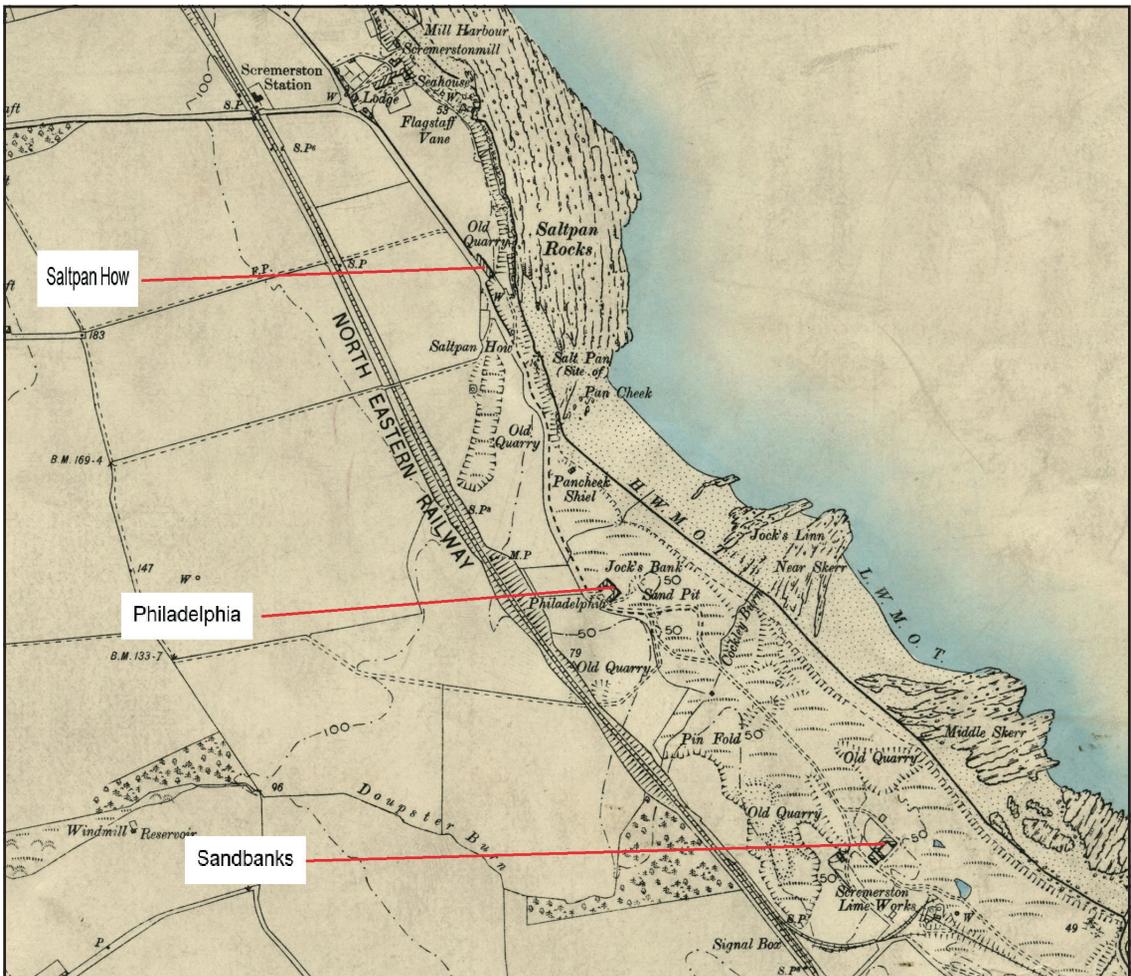


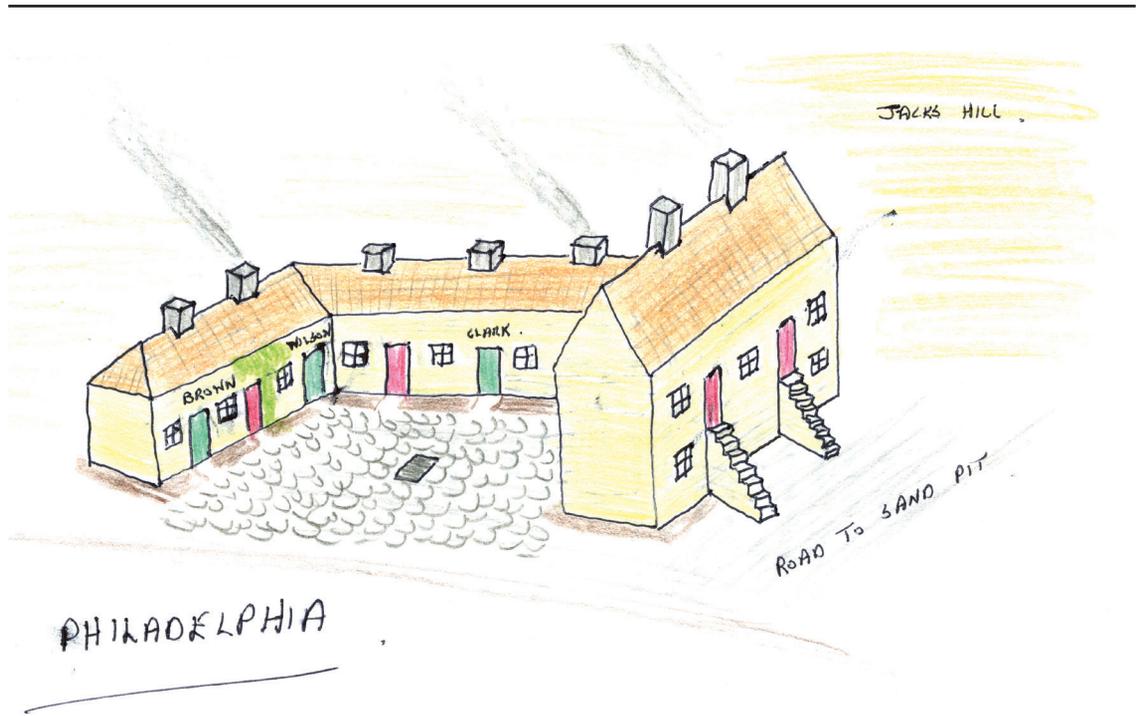
Living Conditions at the Cocklawburn Cottages, 1912 to 1956

by Julie Gibbs

In the area now known as Cocklawburn, there were once three recognised settlements: Philadelphia, Saltpan How and Sandbanks. The cottages, ten at Philadelphia, twelve at Sandbanks and six at Saltpan How, consisted of one- or two-roomed properties, the majority single-storeyed. Like many others in the neighbourhood, they belonged to the Greenwich Hospital Estate and were leased to the Scremerston Coal Company. After the closure of the lime kiln in 1909, the majority of residents worked in the colliery or on the local farms, with families such as the Mowitts, Cowes and Elliot[t]s, remaining, in possibly the same cottage, for ten years or more. By 1911, Philadelphia was reduced to four uninhabited cottages and does not feature in the following account.



2nd edition Ordnance Survey 6" to mile, 1899



Philadelphia Cottage - similar to other settlements (BRO. 532)

Information on public health and the living conditions in these communities can be gleaned from the records of Norham and Islandshire Rural District Council. The Council minutes and the reports of its employees, the Sanitary Inspector and the Medical Officer of Health, detail the steps taken to improve matters, and the difficulties experienced convincing the owner and the lessee of their responsibilities. The irregular water supply at Sandbanks, and overcrowding there and at Saltpan How, were the overriding concerns during the years under consideration. The cottages however, were no worse than others owned by the Estate, and by other landowners, who often appeared complacent about the welfare of their tenants.

Sandbanks water supply 1912 - 1922

The cottages were supplied by a surface pipe some 1,000 yards long, fed by a spring in Scremerston Town Farm. The tap was out of order several times during 1912 and 1913. With remedial work proving unsatisfactory, numerous requests were made for a proper repair. The Estate replied that it was down to the Company under the terms of its lease, while the Company stated that it did not have the authority to interfere with the supply. Notices served on both parties, resulted in some improvement but the supply was still inadequate by March 1914. Therefore, the Council decided to install a pump, at a cost of £4 16s 9d, which it managed to recoup from the Estate, but only after issuing a summons.

Between 1917 and 1922, the pump stopped working more than once. Local children were blamed for the damage that occurred in 1920, resulting in residents obtaining water from a hole in the ground. Two years later, with the pump again out of order, the 100 people affected had to go half a mile for water. Representations to the Estate had no effect so, in desperation, the inhabitants sent a petition to the County Medical Officer. This led to the Estate providing a gravitational water supply, with work commencing in October 1922.

