

Housing the Workers

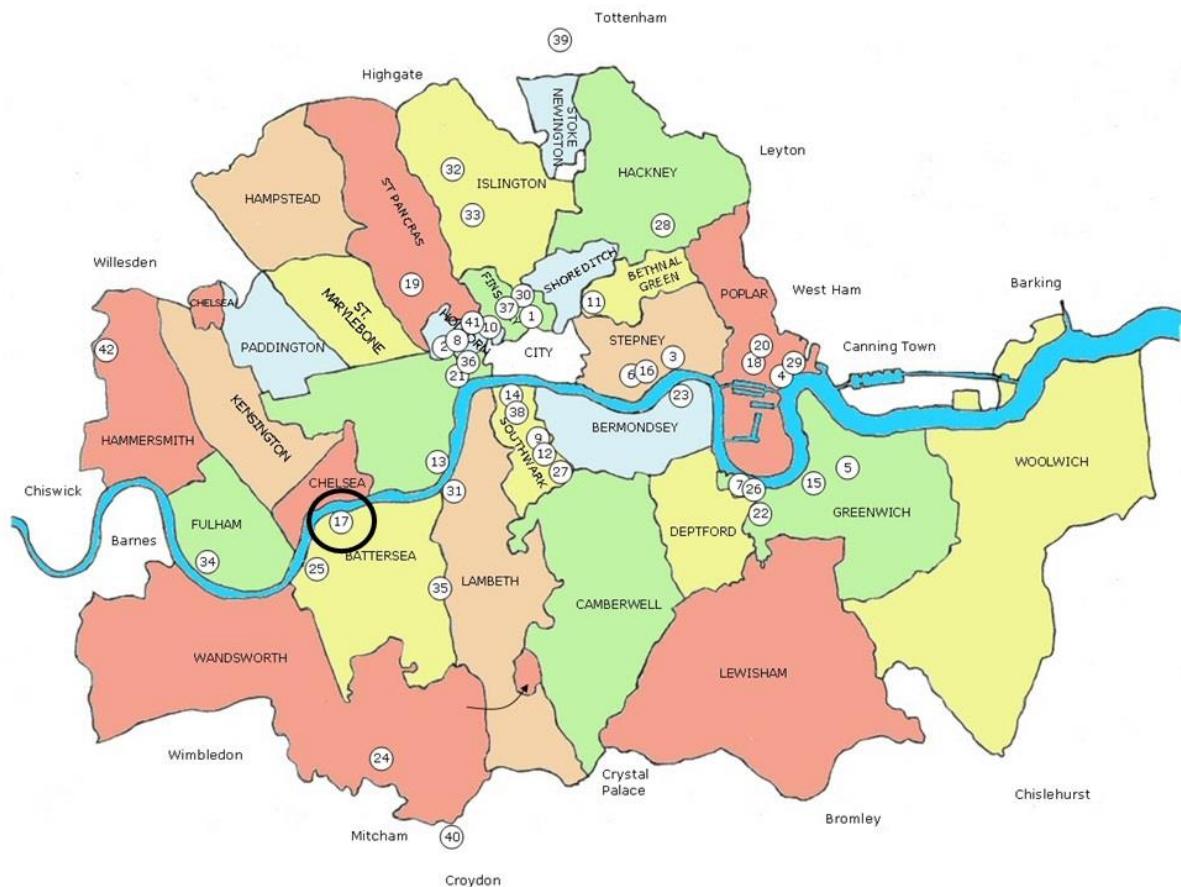
Early London County Council Housing

1889-1914

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Part 3 – the schemes in detail

17 – Battersea Bridge



1.1. Battersea Bridge Construction

Battersea Bridge Buildings, 1901 Re-housing in connection with street improvement

This scheme was to house those displaced by the construction of Battersea Bridge in 1885. The fact that Battersea Bridge Buildings did not open until 1901, 16 years after the bridge, indicates a protracted commitment.

Land near the bridge had been purchased between 1886 and 1890 for the purpose of building the housing for the numbers displaced by the bridge work (190 persons). The MBW failed to do anything about the re-housing and the Council is first recorded as addressing the problem in July 1893 when they tried to sell the site for the erection of working-class housing. The sale failed and the Council's Works Department used it as a stone yard. The Council tried to obtain relief from the commitment in 1895 but was not successful. Eventually, in 1900, plans for a block and two 2-storeyed cottages were drawn up and erected by the Works Department. The scheme provided housing for 286 persons, which was considerably more than the 190 they were committed to re-house. It does seem odd that the Council had no enthusiasm for the scheme, yet they eventually built dwellings to house 50% more people than necessary. One can only assume that there was a need in the local area for the tenancies.

The building consisted of 10 single-roomed tenements, 44 two-roomed tenements; and 15 three-roomed tenements. They appear to be of modest internal proportions when viewing the floor plan in Fig. 1 below. This impression is somewhat misleading as some living rooms and bedrooms are significantly above the recommended minimum size of 144 and 96 sq. ft. respectively. For example, the smaller of the two bedrooms for the tenement in the bottom left-hand corner is 116 sq. ft., which is 20 more than the minimum. Even smaller is the bedroom top left, yet this is 104 sq. ft. The two cottages were named Folly Cottages and have rooms comfortably larger than the minimum required.

