Housing the Workers

Early London County Council Housing 1889-1914

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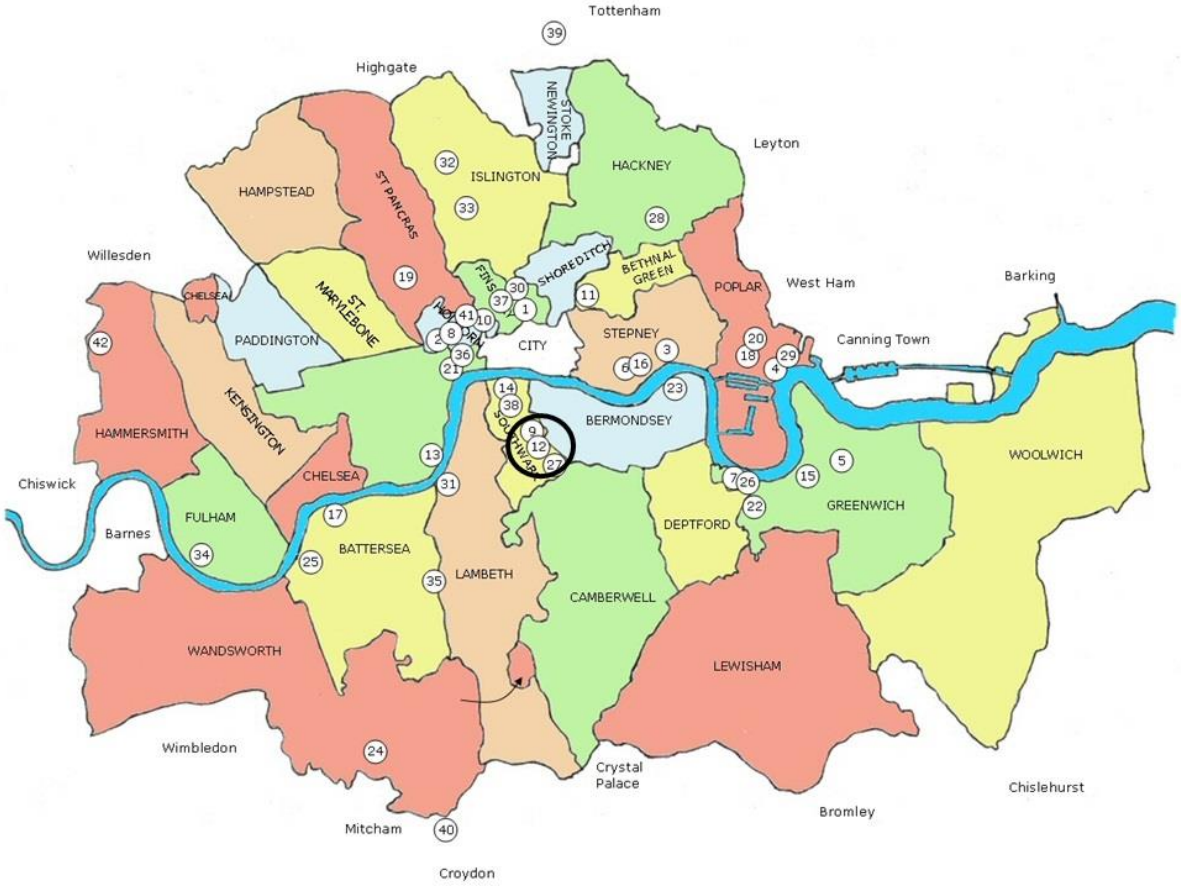
Part 3 – the schemes in detail

12 – Falcon Court, Southwark



Falcon Court scheme, Southwark

Hunter, Murphy and Gardiner Buildings, Borough Road, May 1900
Cobham Buildings, Pocock Street, October 1900.
Built under Parts II & III of the 1890 Housing of the Working Classes Act

In 1889 the medical officer for Southwark put forward a plan to clear a slum area west of Borough High Street in and around Birdcage Alley and Falcon Court. The Secretary of State proposed that the Council should contribute 1/3rd of the cost, but the vestry already had schemes under consideration in the area and requested that the Council take on the scheme and expand it to other streets and alleys in the area, but the name Falcon Court remained to describe the expanded scheme. The slum area had a particularly evil reputation and the death rate was high. The map in Fig. 1 below shows the whole area in question.

