

**Coastal Studies – the  
development of 'hutment  
colonies' – case study of  
Aldbrough 'Cliff Top' colony,  
East Yorkshire.**





(The original article on this theme was written for the Hedon Local History Society Newsletter in the 1990s, what follows is similar to the original but updated).

To an extent before the Great War, but certainly between the Wars, 'colonies' of owner-built 'bungalows' developed at many points along the east coast of England, these initially independent of any planning requirements. Characterized by diverse building materials, of all shapes and sizes and devoid of most facilities, these properties were usually built by persons of modest means who sought by this means to acquire a second home by the sea. Much like a medieval community, these properties were usually detached and on rectangular plots of land rented, or bought, from a local farmer. Some 'colonies' expanded to such an extent that some hutment owners set-up local shops or cafes.

During the 1920s and 1930s such communities came under increasing scrutiny from local authority officials concerned especially with potential threats to public health. This study focuses on one such development along the Holderness coast and may hopefully provide a yardstick for studies of similar communities elsewhere. At some locations such communities have adapted and continue to flourish into the 21st century, two well known examples being Humberstone Fitties south of Cleethorpes and the coastal fringe of the Wash between Heacham and Hunstanton. However, the Aldbrough site has been lost to coastal erosion. During the 1920s the word 'hutment' became the commonly used generic term for such properties, during the 1930s the more complimentary term 'bungalows' was sometimes applied.

Hutment 'colonies' also often evolved in rural areas, unplanned and devoid of services. Here their development mirrored that on pre-enclosure common land whereby a family or individual might set-up a rudimentary hovel detached from manorial regulation.

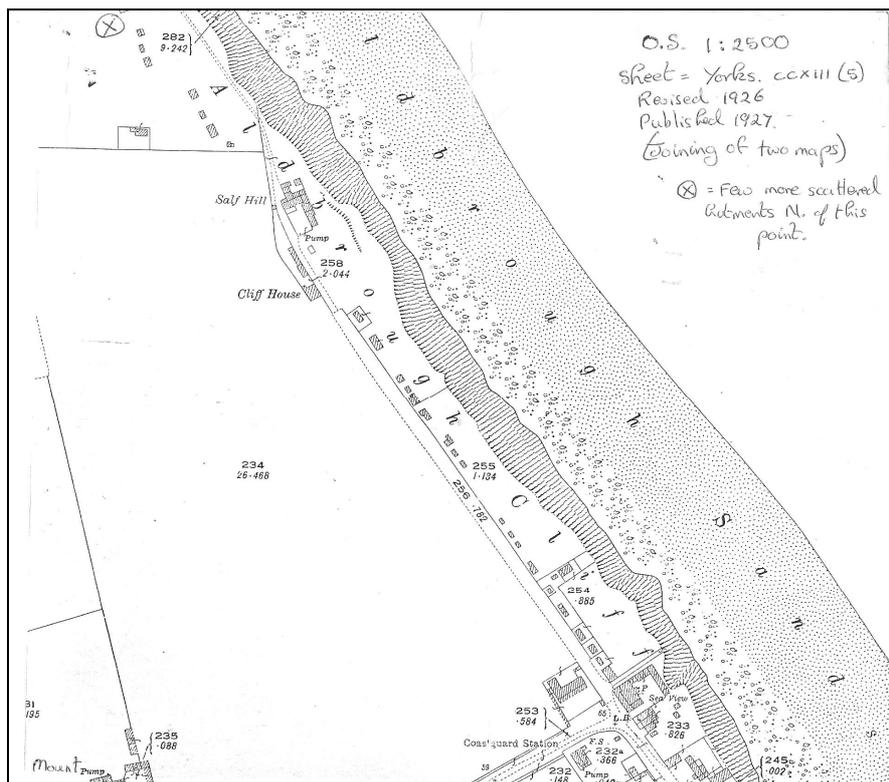
Early 20<sup>th</sup> century hutments might normally have a wooden frame with walls of clinker-built timber, sheet boarding, breeze block or brick. Roofs might be tarred felt, corrugated sheeting, slate or tile. Not infrequently various building and roofing materials could be incorporated in a single property. Some hutments typically were conversions of accommodation previously used for another purpose, the most usual example being converted railway carriages. Late Victorian and Edwardian railway carriages lent themselves to ease of conversion as each compartment could become a room and the corridor down the side a hallway. Often such hutments were raised above ground on low brick pillars to reduce rising damp and to allow air to circulate. The modest surrounding plot might be tilled for vegetables and flowers while a perimeter hedge would afford some privacy and act as a windbreak.



