

## Rural "Slum Clearance."

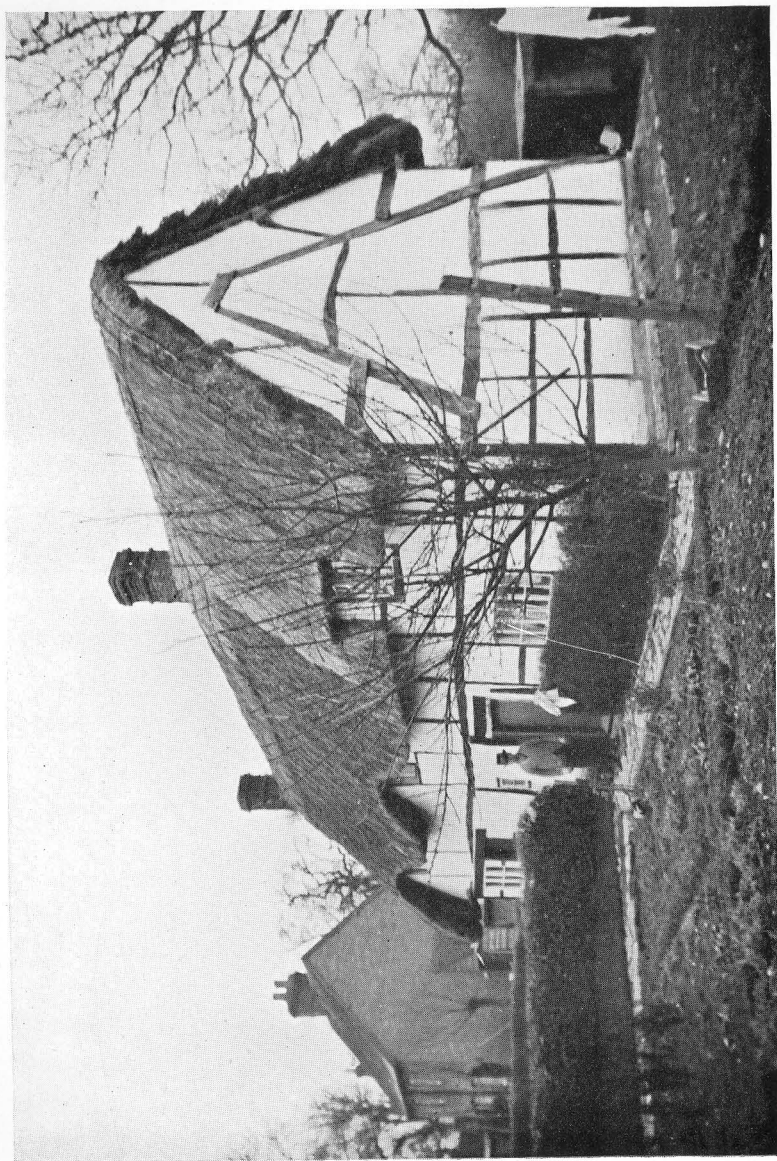
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By C. BIRDWOOD WILLCOCKS, F.R.I.B.A.

**T**HE National Slum Clearance Scheme threatens many of the most beautiful cottages in the country. Recently published figures showed that in seven of the rural districts of Berkshire alone, 421 houses have been scheduled for demolition unless their owners carry out the necessary repairs and improvements. The fate which threatens these Berkshire cottages awaits similar homesteads throughout the country, and it is obvious that unless some satisfactory solution of the problem be forthcoming, in another fifty years very few of the old English cottages, which add so much to the charm of the countryside, will remain.

The Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings and the Council for the Preservation of Rural England are both keenly interested in the matter. In order to obtain useful data, they recently arranged, with the consent of the local authorities concerned, for an inspection to be made of the cottages which had been recommended for demolition, if not put into good condition, under the Wantage and Faringdon Rural District Councils' slum clearance schemes. As the result of these inspections reports have been prepared dealing with the problem both from the practical and amenity standpoints. In the Wantage Rural District area 98 cottages were inspected, and in the Faringdon district 104. Somewhat similar reports have also been made on condemned cottages in Kent and Wiltshire. The results of these inspections are exceedingly interesting. They show that the action of the local authorities in scheduling the cottages was justified. Most of the houses had to be condemned, either on account of their having been allowed to get into bad repair, or owing to their suffering from defects in planning, construction or sanitation which render them unsuitable for habitation. It was found, however, that many of the cottages could be re-conditioned and made into comfortable, roomy homes for considerably less than it would cost to build new houses. Throughout these districts are numerous typically old English cottages showing strong local characteristics, but often in bad repair. It is sincerely

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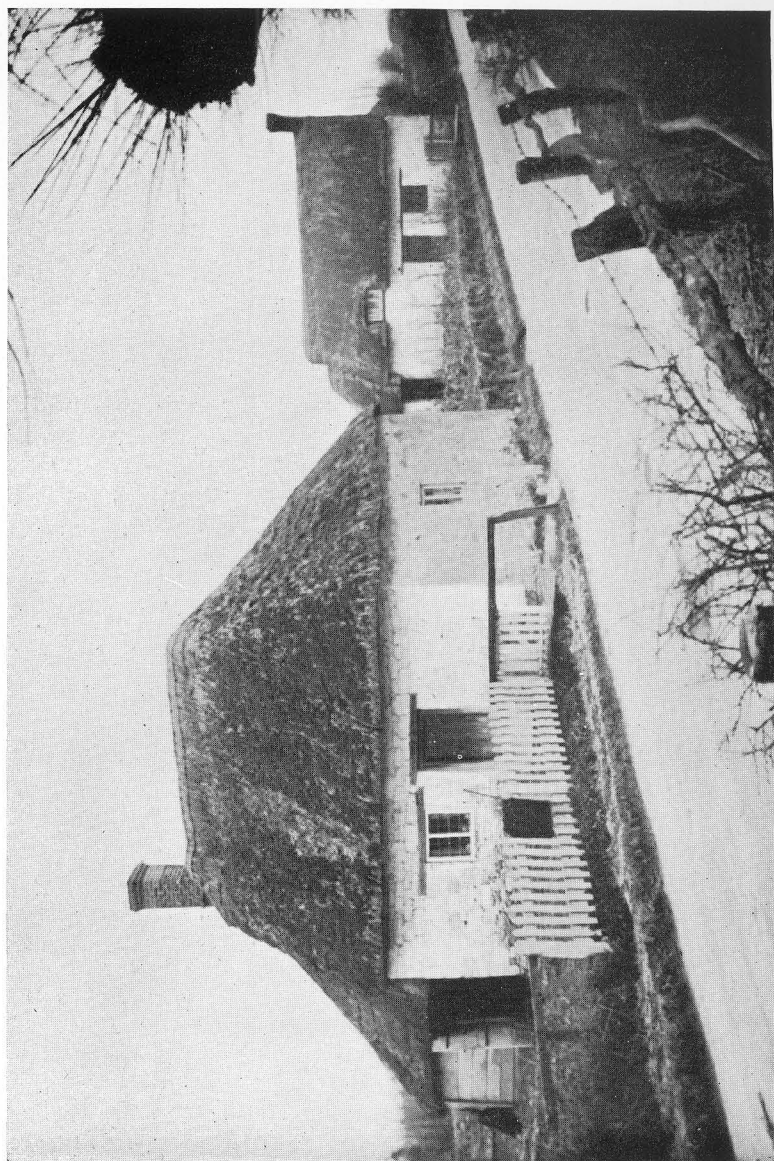
GROVE, WANTAGE.

hoped that they will, whenever possible, be sympathetically re-conditioned and so preserved, as their demolition will do much to destroy the beauty of the countryside and involve considerable outlay on the provision of new houses. A decision with regard to some of the less habitable of them should not be too long delayed, as when such buildings become derelict there is a strong tendency for them to be pulled down. In fact, since the recent inspection was made, at least one repairable house, an interesting half-timber building dated 1643, has been demolished.