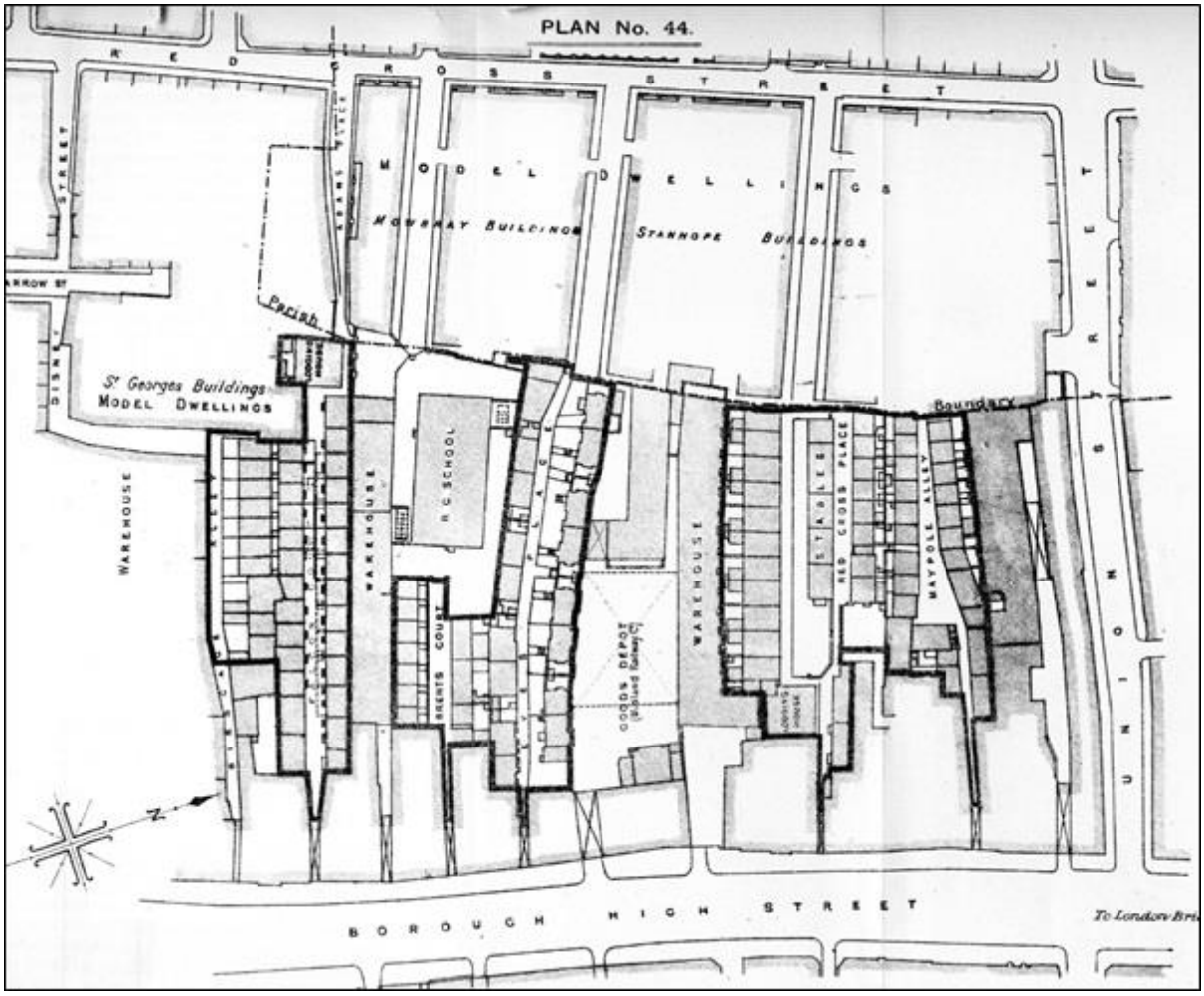


Fig. 1: Falcon Street redevelopment area[i]

