

The Association of Women House Property Managers,
Abford House, Wilton Road, Victoria, S.W. 1.

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THE MANAGEMENT OF WORKING CLASS HOUSE PROPERTY,

BY

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THE importance of management in connection with working-class house property can hardly be exaggerated. Both for old and new houses efficient management is equally essential. Neglect of efficient management, combined with the lack of proper planning and allowing houses to be huddled together into courts and back yards has brought about the inheritance of slums with which we have to deal to-day. Besides the conditions familiar to us as "slums" there is the ordinary deterioration of house property with which the local sanitary authorities have to deal by means of notices to owners, not always received in a friendly spirit, and carried out if at all often grudgingly. What a different atmosphere can be produced by putting the houses under efficient management, those who have had intimate and first-hand experience of both conditions know well.

The question of efficiency enters into every branch and detail of the work of management, of which the following gives a brief outline:—

1. *Collection of rents.*—To do this efficiently the manager must call regularly on every tenant, prompt and regular payment being accepted on both sides as one of the conditions of tenancy. If this condition is generally observed the vicious system by which the thrifty are made to pay for the thriftless is abolished. This weekly or fortnightly visit is important, not only on account of the rents, but as giving an opportunity of getting a personal knowledge of the tenants, hearing any complaints they may have to make and dealing with them on the spot. Their complaints may relate to some condition in the house which needs attention, or difficulties may have arisen with their neighbours or may be due to some industrial trouble or to illness. The efficient manager must be prepared to deal with all these and that with promptitude, for the rent collection must be got through within definite hours and only a fraction of time can be allotted to each visit.

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2. *Repairs.*—Constant attention to repairs is an essential part of good management. The frequent and regular visits for the rent give an opportunity for noticing the necessity for external and internal repairs and getting them done without delay, thus keeping the houses up to the mark. We see the effect of the neglect of small repairs in the gradual deterioration of much house property, and as the houses have been allowed to go downhill, the occupants are apt to go down with them. Whereas where there is prompt payment of rent on the one hand and prompt attention to the necessary repairs on the other, there is also the right kind of give and take between landlord and tenant.

3. *Payment of rates and taxes, and attendance at Assessment Committees.*—This is all part of the work of an efficient manager. The management on some estates hold very strongly that rent and rates should be paid by the tenant as separate items and have carried out this system, the rates being collected weekly with the rents and entered in a separate column in the rent books. It is obvious that this arrangement increases the work of accounts and bookkeeping, but it is more satisfactory for the tenant and from the point of view of citizenship. The tenant knows how much he is paying in rates, takes an interest in what they represent and in their rise or fall.

4. *Selection of new tenants.*—Although at present, owing to the provisions of the Rent Restrictions Act, the manager has little to do under this head, under normal conditions it is a part of the work in which the efficiency of the management is especially tested. A visit to the home of the prospective tenant is very important, together with accurate knowledge as to number and ages of the family with a view to the prevention of overcrowding. References given must be taken up. In these interviews judgment and experience are very necessary, for without going to the extreme practice of Holland, where special blocks are set apart for the undesirable, care should be taken that the incoming tenants are likely to make good neighbours to the occupants of the adjoining tenements.

5. *Prevention of overcrowding.*—The prevention of overcrowding, touched upon in connection with incoming tenants, is in normal times a constant part of the efficient manager's work. Under present conditions, until more houses are forthcoming, it cannot be satisfactorily dealt with. As an example, on an estate recently placed under good management, a case was found of a family of six, with the mother suffering from cancer, living in one room. The congestion on this estate was so great that it was ten months before a move could be arranged which would give the family two rooms, one of considerable size.

6. *Keeping accounts and sending in a quarterly or half-yearly account to the owner.*—It is obvious that this part of the work must be done with accuracy and clearness, and that in these days especially it calls for good business qualities.

To sum up this brief outline, efficient management implies general supervision of the property with a view to the best interests both of owner and tenant, by persons possessing both those traits of character which will render them naturally fitted for such work and the special training essential to prepare them for it.