When making the survey the cottages were divided into four classes :—(1) repairable cottages of artistic merit which should be preserved : (2) repairable cottages of some artistic merit, which, from the amenity aspect, are worth preserving : (3) cottages of little artistic merit, but which it might be economical to re-condition : (4) cottages apparently not worth re-conditioning, or to be demolished or used for other purposes.

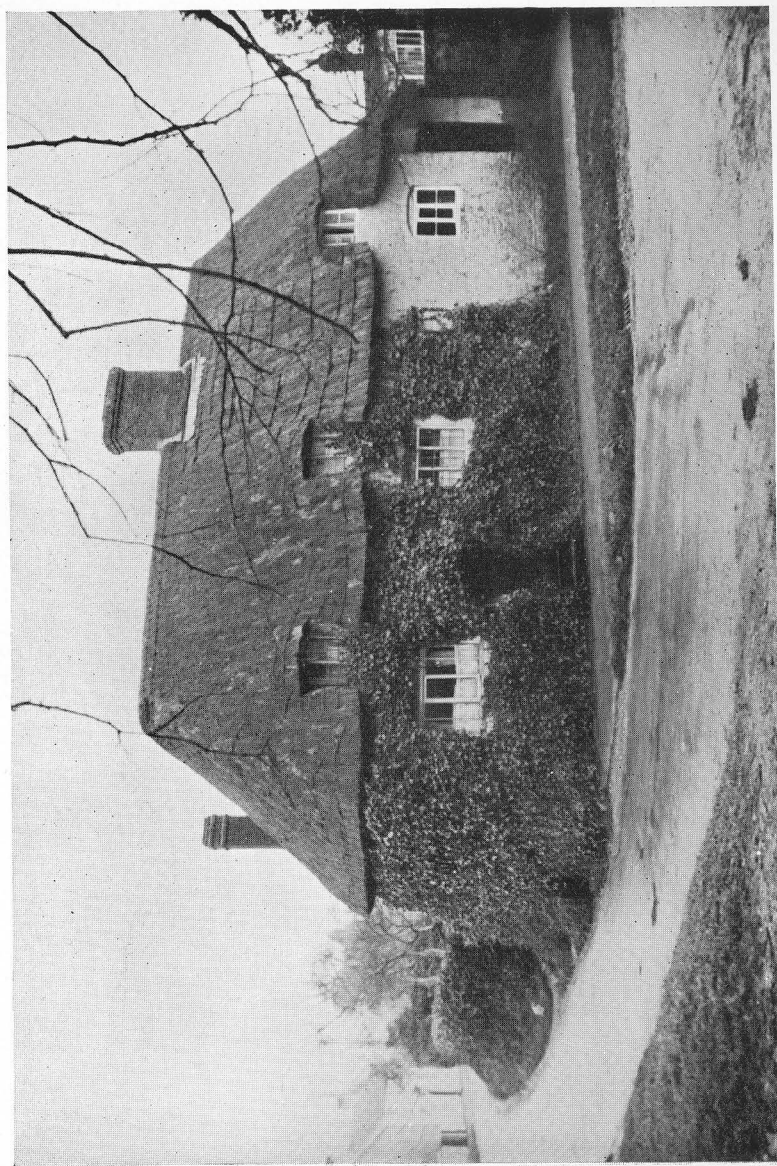
In the Wantage Rural District Council's area 29 cottages came in the first class, 25 in the second, 12 in the third and 32 in the last category. In the Faringdon Rural District Council's area the figures were 35, 15, 19 and 35 respectively. In both districts, therefore, apparently only about one third of the cottages are not worth preserving. The cottages in the Wantage area are chiefly in the downland villages : Aldworth, Blewbury, Childrey, the Hanneys, East Hendred, Sparsholt, and many others famed for their beauty. Some of the condemned houses form pleasant groups, often at right angles to the road, or are important elements in street pictures of great charm, and their removal would be a serious loss to the beauty of their village. Numbers of these old homesteads are of half-timber construction with a frame of Berkshire oak and panels filled in, either with the original wattle and daub, or with brickwork, frequently laid in a herringbone pattern. Several examples of 'crucked' cottages remain. These buildings show one of the earliest existing forms of construction used in the erection of small dwellings. Such houses were built on a framework consisting of gable ends formed of two roughly squared heavy inclined timbers meeting at the ridge and joined by another beam. On this stout frame the walls and roof were erected.

