

Housing the Workers in South Australia during World War Two

Susan Marsden

Soon after the outbreak of war in 1939 private industrial plants in Adelaide started on the production of arms and other machinery of war and building work started on munitions factories. At first the demand for extra workers was satisfied by the large numbers still unemployed or under-employed following the depression, by the employment of married women and by diverting workers, voluntarily or not, from 'non-essential' jobs under Commonwealth manpower regulations. However, the demand — and the attractions of regular, well-paid factory work — were so considerable that many workers also moved in from the country and were even drawn from interstate. The Superintendent of the Government Labour Exchange in June 1941 reported that a total of 143 men from N.S.W. and Victoria had registered between February and May, commenting that there was a 'greater drift from Broken Hill than any other centre'

.²⁴

The numbers of factory workers in the metropolitan area grew from 44,000 pre-war to 58,000 by 1941. All of that growth was in war work, which by then engaged about 20,000 men and women. Many 'immigrant' munitions workers were single, women in particular, but many brought families, who further swelled the city's population. Between 1939 and 1946 the metropolitan area gained 70,000 people, mostly at the expense of the countryside. Adelaide's proportion of the State's population rose sharply for the first time in many years, from about 54 per cent to 59 per cent (it was 51 per cent in 1921). All of that increase had to be housed. Private home sharing, hostel, boarding house and even sleepout accommodation was a necessity, widely used, but it could be only a short-term solution. It was soon obvious that most of the newcomers intended to stay permanently in town and many applied for permission to build their own homes at a time when all available building materials and labour were requisitioned and private house building was effectively banned.

There was already an acute shortage of decent, low-cost purchase and rental housing due to the halt in construction caused by the depression. Even before the war this had boosted demand for rental houses, yet many of these

were badly run-down, old and unhealthy. The State Government-appointed Building Act Inquiry Committee, which surveyed substandard housing in 1937, reported in 1940 that more than 25 per cent of all rental houses in the metropolitan area were slum dwellings, admitting that the percentage was probably much higher as the survey did not cover every suburb. More than 9,000 people lived in houses classified as totally unfit for habitation, described as 'old, damp, decayed, badly-lit, ill-ventilated, [and] vermin-infested ...' Most were small, single or row cottages which also lacked such basic amenities as bathrooms, hot water, even running water, and proper cooking facilities. Apart from rent control, which was introduced across the board by the Commonwealth in 1939 and administered by the states from 1942, nothing was done to effect improvements, even in those 'uninhabitable' places.²⁵

Houses which were in slightly better condition were classified substandard. Altogether over 26,000 people occupied slum or substandard houses. Their numbers must have increased as the residents took in boarders and relatives in wartime. Without doubt, during the war years many slum-dwellers were war workers and their families. In 1937 the Inquiry's surveyors found that a third of the tenants who were workers were skilled and they would have been rapidly taken on at the munitions factories. Even the majority of tenants who were described as unskilled and unemployed would have found jobs during the 1940s. Although it seems to be impossible to discover the actual numbers of war workers who lived in such housing it is likely that they far out-numbered those who were provided the much-publicised Commonwealth war-workers' cottages or State housing authority homes. Certainly, besides the new arrivals in Adelaide, many existing residents were officially acknowledged as in dire need of suitable accommodation.

Clearly, decent low-cost rental houses were required in large numbers. Fortuitously, the South Australian Government had reached the same conclusion only a few years earlier. In 1936 the *Housing Trust Act* was passed, the South Australian Housing Trust (S.A.H.T.) starting its work the following year. The Housing Trust's charter was to assist the industrial expansion of the State by providing good but cheap rental houses for workers. By 1939 the Trust had won respect for the types of

houses constructed, which provided acceptable living standards but were remarkably cheap due to their semi-detached and economical design and the 'mass-production' techniques developed by the building contractor. All of the houses were 'double units', that is, semi-detached pairs. They varied only slightly in design from one site to the next and even from one year to the next, gradually gaining extra rooms. Building materials were brick, stone or concrete, roofed with iron, asbestos cement or tiles, each according to the availability of supplies, which were exceedingly difficult to obtain during the war. The shortages meant that only the bare necessities were provided. Fly-wire, fencing wire and rainwater tanks were omitted and a shortage of copper wire meant that one new group of tenants lived for some time without electricity.