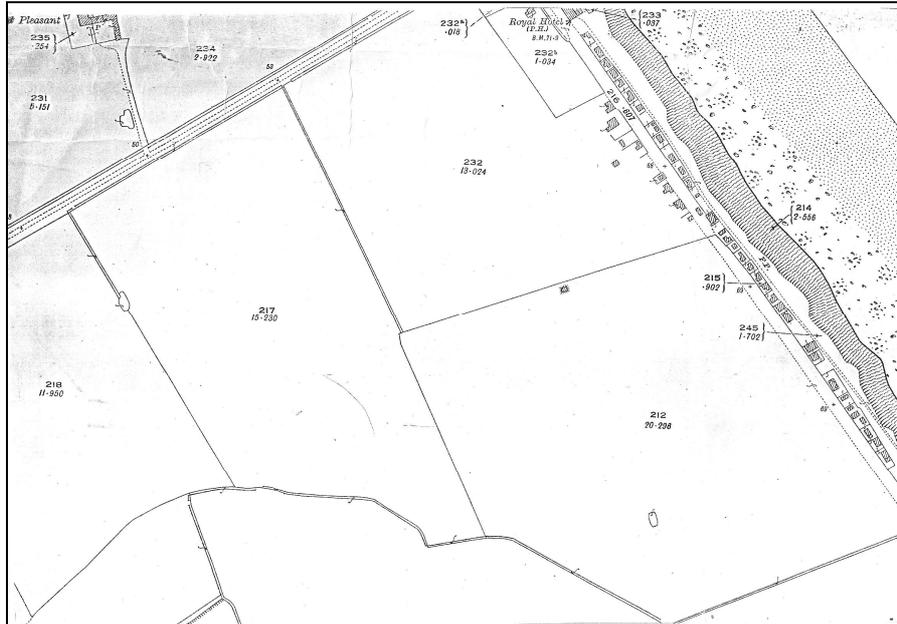
**Fig. 1 Extract from the 1856 O.S. map showing Aldbrough village, Seaside Road, the two hotels and the road running parallel to the coast. Aldbrough parish stands on the coast of Holderness roughly half way between the resorts of Withernsea and Hornsea.**

The First Series 1:10000 O.S. map, sheet 213 published in 1856, shows Seaside Road running 1½ miles due east of Aldbrough village

towards the coast. At its T junction with a road that ran parallel to the coast for a mile or so stood the Talbot Hotel and the Spa Inn (see Fig. 1). The Hotel had been developed as accommodation for relatively well-off families seeking the bracing and health promoting aspects of coastal locations. However, unlike Withersea to the south and Hornsea, Bridlington, Filey and Scarborough to the north it was never to acquire railway access, only that by private or public horse-drawn coaches. The minutes of Skirlaugh Rural District Council for the early 1920s refer to the 'Royal Hotel', Aldbrough, while evidence from the 1927 O.S. map 1:2500, Yorkshire CCXIII(5) sheet shows that the Spa Inn had now become the 'Royal'. The minutes also refer to a nearby 'Temperance Hotel' but whether this was the ex-Talbot Hotel is unclear (see Fig. 2).