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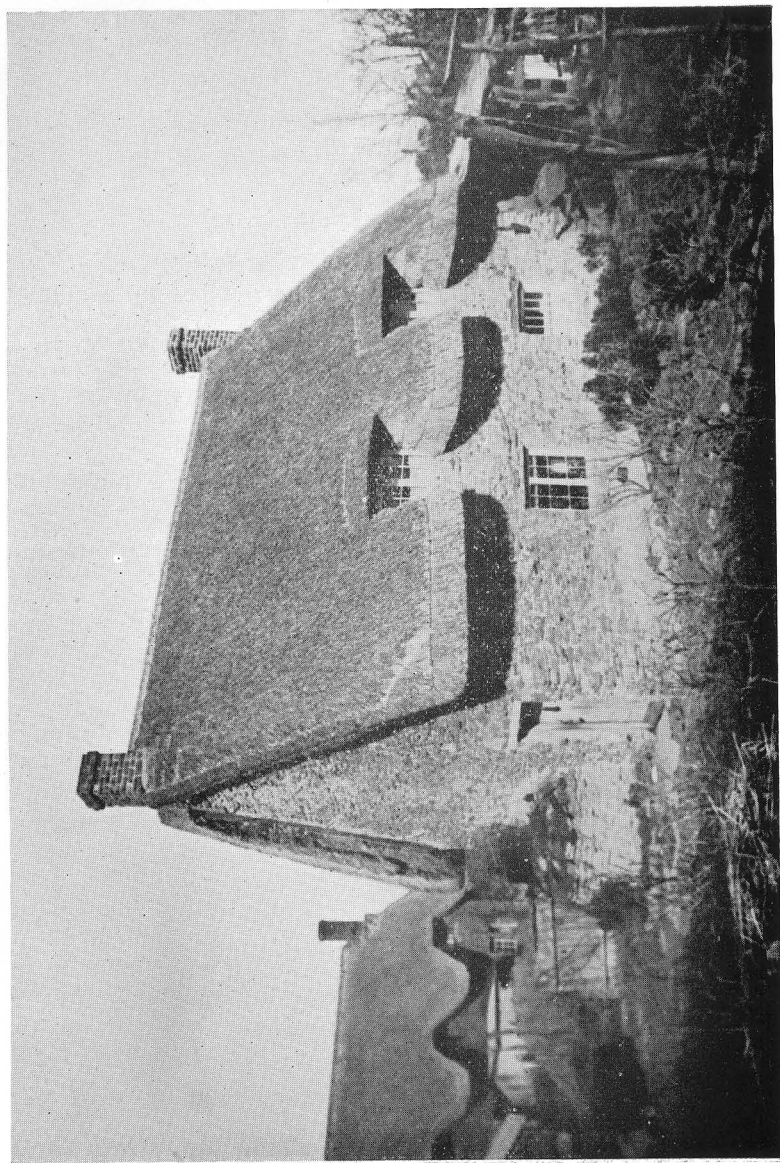
UFFINGTON.

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CHILDREY.

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HINTON WALDRIST.