These were raw new housing estates indeed, set in paddocks without even the benefit of metalled roads or paths. Residents pushed bikes to work through the ruts, and munitions workers on late-night shift guessed their way home in the outer dark. For, by the 1940s, most of the double units were built on broad acres, some distance from established streets. The Housing Trust also kept costs to a minimum by careful choice of sites. From the start it preferred land north west of the city centre where the State's heaviest concentration of industry was located. There remained extensive tracts of flat, open land which could be inexpensively bought and developed as housing estates. This process was well in train by 1940. By then the Commonwealth Government had decided to construct two of the State's three major munitions works in the same north western region, at Hendon and Finsbury. Large, local private factories also in war production included the Actil cotton mill and General Motors-Holden's, both at Woodville in the same region. The Housing Trust had embarked on large-scale land purchase and the construction of what would soon become its biggest housing estate near Woodville and Finsbury, at Woodville Gardens and Woodville North. So, in effect the first new, permanent housing for war workers was simply that constructed by the Trust as part of its ongoing programme. Normally the Trust refused to tie tenancies to particular jobs, the only exception ever being some newly completed houses at Woodville North and the nearby

suburb of Kilburn which were reserved for war workers. The Commonwealth Government in return refunded sales tax on the materials used.

Patently, many hundreds of other war workers joined the Trust's waiting list. More than 14,500 applications had been received by 1945, three quarters of them since 1939. The numbers actually accommodated were far fewer as a total of 1,750 Trust houses only were completed in the suburbs during that time in addition to about 370 which had been allotted before the war.

Nor were all of those houses taken by war workers. No former tenants' dockets for that period have been kept by the Housing Trust so it is not possible to determine what percentage of tenants were employed in war work. However, the Trust strictly interpreted its charter, before 1940 housing only male blue-collar workers, and many, if not most of them, must have either enlisted or moved into 'essential' industries. Ironically, before 1940 the higher 'government' wages may have disqualified munitions workers as tenants, but in that year a *Housing Improvement Act* was passed by State Parliament which freed the Trust to house people both richer and poorer than the low-income workers specified in the original Act. While the Act was ostensibly a response to the horrifying report on substandard housing, mentioned earlier, its main effect was to allow the Housing Trust to vary its housing types, to build in the country, and to house higher-income skilled workers who were crucial to the further industrialisation of the State. Even so, the new powers did not break with Trust tradition in other respects. Apart from soldiers' widows, only male tenants were accepted, and only married men with small families. This totally disqualified the many thousands of women and single men who became munitions workers, unless they happened to be family members of Trust tenants. Tenants were given permission to take in extra family members but tenancy officers strongly policed overcrowding and limited the length of stay.

Hence, the earliest efforts at housing war workers in South Australia made by other government agencies were directed at single women in particular. At first, every encouragement was given to private householders and boarding house proprietors to absorb the increase. Playford even offered to help non-workers shift to the country for the duration

to allow the use of their homes.²⁶

The Commonwealth Department of Labour and National Service made a formal agreement with a boarding house landlady in Hindley Street and the Y.W.C.A. to accommodate between 450 and 500 young women. The Y.W.C.A. hostel was the original building in Hindmarsh Square, but it also operated a new hostel created at Woodville by the Department which bought the nineteenth century mansion 'Tenterden' in 1941. Such co-operation was not complete. For example, the Y.W.C.A. evicted 11 women when they asked for breakfast at 6 a.m. after their shift was changed at Salisbury, even though they offered to make breakfast themselves.²⁷ Tariffs in 1944 ranged from 25 shillings and sixpence a week at this hostel to 30 shillings at Hindley Street. Temporary accommodation for women war workers was also provided by the Woman's Christian Temperance Union at 'Leavitt Hall' in Wakefield Street.²⁸

Munitions welfare officers at Hendon and Salisbury compiled accommodation registers, helped by local councils and voluntary inspectors. In the *Advertiser* on 19 November 1941 the Salisbury munitions factory welfare officer, Mrs P.A. Ohlstrom, described housing as the most important welfare problem because, she said, 'workers who are not well fed and well housed cannot be expected to work with maximum efficiency'. She could deal with most other problems such as catering and hygiene within the factory but housing urgently required the co-operation of householders, as she put it, 'for the benefit of the women and girls who are making munitions for Australian and the Empire defence'.