A few words, then, as to this special training. The foundation should be a good general education, which has instilled right principles and has helped to make the mind alert, capable of judgment and decision and interested in wider questions than the daily narrow round. Some knowledge of economics is necessary, since the manager is bound to encounter the industrial problems of the day in practical form and needs sound knowledge as a guide both to opinions and action. The necessity for some knowledge of building construction is obvious, as also of sanitation. The Public Health and Housing Acts must have been mastered, also the law of landlord and tenant and the assessment and rating of property. A good working knowledge of accounts is also necessary.

It is advisable that candidates for the work should prepare themselves to take the Certificate of the Surveyors' Institution and thus become fully qualified for Estate Management. The College of Estate Management, Lincoln's Inn Fields, prepares students for the examinations for this Certificate. This gives the theoretical part of the training, the practical part being taken under fully trained managers on working class estates in different parts of London.

Then as to personality. No amount of special training will make a good house property manager if the right kind of personality is lacking. The essential qualities include strength of mind and body, a keen sense of justice, wide sympathy and patience, and a true and deep interest, not only in the property but in its occupants, with a strong purpose to be of service to both tenants and owners in the wisest ways.

Given the right personality and the right education and training, it is perhaps of little moment whether the work is done by men or women. There are, however, certain arguments in favour of women. Generally speaking, it is the woman who pays the rent, the woman has the management of the home, and it is natural that a woman should understand other women's house and home difficulties better than a man. It was this that Miss Octavia Hill saw when she began her work in London some sixty years ago with the acquisition and management of a few small houses.

The extension of the work.—Octavia Hill worked upon two main principles:—(1) The principle of co-operation. She saw that the spirit inspiring all the relations between landlord and tenant must be that of co-operation, each doing his share and fulfilling his part of the mutual obligations. (2) The principle of sound business methods. She saw also that unless the work that she inaugurated were carried out on sound business principles and made to pay, it

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would never take any real hold or spread as she hoped. Accordingly, she started on a firm financial basis and always worked on those lines. Consequently her work did not die with her, but spread and developed until now in London alone there are over 6,000 tenancies under the capable management of specially trained women, the properties being severally owned by the Crown, the Ecclesiastical Commissioners, various companies, and private owners. As to municipal bodies, one of the London Borough Councils have put a part of their working class house property into the hands of trained women managers, and in the country a Rural District Council (Amersham, Bucks) have put their State-aided cottages in thirteen villages under the management of a trained woman, who has to traverse 64 miles a week in the course of her work. It is claimed that management on these lines, with punctual payment of rent on the one hand and prevention of deterioration through prompt attention to repairs on the other, gives good results both morally and financially, and it is to be hoped that other local authorities will follow these examples.

The Report of the Unhealthy Areas Committee (1921), of which the present Minister of Health was the Chairman, recommends "That pending reconstruction local authorities should be encouraged to purchase areas declared by resolution to be unhealthy, and to improve the housing conditions therein by alteration and repair in accordance with a scheme approved by the Ministry of Health, collecting rents and managing the property on the Octavia Hill system." Strong testimony in favour of the system is also given by Mr. I. G. Gibbon, writing from the Ministry of Health, in his Introduction contributed to a short work entitled "House Property and its Management." He writes, "Management of house property on the general lines laid down by her (Octavia Hill), adapted and developed, and, as I believe, with increasing emphasis on co-operative self-management, will help materially not only in the minor achievement of preventing property from degenerating into slums—and this, as experience shows, may well happen even with good and well-planned property—but in the greater achievement of attaining that higher standard of contentment and of pride of home and locality which should be the aim of all those who have the interests of the country at heart."

The system has been at work in Edinburgh for years and has spread as far afield as Holland and America, but our own provincial towns have been slow to take it up, though some attempt to do so has been made in a few—Manchester especially having a Housing Company successfully running on these lines.

Applications and inquiries with regard to the work may be addressed to The Association of Women House Property Managers, Abford House, Wilton Road, Victoria, S.W.1.

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