The pair of cottages at Grove illustrate this form of construction, but in this case the walls have been carried up above the 'crucks' to give more room inside. Many of the later cottages had brick walls. The cottages at Chilton are good examples of the Georgian brickwork which gave a pleasant character to the houses of that period. In the western part of the district stone walls are met with, as in the cottages at Childrey. Clunch, hard chalk dug from the neighbouring hills, is also frequently used. An interesting group of scheduled cottages at Upton, dated 1706, has all the outside walls built of this material. The old roofs were generally thatched, but many have been re-roofed with local tiles. A few stone slated roofs are to be met with in this district, but they are more common farther west. Internally the cottages often contain a wealth of heavy oak beams and joists, such as in a beautiful L-shaped group in Horne Lane, East Hendred, and the picturesque row at Mount Pleasant, Compton, which form such a satisfactory termination to the street, and in one of which the Compton Pilgrims first met.

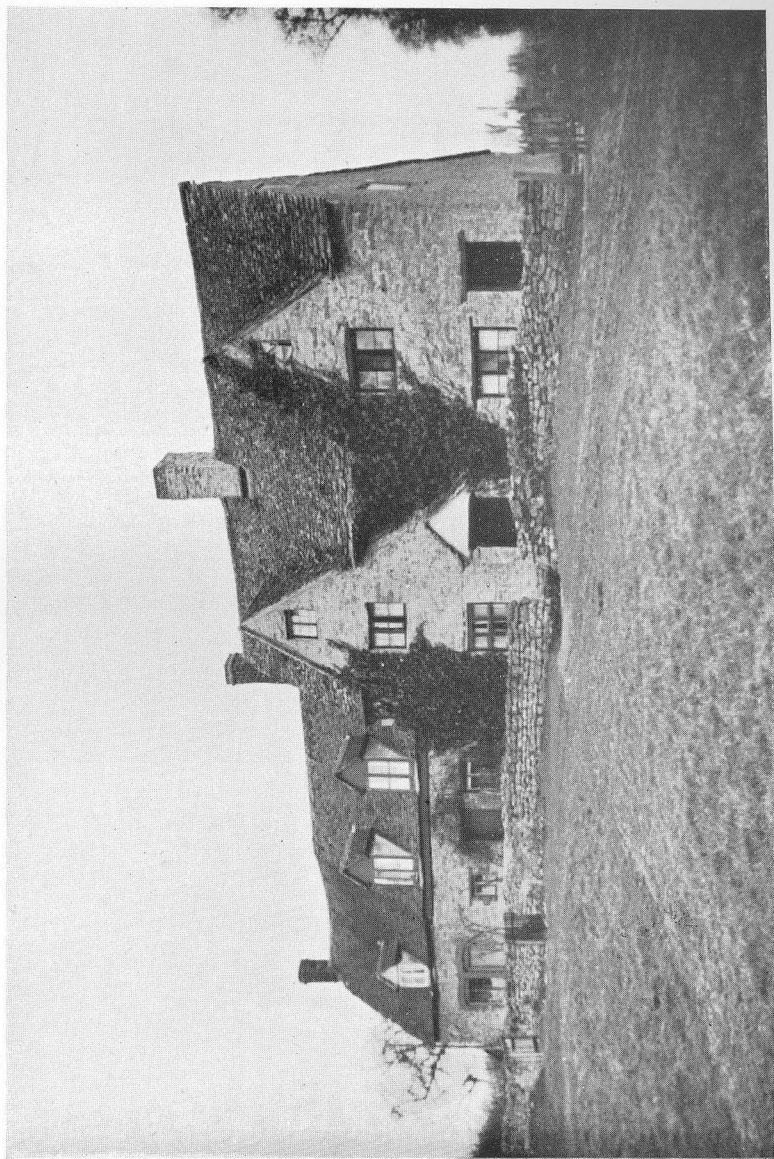
Many of these cottages have been inhabited by the same families for years. One at West Hanney is now occupied by the third generation, and there must be many more such cases.