The National Employment Office Inspector reported in December 1941 that about 20 women per week needed placing and that the accommodation registers had 'fairly satisfactory results'. He had received almost no requests for accommodation from men and had placed the few in need simply by advertising for individual board and rent. However, at that time only the smallest munitions factory, at Hendon, was complete and in full production. He did argue the need to provide some accommodation immediately, the planned building schemes being too far ahead to be of much use.²⁹ Possibly for the same reason the Commonwealth

had portable sleepouts built locally which were rented to households for use by munitions workers. The scheme was administered by an employee of the State Tourist Bureau, which also operated another accommodation register. Approximately 150 sleepouts were set up all over the city and at Salisbury. They were used as bedrooms by one or two people, although one hirer was reported with a family of five using the sleepout, with a kitchenette. Generally, Mrs Hay's reports were of this kind: 'Most comfortable, very well kept, good improvements. An excellent type woman, and good home for the girls.'³⁰

In the meantime, the Commonwealth created a War Workers Housing Trust (W.W.H.T.) which in the other States embarked upon house-building for family men, but in South Australia waited a year until government negotiations about the use of the State's own Housing Trust broke down in acrimonious exchange between Premier and Prime Minister.³¹ The W.W.H.T. advertised for a local supervising architect late in 1941, and commissioned a report from Professor K.S. Isles on S.A.H.T. housing, to find out whether the number and size of rooms provided were the best in relation to tenants' financial circumstances. He confirmed the general opinion that most tenants preferred the smaller sizes at the present low rents to more expensive sizes, and decided that these sizes were 'the optima in South Australian conditions for the present'.³²

Other factors in tenants' satisfaction do not seem to have been assessed, including the fact that the houses were permanent and of solid construction: this affected tenants' status in a positive sense as they were well treated by the Trust as potentially long-term residents and themselves willingly maintained and improved the properties. Seemingly ignoring those crucial factors in mid-1942, the W.W.H.T. called for tenders to build 180 'cabin cottages' which were not only very small but also primitive in many other respects as they were designed as temporary housing. They were to be constructed of timber and asbestos 'within 15 miles of Adelaide'. This was at the old country town of Salisbury, the nearest place to Penfield, where the huge munitions works had been recently completed as the State's third. A combination of two firms, Wood, Combe and Kramer and R.P. Brimblecombe and Son, completed the cottages by late 1942, and a further 104 soon afterwards.³³

Once they were in residence, the W.W.H.T. avoided further

responsibility for the tenants, no matter how legitimate their needs. Residents themselves formed a Progress Association and made some improvements in the estate but they had little incentive to spend effort on temporary cottages and for the same reason they gained almost no support from the W.W. H.T. or the conservative Salisbury Council. Their only allies were the welfare officers at the munitions factory, who were honorary members of the Progress Association and who made increasingly exasperated reports on official dismissal of occupants' 'many and varied problems'. One report, in March 1944, acknowledged that the scheme was an emergency measure. This presumably explained why so many amenities were omitted: no showers, no eaves or verandahs to give protection from the sun, no rainwater tanks despite the poor and unreliable local water supply, no storage space until sheds were grudgingly supplied which were so tiny as to be almost unusable, no roads and no footpaths. A later report, in May 1944, argued that official reluctance to improve what was seen as a temporary area only was not only unjust but unrealistic as the settlement might exist until well after the war because of the general housing shortage.

Residents faced a second winter of discomfort on a heavy clay area without the roads and paths they had been promised. They had been discouraged in their efforts to provide recreation for the hundreds of children by the Trust's refusal to help erect a community hall or staff a kindergarten and by the National Fitness Council's refusal to subsidise a temporary settlement. Similarly, Salisbury District Council at first would not provide immunisation, health inspection or other local services. A Progress Association spokesman claimed with good reason that cabin cottage dwellers were 'treated like lepers' by the council.³⁴ The welfare officers believed there should be official recognition of the needs of a community suddenly placed beside an established community of landowners, 'with whom no real fusion seems possible'. The cottage area was described as physically and socially separate from the town of Salisbury, the old townspeople resenting the disruption to services and the presence of a potential 'slum' close to their best properties. Yet the cabin dwellers had shown a capacity to help themselves and they should not be regarded as a substandard community. The welfare officers concluded: 'What is needed is some encouragement of their legitimate

aspirations to establish a satisfactory community life in the face of unusually difficult circumstances, the remedies for some of which it is claimed, lie within official powers'.³⁵ This brought an official inspection but still no improvement. As the area welfare officer remarked, here was yet another instance of 'empty promises'.³⁶

