

# **Housing the Workers**

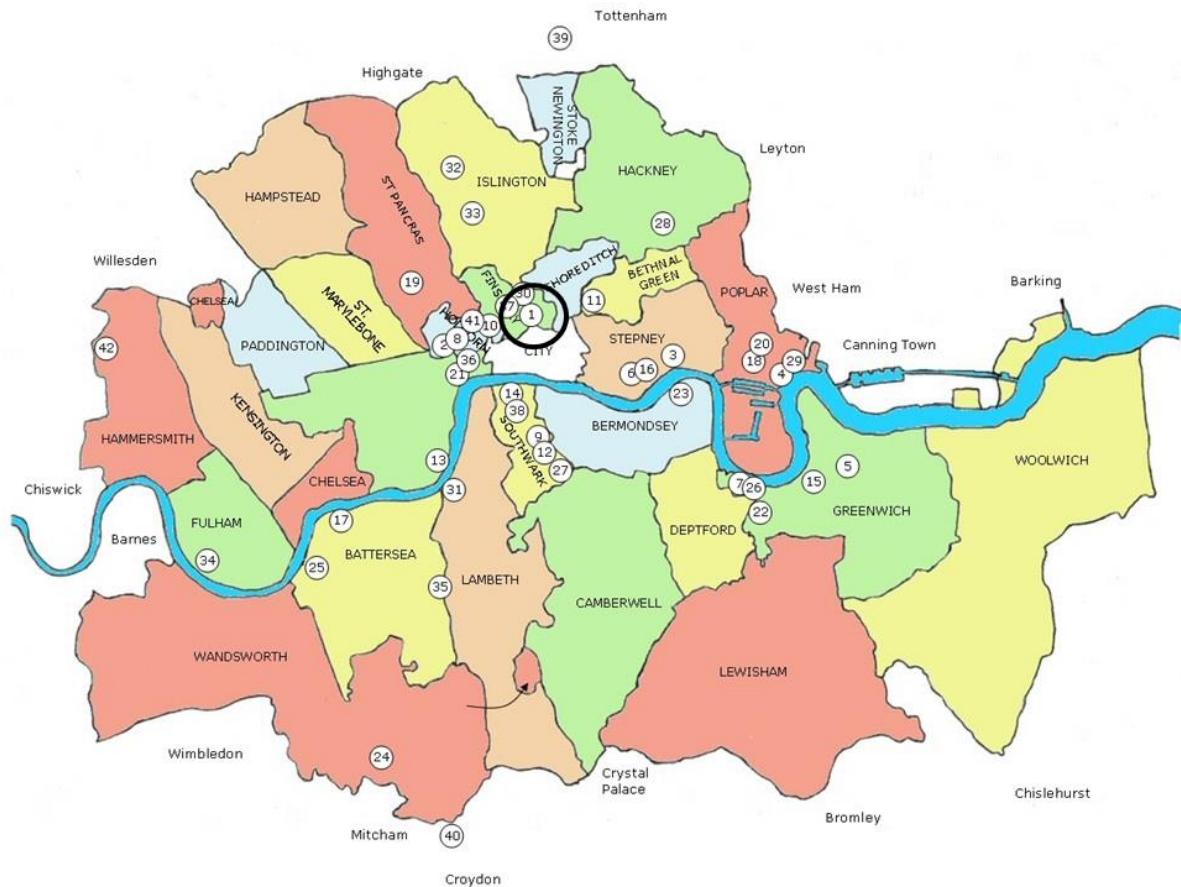
## **Early London County Council Housing**

### **1889-1914**

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#### **Part 3 – the schemes in detail**

##### **1 – Dufferin Street costermonger's dwellings**



## Dufferin Street costermonger's dwellings

Built privately 1889

Purchased in 1891 by the LCC under Part III of the 1890 Housing of the Working Classes Act

The first LCC building completed is not representative of the Council buildings that followed, and was not actually built by the Council, but was purchased by them.



Fig. 1: Site of Dufferin Street costermongers dwellings from 1916 OS map

The history of the buildings is an interesting one, with the results not meeting the good intentions in the original plan. The history starts in 1877 when some local costermongers, who were to be displaced by the Whitecross Street slum clearance scheme, requested that the Metropolitan Board of Works should build costermongers dwellings. Despite promises, the MBW had no plans to build any dwellings for these people (who needed storage space for chattels, carts and donkeys). Some angry costermongers tried to raise interest to fight the MBW but it took a local tobacconist, a Mr Hibbert, to organise the men well enough to form the Watch Committee of the St Luke's Costermongers. The costermongers were successful in embarrassing the MBW enough for the latter to agree to sell a plot of land to the committee for £658, which was considerably less than its market value of approximately £3,000.<sup>1</sup> The land was just to the west of Bunhill Fields and north of the City of London boundary, and had to be used for the construction of dwellings for costermongers and storage for their chattels, carts

and donkeys. Despite this success, things started to go wrong for the committee from the beginning.

