The pattern of housing provision in the two coalfields has been outlined, and it would appear that an explanation must now be found to cover two sets of variation: between the two areas on the aggregate level of distinctive systems, and also within each area and system. It could be argued that in order to do this, a highly particularistic approach is required, such is the range of variation in individual circumstances.<sup>22</sup> The relevant factors might then be, for example, the availability of capital to each company, whether the agent or owner had a more sophisticated approach to industrial relations or to the benefits of increased expenditure on social provision upon production – and so on in a detailed analysis of what determined action in each case. Such factors certainly did exist, but there were also more general considerations which created limits within which individuals had to operate. The suggestion is that both the variations within and between the two areas may in broad terms be explained by an economic assessment of fixed and variable costs, but starting in the North-East from a presupposition in favour of, and in South Wales against, fixed costs.

One explanation which should be initially discussed and treated with scepticism is the frequently encountered view that company housing was an agency of social control. Songs and stories about the “candyman”, the evictions during the strikes of 1832, 1844 and 1865, certainly suggest that company housing was a major weapon for coal-owners dealing with militancy in the first part of the nineteenth century.<sup>23</sup> As late as 1871 there

<sup>21</sup> DCOA and DMA, Joint return as to houses and rent, June 1906, DCRO, NCB 1/CO/86 551. See also Royal Commission on the Coal Industry, 1925, Vol. III, p. 249.

<sup>22</sup> I owe this suggestion to Professor Norman McCord.

<sup>23</sup> See R. Fynes, *The Miners of Northumberland and Durham* (1873), and E. Welbourne, *The Miners' Union of Northumberland and Durham* (1923).

is evidence of such attitudes surviving. The Throckley Coal Company threatened “that in consequence of the immeasurable demands of the men [. . .] we are determined at the end of this notice to take possession of their houses”, unless terms were accepted.<sup>24</sup> But this is far from being a complete explanation. Why should it be *free* housing, and why should rent allowances be paid? Did the miners in South Wales not need to be controlled? And how does it explain the variation within Durham? Eviction might be a useful weapon during a strike, but this was just as possible where a rent was charged. Indeed, in South Wales it was found that ownership by the miners and landlords had something to recommend it. Those who lived in company houses had little to tie them to an area, whereas those who were buying a house were tied and immobile, creating a more stable workforce. Further, as the Ocean Coal Company commented in 1885, “A colliery company has much to gain by encouraging the public to build largely in its vicinity so as to secure their keep and support in any conflict they may be involved in with their workmen.”<sup>25</sup> Simply because a particular institution was used for a certain end does not prove it was *created* for that purpose. The owners merely used what was to hand to maintain their position when it was threatened; what remains at issue is the factors determining the nature of what was available in the first instance.

There is, in any case, little doubt that, on the whole, the workers had a much firmer commitment to the continuation of the free-house system than, generally speaking, did the owners. Both the Durham and the Northumberland Miners’ Associations concentrated upon maintaining rather than challenging the *status quo*, the former with more success than the latter. In Northumberland at least there was no doubt of the desire of the owners’ association to terminate the existing system. As a first stage in the analysis, the negotiations between the associations of owners and miners will be outlined in order to suggest how the system was viewed by the participants.

The ambition of the DMA was to institutionalise and formalise the terms on which the free house was granted.<sup>26</sup> A definite agreement between the DMA and the DCOA was finally reached by the Conciliation Board in 1900. Previously men had to rely upon precedent and custom in making a claim for a house or rent allowance which would, if necessary, be settled by

<sup>24</sup> I am grateful to Bill Williamson for drawing my attention to this reference in NCRO 407/2, pp. 253–54.

<sup>25</sup> Quoted by Jones, “Aspects”, pp. 295–96, from Llandinam Documents Section E, 297, National Library of Wales.

<sup>26</sup> J. H. Wilson, *A history of the Durham Miners’ Association 1870–1904* (1907), pp. 307–09; G. H. Metcalfe, “A History of the Durham Miners’ Association 1869–1915” (1947, typescript in University Library, Durham), pp. 185–93.



the Joint Committee of the two organisations. But the agreement of 5 November 1900 brought in a more definite state of affairs by resolving

1. That married workmen of the following classes, and widowers of the same classes having families, shall be allowed free houses or the customary allowance for rent in lieu thereof:

UNDERGROUND	Deputies	Rolleywaymen
	Hewers	Horsekeepers
	Stonemen	Shotfirers
	Shaftsmen	Wastemen
	Timber Drawers	Shifters
	Onsetters	
ABOVEGROUND	Banksmen	

2. That no married persons or other classes than those named above shall be entitled to free houses or allowances for rent unless in the case of any individual colliery it is proved to have been the custom at the 1st of June, 1900, to allow free houses or allowance for rent to a majority of the married workmen of any such class or classes, in which case the custom at that colliery as regards such class or classes shall continue in operation.

3. That no unmarried person of any class shall be entitled to receive free house or allowance for rent unless it is proved in the case of any individual colliery that it was the custom at the 1st of June, 1900, to provide a majority of the unmarried householders of such class with house or allowance for rent, in which case the custom at that colliery shall continue in operation.

[. . .]

