

Councillor's Vision Of A Tin Town For Outcasts

PLAN TO DEMOLISH HOLMSLEY IN TWO YEARS IS REJECTED

C.T. NOVEMBER 28, 1952

HOLMSLEY cannot be closed down within two years. That is the majority opinion of Christchurch Town Council but it is not the opinion of Councillor S. Kermode.

"It can be done," he told the Council at their meeting on Tuesday, and with emphasis he added: "I don't want to hear anyone say it can't be done."

After drawing attention to the way in which the whole encampment was deteriorating, he said: "I have visions of Holmsley becoming another tin town settlement for outcasts such as I saw on the outskirts of Casablanca in North Africa." In Councillor Kermode's name the Council had before them a notice of motion "that the Buildings Committee and the Housing Allocation Committee be requested to submit definite proposals for the complete closing down of Holmsley within a period not exceeding two years."

Under Standing Orders this motion should have been referred to the appropriate committee without discussion, but the Mayor, Councillor K. H. Ashcroft, decided to allow a full debate, and Alderman E. J. Slinn, chairman of the Buildings Committee, asked for a recorded vote after he had moved an amendment. In its original form the amendment contained a statement to the effect that the Council accepted full responsibility for rehousing at the earliest possible time, the families living at Holmsley who had been placed there by the Council.

AN ACCEPTED PRINCIPLE

Following an objection by Coun. Morgan to this wording, the amendment was framed as follows: **"That this Council declares as an accepted principle that due regard must at all times be paid to the claims for re-housing at the earliest possible time of all families now living at Holmsley and who have been placed there by the Christchurch Council, together with all the other applicants on the general list, many of whom have long residential qualification in the Borough and whose need for re-housing in a number of cases is both great and urgent."**

It was because the Building Committee had decided to seek Specialist advice on the repair of some of the huts and to tell the Minister of Housing that the buildings would be required for another three to five years, that Councillor Kermode brought forward the notice of motion, which he originally intended to move next month.

He recalled the early investigations which led the Council to take over Holmsley six years ago. "But it was understood it would not be for more than five years," he declared.

Councillor Kermode said that some time ago he became a manager of Holmsley School. "And it soon became quite evident to me that something was radically wrong," he continued. "The whole tone of the place has steadily declined.

"It seems that instead of being the temporary home of Christchurch housing hardship cases it is steadily becoming the permanent home of people who cannot or will not pay their rent. In all walks of life there were good and bad, but at Holmsley there seemed to be an undue proportion of the lower type."

In discussions with the chairman of the Buildings Committee, Coun. Kermode said he had expressed concern when he found that people from all parts of the country were being granted huts. These people had no legitimate claim on the Christchurch Council. He also expressed concern when he found that people who did not pay the rent of a Council house were being relegated to Holmsley.

TONE HAS DECLINED

"How can I believe that such people will ever be offered a Council house again?" he asked.

Councillor Kermode referred to the many Holmsley protests about the allocation of Council houses and declared: —

"There is no evidence whatsoever of the Council's intention to close down Holmsley." On the contrary it seemed that the satisfactory people would be housed and the unsatisfactory residue would remain there indefinitely.

"I trust I will not hurt the feelings of many respectable people at Holmsley when I say that the tone of the place has declined," went on Coun. Kermode, who pleaded that the children of Holmsley should be given a chance to live in decent surroundings. "Let there be no mistake," he continued. "I have no sympathy with the drunkard or "chiseller" who fails to do his duty to his family, but it is the children we must consider, and we owe it to them to provide them with a proper home and decent environment."

After saying that the re-letting of huts gave him cause for considerable anxiety, Coun. Kermode concluded by declaring that the only answer to the problem was to make a determined resolution to demolish, every hut within the next two years.

Councillor G. J. Furneaux seconded the motion but went on to give one reason why more people had not been housed. He claimed that two years ago the Council had a perfect housing programme which placed Christchurch on the top of the housing world.

"But who wrecked that system of organised progress and building of permanent housing? Certainly not the Building Committee," he declared.

He mentioned that at that time they had 19 local builders building 162 dwellings; now they had one Bournemouth builder building 54 dwellings which could have been completed months ago had the local builders been allowed to carry out the contracts approved by the Buildings Committee.

When he and Alderman Slinn visited Holmsley a month ago it was pointed out that even if the Council allocated 50 per cent, of their houses to Holmsley it would take three years to clear the place at the rate they were now building.