The cottages in the Faringdon rural district are noticeable and differ from those in most other parts of the county. Stone and stone slates are the local materials, this being the stone district of Berkshire. Throughout the neighbourhood itself there is a considerable difference in the stone used, the kind depending on the supply available, which gives a strong local character to the villages. In Hinton Waldrist most of the old walls were built of thin beds of small stones, whilst in Faringdon medium-size stones were used. The local material at Uffington was clunch in fairly large blocks on a foundation of sarsen stones. In Ashbury alternate bands of clunch and sarsen, etc., are a feature of the walling. Practically all the old buildings in this part of the county were roofed with stone slates or thatch. Many of these old roofs remain and should, when possible, be carefully preserved. Interesting features are the staircases, a number of which are semi-circular on plan and probably based on stone traditions.

Three-storey cottages, somewhat unusual in many parts of the county, are not uncommon. The cottages in the Horsecroft at Stanford-in-the-Vale are characteristic of the buildings in this old-world village. On the chimney stack of the lower cottage is the date 1691. Two of the row of four cottages on the village green were once a beautiful small stone-walled and stone-tiled house. In one is the old semi-circular staircase, and on the front gables are the initials, " IY.HY," and the date 1670. A cottage of the same period at Duxford has the date 1659 carved on a wooden corbel under the end of a beam. A similar cottage at Uffington is dated 1697. These dates are of interest, as the age of old cottages is often a matter of considerable conjecture.

The cottage illustrated at Hinton Waldrist is a good example of the local style of building, of which there are several excellent examples in the village, mostly newly thatched. The same family has occupied this cottage for three generations. In another large cottage—once a pair—are some surprisingly massive roof timbers. In the adjacent hamlet of Duxford all the buildings are of a style similar to those at Hinton Waldrist. A feature of these houses is the heavily moulded oak beams found in several of the rooms. The five very characteristic cottages which have been scheduled compose the greater part of this hamlet. In Uffington are many early cottages with walls of hard chalk, or clunch. Similar typical little buildings are found at Longcot and elsewhere in this, the Thomas Hughes country. The two groups of scheduled houses on the main road at Shrivenham are close to one another and make one of the most beautiful street pictures in that attractive village. In Lechlade several of the listed houses are essential features of this friendly little town and their destruction would be deplorable. The scheduled cottages at Longworth are built round three sides of a court, with one side parallel to the street. The group consists of four roomy homes full of heavy timbers and retaining several of the original Jacobean windows. They are some of the most interesting cottages in the county. Unfortunately the walls are defective in places, but the buildings are repairable and should certainly be saved.

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STANFORD-IN-THE-VALE.

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STANFORD-IN-THE-VALE.

But how are they and numbers more like them to be preserved? Many suffer from the defects common to such buildings—low rooms, steep staircases and inter-communicating bedrooms with small windows and exposed rafters, sometimes open to the ridge. When reconditioning such cottages the worst defects in planning can often be overcome by the conversion of existing pantries into useful sculleries or the addition of new sculleries, sometimes with extra bedrooms over, and the formation of larders. On the first floor a passage can frequently be partitioned off to separate the bedrooms and additional light introduced by the insertion of windows in back elevations or gable ends. New windows should, however, always be in scale with, and similar to, the existing old ones so as not to destroy the proportions of the cottages on which so much of their charm depends. A simple drainage system is frequently desirable. The action of the local authorities in scheduling the cottages will apparently result in a number being repaired by their owners. Others will be sold for conversion into week-end homes, etc., but what of the remainder whose owners cannot afford to do them up satisfactorily? In 1926 the Government passed a Rural Housing Act to enable local authorities to provide grants, or loans, or both, to assist in such cases. Grants (of which the Government pay half) are given, subject to reasonable conditions, not exceeding in respect of each dwelling either two-thirds of the estimated cost of the work, or the sum of £100. Many old cottages have been reconditioned in Berkshire, Devonshire, Hampshire and other counties under this Act, but much more use could and should be made of it. That it is economical and in the interests of all concerned the following example will show:—