Holidaymakers at Sandbanks

The defective supply did not deter a family holidaying at one of the Sandbanks Cottages, as evident from a case heard at Norham and Islandshire Petty Sessions on 1 August 1917. George Allan, an Assurance Agent, aged 60, from Duns, his daughter Catherine aged 30, and his sister-in-law, Isabella Gillie aged 50, were charged with stealing wooden keys and cushions from the railway line near Sandbanks. Mr Allan admitted to being *'guilty of a very silly action'* believing that the wood had been thrown away. They were each fined 18s 4d including costs. Some of Mr Allan's friends had been collecting flowers from beside the railway line. Were they also staying at the cottages? While the War may have restricted travelling, why choose Sandbanks? Were the empty cottages regularly used in this way? If so, how did people know about them?

Overcrowding

Between 1918 and 1924, the Council meetings focussed on the need for more working-class housing. To avoid having a scheme imposed by the Local Government Board, it was eventually agreed to build 150 houses in the District, taking advantage of the financial assistance available. Steps were taken to acquire sites either by agreement or compulsory order.

Dr James McWhir, Medical Officer of Health, in post since March 1919, visited the cottages in the Scremerston District, recording the accommodation, the number of occupants and the general condition. His first report of December 1919 described the Saltpan How cottages as embodying *'the lowest depth of degradation'*. Each cottage consisted of a single apartment and a small damp scullery, the kitchens having a capacity of 1,890 cubic feet and the sculleries, 343 cubic feet. One household had four sleeping in the kitchen and three children, aged five to eight, in the scullery. A family of five had two teenage sons sleeping in the scullery. The cement floors were broken and only one window in the row could be opened. He hoped that there would be no delay in deciding the fate of Saltpan How and that the *'housing of pit workers will receive the earnest consideration of all concerned'*.

His second report completed by January 1920, included Sandbanks. Each of the twelve houses had had the one room converted into two rooms by wooden partitions. Two dwellings were allotted to one family and accommodated four and five occupants respectively. Of the other houses, three had eight *'inmates'*, two had seven, and two six. The cottages were free from damp and had fairly good light but nearly all the windows were in need of repair. The kitchens had a cubic capacity of 1,973 and the rooms 1,157. Reports were sent to the owner, lessee and tenants.

In February, he visited some of the most unsanitary houses in the Scremerston area, accompanied by the Sanitary Inspector and Mr Bryant from the Housing Commission. Mr Carr, Managing Director of the Company, asked to discuss the report with the Council's Housing Committee.

The Medical Officer's Annual Report for the year ending 1919, reproduced in the *Berwick Advertiser* of 3rd April 1920, included one section entitled *'Housing, A Land of Poetry and Romance and itshovels'*. Referring to Norham and Islandshire, it stated that overcrowded hovels, with young men and women huddled together, were so familiar as to be thought acceptable, ignoring the well-known connection between overcrowding and tubercular disease. The chief difficulty was the reluctance of proprietors to spend money, though like elsewhere, there was a scarcity of labour and building materials were expensive.

As a result of Mr Bryant's inspection, the Council, despite not thinking an increase necessary, was forced by the Ministry of Health to acquire sites for 400 houses and, in July 1920, was given one month to submit an amended scheme or else be dealt with as a Defaulting Authority. Even before the increase, the Council had found owners unwilling to sell, local opposition and prohibitive

terms. The original plans approved by the Council were rejected by the Housing Commissioner due to the internal construction and costs. Eventually a scheme of two and three-bedroom bungalows, a style regarded as an unsatisfactory compromise, was agreed. Each was to consist of a living room and scullery with some having an additional parlour.

Overcrowding worsened at Sandbanks in 1921, and the owner and lessee were requested to take action during the summer months. Attention was drawn to the reluctance of farmers to let cottages to non-farm workers as, under the Rent (Restrictions) Act 1920, they could not regain possession if needed for a farm worker. Did the Company apply the same policy?

In June 1921, the Minister of Health considered the tenders for building the new houses too high compared with the much lower figures received throughout the country, and requested that fresh tenders be obtained. Due to the current industrial and economic crisis, it was stressed that only essential houses should be erected and that another review be undertaken. All sites purchased to date were to be held in abeyance until this was done. At this, the District Council decided to abandon all schemes, letting the land already acquired.