FAR TOO GLOOMY

Alderman Slinn thought Coun. Kermode had drawn a far too gloomy picture of Holmsley. There were a number of people there who had made real homes out of the huts. Mentioning that during the past 6 months the Council had placed 17 desperate cases in Holmsley, Alderman Slinn continued: "We regretted having to do this, but we are the housing authority and we have no alternative."

He then took up a point raised by Coun. Furneaux. "I say quite frankly," he declared, "that there are people living at Holmsley who would not be there but for Coun. Kermode." Alderman Slinn then recounted the history of the 54 Somerford houses which were delayed because Coun. Kermode objected to the negotiated price contracts with local builders, and said the contract should be put out to tender. Prompted perhaps by Coun. Kermode's eloquence, the Council over-ruled the committee. Alderman Slinn pointed out that when the local builders revised their negotiated prices the cost worked out at £9 per house less than the lowest tender. They had to bear in mind that because of the eight or nine months delay costs had risen and the subsidy had been increased.

"During the whole period of that delay the Tenancies Committee did not have a house to allocate," declared Alderman Slinn.

LONG DELAY

On July 15th they had eight units of accommodation to allocate and four were given to Holmsley people. In October another eight units were allocated, and again four went to Holmsley. "We shall not have, any more to allocate until the new year because of the long delay caused by the 54 houses not being built under the negotiated price system," he said.

As to getting rid of Holmsley in two years, Alderman Slinn said they had got to face up to facts. At the present moment there were 182 families at Holmsley, and there were 657 applicants on the general list for accommodation. "All these are bona-fide applicants because we have recently issued a circular letter questioning everybody on the list," he said.

The position was complicated by the fact that the Council also had 86 families in requisitioned properties and the Minister of Housing had told all local authorities that requisitioned premises should be handed back within two years. This gave a ratio of general list applicants to Holmsley applicants of four to one.

PHYSICAL IMPOSSIBILITY

"If we allocate the whole of our housing in the next two years we could clear Holmsley, but if the other applicants are to have equal consideration we must build 452 houses," he said.

"We would be only too glad to get rid of Holmsley but at the same time we could not get rid of it and let the rest of the applicants 'go hang.' "

Seconding the amendment, Ald. Markham said he did so not because he did not want to see the people of Holmsley rehoused, but because it was a physical impossibility to provide sufficient houses at the rate they were being built. He would be pleased to see Holmsley "wiped off the face of the earth".

He said there were practically as many applicants on the housing list now as there were in 1945, and he understood 2,000 more people were wanted in the aircraft industry in the district.

Coun. J. Vaughan thought Coun. Kermode's resolution amounted to a condemnation of the Tenancies Committee. They had worked hard and had had an almost impossible task. The fact that people had to go to Holmsley should not make them criminals. It should make them want to be better citizens and earn the right to better accommodation.

After raising his objection to the wording of the amendment, Coun. Morgan said he thought the Council were losing their sense of proportion. "What right have we to demolish Holmsley?" he asked. "It does not belong to us." He agreed that the sooner it was closed down the better, and he suggested that the best way to do that was not to send any more people there. He did not think the Council should be committed to take full responsibility for housing "non-social" people.

"Let's realise our limitations," he went on. "The Council has gone as far as it ought in the question of subsidised houses. The sooner we let the builders build the better."

GOOD PROGRESS

In his reply to the debate, Coun Kermode referred to Coun. Furneaux's statement about the delay in building the 54 houses. The Bournemouth builder was now making good progress, and he remembered a case where one local builder had a delay of 15 months before starting a contract

Referring to the efforts of Mr. Nigel Nicolson in regard to the Holmsley question, Coun. Kermode said, "I don't think we have ever had a better or more vigorous representative in Parliament. He says that Holmsley is the worst problem that we have to face and that he and the Christchurch Council had embarked on an all-out attack on it."

The Mayor said it was Mr. Nicolson who suggested that some of the huts should be repaired. "But I consider however worthy Mr. Nicolson might be, he should consult the Council before making statements of the kind he made last week," he added.

On a vote being taken there was an overwhelming majority for the amendment, only two members voting for the resolution.

[Ald. Slinn has contacted the Christchurch Times to say that the figure given concerning the negotiated prices was incorrect. In fact, the lowest tender made each house £3 10s. 0d. cheaper than the negotiated prices.]