Early days of the Mill Street Housing Society

The Mission's founder, Alfred Harman Edwards, realised from the start of the Mission in 1905 that affordable and sanitary housing was an essential component for families to bring up the next generation in a decent manner.

By the 1920s the failure of the post-first world war council house building programme "Homes Fit for Heroes" to cope with the vast numbers needed was being reluctantly acknowledged by the authorities. Mr Edwards wrote in his newsletter *Musings by the Mill Stream* (which he sold for a penny each to fund the Mission) in February 1927:

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In a daily paper dated December 17th, 1926, there was a leading article on "What the Prince saw." It appears that the Prince of Wales had paid a visit to Somers Town N.W. on a certain Wednesday night, and "inspected a number of heart-break houses, including one consisting of four rooms and two attics, in which 21 persons were living!" That is an average of just over 3 persons per room. We can beat that in Dorchester easily, and elsewhere in Dorset too, unfortunately. The Prince said "It is disgraceful that people should have to live under these conditions," and the Editor adds—"It is disgraceful that at this time of day and in a country which we were promised would be made fit for heroes to live in, conditions like those which may be encountered, not alone in Somers Town, but in various parts of the East End, in Glasgow and elsewhere, should still prevail. Of what use is a vast expenditure upon public health while these breeding grounds of disease flourish? Yet how difficult it is to induce our rulers to give effect to even the most obvious and the most carefully prepared schemes for clearing "the slums."

It seems to me that another of the Mission's publications must have found its way to London, for in December "Musings" there were words almost identical with the above!

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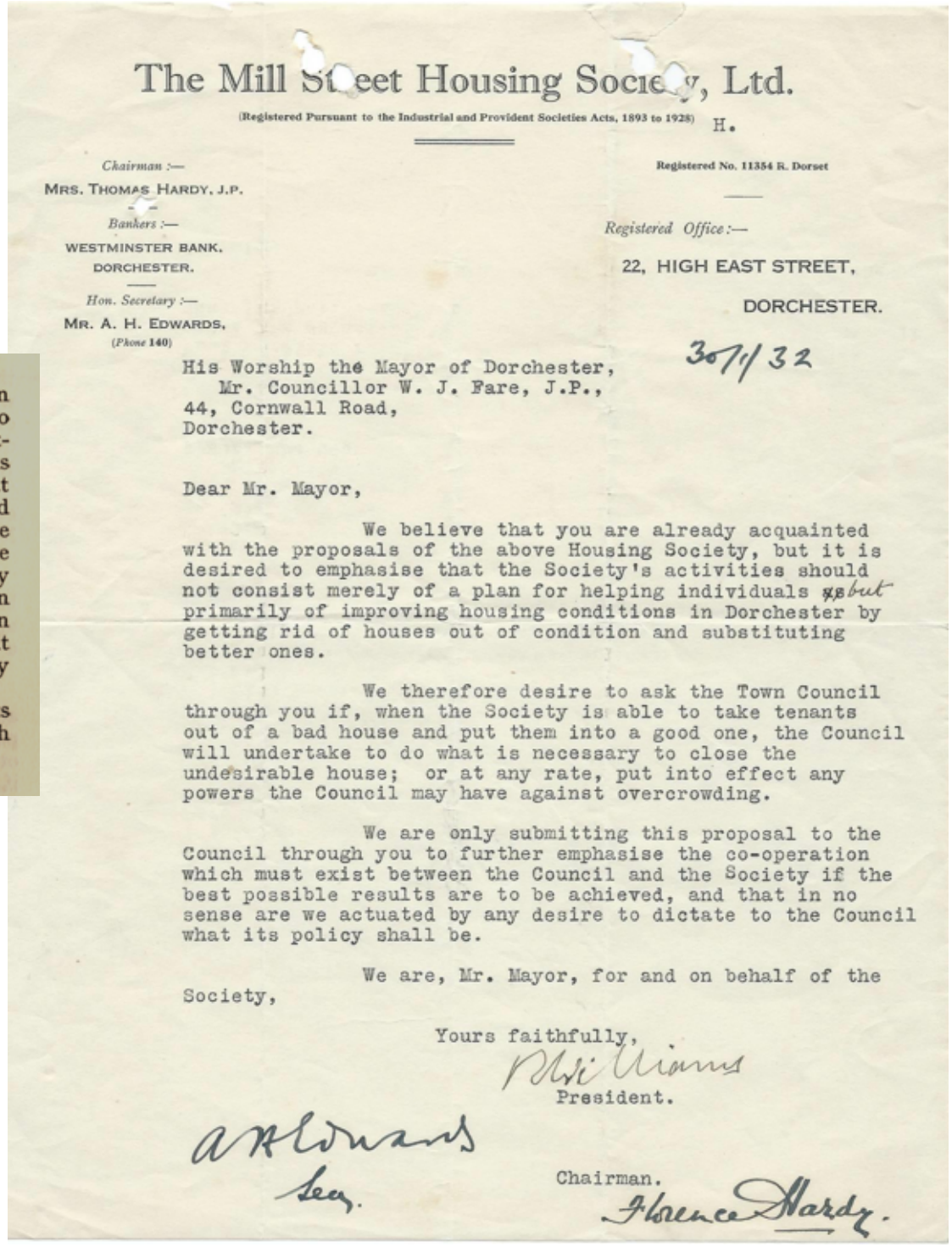
In Manchester and Cambridge not-for-profit housing societies were building homes with funds raised by share subscriptions and donations from well-wishers.

