

Whilst researching recently the British Newspaper Archive for information about Newtown, I found this fascinating letter from 1864 bewailing the lack of decent housing for the working people of Milborne Port... (Please note that I have edited it to about two thirds of its original length.)

Nathalie Hetherington, Milborne Port History & Heritage Group

To the Editor of 'The Western Gazette',

With kind permission, I will now endeavour to... tell your readers something about the miserable state of affairs at Milborne Port. Business has lately called me to that place several times and during my visits, I have kept my eye and ears open to gather all the information I could about the inhabitants and the trade the town.

I was at first inclined think the folks rather narrow-minded, for, on whatever topic conversation was started, it generally turned upon the want of house accommodation in the town, until I was almost tired of hearing dismal tales of over-crowding, and the many evils which follow in its train... Then came long story about the numerous houses which had been pulled or burnt down, allowed to fall, etc. After looking at the ball court, and expressing my desire to join in a friendly game, as well as respect for the liberal-minded gentleman¹ who had thus provided for the recreation of his poorer neighbours, I was informed that the money thus spent would have been much more advantageously expended on the erection of a house or two. On another occasion, after looking over a public building recently erected, I was praising the liberality of the founder, and pointing out the advantages which would be likely to result therefrom, when the old gentleman to whom I was speaking replied, "Ah ! yes, Sir, he is an admirable gentleman, but, like all the rest of us, he has one or two crochets² which nobody can understand. He will pull down house after house, but, in all the years I have known Milborne, I never knew him to erect one. Even when he built this place, he pulled down some cottages to make room for it, but did not build any more for the people, who were thus turned out, to live in."

I could enumerate dozens of little facts of this sort, but as it would take up too much of your space. I will content myself at present giving you brief outline of the information I have gathered from various sources... At Milborne Port, the [gloving] trade is very prosperous, and, as fresh hands are being constantly employed, the population is of course increasing, but the number of houses is rapidly on the decrease, notwithstanding all that one gentleman who has a little land there can do to provide cottages for his workpeople...

Although I was informed that fifty or hundred houses could be let immediately, it appears that *none can built*. I saw several places in the town where houses had been lately pulled down, and several others were pointed out as condemned, whilst I was assured that the crowding was getting worse and worse daily... From what I could learn, large number of persons who work at Milborne Port live in Osborne, Sherborne, Henstridge, etc. and walk daily from and to those places, in all weathers, rather than run the imminent risks to health which they and their children would otherwise be exposed to [if they lived in Milborne].

¹ Sir William Coles Medlycott in 1847

² a perverse or unfounded belief or notion

To give some idea of what this risk really is, I may inform you that I saw two cottages, each of which had but two rooms, one under and one over - low, thatched, ill-ventilated, dingy hovels. One contained an aged man, with a wife some years his junior, and a family of five or six children... The other hole contained a somewhat similar family. Another case is that of an aged couple, who had a married daughter with her husband and three or four children, as well as several another family, living with them in a cottage hardly fit for second couple. I was informed that, only short time since, a man and his wife, with four daughters and two sons, their ages varying from twelve to twenty-five, all lived in two rooms. Even in the principle street, one house, and that by no means a large one, contained three families, and several people with whom I conversed considered themselves quite fortunate in having entire houses, although they were but old places, and little better than barns, when they took possession... Several families have emigrated rather than put up with all this. One young man who had married, and, as usual, taken a room, went to America, as his landlady was compelled to leave her home, and he could not get another place to lodge.

Is anything more than this necessary to call attention to the sad want of accommodation at Milborne? ... Numerous politicians all touch on this subject, but not one, I think, goes more directly to the point than an eminent politician who a few years ago, wrote : "I hold that no individual landlord, and that not all the landlords in the kingdom put together, has, or have, the right to eject the natives from the land, and to make them houseless, *without providing other houses for them in!* This is what I hold: and it is what the laws of England hold; and it is what the laws of God clearly hold."

I have much more to say on the sanitary condition of the town, but must leave it for another letter.

I remain, Sir,

Yours respectfully,

TRAVELLER.

Yeovil, July 6, 1864.