The total cost of recently converting three small cottages into two—one small and one medium size—including the erection of new sculleries and an extra bedroom, laying on water, a drainage system, general repairs and professional fees, etc., came to £500, towards which amount a grant of £200 was made. For the latter sum, therefore, the local authorities were relieved of the necessity of erecting two new cottages, whilst for £300 the owner was able

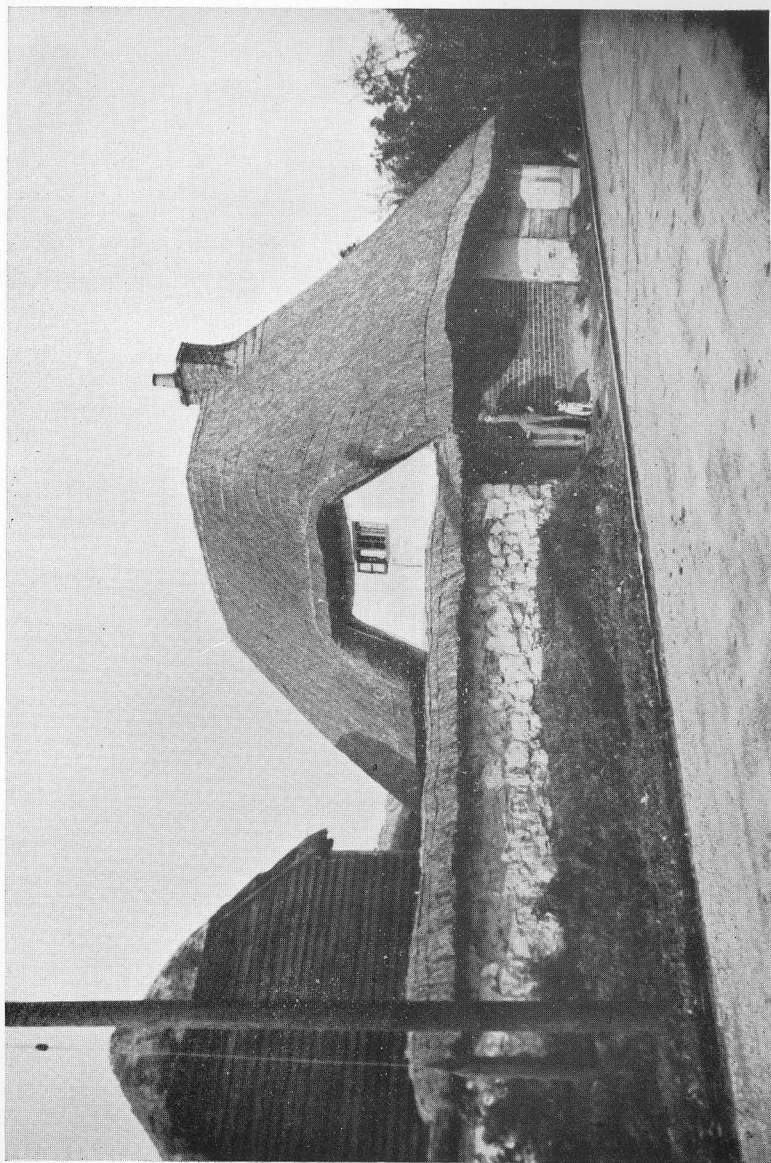
to convert his out-of-date buildings into a pair of useful modernised houses—apparently a good bargain from all points of view. Many cottages, of course, do not require additions, and could be reconditioned for considerably less. Finally there is the case of the repairable cottages of sufficient artistic merit to be worth preserving, but which the owners cannot afford to recondition, even with the help of a grant or loan, and which, if condemned, will have practically little more than a site value.