Before discussing the site it is worth noting the "GOODS DEPOT (Midland Railway Co)" site in the middle of the map. It may seem surprising to see a Midland Railway depot south of the Thames but all the railway companies had depots spread around London as a collection point for baggage and goods. The packages to and from the East Midlands and Yorkshire, via St Pancras Station north of the Thames, would have been collected here for onward transportation.

Returning to Falcon Court, it was deemed unsuitable for replacement housing because of its location and, no doubt, due to the value of the land because of its proximity to Borough High Street. However, working class housing had to be built in the vicinity to house the numbers displaced (set at 500 persons) and other nearby sites had to be found. The vestry agreed to contribute half of the costs and the resulting net cost to the Council of the purchase was £15,500. The sites chosen for the new housing were in nearby Borough Rd and Pocock St. Neither of these were slum clearances and so the purchase of those sites involved just the land with no tenants or landlords to worry about. The purchase of the Borough Road site from the trustees of the Bridge House Estate was carried through in 1896 for £8000 and the Pocock St site was purchased for £5,900. As the clearance of Falcon Court was carried out under Part II of the 1890 Act the vestry had to contribute towards the costs and they were ordered to pay half the clearance cost of £15,500. The construction of the replacement housing by the Council (under Part II of the 1890 Act) was on land purchased under Part III.

By 1896, the Council were involved in a number of large housing schemes including Boundary Street and Millbank. As a result, the Council's own architects felt they were unable to design the new buildings in the time allowed and they therefore commissioned Joseph, Son and Smithem as architects for the Borough Rd housing. The company was well-known in its day as designers of block dwellings, but the rather plain result reflects a lack of flair, although no worse than many being built at the time. The first plans submitted by the architects were rejected by the Council as having too high a density, and the architects submitted new plans of lower density and these were accepted[ii]. Unusually, the erection of the buildings was divided into 9 contracts on the advice of the architects and included tiling of halls and stairways by J Wedgewood and Sons Ltd. The result was 52 tenements of 2 rooms and 32 tenements of 3 rooms giving space for 400 persons. The total contract price was £22,934.

The Pocock Street site was an extension of a clearance in Green Street (soon to be renamed Rushworth Street) that also resulted in the aforementioned Merrow and Ripley Buildings. The resulting block, named Cobham Buildings, is unusual because no LCC photographs for it can be found. It is recorded that the plans, as submitted by the Council to the Local Government Board for approval in February 1899, were found objectionable because of the thinness of the party walls. Although the plans were altered to meet some of the criticisms, the Board stipulated two rules: one roomed tenements can only be rented by childless couples, two girls, or an elderly couple of the same sex; and the 2-roomed tenements to be rented to married couples with a maximum of two children both under 10. The Board withdrew these rules and allowed the Council to administer its own restrictions. Cobham Buildings was constructed by the Works Department in 1900 to house 278 people. The thinness of the party walls can clearly be seen when comparing the plan in Fig. 4 with that of Murphy Buildings in Fig. 3.

The map in Fig. 2 below shows the Borough Road site (Hunter, Murphy and Gardiner Buildings) and the Pocock Street site (Cobham Buildings). The former appear to have been named after leading individuals in the LCC at the time, but Cobham Buildings followed the example of the nearby Green & Gun Street buildings and was named after a pleasant Surrey town.