The Medical Officer, writing in December 1923, stated that since the series of reports of 1919-20, the cottages at Saltpan How had been rough cast and three of the one apartment dwellings converted into two. There were still three one-roomed houses, one being occupied by a married couple with two young children, the second by a childless couple and the third by a married couple and an infant. Two windows described as *'fixtures'* could not be opened. At Sandbanks there had been no structural alteration (See the table next page).

On receipt of the Medical Officer's report, Mr J A Kilpatrick, the then Manager of the Company, replied, admitting that many of the houses of which they were tenants only, did not conform to present day standards of comfort, hygiene and sanitation but that this was due entirely to their original construction, age and location. He took umbrage at the Medical Officer's scathing remarks which made it seem that the Company was oblivious to their state and completely indifferent to the health and comfort of its workers. Much had been done in the past few years to render cottages more habitable and since the beginning of the year, much thought, time and money had been expended and a Workers' Committee formed in an attempt to better the conditions.

The question of overcrowding was a complex one, he continued. *'Constant irritation, jealousy and general ill feeling'* would be caused if the families were redistributed in an attempt to house each in accordance with its size. If tenants were evicted, it would be impossible for them to find better accommodation near to their work. New larger houses were needed but the Company did not intend to build them. He enquired what the Council was doing to encourage private enterprise in that direction, under the new Housing Act.

In response, the Council stated that the onus of providing housing accommodation fell on the firms concerned and not on the Council and forwarded details of a scheme offering grants of between £50 and £75, to enable individuals to build one- or two-storeyed houses ranging from 550 to 950 square feet. As it turned out, few took up the offer.

The Medical Officer concluded in his Annual Report for the year ending December 1923, that one-apartment dwellings should be banned in a mining village. At Scremerston, several occupants entered their tenancy at the beginning of their married life, with the birth of every child bringing more squalor. The shortage of properties prevented them from finding alternative accommodation. The *'discontent with home surroundings engenders disaffection towards the body politic'*. Only *'an awakened public conscience can end such conditions.'*

Sandbanks Cottage accommodation and number of occupants as at December 1923

Number	Number of Occupants	Details
1	6	A married couple, and four children aged from 2 to 11
2	6	A married couple, a male relative aged 34 and three children aged 4 to 13
3	8	A married couple, and six children aged from 4 to 14
4	3	Three adults
5	8	A married couple, an aged female and five children aged 5 to 14
6	9	A married couple, and seven children aged 2 to 18, the kitchen window has a layer of brown paper in place of a pane.
7	5	A married couple, and three children all under school age
8	9	A married couple, and seven children aged 3 to 13 and all female. The kitchen window has a layer of brown paper in place of a pane.
9	8	A married couple, an elderly female relative, and five children aged from 1 to 18.
10	4	Three adults and a child of 5
11 and 12	8	One family occupies both cottages.

The following year's report stated that Scremerston, the only mining district in the area, had suffered from the depression affecting the country's coalfields and unsurprisingly conditions, such as those at Sandbanks and Saltpan How, remained unremedied. Further expenditure on the nation's health was pointless unless there were drastic changes in the conditions under which a large number of manual workers lived. In 1925, the Colliery shut its doors on several occasions, affecting between 200 and 300 men. It was only due to the stringent economy in production costs and close co-operation between management and employees that it was able to re-open.

Between April 1928 and 1949, no mention of Saltpan How was made in the minutes and the only references to Sandbanks related to outbreaks of scarlet fever. In November and December 1931, four cases were transferred to the hospital at Berwick, at considerable cost to the District Council, isolation at home being impossible. Much earlier, in September 1913, one case of diphtheria occurred at Saltpan How, caused by the window of the cottage being too close to the ashpit and privies; the window was eventually removed. Another case, in December 1927, was also taken to the hospital. More infectious diseases may have occurred in these cottages but the precise location of an outbreak was not always specified.

During 1928, the first Council houses, twelve in number, were built in Scremerston. There was great demand, with the claim of large families recognised. None of the tenants listed came from Saltpan How or Sandbanks.

In August 1935, a number of Clearance Orders (Housing Act 1930), were proposed by the Council ordering the vacation and demolition of houses considered unfit for human habitation, of which 41 belonged to the Estate. The tenants at *'Saltpan How, Clearance Order No. 5'*, were Peter Finlay, Mary Skelly, Robert M Locke, Robert Collins and John Gibson. Three coal-houses, six privies, one wash-house and one disused building were included in the Order.