5. That no rent allowance be granted to any person who is offered a colliery house and refuses to accept it.<sup>27</sup>

There was still room for doubt here on how to determine “the customary allowance of rent”; in 1901 it was ruled that

The allowance for rent in lieu of a house which will be the “customary allowance” at any particular colliery, will be that allowance or scale of allowances which has hitherto been paid to any particular class or to the several classes in or about the place where the houses are supplied free are situated — the said allowance or scale, if not already in operation at that particular colliery, to be ascertained by reference to the allowance or allowances in force at the collieries immediately around.<sup>28</sup>

The system laid down in 1900-01 continued in operation until the First World War, with the addition of another class of underground workers in 1904.<sup>29</sup> The agreement helps to explain the major trends noted earlier for Durham. The definite obligation to provide a house or rent allowance most benefitted married aboveground workers: the increase in the proportion in

<sup>27</sup> Durham Miners' Association, *Acts of Parliament, County and National Agreements*, revised ed. (1930), pp. 74-75.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 76.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 77.

receipt of a rent allowance is very apparent between 1896 and 1912. At the same time, the agreement permitted the owners to switch from providing a house to paying a rent allowance with complete freedom. Clearly, after 1900 more companies were opting to pay the customary allowance than to erect houses, as is apparent in the decline in the proportion of married underground workers in receipt of a free house between 1896 and 1912. It was, in other words, a choice between fixed and variable costs, with the owners increasingly opting for the variable cost of the rent allowance. For the miners, however, the free company house had a higher real value than the rent paid in lieu, and their general preference was at odds with the owners. In Northumberland, this was even more the case, for there the owners were pressing to go further: they did not wish simply to switch from free houses to rent allowances, but rather to end the system completely and come into line with the practice of coalfields elsewhere in the country, including South Wales.

No such definite agreement as that of 1900 in Durham was achieved in Northumberland, where the granting of houses and rent remained a matter of custom – a custom which the owners were eager to repudiate. When the Joint Committee of the Coalowners' Association and the NMA was set up in 1873, one of its tasks was to determine who should be granted houses and rent, on a piecemeal basis relying on custom and precedent.<sup>30</sup> By the mid 1870's, however, the owners were no longer prepared to accept the practice. In 1876, when presenting their case for a 20-percent reduction, the owners complained that the cost of supplying 8,000 free houses at a capital cost of £1,000,000 was a serious disadvantage in competing with other coalfields; wages, they believed, should in consequence be reduced. The miners could argue that free houses had been just as much the custom in 1871 which provided the agreed basis for determining wages:

the condition now has been a permanent condition always; [. . .] that settled the relationship in wages as between the employer and his workmen. If there was a general settlement upon that basis over a long series of years, and that was a permanent settlement, should that be brought in as a single element to affect a special case when a claim is made? I say that the justice of the case would have settled itself over a series of years – 100 or 150 years – if that was your relationship. Now, you want a reduction at this moment, [. . .] and you bring it in as a special cause why wages should be reduced, and I do not think that is right.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>30</sup> Steam Collieries' Defence Association, *Wages and Trade Customs*, 1873 (1874), p. 108; Northumberland Coal Owners' Association, *Proceedings of the Joint Committee from its formation to October 1897*, NCRO, NCB/C 5/1, 1/1.

<sup>31</sup> Northumberland Coal Trade Arbitration, September 1876, pp. 9-10, 20, 57-60, 94, NCRO, NCB/C 1/125.

The free-house system was indeed excluded from consideration by the Umpire. But if the owners were using the free-house system in 1876 in justification of a wage reduction, in 1877 they wanted to end the system entirely. Once again, the union "strongly refused to entertain the question of considering the house and coal".<sup>32</sup>

The owners in fact seem to have stopped paying rent allowances where they could, and denied the existence of the agreement of 1873. By the early 1880's this had become one of the major issues between the two associations. The figures given earlier certainly indicate that the Northumberland owners had moved towards rent allowances earlier than the Durham owners, and probably this was seen as a stage towards abandoning the whole system. When in 1881 the NMA complained of the obvious inequalities created between those in company houses and in rented houses, between those with and those without an allowance,<sup>33</sup> the owners took the line

that they had far more men than they needed, and that men were continually applying for work, and were offering themselves if they would only give them work, to find their own houses and fire coal, and contended that under these circumstances they could not be expected to pay the men rent.<sup>34</sup>

The owners could easily respond to complaints of inequalities that

They were willing to make all alike, and they fully recognised the fact that until this was done there would be dissatisfaction. The house and coal had a money value; this could be ascertained, and the men who have these privileges could be paid for giving them up, and then all could pay rent in future.<sup>35</sup>

The owners' association refused any general agreement with the NMA on rent, "but has no objection to consider any reasonable scheme for doing away with the custom of Free Houses and Coals and substituting for it an equivalent general wage."<sup>36</sup>

What the owners would accept failing anything else was a link between coal prices and the level of rent allowances.<sup>37</sup> This suggests the issue at stake. Wages as a whole were determined by a sliding scale against coal prices (whether formally or informally), and were paid on a piece rate. In a period of depression, men would have a lower piece rate and would also be

<sup>32</sup> Northumberland Coal Trade Arbitration, July 1877, pp. 4, 8, NCRO, NCB/C 1/126.