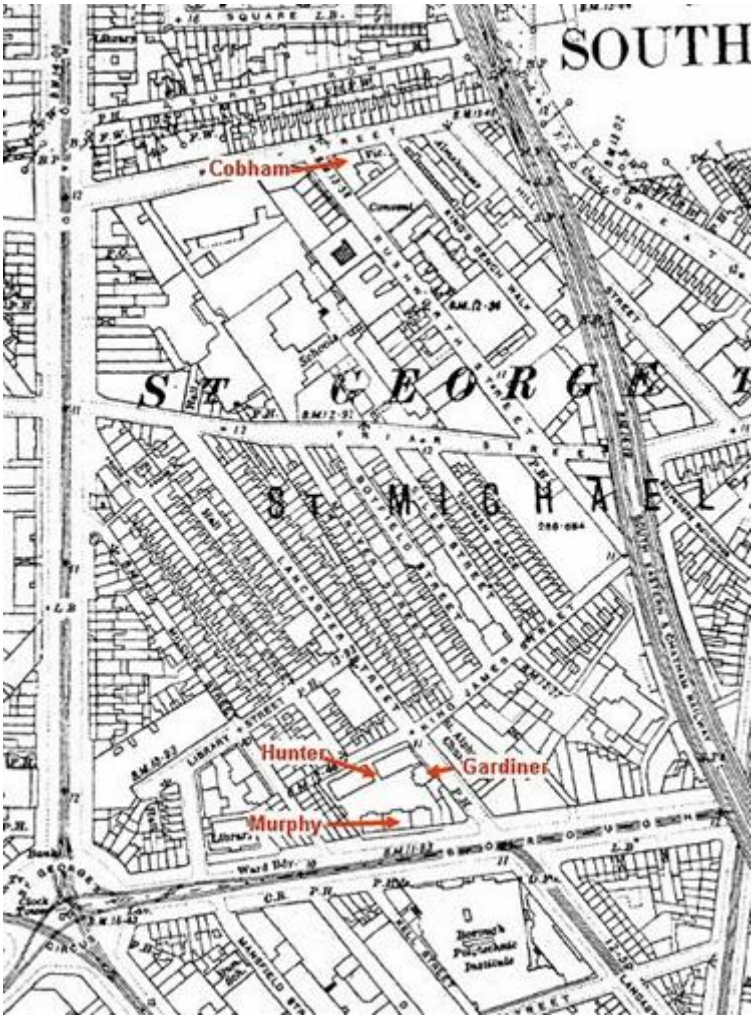


Fig. 2: Borough Rd site - OS Map, 1916

From the plan of Murphy Building in Fig. 3 below it would appear that the size of the rooms do not seem to be particularly generous, but the average size of living rooms was 173 sq. ft. with bedrooms averaging 119 sq. ft. These sizes are well above the Council's minimum recommendation of 146 and 96 sq. ft. respectively. Each tenement has a separate WC, a scullery, and a windowed space alongside the WC. The Hunter and Gardiner Buildings were of different design, with the latter small building having WCs accessed from the hall/landing rather than within the tenement, and a scullery shared between two tenements.

