

Curran Fellowship (2021) report

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The cheap cottages crusade

Rural bye-laws and the periodical press, 1901-1905

The drafting of this report provides me with a further opportunity to express my deepest gratitude to the Research Society for Victorian Periodicals for awarding me a Curran Fellowship. It provided me with a unique opportunity to broaden the scope of my main area of research, namely the history of British town planning. Most importantly however, it contributed to giving birth to a keen interest in a field I was unfamiliar with and intend to further engage with in the future. The call for applications launched by the RVSP was thought-provoking for a planner. I was particularly interested in the statement that the Fellowships do not aim to "support historical or literary research that merely makes some use of Victorian newspapers and magazines as a source, but, rather, to support research that tells us something new about the nature of those publications [...]". In building my application and carrying out the research, I therefore strove to keep this in mind, and hope that my work will contribute to shed light on the significant role played by the periodical press in the campaign to provide low-cost, quality housing for the rural working classes in the late 19th and early 20th century. Yet, I also attempted to use this research as a way to suggest that scholars whose work focuses on the history of planning and development control have much to learn from the periodical press, which they have arguably and somewhat foolishly tended to ignore.

My application to the Fellowship scheme was a deliberate aim to challenge the way I approach planning history: I recently became aware of the fact that like most scholars in the field whose background is primarily in planning, I have tended to rely on discipline-specific primary sources, such as plans and reports. This research, which focused on a period which effectively predates the birth of planning as a discipline and profession was therefore an incentive to delve into a different type of corpus and to look at the history of development control through a different lens in an attempt to challenge existing historiography. I became interested in the idea that the periodical press played a significant, yet misunderstood role in debates related to development control and planning when I realized John St Loe Strachey's significant involvement in the

Letchworth Garden City Cheap Cottages exhibition held in 1905. I had already carried out research into this event with a couple of colleagues but our work had focused on the history of architecture and construction and to some extent, to building laws and regulations. That a press editor and proprietor was central to this major exhibition caught my attention and encouraged me to further examine the role of the press in the campaign to build better housing for rural labourers. The preliminary research I carried out prior to submitting my application allowed me to collect articles published in a range of Victorian periodicals, in particular the *Spectator* and *Country Life*. This material was used to build the application.

The funding provided through the Fellowship allowed me to plan several research trips to the UK, which gave me the opportunity to access material held at the British Library in London and the Bodleian Library in Oxford. Although a number of unforeseen circumstances led to a change of dates, I was able to spend enough time in each of these libraries to access all the material I had identified during my preliminary research. I was also able to access a vast number of additional sources that confirmed the validity of my hypotheses. These research trips not only gave me opportunities to access digitised and printed primary sources at the British Library in London and the Bodleian Library in Oxford: they also gave me an opportunity to gain a better understanding of Victorian periodical studies as a distinct area of research and to become familiar with a range of key works in the field. My initial plan was to travel to the UK three times over a five-month period, from March to July 2022. Due to a number of unforeseen circumstances, the dates at which I effectively travelled were July 1-3 and 24-31; October 21-27, 2022; March 1-3 and May 1-3, 2023.

Deliverables

/ Paper submitted to the *Victorian Periodicals Review*

The main deliverable I committed to when applying for a Curran Fellowship was a paper which I would submit to the *Victorian Periodicals Review*. The paper was completed in late May 2023 and was submitted to the Editor on June 21st. Its content is consistent with the application I submitted: it aims to explain the pivotal role that the periodical press played in what I call the "cheap cottage crusade", namely a campaign that called for building more affordable homes for agricultural labourers, but also and perhaps most importantly, that propagated the view that building regulations were to blame for the shortage. My paper attempts to highlight the ways in which this discourse was constructed and disseminated through text and visual material published in a range of periodicals, most importantly in the *Spectator* and *Country Life*. It also

aims to throw light on the central role of the periodical press in the network of stakeholders who had an interest in fighting these regulations.

/ Paper given at the 2022 RSVP Conference Margin / Limit / Periphery / Edge

As a new member of the RVSP, I wished to engage with the Society's activities and submitted an abstract to the 2022 conference. I felt that the Margin/Limit/Periphery/Edge theme was particularly relevant to accommodate a paper that focused on two key protagonists of the campaign for cheap cottages and against rural bye-laws. First, Justice William Grantham, a barrister who served as Judge of the High Court of Justice and erected non-compliant buildings on his estate. Second, Dr George Poore, a University College London Hospital physician who had been medical attendant to King Edward in 1872 and became famous for the alternative design experiments he carried out in his Andover cottage. The periodical press provides a fascinating corpus to scrutinize these men's actions and the debates they illustrate. From a geographic point of view, it highlights the uneven geographic coverage of contemporary building regulations which were enforced in rural areas on a voluntary basis: what was deemed acceptable in one district may have been illegal across the administrative boundary. Thus, Poore was able to experiment in Andover where bye-laws were not enforced whereas Grantham was taken to court by the Chailey Rural District Council which had chosen to apply regulations. From a legal perspective, the court proceedings reported in the press also sheds light on the limits of these emerging contemporary regulations and their interpretation. The periodical press allows to understand how these two men were considered by their peers and the general public: by operating at the margins of the law or illegally, they were seen as heroes by some, as heretics by others. I wish to take this opportunity to thank the conference organisers and committee for allowing me to speak at this event and as a result, to listen to many fascinating presentations by other scholars. I very much hope to contribute to future conferences and whenever possible, attend them.