<sup>33</sup> Minutes of NMA, Committee meeting 26 May 1881, NCRO 759/68.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, circular on house-rent and fire question, March 1881.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, circular of 2 January 1882.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, circular of 9 January.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, delegate meetings of 2 April 1881, 20-22 May 1882; circulars of 7 June 1881, 10 and 26 July 1882.

working fewer hours; the real value of a free house or a rent allowance as a proportion of total income was then increased. But the owners were loath to accept such a system which made the total wage bill less flexible. This was particularly resented when it was realised that unemployed miners would accept work on any terms. The end of the free-house and rent-allowance system would make it easier for the owners to vary their total wage bill; but for the men, it would remove an element of security in bad times. Unemployed miners in a free house retained that privilege when laid off; unemployed miners without a free house lost everything. Not surprisingly, in 1887 and in 1890-01 the NMA again sought an agreed rent allowance. Again, the owners countered that “the only possible way of establishing absolute equality [. . .] was that the present houses should be valued and the amount placed on present prices, and the householders to pay rent for colliery houses.” It was, after all, “the system in operation in every mining district in the country, with the exception of these two Counties”. The union was unimpressed, taking the view that the proposal “instead of improving matters would make them much worse, and that if they attempted to enforce such a change it would inevitably, in their opinion, lead to a general strike.” The same suggestion and response were repeated in 1905. Indeed, as one commentator saw in 1907, the men “not only look upon the ‘free’ house as an ‘inalienable right’ which has descended to them through centuries of practice, but they realise that, whatever the disadvantages of the system may be from their point of view, the advantages of having a rent-free house when no wages are being earned [. . .] are too solid to be lightly given up”.<sup>38</sup>

Housing, then, was not viewed by either side as a possible agency for social control; rather, it was seen to confer greater security upon the miners, at a cost resented by the owners. A miners’ delegate might claim in 1908 that “the present system is contrary to the spirit of the age – it is against housing reform”, or another in 1913 that “the colliery house system was a remnant of the old ‘bond’ and was a form of slavery”.<sup>39</sup> But their motions were defeated, on the grounds that if the owners were eager to end the system then it was clearly “not for our benefit”; that an increased wage

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, rent-committee meetings 27 July and 10 August 1886, special delegate meeting 18 September 1886 and 5 January 1887, delegate meetings 16 August 1890 and 22 August 1891, circular of 4 October 1890; L. W. Darra Mair, Report to the Local Government Board on the Sanitary Circumstances of the Whickham Urban District, with Special Reference to its Housing Accommodation Generally, and to Certain Back-to-Back Houses at Marley Hill in particular [Reports of Medical Inspectors of the Local Government Board, 262] (1907), p. 12.

<sup>39</sup> NMA, Council minutes 1907-09, 23 November 1908, and Council minutes 1911-15, 19-20 May and 15 November 1913, NCRO 759/27, 28.

instead of a house was of little value if “in bad times we would lose any equivalent we might get”; and that while evictions had occurred during strikes in the past, they would be worse off if all houses were rented, for owners would be able to demand arrears. “Regarding independence”, said one delegate, “he knew of men who had been the greatest agitators yet in a colliery house all their lives and not interfered with by the owners.”<sup>40</sup> It could indeed be said that the free-house system was less a means of owners imposing social control on the miners, than a means by which the miners derived a greater opportunity cost from the owners.

The hostility of the owners in Northumberland to the whole housing system, and the switch within Durham from houses to rent allowances, depended largely upon a relative assessment of fixed against variable costs. The adjustment between the two was of great significance, for housing was a large proportion of fixed costs, and wages of variable costs. The increased fixed capital cost involved in providing housing may be illustrated by three examples from Northumberland. In 1867 the Throckley Coal Company planned a development which “is estimated will not cost less than from £18,000 to £20,000 (exclusive of the cottages which will cost £8,000)”.<sup>41</sup> Again, in 1897 a scheme to increase the output of Woodhorn colliery would cost £37,350 for additional land and 350 houses, whereas the additional investment in the colliery would be £10,800.<sup>42</sup> And a valuation of Pegswood colliery in 1909 showed a total investment of £71,040, of which £40,100 or 56.4 per cent was accounted for by 448 houses.<sup>43</sup> Clearly, the companies could save substantial amounts of capital by dropping their housing responsibility, but would have to increase their variable costs of rent allowances or wages.

Essentially, owners in both counties were aiming to reduce their fixed costs of free company housing, and to increase instead their variable costs, by paying rent allowances or, if possible, higher wages instead of both free houses and rent allowances. In South Wales, where companies did not normally provide housing, a higher money wage was paid; if housing were provided, then a deduction was made from the wage in the form of a close-to-market rent. This was the reverse of the North-Eastern pattern of paying a lower money wage and supplementing it when a house was not provided free of charge. This is merely to say that in one coalfield the owners were starting from the presupposition that housing *would* be

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Copy of letter sent to C. J. Grey, 23 February 1867, *ibid.*, 407/2, p. 8. My thanks are due to Bill Williamson for this reference.

<sup>42</sup> Estimated cost to equip Woodhorn colliery, September 1897, NCRO, NCB/AS 78.