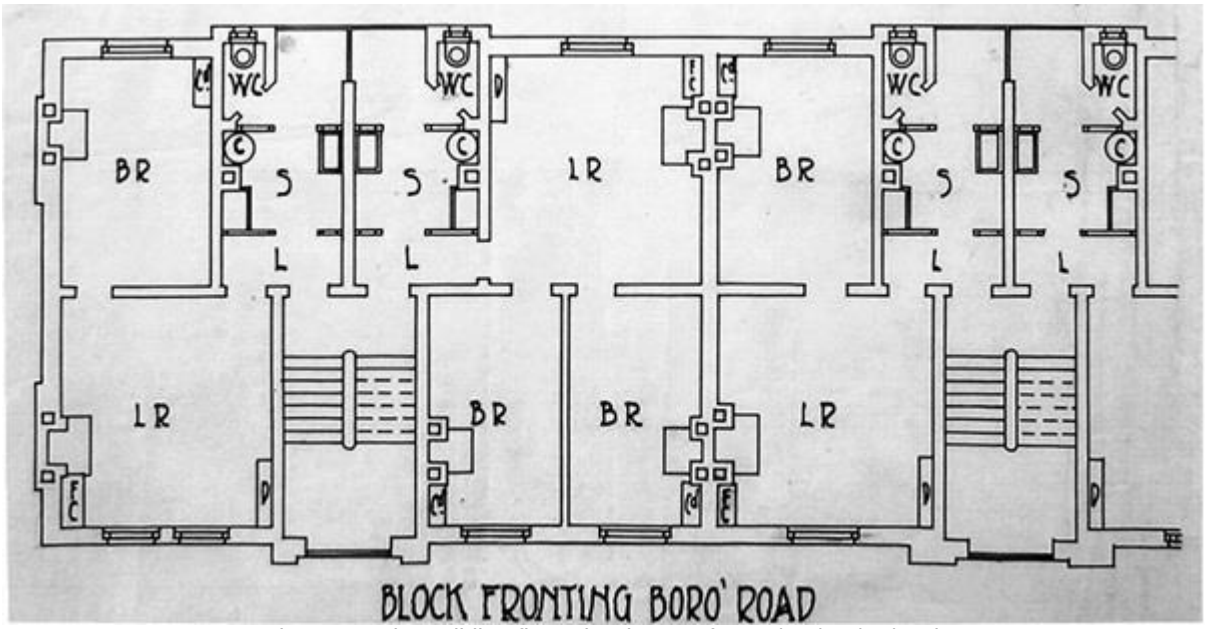


Fig. 3: Murphy Building floor plan (LMA ref: LCC/AR/HS/03/059)