At the end of August, the Ministry of Health having encouraged the Council to take this action, discovered that it did not have the authority to order Crown properties, that is those belonging to the Estate, to be demolished. The Council, not accepting that the Crown should be treated differently, asked for an independent inspection to be carried out by the County Sanitary Inspector. A meeting of all parties resolved that the properties could be considered subject to the Housing Act, as long as the Estate had the same rights as any other owner to lodge objections.

Further inspections of working class dwellings to ascertain the extent of overcrowding and the creation of a five-year building programme were ordered by the Housing Act 1935, the surveys to be completed by 1 April 1936. Overcrowding, that is where persons over 10 years of age, of the opposite sex and not man and wife were sleeping in the same room, was to become an offence on the part of the occupier and the landlord. The surveys revealed that Norham and Islandshire was the worst overcrowded Rural District in the country despite its low population. Out of the 1,497 working class houses inspected, 332 were found to be overcrowded, a percentage of 22.17, some 9% more than any other northern Rural Districts. In the Scremerston Ward, 59 out of 182 houses were overcrowded, a percentage of 30.72. The high figure was believed to be due to the number of tied farm cottages.

In October 1936, the Council rescinded Clearance Orders, Scremerston, Nos 1 – 6, without specifying a reason. It is possible that some work had been carried out on these properties but there may not have been anywhere for the families to move to. In the same month, the Surveyor reported on the condition of certain houses at Sandbanks and in December, they were declared unfit for habitation and a Clearance Order proposed. The following March, the Order was deemed unnecessary as the Estate wished to retain the houses for purposes other than for human habitation until they could be rendered fit for occupation.

If the scheme for 400 working class houses had proceeded, overcrowding in the area may well have been eradicated. Piecemeal building of council houses could not hope to meet the demand. Further surveys in the 1940s, confirmed what was already known, that there was a shortage of houses, overcrowding, and condemned houses were still occupied.

The Smith, Cowe and Elliott families remained at Saltpan How during the 1940s, but had left by 1949. In December 1946, one resident, Mrs J Elliott, witnessed the subsidence of part of the road between Saltpan How and Sandbanks. She admitted to a reporter from the *Berwick Advertiser*, that they were rather excited at seeing the cracks steadily widen, and it came as no surprise when the crumbling cliff fell away after three weeks of heavy rain and high seas, leaving the five yards of turf between the road and the gap just waiting to fall. She had had to take in foodstuffs for the five isolated families at Sandbanks, possibly the Bruce, Elliott, Matthewson, Reid and Swinney families, who were there in the 1930s. Mrs Elliott was waiting to get a cottage at Scremerston, as her own house was condemned due to the gaping hole at the back. She had lived in the district for 44 years and could remember a shieling and a patch of grass in place of the waves.

It was to this condemned house that her son, J A Elliott, returned in May 1945. A driver with the Royal Army Service Corps, he had been held prisoner at Stalag 344, Poland, from 1940. The special train on which he arrived, allowed him off at Scremerston, about 100 yards from where he lived. How many others came back to similar conditions? A few years later, only the walls of the

cottages remained, their red tiles scattered on the ground.

In 1954, the last occupied house at Sandbanks had been the home of Mr and Mrs William Bruce for 17 years, that is since the time of the Clearance Orders. Lit by oil lamps, it was kept clean and tidy. Mr Bruce, once an employee of the Old Colliery, now a miner at Blackhill, had lived all his life in the little community seeing it change from a centre of industry to a peaceful place. In summer, they found it very pleasant, enjoying the company of visitors attracted by the nearby windmill built by Mr Bruce to charge his car batteries. In winter however, finding it cold and miserable, they often thought about moving. They stayed until 1956 and their old home may well have been the empty house demolished by the Estate, in June that year.



Cocklawburn as it is now

It was almost inevitable as the local industries closed that, given the continued neglect of the cottages and the availability of better housing in Scremerston, the isolated but bustling community gradually dwindled away. However, the newspaper interviews carried out in the 1940s and 1950s, seem to suggest that not everyone was ready to move from a place that had been their home for all or much of their life. Today, nothing remains of the Cocklawburn cottages and it is hard to imagine that an area visited purely for leisure, had such a vibrant past.

Sources (Berwick Archives, BRO)

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