<sup>43</sup> Valuation of Pegswood colliery, *ibid.*, 66, 68-71.

supplied, and in the other from the presupposition that housing would *not* be provided. So one question is: what determined the starting-point from which the assessment of fixed against variable costs could commence? The further question is: why did owners in the North-East wish to reverse the existing system and move away from fixed and towards variable costs?

The answer to the first question – what determined the initial presupposition? – is of course the age of the Great Northern coalfield and the youth of the South Wales coalfield. The Great Northern coalfield was the oldest major coalfield in the country, with a virtual monopoly of the major market for coal in London until the 1840's. The rapid development of the South Wales coalfield only really dates from the 1850's.<sup>44</sup> This had important consequences for establishing the presupposition of the proper role of the owners in providing houses. In the early days of mining it was usual to apply the same terms to miners as to agricultural workers, namely a yearly hiring or binding, and a tied cottage. In Northumberland and Durham in the eighteenth century the yearly bond was the usual form of engagement; it persisted in Northumberland until 1844, and lingered in Durham until 1872.<sup>45</sup> The Northern coalfield, and especially Durham, was the most developed under the old régime of “agricultural” terms of employment, in which the free house or tied cottage was an integral part. “All other coal centres are relatively of very modern development [. . .]. That is to say, in all these other coal centres, there is the usual relationship between landlord and tenant, and house rent is payable by the miner, even though his employer be, as is often the case, the owner of the house too. It is a separate transaction altogether.”<sup>46</sup> The owners might prefer housing to become “a separate transaction altogether”, but removing it from the wage bargain was difficult. As the miners argued in Northumberland in 1876, the existence of the free house had established wage relationships over a long period, and it was difficult to create a new basis. In South Wales the problem did not exist. The free house was in many ways a historical hang-over which owners in other areas, starting without any prior assumption that housing should be free, were not likely to adopt. It was

<sup>44</sup> J. U. Nef, *The Rise of the British Coal Industry* (2 vols; 1932); P. Sweezy, *Monopoly and Competition in the English Coal Trade 1550-1850* (1938); J. H. Morris and L. J. Williams, *The South Wales Coal Industry 1841-75* (1958).

<sup>45</sup> E. Hughes, *North Country Life in the Eighteenth Century. The North-East 1700-1750* (1952), p. 257; T. S. Ashton and J. Sykes, *The Coal Industry of the Eighteenth Century* (1929), ch. 6; H. Scott, “The miners’ bond in Northumberland and Durham”, in: *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Newcastle-upon-Tyne, Fourth Series*, XI (1946-50); P. E. H. Hair, “The binding of the pitmen of the North-East, 1800-9”, in: *Durham University Journal*, LVIII (1965).

<sup>46</sup> Darra Mair, Report, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

simply an anachronism. This was particularly so given the type of companies in the two areas. In Durham, the large aristocratic landowners – Ravensworth, Londonderry, Durham – continued for longer to play a direct role in the industry as producers, whereas in South Wales comparable families such as Bute, Plymouth and Tredegar took the royalties and left the mining to others. Apart from the iron companies which moved into the coal trade, the South Wales firms were in the early days small. Their limited capital was required for the rapid development of the coalfield, and they were loath to provide housing, free or otherwise. They were not, like their peers in the North-East, caught by an expectation which had become entangled in the whole system of labour relations.

The second question to ask is why the owners in the North-East wished to change the presupposition, to switch from fixed to variable costs. The answer, of course, is that the former were becoming more burdensome than the latter, though a simple economic choice could often be hindered by other factors. The suggestion was made in 1907 that rent allowances emerged during the boom of the early 1870's, when the workforce outstripped the housing supply. "It was fixed in each place at a sum which at that time, more than 30 years ago, represented approximately the market value of the houses which had to be rented. The sum then so fixed in the different districts has, speaking generally, remained the same to the present day".<sup>47</sup> By 1906 the mean rent allowance in Durham of 2/4d per week was considerably lower than the market rent of a house. A colliery company erecting a house would of course expect, if it was judging its expenditure in economic terms, to earn a market rate of return. Accordingly, if it had a choice between erecting a house worth perhaps 4/6d per week on the free market or paying a rent allowance of 2/4d, it was more likely to opt for the rent allowance and invest the capital in more profitable ways. The differential between the rent allowed and the cost of erecting a house was widening. The definition of customary rent in 1901 probably helped, for it made the determination of the rent allowance a traditional or historic figure, whereas the cost of erecting a house was determined by current and rising price levels, and by a distinct improvement in the quality of property erected. This is to say that within the North-East the additional variable cost of the rent allowance was considerably less than the fixed cost of providing housing, and colliery companies were making the logical decision in opting for the former rather than the latter. Of course, an owner might take a wider view than is suggested here and consider the real if unquantifiable benefits to be gained in labour relations and productivity

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

by providing good quality housing and other social overhead capital. For example, the Horden Colliery Company was just before the First World War developing a modern pit at Blackhall Colliery. The housing was of good quality, of four or five rooms, and the village was planned to have a workman's club, theatre, swimming bath, church, hospital, hotel and park.<sup>48</sup> There was, in other words, no necessary contradiction between increasing production and increased expenditure on social provision, although the company might have had little choice in this new area of coastal development remote from other centres.