On a legal point it seems that the committee had not formally agreed to purchase the land and the MBW took Mr Hibbert's word for the agreement. This agreement required someone responsible to purchase the land (rather than a committee) and a suitable person, a Mr Orsman, was put forward. There is no clue in the Council minutes as to who this Mr Orsman is, but there is a William J Orsman in the 1881 and 1891 censuses, living in Hackney, an Inspector in the GPO and a member of the County Council in the 1891 census. In 1887 he wrote a letter to the MBW but this was not delivered by Mr Hibbert, who subsequently destroyed it for reasons that are not explained in the minutes. One assumes that the MBW were therefore not aware of him, or at least of his commitment, yet they still sold the land to members of the Watch Committee on the 27<sup>th</sup> March 1888. The committee members were now the legal owners but did not have the authority from the rest of the committee or the costermongers themselves. The conveyance stipulated that dwellings had to be erected for costermongers, with sheds for carts and donkeys. A builder was found to construct the dwellings, a William Lemon Kelleway of St Marylebone. William Kelleway was a speculative builder who agreed to build the costermonger's dwellings for £9,591. He was also supplied the money for the land purchase and held a mortgage against the committee. To further complicate matters, he raised much of his money from a third party. The resulting buildings, completed in June 1889, were considered to be of inferior construction and valued by the Council at just £7,058, over £1,500 less than the cost to build. Most of the tenements were not rented to costermongers and William Kelleway went bankrupt in 1890. The committee were, not surprisingly, somewhat aggrieved that 'their' building was owned by a bankrupt and he had let dwellings to tenants who were not costermongers.

William Kelleway tried to sell the property to the Council to help with his insolvency but the Council were advised not to buy the property under any circumstances. The Council placed pressure on Mr Kelleway as regards the rules of the conveyance that it should be for costermongers only, and that the structure itself did not meet the needs of them. The Council considered a number of solutions but decided to purchase the buildings under Part III of the 1890 Housing of the Working Classes Act, and was offered the building by Mr Kelleway for £7,300 in June 1891. The Council must have balked at this cost as they finally purchased it for £6,300 in December 1891.

Thus the Council came in possession of a sub-standard block dwelling built specifically for costermongers. The Council, to their credit, rented the tenements only to costermongers until 1900 when they relaxed the rules. The dwellings consisted of accommodation for 174 persons in 29 one-room, 23 two-room and 4 three-room tenements. There were also 12 stables and sheds. As for Mr Kelleway, he remained a bankrupt and was not released from this by the courts as they believed his bankruptcy was caused by bad book-keeping.<sup>ii</sup> On the 1901 census he is living as a Clerk of Works in less palatial circumstances in Holloway, North London, having moved from St Johns Wood Rd (home of Lords Cricket Ground) where he lived in 1891.

The 1901 census shows that the buildings are mainly occupied by locals with many in costermonger or dealer trades. The census shows a good occupancy of 86% against the theoretical maximum of 174 persons. Of the 56 tenements, only 6 are officially overcrowded, and all of these by just a single occupant. The majority of the heads of household were locally born. All this indicates a building that was doing its job in helping to house local working class

people. A number of the rooms had been combined to make larger single tenement for bigger families. The original 55 tenements, as built, had been combined to generate 44 tenements.

The 1911 census shows the buildings continued to be well occupied with only 2 of the 56 tenements un-occupied. The big difference since the 1901 census is that the occupants were in a wide variety of working class occupations with a relatively small number who could be classed as street traders. The census shows an occupancy that has reduced from the 86% in 1901 to 74%. As in 1901, only 6 were officially overcrowded, and all of these by just a single occupant. All this indicates a building that was continuing to do its job in helping to house local working class people although few were costermongers or street traders. The census address for the buildings is “Costermonger’s Dwellings” although some individuals had given their address on the census return sheets as “LCC Buildings”, which may be deliberate on their part.

Despite the poor quality of the construction, the buildings still stand today and are known as Dufferin Court and have been owned since 1967 by The Peabody Trust, who also own most of the other buildings that occupy Dufferin Street. The modern photographs in the pictures below give no impression of the supposedly poor quality of construction. The storage sheds occupy the whole of the ground floor at the back and are clear to see in Fig. 3.



Fig. 2: Dufferin Court, front 2009



Fig. 3: Dufferin Court, rear 2009

## Footnotes

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<sup>i</sup> C. J. Stewart; The Housing Question in London; The London County Council; 1900; p139  
<sup>ii</sup> The Times, 13<sup>th</sup> December 1890