**Figs.2 and 3 Extracts from the 1927 O.S. 25 inch map showing the exact position of most of the hutments.**



Beyond the two hotels a hutment colony had developed by the mid 1920s. In 1923 a letter from Aldbrough parish council to Skirlaugh Rural District Council referred to '20 or 30 hutments' while in the same year a joint letter from the managers of both hotels complained of unfair competition for business posed by hutment owners. A 1924 survey by the Rural District Council's building surveyor identified 90 hutments built and plots let for '60 or 70 more'. The 1927 O.S. map shows that the bulk of these hutments were along the seaward side of the road running parallel to the coast, both north and south of the junction with Seaside Road (see Figs. 2 and 3).

Why was this 'colony' developing when it did? Clearly between the local situation as shown on the 1856 map and that shown on the 1925 map some cliff-top farm land had been lost to marine erosion. Possibly as cliff-top fields became too small for effective cultivation the farmers saw hutment tenants as an alternative source of income. Also Aldbrough was the destination for many bus day-trips from Hull, a rapidly expanding provision. As many as 30 buses per day were travelling between Hull and Aldbrough on bank holidays and weekends in 1924, travelling on recently surfaced tar-macadam

roads. On a local scale Aldbrough was a 'boom resort' of the motor age.<sup>1</sup>

On a personal level, and in giving evidence to the Rural District Council's building surveyor many residents cited health factors as their main reason for having built, or bought, a hutment at Aldbrough. One woman claimed that the bracing air kept her husband 'off the parish'. Another person suffered less from bronchitis when at the cliff-top colony while another bought a hutment because their health had been damaged 'in the War', although they received no army pension.

Although some Aldbrough hutments became permanent homes most remained second homes. The Building Surveyor's survey of 1924 listed the names and addresses of all owners and showed that all lived in Hull or its suburbs, the locations being mostly late 19th century by-law housing, probably then rented by lower middle and working class families in regular employment. Eighteen of the 61 owners listed were women, two owned shops in Hull while a further five owned pubs or clubs. It seems then that this opportunity to acquire a seaside retreat was beyond the means of the labouring class. With no rail link the issue of how to get from Hull must have been very relevant, it may well have been the case that cycling was the simplest option.

In its early days the colony must have been a hotbed of free enterprise but by 1924 the Public Health Committee of Skirlaugh Rural District Council was expressing concern about the site. From then on, and into the 1930s, the local authority's Sanitary Inspector

---

1

Aldbrough village itself was not their destination. Even though Aldbrough, like most farming villages, had experienced depopulation in the late 19th century it remained in the 1920s the largest village in Skirlaugh Rural District. Many Aldbrough residents lived in poverty in poor quality housing and in overcrowded conditions. Skirlaugh Public Health Committee reported in 1924, for example, that three families lived in a four bedroom house, with a couple and five children living in one bedroom. However, the Inspector of Nuisance concluded 'I do not know that anything can be done in the matter as there is no other accommodation available'. For a detailed study of housing provision in the area up to the Second World War see Clarke, R., 1992.

conducted a number of fact finding surveys and by the late 1920s an Aldbrough Cliff Top sub-committee of the Rural District Council had been formed to oversee the changes needed in the provision of basic services. Often the local authority found itself in the familiar position of demanding improvements to local sanitary conditions that the owners themselves did not want, or, at least, did not want to pay for. Controversy centered on three issues; sanitation, water supply and building standards. Schemes for improvement were further compromised by the realization that the products of capital investment, whether by the local authority or by individuals, would relatively soon be swept away by the rapid rate of coastal erosion.

In his first survey of the colony in the summer of 1923 the Sanitary Inspector found that 'closet accommodation appears to be earth pails, disposed of by throwing over the cliff'.<sup>2</sup> There was, he recorded, also no mains drain system and no piped water supply, hutment owners and tenants apparently getting their water from the hand-pump outside the Coastguard Station (see Fig. 2). By the following year a few hutments had been provided with a cesspit but the local by-law requirement that such pits should be at least 50 feet from the 'house' presented an impossible problem for most hutment residents.