The existence of choice between houses or rent allowances might not, indeed, always be present, and depended largely upon topography, with some modification by demography. Together they determined the likelihood of alternative agencies of house provision being available in place of the colliery companies. If collieries were in remote, sparsely populated areas and quite distinct from one another, no one was likely to be available to build and invest in houses. This geographical factor is relevant for the variations within the two coalfields, and between them on the aggregate level. The company role in housing in South Wales tended to be highest where settlement was in small, self-contained communities in sparsely populated areas. This was the case in the relatively open landscape of the anthracite district in the West of the coalfield, which had the highest company provision of housing. Generally speaking, and certainly in the steam-coal districts which were the most significant in South Wales, the settlement pattern was different, and quite unlike anything in the North-East. The colliery settlements in these areas were linear, following the narrow deep, valleys. The villages are like beads on a string: in the Rhondda Fawr, for example, Hafod leads to Porth, to Dinas, to Trealaw, to Llwynypia, to Gelli, to Ton Pentre and so on up the valley, with the boundaries between each village not always readily apparent. Opening a pit in these valleys meant an extension along the valley, and often with workmen commuting by train from existing settlements.<sup>49</sup> With extensions being contiguous to rather than distinct from the previous settlement, addition to the built-up area was possible using the resources of the existing community, ploughing back the profits from the previous development and drawing upon an existing building industry. This was necessary for speculative building, which was so important in the area, in order to provide both the funds and the builders. It was also necessary for the building clubs, which needed to award contracts to existing builders,

<sup>48</sup> H. F. Bulman, *Coal Mining and the Coal Miner* (1920), pp. 252-61.

<sup>49</sup> Jones, "Aspects", p. 276.



although the clubs were more than geographically determined, reflecting as they did the high wage levels of miners, and fitting so well with the dominant ethic of the valleys.<sup>50</sup> What this did entail was that any major role by the companies was unnecessary. By contrast, in the North-East the settlement pattern was generally one of dispersed self-contained villages such as Wheatley Hill or Horden or Ushaw Moor, excepting such nodes as Stanley and Chester-le-Street in Durham, or Morpeth, Blyth and Ashington in Northumberland.<sup>51</sup> The low level of company activity in Durham occurred rather where the pits were located in the major industrial area of Tyneside. The variation in settlement patterns was one major factor explaining the difference in company action within the two areas: isolation and dispersal in South Wales might force companies to go against their initial presupposition against building, while in the North-East it might prevent the companies from opting for variable as against fixed costs.

The argument is conveniently illustrated by the case of Thomas Hedley Brothers, who owned two concerns in the area around Stanley. The policy adopted at the two locations clearly indicates the careful assessment of fixed against variable costs, with the ultimate choice determined by geography. One concern – the Holmside and Craghead collieries – was in the area of sparse settlement; the other, the South Moor colliery, was immediately adjacent to Stanley. The housing policy adopted at each by the same owner varied widely. As the viewer to the Holmside and Craghead collieries pointed out in his report for 1899, “equal to 50.88% of the workmen at South Moor are not housed by that Company, whereas we can only obtain an addition of 16.87% to our housed workmen here, owing chiefly to the scarcity of private property in the immediate neighbourhood.” The constant worry at Holmside and Craghead was the difficulty of obtaining enough competent workmen given “our remote position and unfavourable conditions – as compared with those of South Moor”. The isolation meant not only that private building enterprise was absent; it meant that labour was disinclined to settle. This did not arise at South Moor colliery, which “is situated in close proximity to a large centre, where there are many more attractions both for the young and old people”. But at Craghead families were unwilling to stay: the choice, it was said, was

<sup>50</sup> I. G. Jones, “The South Wales collier in mid-nineteenth century”, in: *Victorian South Wales – Architecture, Industry and Society* [Victorian Society, Seventh Conference Report] (1971).

<sup>51</sup> A. E. Smailes, “Population changes in the colliery districts of Northumberland and Durham”, in: *Geographical Journal*, XCI (1938); J. W. House, *North-Eastern England. Population Movements and the Landscape since the Early Nineteenth Century* [University of Durham, King’s College, Department of Geography, Research Series, No 1] (1954).

limited “to inferior men”. Particularly in years of good trade men moved away and this led to constriction of output. In 1900, the number of hewers was 20.1 per cent down on 1899 and the output fell. As the viewer said, “During a period of prosperity, when wages are good, workmen show a decided preference for living in the neighbourhood of towns or villages where railway or tramway facilities are good, hence workmen are bad to get.” Stanley had the attraction of a music hall and football team, which more remote locations lacked. The viewer’s policy was therefore to continue supplying free housing as the only way to attract men. In other words, remoteness might not only dictate company initiative in the absence of private builders; the provision of a free house rather than a rent allowance might induce labour to settle. In 1903 and 1904 additional housing was provided which brought the number of workmen living in company houses in 1905 to 1,046 out of 1,184.

