

Lack of Houses in England; Wooden Buildings Advocated

Health Minister States That 500,000 Houses Are Needed—Ordinances in Way of Wood as Material—Critics of Frame Houses

(Foreign Correspondence of the New York Evening Post.) London, Oct. 17.—It is now eleven months since the practice and two or three years since it became clear that the provision of an immense number of new houses would be one of the most clamant of national needs immediately after the restoration of peace. This week the Minister of Health, Dr. Addison, has given an official statement of the progress already made. Here it is:

Houses required, 500,000. Houses in scheme under consideration, 40,000. Houses being erected, 8,000. Houses occupied, none.

In the light of such figures one is not surprised to note a rapidly growing movement—it might almost be called an agitation—in favor of the use of other material than the brick or stone of which the Englishman's home is normally constructed. Every possible variety finds its partisans. The editor of the Spectator, Mr. St. Leger Streatfeild, has written a book, "The Wooden House," in which he advocates cottages of rammed earth, technically known as "pise en terre." Others are trying to boom the system of breeze-concrete hollow blocks. But the propaganda that is being most vigorously pushed in the press is for the adoption here of the frame house system known in the United States and Canada. Day by day the Daily Mail and other papers have been giving prominence on their picture page to representations of the most attractive looking villas and cottages of this type, and the missionary effort is supported by a letter press by testimonials from English folk who have lived in such houses abroad and find them far preferable to the brick residences that are customary here. Their evidence is confirmed by British experience also: for, though wooden houses are not usual in England, they are by no means unknown. In some parts of the country, notably Essex and Kent, one may frequently come across "weatherboard" houses which have stood the test of occupation for scores or even hundreds of years. They were put up in districts where there was an abundance of good timber close at hand and where the difficulties in transporting stone or brick to the spot made the timber much the cheapest material. There are, indeed, many more wooden houses in this country than the passing traveller would suppose, for in many instances the "weatherboard" has been disguised by an outside coating.

It is argued, firstly in favor of the wooden house that it is far cheaper than the brick. A "mill-cut" cottage for the demobilized soldier could be erected, it is said, for £280, as against \$400 for similar accommodation in brick or stone. In the case of larger houses the cost would be £450, as against \$1,200 or £1,500, and £600, as against £1,800 to £2,000. Further, while a brick or stone house takes at least four months in building, a frame house can be put up within a fortnight or three weeks. And the work does not need an architect, or even a craftsman, but can be carried out by unskilled labor.

These arguments, however, are not being accepted without question. They are challenged at every point, especially by the representatives of the Ministry of Health. Dr. Addison contends that the British Columbia house, which is said to be brought over here for a little more than £250, is not really a house, but only four walls and a roof, and the general rule is that the frame or shell of a house, whether of brick or of timber, costs only one-third of the total. He mentions that even to convert army huts into civilian dwellings, though they were supplied at 38 per cent discount, cost nearly £400. According to the Ministry of Health the amount saved by using a wooden shell is at most 6 per cent of the total cost of a similar brick-built house. On the other hand, advocates of the frame house system reply to Dr. Addison with specific and detailed figures which are wholly irreconcilable with his estimates. The opponents of the frame house contend further that, however practicable it may be in some countries, it is unsuitable to damp a climate as the English. The obvious answer is that, though the climate of some regions where the frame house is used is much drier than that of England, it has equally stood the weather test in districts where there is heavy rainfall. British Columbia is an instance in this connection, and also the west coast of Norway, where it is colder and rainier than in England.

The next objection is the danger of fire, which would at any rate compel increased insurance rates and thus increase the cost. This objection is met by the proposal that wooden houses should be erected mainly in rural or other sparsely populated districts. In Newington, their housing schemes do not allow wooden houses to be built in rows, but require them to be detached or semi-detached, with a garden or lawn between each house. In the case of a row of houses, it is said, tends to stop a fire. And the adoption of the frame house according to the method proposed would involve the introduction of the central heating system, which would lessen the risk of fire. That is a method to which the Englishman is not accustomed, and his traditional prejudice in favor of the open fireplace will have to be overcome if the median type of house is to become popular.

Ordinances a Difficulty. A very substantial difficulty in the way of the acclimatization of the frame house in England is the obstruction offered by the local ordinances or "by-laws" in most districts. The requirements imposed by these by-laws are often absolutely prohibitive of the erection of any wooden houses. But the Ministry of Health has the power to supersede them by general regulations of its own, and it was announced a few days ago that steps are to be taken in this direction. A memorandum, however, that has just been issued on this subject is criticised by builders as too vague to effect much.

Indeed strong complaints are being made that the Ministry of Health is not honestly trying to help in this matter, but would secretly be pleased if the whole idea of introducing wooden houses came to naught. Its attitude has been so unfriendly as to give rise to a suspicion that there may be working in the background the influence of some powerful trade interests. The ministry declares itself eager to investigate the whole question, and to that end it has accepted the offer of the agent-general for British Columbia to erect and open a sample house, which is to be placed on public view, so that its advantages and disadvantages may be impartially weighed. In contrast with this is the offer of William F. Regan, once well known in the mining world, who undertakes to deliver in various English ports 60,000 American wooden houses within one year, at the rate of 5,000 every three weeks, from a given date, at prices ranging from £250 to £750 each. These, he says, will not be disreputable, cast-off, worn-out army huts, but artistic residences, furniture saving, saving, labor saving, warm in winter, cool in summer, and fit for any man to occupy, he is a workman or a capitalist. Mr. Regan ridicules the idea of Dr. Addison's single experimental house which is "to be erected as a curiosity in one of our parks," with the prospect that during the winter it will be the resting place for London sparrows and next summer may be used by the flappers of 1920 as a park tea lounge. "This," he comments, "is Government commercial capacity on the big scale, after months of official palaver."

But, after all, it seems doubtful whether there would really be any need to send overseas for wooden houses in sufficient numbers to make a very considerable experiment. Dr. Addison admits that there is abundant timber available in England at present for house building, and English builders are quite prepared to undertake the work if an opportunity is afforded them. A single firm in Norwich declares itself ready to deliver 1,000 wooden houses of uniform specification as soon as there is an alteration in the by-laws which prevent their erection. They have already available sufficient material for this purpose, and if they could put a building on the rail which would be erected by the purchaser himself or his local builder on the spot which he had chosen. The construction of such houses in this country would, of course, save a long and expensive sea journey and the difference between the rates of Canadian and English labor, as well as reducing the risk of damage to sections in the progress of loading, shipment and general handling.

As the situation is today, the question of the comparative merits of the wooden and the brick house is rapidly becoming irrelevant. The wooden house may be cheaper or dearer than the brick house, it may run greater risks of being burnt down or it may not; it may or may not be as comfortable as

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the house in which the Englishman has hitherto been accustomed to live. The great thing is that the wooden house is a house. Every other consideration is nowadays beside the point. It is no longer a question of the ideal place to live in. There are tens of thousands of people in England just now who would jump at the chance of getting a house of any kind or pattern. The figures quoted at the beginning of this letter show that the Government provision of housing accommodation has scarcely touched the fringe of the problem, and unless there were thousands of people in England just now who would jump at the chance of getting a house of any kind or pattern. The figures quoted at the beginning of this letter show that the Government provision of housing accommodation has scarcely touched the fringe of the problem, and unless there were thousands of people in England just now who would jump at the chance of getting a house of any kind or pattern.

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