Clearly the Aldbrough Cliff Top sub Committee considered various possible sewerage schemes for the hutment colony. In correspondence between Skirlaugh Rural District Council and the Ministry of Health the latter recommended a 'broad irrigation system of about two acres'(?), the estimated cost being £700-£800. The Council was anxious that owners met some of the capital expenditure and at a meeting held in the 'Poplar Café' every owner agreed to pay £1 towards the cost of such a provision. Despite it being a time of recession (falling costs) and despite a proposal to deploy

---

2

The Holderness clay cliffs are treacherous to try and climb, if the 'colonists' were to enjoy the beach and water's edge they would have had to create a safe way down, perhaps incorporating steps. Still today when walking the expansive sandy beach one has to be aware of high tide times and know the points along the coast where access from beach to cliff-top is practical.

unemployed to do the work by 1925 the projected cost had risen to £1695. This seems to have resulted from a necessity to build the mains sewer further inland as rapid coastal erosion, particularly in the January and February gales, meant that the original project would not now have the minimum 30 years lifespan necessary to justify the public expenditure.

By 1926/7 the stark choice facing the local authority with regard to drainage of the hutment colony was either to demolish the hutments as 'unfit for human habitation' or to impose a much increased rate on the parish of Aldbrough to raise the necessary funding - this likely to be bitterly opposed as most rate payers living in the village itself would not see any direct benefit. At the 'eleventh hour' the local landowners who had directly benefitted from the sale or rental of cliff-top land agreed to fund the necessary sewerage scheme. The agreed work was to lay a pipe sewer with an outfall into a local ditch which in turn flowed into the Lambwath Stream (see Fig. 1).<sup>3</sup> The following summer (1927) the principal local landowner was granted an annually renewable license for the remaining hutments to be classed as a 'Holiday Camp' thereby making sanitary and drainage provision at the site his sole responsibility.

By 1928 coastal erosion had swept away land to the east of the cliff-top road. Already some hutments had gone or were hanging precariously along the cliff top. Also by January 1928 the Royal Hotel had been undermined. Plans were agreed to build a replacement inland west of the Coastguard Station. As a result of continuing coastal erosion this replacement now stands perilously near the cliff top (see Fig. 4).

---

3

As may be seen the Lambwath Stream flowed inland despite draining land adjacent to the coast. In fact this was the normal Drainage pattern for Holderness as retreating glaciers immediately after the last Ice Age had deposited increasing volumes of till as the retreat quickened. Therefore the highest land of the newly formed plain of Holderness was that nearest to the newly formed sea (German Ocean, later North Sea). For example Bowen's map of the East Riding, published 1750, clearly shows this stream as a tributary of the larger watercourse flowing south and east and into the Humber. The lower part of this river had been canalised to create Hedon Haven, probably in the 13th century.

Also of concern to the local authority was the issue of a pure water supply to promote good health at the hutment colony. No piped water supply existed east of Aldbrough village so in 1924 the sub-committee entered into negotiations with Hull Corporation over the possibility of extending the mains water supply to the colony, this at an estimated cost of £130 pa. This plan was progressed and by the summer of 1926 Hull Corporation was ready to lay the main 'as soon as the Strike is over'.<sup>4</sup> Following the agreement on 'Holiday Camp' status a water main was extended alongside Seaside Road and the principal landowner then paid for the extension of a mains water pipe to the hutments. This, in turn, enabled the new Royal Hotel to tap into the mains water supply.<sup>5</sup>

It seems very likely that most of the 1920s hutments built at Aldbrough did not meet the building standards demanded by building by-laws adopted by most rural authorities during the late nineteenth century. However there was a housing shortage and many rural authorities were unable, or unwilling, to fund the building of council houses by the terms of the 1919 Housing Act (for a more detailed analysis of this point for the whole of Skirlaugh R.D.C. area see Clarke, 1992). To enable marginal housing to be retained at a time of rural housing shortage Skirlaugh Rural District Council (and others) adopted the 'Relaxed Building Bylaws' as sanctioned by the Ministry of Health. These allowed bungalows to be built of wood and galvanized sheet as well as the conversion of disused railway carriages on the issuing of a license by the Building Inspector, this annually renewed following an inspection of the property. However, some hutments built before 1924 didn't even meet the standards of the Relaxed Bylaws and five people who built hutments in the spring

---

4

This reference, presumably, to the miner's strike continuing after the collapse of the General Strike.