Mr Edwards asked the widow of Thomas Hardy, Florence, who lived nearby at Max Gate, to become the chairman of a housing society he was determined to start at Mill Street. He started the fund by selling bricks for sixpence each, with bigger ones at a shilling.

Opposite is the tactful letter, almost certainly written by Alfred Edwards, signed by Florence Hardy, asking the council to co-operate in controlling overcrowding.



The Mill Street Housing Society, Ltd.

(Registered Pursuant to the Industrial and Provident Societies Acts, 1893 to 1928) H.

Chairman :—
MRS. THOMAS HARDY, J.P.

Bankers :—
WESTMINSTER BANK,
DORCHESTER.

Hon. Secretary :—
MR. A. H. EDWARDS,
(Phone 140)

Registered No. 11354 R. Dorset

Registered Office :—
22, HIGH EAST STREET,
DORCHESTER.

30/1/32

His Worship the Mayor of Dorchester,
Mr. Councillor W. J. Fare, J.P.,
44, Cornwall Road,
Dorchester.

Dear Mr. Mayor,

We believe that you are already acquainted with the proposals of the above Housing Society, but it is desired to emphasise that the Society's activities should not consist merely of a plan for helping individuals ~~as~~ but primarily of improving housing conditions in Dorchester by getting rid of houses out of condition and substituting better ones.

We therefore desire to ask the Town Council through you if, when the Society is able to take tenants out of a bad house and put them into a good one, the Council will undertake to do what is necessary to close the undesirable house; or at any rate, put into effect any powers the Council may have against overcrowding.

We are only submitting this proposal to the Council through you to further emphasise the co-operation which must exist between the Council and the Society if the best possible results are to be achieved, and that in no sense are we actuated by any desire to dictate to the Council what its policy shall be.

We are, Mr. Mayor, for and on behalf of the Society,

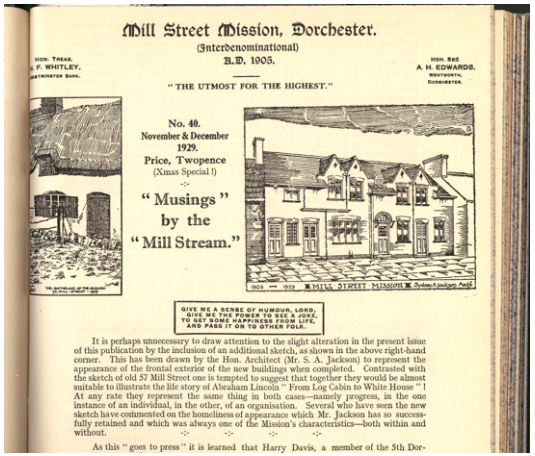
Yours faithfully,

President.

Sec.

Chairman.

In the March & April 1928 issue
Mr Edwards describes the overcrowding and high rents he campaigned against:



Mill Street Mission, Dorchester.
(Interdenominational)
A.D. 1905.

"THE UTMOST FOR THE HIGHEST."

No. 40.
November & December
1929.
Price, Twopence
(Xmas Special !)

"Musings"
by the
"Mill Stream."

GIVE ME A SENSE OF HUMOUR, LORD,
GIVE ME THE POWER TO SEE A JOKE,
TO GET SOME HAPPINESS FROM LIFE,
AND PASS IT ON TO OTHER FOLK.