At South Moor, the policy was different. In 1914, the cost of providing 830 houses in place of rent allowances (which amounted to £11,874 a year) was calculated to be £249,000. As the viewer argued, “hence it is clearly to our interest to continue paying rent to as large a proportion of our workmen as can be induced to live in rented houses. The allowances we pay to each man does not as a rule represent more than half the actual rent he is paying”. The different response of the same owner in the two areas is striking: at South Moor in 1912, of 4,624 workers, 3,225 or 69.7 per cent did not live in a free house and £10,492 was paid in rent allowances; at Craghead and Holmside in 1909, of 1,410 workers only 271 or 19.2 per cent did not live in a free house, and £502 was paid in rent allowances. The owners had in one case opted for a higher fixed cost, in the other for a higher variable cost. There is little doubt that the latter was financially more attractive, but the influence of geography meant that at Craghead and Holmside it simply was not available.<sup>52</sup>

The influence of location might be reinforced or lessened by demographic considerations. The importance of the difference in settlement patterns was that where the demand for housing was concentrated and present over time, rather than dispersed or present only as a short and intense phenomenon when a pit was being developed, then a speculative building industry and private investment were more likely to develop and so make company housing largely redundant. In the South Wales steam-coal districts, though not in the anthracite districts, the limitation of development to a defined and concentrated area did create a continuous demand for housing, which in turn created an investment market and

<sup>52</sup> Viewer’s Reports for Thomas Hedley Bros.

building industry. In the North-East this occurred at a few nodes such as Stanley, but on a large scale only on Tyneside, where there was a continuity of demand arising from the need to house workers in other industries. But this locational explanation of the nature of demand for housing was also affected by the rate of population growth and the speed with which output was increasing. Within the Great Northern coalfield, production was increasing more rapidly in Northumberland (69 per cent between 1889 and 1914) than in Durham (37 per cent), though in both cases much less than in South Wales (102 per cent), where in turn the increase was greatest in the steam-coal districts.<sup>53</sup> This meant that in South Wales, where the demand for housing was most concentrated for geographical reasons, the growth rate of population was highest; where the demand was dispersed, the growth rate was lower. The level of effective demand was higher in South Wales, and higher in the East than in the West, which encouraged agencies other than the companies. Also, the pace of development was such that the owners were much more likely to require their available capital for increasing production rather than for house building. Within the North-East, the most rapid development was in Northumberland, and here the owners' association wished to reduce their fixed costs and overthrow the whole pattern of house provision, although there were of course individual exceptions like the Ashington Coal Company, which continued to build and which engaged in a variety of paternalistic welfare provisions.<sup>54</sup> The owners' association failed in its ambition, largely because the existing pattern had by then become an integral part of the system of industrial relations, entangled with wage levels and involving the union's as well as the owners' assessment of the economics of the industry. The problem, of course, was that choice was constrained by expectations. In both areas, where it was possible, the owners weighed fixed costs against variable costs. But a presupposition had been created in the North-East towards fixed costs, from which it was difficult for the owners to break. In South Wales, no such presupposition existed, and the owners instead paid higher wages, which allowed the miners themselves to take over some of the role which the owners might otherwise have been forced to bear. The North-Eastern owners might have been able to switch to rent allowances where this was possible, but where it was not, there was no presupposition that anyone but themselves would supply the houses.

<sup>53</sup> J. W. F. Rowe, *Wages in the Coal Industry* (1923), p. 14; House, North-Eastern England, *op. cit.*; T. Mansel Hodges, "The peopling of the hinterland and port of Cardiff, 1801-1914", in: *Economic History Review*, XVII (1947), pp. 62-72; B. Thomas, "The migration of labour into the Glamorganshire coalfield, 1861-1911", in: *Economica* X (1930), pp. 275-94; Jones, "Aspects".

<sup>54</sup> This was drawn to my attention by Professor Norman McCord.

## IV

The discussion has largely been couched in terms of economics and geography, but it is important not to lose sight of the social connotations of the two systems. For a start, who was better off?

In South Wales, the money wage of hewers was higher. But this is before adjustment has been made for housing. For a true comparison, either an addition has to be made to the wage of the North-Eastern hewer to cover his free-house or rent allowance; or a deduction has to be made from the wage of the South Wales hewer to cover his expenditure upon housing. This is not easy, for in the North-East a free house was worth more than a rent allowance, while in South Wales a miner might be an owner-occupier living rent-free, might be in the process of buying a house through a building club at a high weekly cost, or might be renting a house either from the colliery company or a landlord. Adjustment A is made by addition to the North-Eastern wage. The official value placed in Durham upon a free house and coals was 5/- per week, upon rent allowance and coals 4/4½d. In 1913 the average value for all underground workers in Durham of house and coal or rent and coal was placed at 3/6.74d per week; if the average is calculated only for those receiving one or other, it was 4/8.53d per week.<sup>55</sup> The element for coals should be excluded, since this was also paid in other coalfields. The suggestion of J. W. F. Rowe that an addition of 8d per shift should be made will be followed.<sup>56</sup> The North-Eastern hewer is left worse off than the collier in South Wales. But if the calculation were made the other way (adjustment B), by deducting rent from the South Wales hewers' wages — say 1/2d per shift —, then the relative position would be reversed.<sup>57</sup> Of course, the comparison is even more complex because of the peculiar pattern of shift work in the North-East, which gave the Durham miner a working day 44 per cent shorter than his colleague in South

*Shift earnings of coal-getters, 1914*

	Unadjusted	Adjustment A	Adjustment B
Northumberland	8/5d	9/1d	8/5d
Durham	8/3d	8/11d	8/3d
South Wales	9/4d	9/4d	8/2d

Source: Rowe, *Wages in the Coal Industry*, pp. 72-73.