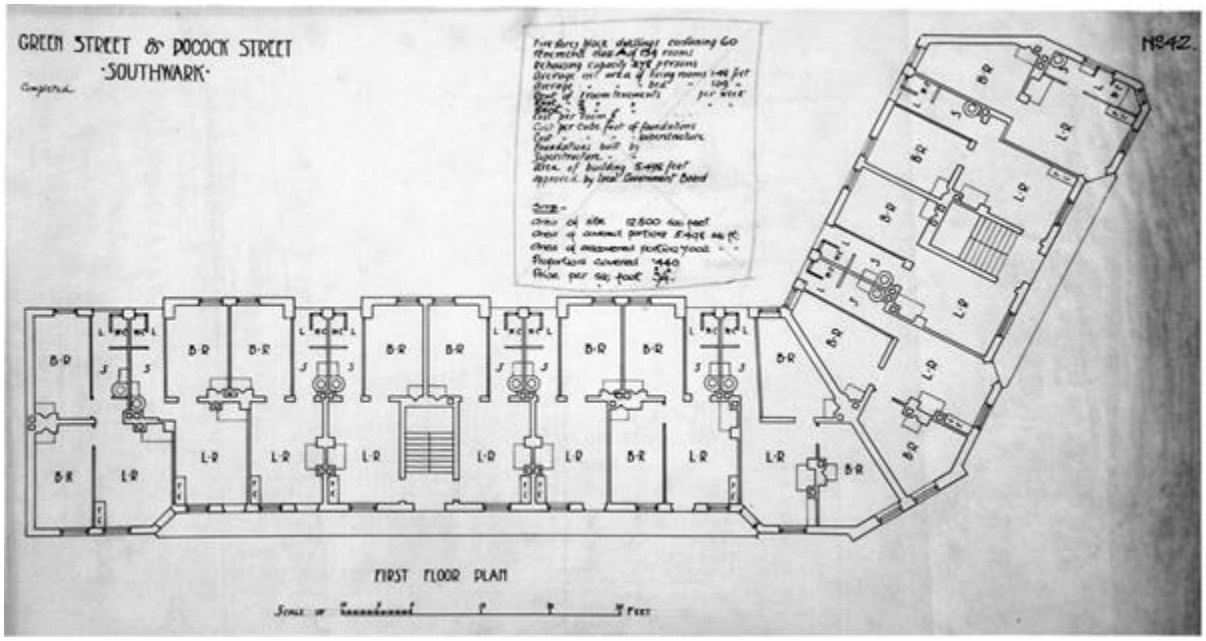


Fig. 4: Cobham Buildings floor plan (LMS ref: LCC/AR/HS/03/059)


Fig. 5: Murphy House (2005)


Fig. 6: Hunter (left) and Gardiner Houses (2005)

Note that the sixth floor in the roof space of Murphy House shown in Fig. 5 above was added when the buildings were modernised, and that Gardiner House is 4 storeys.

The costs of clearing Falcon Court and the building of the new working class housing is in Table 1 below. The figures are difficult to compare to other schemes because the new buildings were not constructed on the cleared site, and the costs are difficult to establish accurately from the Council's own publications. In particular, the net cost of the Falcon Court clearance is not itemised apart from the gross cost of the property being £35,500 (as against a net cost to the LCC of £15,500).

The Borough Rd dwellings made a profit of 4.9% on income in 1913-14, which was about average for all Council buildings, but the Cobham Buildings made a large 10.3% profit which is a surprise considering the buildings seem to have been constructed to lower standards than usual for the Council.

	Outgoings	Income	
Net cost to LCC of Falcon Court clearance	£15,500		
Purchase of Borough Rd site	£8,000		
Purchase of Pocock Street site	£5,900		
TOTAL PURCHASE COSTS			£29,400
Cost of Borough Rd buildings	£22,934		
Cost of Cobham Buildings	£12,664		
TOTAL COSTS			£64,998
Contribution by vestry (half the cost of clearance)		£7,750	
Cost per person (based on 678 persons)			£84pp
Balance of accounts, 1913-1914, Borough Rd	£1,738	£1,828	£90 (4.9%)
Balance of accounts, 1913-1914, Cobham Bldgs	£1,002	£1,119	£116 (10.3%)

Table 1: Costs for Borough Rd and Pocock Street schemes

The 1911 census returns show that the separate Cobham Buildings are well occupied but with little over-crowding. Of the 60 tenements, 3 are unoccupied and a mere 8 are officially over-crowded when the measure of 2 people per room is used. The tenants cover a wide number of occupations but with a good representation from the local printing and iron working trades. Only 13 heads of household are from a 3 mile radius indicating that the buildings have not met the needs of the local people. There are only 6 tenants in government or local-authority employment, these being four Police Constables, a widow who is an office cleaner at Scotland Yard and a cashier at Southwark Public Baths. The total occupancy is a good 82% of the maximum.

The Hunter, Murphy and Gardiner Buildings follow a similar pattern, according to the 1911 census. Of the 84 tenements, just one is un-occupied and only 22% of the rest are occupied by a head of household born within a 2 miles radius of the buildings. Those working in employment of government of local authority are a higher proportion than in Cobham at 18%. These include 8 Police Constables and one Police Sergeant. One 3-roomed tenement is occupied by a 52 year-old spinster from Oxford living on "Private means". Tracing back through the census returns it seems that her father died when she was a baby and in adulthood always lived on private means. This lady is not the type of tenants the LCC was targeting. The

tenements are less crowded than in Cobham Buildings with only 6 of the 85 tenements over-crowded and this has contributed to a relatively low occupancy of 72% of the maximum.

The buildings survived the WW2 bombing but the vicarage next to Cobham Buildings was destroyed (see Fig. 2 above).

Footnotes

[i] C. J. Stewart; The Housing Question in London; The London County Council; 1900; p244
[ii] The Housing Question in London; LCC; pp266-167