It is perhaps unnecessary to draw attention to the slight alteration in the present issue of this publication by the inclusion of an additional sketch, as shown in the above right-hand corner. This has been drawn by the Hon. Architect (Mr. S. A. Jackson) to represent the appearance of the frontal exterior of the new buildings when completed. Contrasted with the sketch of old 57 Mill Street one is tempted to suggest that together they would be almost suitable to illustrate the life story of Abraham Lincoln "From Log Cabin to White House"! At any rate they represent the same thing in both cases—namely progress, in the one instance of an individual, in the other, of an organisation. Several who have seen the new sketch have commented on the homeliness of appearance which Mr. Jackson has so successfully retained and which was always one of the Mission's characteristics—both within and without.

As this "goes to press" it is learned that Harry Davis, a member of the 5th Dor-

Musings by the Mill Stream was circulated to the Mission's supporters from 1927 to 1946.

I recently "trickled round" a new Council house which a family had just been fortunate enough to obtain. Father was in the scullery having a good wash, in the big basin installed therein. The boy, lately starting work, was loud in his praise of the wonderful bath, with a copper in the corner from which hot water could be obtained "in no time." And Mother in the kitchen, with a "glorious grate" said it had made cooking a real pleasure. And "look what a lovely kitchen," she said, "There's room for the furniture now, and we can stand upright with our hats on!" I wish the Housing Committee could have seen and heard that family. The scene—even in this one house—was worth the extra rate! What a pity the Committee cannot have some cinematograph films prepared—for exhibition in the Rate Collector's office.

* * * *

I could not help contrasting the foregoing with another scene depicted by the visit which a woman paid me to-day. She and her husband and one boy occupy two rooms. In the front room there is her piano and bookcase, saucepans, dusbin, coal and all the crockery, etc. The family have meals there, and do all the washing, the clothes being hung up in the room to dry. The rent is 7/- for two rooms, the rent of the whole house being 9/4! The husband has been home ill for a month with bronchitis, and the boy has been in Hospital with rheumatism, pleurisy and bronchial pneumonia. Mother tried to get a Council house, but failed, because there was only one child. Notice to quit has been given, because the tenant of the house thinks a rent of 10/- per week can be obtained for the two rooms. And if other accommodation cannot be found, the family is told to go to the Poor Law Institution! Never mind what I said; what would *you* have said?

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In the January & February 1932 issue of *Musings by the Mill Stream* Mr Edwards said:

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Someone threw a "scrap of paper" at me during the last week, and as it unfolded itself I learned it contained a summary of how a man, his wife and two small children were "living" (?). The husband receives 27/- per week out of which he pays insurance. The wife pays 10/- for rent, for 1 cwt. of coal 2/3, for Oil, Wood, Soap, etc., 2/6, and towards a debt incurred when the last baby came 2/-, leaving under 10/- for food for four mouths, two of them, at least very hungry ones. A worker in the course of a visit happened to call in one very frosty evening, and found the baby blue with cold, there being no fire in the room and very few babies clothes available. Needless to say, matters were soon put right, but the mother had not said a word to anyone, and was cheerful, despite her hunger and the anguish which the children's hunger caused her.

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Another of the Missions staff found the way into a single room in a part of the town—not Mill Street—where lay on a filthy mattress covered with an old coat, a most dirty and degraded looking individual too ill hardly to move or speak. The "furniture" comprised a table and chair. There was no fire, and the window and door had been kept closed. The scene and stench would have outvied a London slum. The visitor later expressed to me his sincere regret that he could not sketch, for said he, "I would have drawn that scene, written underneath, "*** is good for you" and sent it as an unsolicited testimonial to those who thus advertise. For the poor fellow's downfall was due to too much drink—the stuff so highly recommended by some members of the medical profession!

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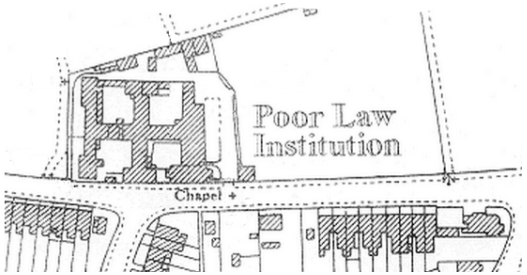
There is still need therefore to sing, and act upon, the old hymn which begins :—

"Rescue the perishing, care for the dying,
Snatch them in pity, from sin and the grave;
Weep o'er the erring one, lift up the fallen,
Tell them of Jesus, the Mighty to save."

It may be "crude theology," but it works.

The Poor Law Institution was the workhouse built in 1836 at Damers Road.
In 1930 it had been renamed the Public Assistance Institution.
The original front, chapel and master's house (*above*) can still be seen.

Poster from a 1929 ad campaign