In some districts sufficient local interest may exist to enable public utility societies to be formed to purchase and recondition these cottages. It is doubtful, however, in view of the wide areas over which they are scattered, if much will be done in this way. A more practicable arrangement will apparently be for the local authorities to purchase and recondition these houses, as has been successfully done by the Cheltenham Corporation. Other local authorities, it is hoped, will follow this example. By whomsoever the cottages are reconditioned, however, it is most desirable that they should be repaired in such a way as not to destroy their original character and charm, and local authorities, before sanctioning the expenditure of public money on this work, should satisfy themselves that such will be the case.

It is sincerely to be hoped that widespread action will be taken to preserve, when practicable, as many as possible of these beautiful old English cottage homes. Examples of the disappearing craftsmanship of the countryside, they should surely be regarded as a treasured heritage to be carefully preserved for the generations to come.

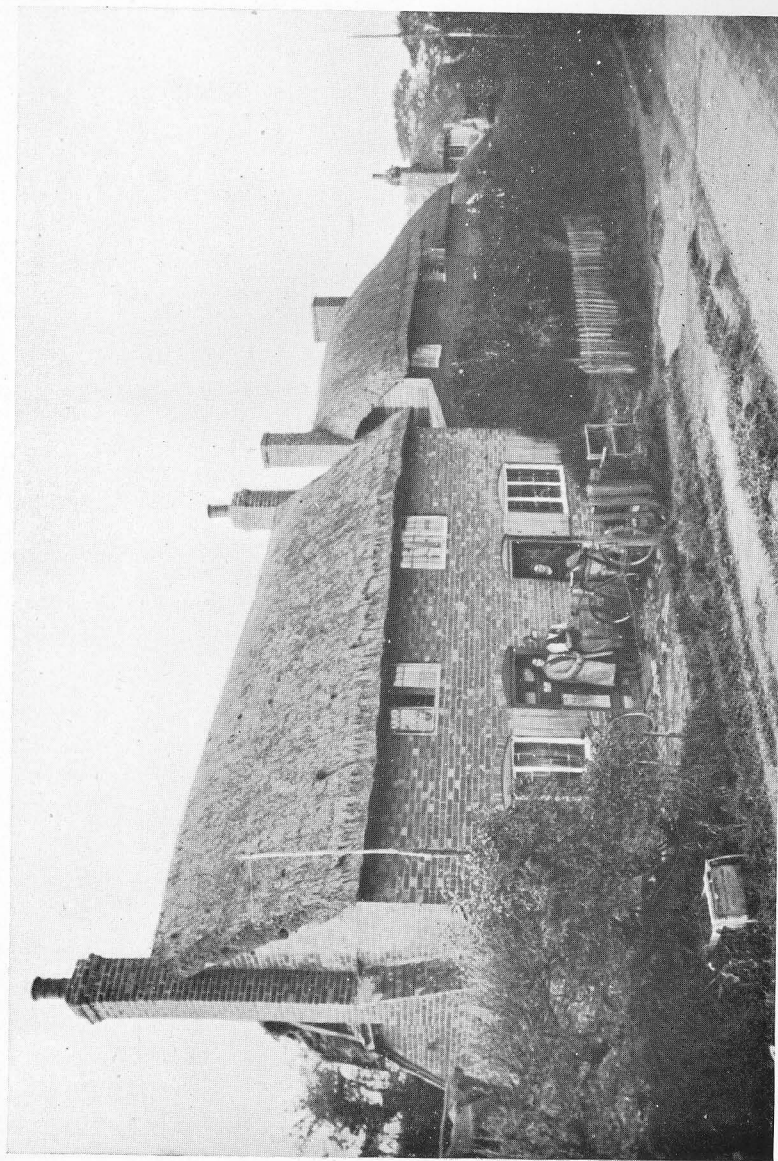
N.B. The illustrations are from photographs taken by the author of the article [Ed.]

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BLEWBEURY.

RURAL "SLUM CLEARANCE."



CHILTON.