<sup>55</sup> DCOA, Returns as to houses or rents and coals, August 1913, 668.

<sup>56</sup> Rowe, *Wages*, op. cit., pp. 84-85.

<sup>57</sup> Rents for the mining areas from M. J. Daunton, *Coal Metropolis: Cardiff 1870-1914* (1977), p. 85.

*Size distribution of company housing in South Wales and the North East*

	Durham 1914	Northumberland 1914	South Wales 1918
4 rooms and above	45.8	39.6	94.2
3 rooms	31.6	38.4	4.7
2 rooms	22.4	21.4	1.1
1 room	0.1	0.6	—
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: NCRO, NCB/C 366; Royal Commission on the Coal Industry, 1918-19, Vol. III, Appendix 72, pp. 208-09; DCRO, 1/CO/86 778.

Wales.<sup>58</sup> But what does stand out is that there was a difference in the relative wage levels to take account of the way in which housing was supplied. In other words, “free” house is a misnomer; the company houses of the North-East were paid for by a lower money wage, whereas in South Wales they were paid for by rent.

It has been argued that the housing system of the Great-Northern coalfield had harmful effects upon housing standards, and there is no doubt that the difference in the method of provision of housing was paralleled by a difference in quality. This is indicated by the size distribution of company houses in the two areas, and by the level of overcrowding shown by the census. In the Rhondda in 1911, 5.6 per cent of the population was living in overcrowded conditions, in Aberdare 5.9 per cent, whereas the figure in Stanley was 34.2 per cent, in Brandon and Byshtotles 32.2 per cent, in Annfield Plain 41.4 per cent.<sup>59</sup> In his report to the Local Government Board in 1907, Dr Darra Mair argued that it was the free-house system which explained why “the people of the northern coalfield are living in such exceptionally bad conditions of housing”.

In the first place, the very fact that proprietors of collieries are known to be responsible for the provision of houses for their workmen must interfere with the building of houses by private enterprise. Anybody who builds houses, does so in the expectation that he will obtain a return for his capital so expended, and it seems obvious that he would not be attracted to a place in which he knew that other persons had built houses or might build houses, let or to be let for no rent at all. [ . . . ] It seems also obvious that, even when houses are built by private enterprise, they would approximate fairly closely in character to the “rent-free” houses erected by colliery owners — there would be no incentive, at any rate, to compete with them and to provide better houses at the same rent [ . . . ].

In the second place, it seems but natural that colliery owners should seek not to build more houses than are absolutely necessary, seeing that they

<sup>58</sup> Dauntton, “Down the pit”.

<sup>59</sup> Census of England and Wales, 1911.

receive no rent for them; and also not to lay out more capital than is absolutely necessary on the houses which they do build. As a consequence houses have been built with as few rooms as possible.

If to this is added the miner's anxiety to have a free house, or failing that a house for a rent as close as possible to his allowance, then, argued Darra Mair, the result was a "standard of comfort and decency among the people [. . .] lower than that prevailing among the working class generally, and also lower than that prevailing among those engaged in similar occupation in colliery districts elsewhere".<sup>60</sup> This interpretation was followed by A. L. Bowley and A. R. Burnett-Hurst in their study of Stanley, where they argued that the financial attraction of the free house kept families in unsuitable houses.<sup>61</sup> The common complaint was that the free-house system led to a "desire to avoid the expenditure on rent of any part of the wage earned",<sup>62</sup> so that "families that could afford to pay rent for more adequate accommodation are tempted to remain where they can live for nothing and the will to progress is subtly stifled".<sup>63</sup>

However, this is to exaggerate the significance of the free-house system for housing standards; what is at issue is a wider regional phenomenon. Housing standards were the same in the industrial and commercial centres of the North-East where housing was provided on the free market. In Newcastle in 1911 the level of overcrowding of the population was 31.6 per cent, in Gateshead 33.7 per cent, in Sunderland 32.6 per cent. It would be difficult to argue that the low standard of housing in these areas, or for that matter in rural Northumberland, is to be explained by free housing on the coalfield. It is more sensible to argue that the low standard of housing on the coalfield reflected a wider regional phenomenon. However, the impact upon the level of private building is more problematical. On the whole, companies were reluctantly building where location made the presence of private builders unlikely, which is to reverse Darra Mair's logic. Nevertheless, the past activity of coal companies might discourage private enterprise where it would otherwise emerge, and one strategy for companies seeking to escape from onerous fixed costs might be to stop building, so that a housing shortage caused rents to rise and induced private enterprise to move in.<sup>64</sup>

<sup>60</sup> Darra Mair, Report, pp. 12-13.

<sup>61</sup> A. L. Bowley and A. R. Burnett-Hurst, *Livelihood and Poverty* (1915), pp. 22-23, 140-45.

<sup>62</sup> *The Land. The Report of the Liberal Land Enquiry Committee* (1914), p. 199.

<sup>63</sup> *The Times*, 11 September 1928.