5

This episode begs the question as to how, for decades, the Royal Hotel, the Spa Hotel and The Coastguard Station obtained a water supply. They may have had tanks and systems for collecting rainfall and, or, received frequent deliveries by horse-drawn water tanks.

of 1924 were ordered to upgrade or demolish them within one month of a formal notice being issued. In the same year hutment owners were ordered to raise their properties above ground level and support them on concrete blocks, presumably to reduce damp. Also they were required to replace coal-fired ranges with oil stoves, presumably to reduce fire risk, although the logic is not clear.

After a succession of meetings it seems that the majority of owners went to the necessary lengths to comply with Relaxed Building Bylaws. Once holiday camp status was achieved all plots were marked-out as having a 40 feet wide frontage and 30 feet depth. In March 1929 a newly built bungalow which conformed to the 'Temporary (Relaxed) Building Bylaws' was described as having 'two rooms each of over 120 square feet, one other bedroom and a dairy' (kitchen?). Presumably each hutment had an earth closet, and as it seems unlikely that this rural community had a regular 'night soil' collection service, disposal of the contents was the responsibility of the owner or tenant. Piped mains cold water had now been piped to both hutments and standpipes while rainwater was either collected or channeled to the open drain. There was to be no electricity supply for many a year, internal lighting would be by oil lamps, candles, rush-lights and the like.

Evidence of plans to build public toilets, a fish and chip shop, a railed area for people queuing for coaches as well as the rebuilding of the Royal Hotel and local landowner's enthusiasm to achieve holiday camp status all prove that, despite the ravages of coastal erosion, by the end of the 1920s Aldbrough cliff top site remained a busy and popular venue for both day-trippers and holiday makers from Hull. It seems that about this time permission begins to be given for the building of bungalows alongside Seaside Road itself and it is a proportion of these that survived to the early 21st century. Thus, sadly, only a very few remain (see Figs 3 – 8).



**Fig. 4 The inter-war Royal Hotel (since renamed), now (2014), as a result of coastal erosion, stands within yards of the cliff-top.**



**Fig. 5 The end of Seaside Road, the road that once led to the original Royal and Spa Hotels as well as the Coastguard Station and the flourishing hutment colony.**



**Fig.6 Rapid coastal erosion and long-shore drift leaving no vestiges of what went before – just an expansive sandy beach over which to superimpose a mental image of bygone times.**



**Fig. 7 A particularly rustic remaining hutment with Mount Pleasant farm buildings close by (see Figs. 1 and 2 and 3).**



**Fig. 8 Lovingly cared-for over many years.**



**Fig. 9 Nearing the end (see North Sea gas platform on the horizon).**

Despite rapid coastal erosion, today (2014) there are far more holiday homes along the Holderness coast than a generation or two ago. This is because the modern holiday home is a 'static' caravan with a single or double-axle which can be moved relatively easily from a threatened location. Service conduits for electricity, gas, water and sewerage in the form of flexible plastic pipes can also be rescued and re-used with relative ease. Only the concrete bases on which the caravans stand have to be sacrificed. What does seem strange, however, is that a number of the caravan sites have no nearby access to the beach from the cliff-top, residents having to take a car journey to the points along the Holderness coast where such access exists. The unconsolidated boulder clay cliffs in their natural state are treacherous to climb up, or down.

### **Bibliography,**

Clarke, R.S., *Housing for the Rural Working Classes of East Yorkshire in the late Nineteenth Century and the Development of Early Rural Council Housing to 1939*. M. Phil. Thesis, 1992, (copy at the Treasure House, Beverley).