However, the problems of such temporary areas as Salisbury and the housing shortage in general were so severe that the Commonwealth Government was forced to reconsider its approach. On 8 December 1943 Cabinet approved a limited programme of permanent housing with priority for manpower and materials to certain projects by both the State housing authorities and the reconstituted W. W. H. T.³⁷

The W.W.H.T. proceeded with its existing plans to build permanent housing at Finsbury (now Woodville North), Ovingham and Prospect. The largest estate was at Finsbury where 118 timber-framed asbestos cottages were completed in 1943. Such was the need that 380 applications were at once received, although eligibility was limited to local munitions workers who were married and had children. Rent was 20 shillings and sixpence a week, about five shillings lower than most nearby private rentals but, for obvious reasons, higher than the Salisbury rents which were twelve shillings and sixpence and fourteen shillings plus fees for sanitary services.³⁸

Thirty four cottages were erected in the same year at Ovingham, some of them facing Torrens Road near the railway line. These were timber and supplied to the builders to erect.³⁹ The 29 Prospect cottages were completed in 1944. In each case the W.W.H.T. was careful to negotiate with the local council, offering to pay a fee the equivalent of the usual rates so that roads, paths and other council services were quickly provided. A reserve was even provided at Finsbury and Woodville Council supported the new Progressive Association's efforts to set up a child welfare centre there.⁴⁰ All the houses were well maintained, mainly because they were to be sold after the war with tenants having first option, although the Finsbury houses were for years afterwards let to employees of the firms which took over the munitions works.⁴¹ The W.W.H.T. also provided accommodation in the country for women who worked at munitions flax mills at Laura, Morphett Vale and Undalya.

The only property extensively modified was a large house at Laura which became a hostel for 32 workers.⁴²

By far the most ‘appalling’ housing shortage was in the emerging industrial town of Whyalla but the W.W.H.T. found in 1941 that B.H.P. was already building single men’s quarters and the S.A.H.T. its first country double units. Between 1938 and 1941 the town’s population leapt as thousands of men came to work for B.H.P. The S.A.H.T. had built about 100 rental houses at Whyalla by 1945. Just as in Adelaide, there were many more workers and their families crammed in shared houses or in decrepit and makeshift places than could get proper homes.⁴³

As in many other events in history, official records provide much evidence of the history of formal war worker housing in South Australia but they almost completely omit any reference to the private housing the majority of workers were forced by circumstance to accept.

²⁴ Australian Archives S.A. (A.A.S.A.): CRSD 358, 30 1 (Housing general 1941-44).

²⁵ The section on substandard housing and the South Australian Housing Trust is based on S. Marsden, *Business, Charity and Sentiment: The South Australian Housing Trust 1936-1986* (Adelaide, 1986).

²⁶ *Advertiser*, 25 June 1941.

²⁷ A.A.S.A.: AP262, 3131 2 1. (Housing and accommodations government areas) and CI22376, 2 6 (Woodville Hostel accommodation). See also S. Marsden, *A History of Woodville* (Woodville, 1977). p. 218.

²⁸ A.A.S.A.: CRSD 358, 30 1 1.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ A.A.S.A.: CRSD 358, 30 1 2.

³¹ Marsden, *A History of Woodville*, p. 219, and A.A.S.A.: AP562 9, CL2081 1.

³² Marsden, *Business, Charity and Sentiment* pp. 53-61, 65.

³³ A.A.S.A.: AP562, W271 (Salisbury Wartime Cottages-Amalgamated Construction Co.).

³⁴ *News*, 17 May 1941.

³⁵ A.A.S.A.: AP262, 3131 2 1. For a history of these wartime events, including an account of established residents’ disapproving opinions of the cabin dwellers, see Margaret Allen, ‘Salisbury (S.A.) in Transition from Country Town to Outer Metropolitan Suburb, (M.A. thesis. University of Adelaide. 1976).

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 10 Nov. 1944.

³⁷ A.A.S.A.: CRSD 358, 30 1 1.

³⁸ A.A.S.A.: AP563, CI.2081 1 (Finsbury housing management and tenancy).

³⁹ A.A.S.A.: AP563, CI.2081 1 (Finsbury housing management and tenancy).

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*; Marsden, *A History of Woodville*, pp. 219-20.

⁴¹ CL20814.

⁴² A.A.S.A.: AP563 1, 2 26 (Laura Flax Mill Hostel file).

⁴³ Marsden, *Business, Charity and Sentiment*, pp. 191-96.