<sup>64</sup> *Census of England and Wales, 1911*; see also N. McCord and D. J. Rowe, "Industrialisation and urban growth in North-East England", in: *International Review of Social*

The social significance of the free-house system lies less in explaining standards than in the manner houses were allocated. The colliery houses of the North-East were allocated by a "points" system determined by the needs of the colliery for a stable workforce of married men with children who would in turn go down the pit. The following agreement was made at Langley Park Colliery in 1900:

the following conditions must be observed in the filling up of vacant colliery houses:

1st. It is to be always understood that in the event of the manager being short of lads he to have the option of employing a strange family to fill a vacant house in preference to any workman then living on the place. (This rule has always been practised since the commencement of the colliery.)

2nd. Where a man is given work at the colliery with a family of six members, he to take preference for a colliery house over an existing workman whose family is less than six, but if their families are equal in numbers then the old workman to take preference for a colliery house over the new one.<sup>65</sup>

The manner in which a miner was selected for a free house or forced to accept a rent allowance was clearly of great importance to him. It was a system which also raised the problem of what was to happen to miners when they retired. The solution was the formation of the Durham Aged Mineworkers' Homes Association in 1894, paid for by a voluntary levy upon members of the DMA and assistance from the coal-owners.<sup>66</sup> So the miners employed at the Craghead colliery, living in a company house, would on retirement move to the row of single-storey cottages with their gardens and sheltered seats, where they could wile away their time under a plaque recording the combined initiative of Hedley Brothers and the DMA in building the properties.<sup>67</sup>

In South Wales, the ranking of housing was different. There was little incentive to live in a colliery house, and the way in which such housing was allocated was of little interest to the community. The South Wales miner instead gave the highest status to owner occupation. As a witness to the Royal Commission of 1919 said, the South Wales "collier prefers that class of investment to anything else; he likes to live in his own house."<sup>68</sup> This might strain the family budget during the period of purchase, when the weekly outgoings would be higher than the rent of a house on the open

History, XXII (1977); manager of Langley Park colliery to manager of Medomsley colliery, 13 September 1906, DCRO, NCB 4/3.

<sup>65</sup> Langley Park colliery, meeting between manager and deputation of the workmen, January 1900, DCRO, NCB 4/3.

<sup>66</sup> Garside, *Durham Miners*, op. cit., pp. 291-93.

<sup>67</sup> The cottages and plaque still stand.

<sup>68</sup> Royal Commission on the Coal Industry, 1918-19, Vol. II, q. 17199.

market. Certainly, the consumption pattern was different from the North-East, where many miners did not spend any of their wage upon housing. Whether this helps to explain – or is explained by – the development of the “Welsh industrial nonconformist ethic” is perhaps a subject for further research.<sup>69</sup>

## V

This research started from a dissatisfaction with much current work on the history of miners and of housing. A brief conclusion is in order to suggest how the findings might relate to these two areas.

Some might like to find a connection between tensions in the two housing markets outlined here, and trends in unionisation or militancy. This is not immediately apparent, but might merit some further consideration by those concerned with union history. What *is* apparent is that miners in South Wales and the North-East stood in different relationships to their employers. Whether the level of owner occupation in South Wales gave the collier greater independence in his dealings with the coal-owner is a moot point, for property ownership constrained mobility; a North-Eastern miner might feel freer to leave one firm and move to another. The contrast is rather that the South Wales miner was more likely to have a separate set of social relationships arising from the housing market, whereas in the North-East the miner's position in the housing market paralleled his position in the labour market. The South Wales miner was brought into relationships with his landlord, or with his fellows in a club which involved negotiations with banks, landowners, builders, solicitors. The North-Eastern miner was more concerned about the “points” he received from his employer; in some ways, it created a more closed or one-dimensional social pattern. It followed that whereas housing in South Wales was distinct from the pattern of labour relations, in the North-East it was entangled with the wage bargain. What can certainly be argued is that the social historian of the coalfield, in his assiduous research into strikes, militancy and class-consciousness, cannot afford to neglect the way in which the miners lived.

The history of housing is often presented as a failure of the free market to house the working class, with a consequent development of subsidised local-authority housing. Against this it could be argued that up to the First World War the free market was functioning adequately and that housing standards were rising; rather, it was the distortion of the free market by

<sup>69</sup> E. D. Lewis, *The Rhondda Valleys* (1959), pp. 217-27.



war-time controls on rent and mortgages which necessitated the provision of public housing. This study of miners' housing could give support to both views. Before 1914 there were obvious signs of tension in the method by which housing was supplied in the North-East, as the companies became unwilling to erect more property. The owners saw one possible solution to be the provision of housing by the local authorities.<sup>70</sup> In South Wales, the crisis much more obviously came with war-time distortions of the flow of funds to both speculative builders and building clubs. But of course the tensions which had appeared in the North-East before 1914 were outside a private-enterprise house market, and in many villages the provision of housing moved straight from the coal company to the local authority. The circumstances were exceptional, creating a somewhat unusual spectacle of employers finding their salvation in public housing. This is to suggest that the way forward in the analysis of housing is not through a "Whig" view of the inevitable rise of council housing, but rather through a close study of the functioning of particular housing markets, the tensions and strains which might emerge, and the interest groups which might be created.

<sup>70</sup> R. Ryder, "Council house building in Co. Durham 1900-39; the local implementation of national policy" (M.Ph. Durham, 1979), p. 120, quotes the Consett Iron Co.'s request to Blaydon Urban District Council to "exercise its powers under the Housing and Town Planning Act".