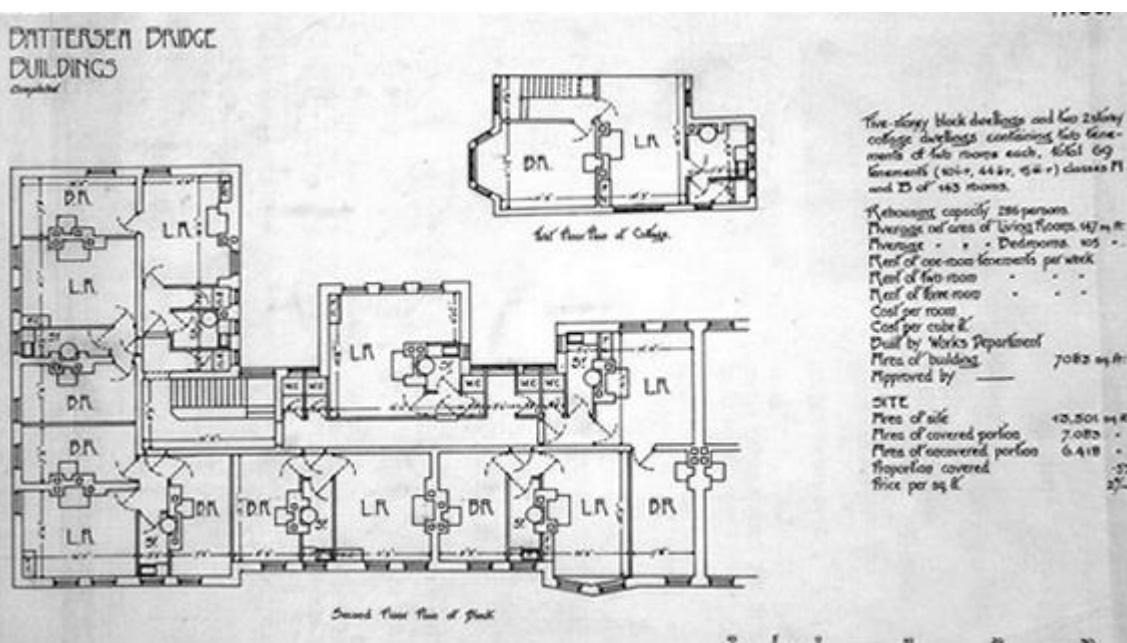


Fig. 1: Battersea Bridge Buildings second floor plan (LMA ref: LCC/AR/HS/03/059)

The final result was a relatively lack-lustre building with little architectural merit, although well proportioned. The style and layout of the windows is similar to other schemes of the time. Compare to photographs of the Boundary Street and Millbank buildings.



Fig. 2: Battersea Bridge Buildings shortly after opening
(LMA ref: SC/PHL/02/0766-33)



Fig. 3: 1916 OS Map showing location

The costs of the scheme are difficult to establish from Council records or publications. No value is quoted for the purchase of the land, and only estimates are provided for the construction, not final costs. In the circumstances, calculating the cost per person is not going to provide any useful data. The 1913-14 LCC Accounts show that the outgoings were £1,023 and income £1,035, giving a very small profit of £12 (1.2%).

The 1911 census returns indicate a typically occupied building with little overcrowding but with five of the 69 tenancies unoccupied. The total occupancy of the building was a low 75% against the theoretical maximum. Many of the tenants were in skilled labouring or non-manual occupations than in the heavy or “dirty” labouring occupations seen in many LCC blocks to the east of London. Of the 64 occupied tenancies only 4 were occupied by heads of household in occupations that could be considered heavy labouring. With the London General Omnibus Company depot opposite it is not surprising to see a number of occupants in the driver/fitter trade. One motor engineer from Cheshire occupied 2 adjacent 2-roomed tenancies to house himself, his wife and their 7 children - this still resulted in 9 people and therefore officially overcrowding. This seems to be an expensive way to obtain a 4-roomed tenement but he may have been able to strike a deal with the Council of the rent he paid. The rest of the occupants are in typical trades or occupations seen in this part of southwest London. These include: chauffeurs; coachmen; clerks; PCs; and painter/decorators. Two of the census returns have extra information added by the householder that is worth transcribing. In a 2-roomed tenancy were a 72 year-old omnibus coachman (widower) and his 45 year old labourer son. The line for the father is crossed out and a note written below on the form: *“died suddenly after signing census form 31/3”*. A sad record of a brief moment in time. On another census return the occupant is a 31 year-old spinster who was an artist from Paddington. In the very right-hand column, headed “Infirmity”, is the following: *“What is called in official circles “a pauper’s brain”, that is one which cannot keep up with the complexities of civilised life”*. This was written by the tenant herself and one wonders what motive she had to admit that she was someone who had trouble coping with everyday life. She must have been a sensitive young lady.

The buildings have since been demolished and replaced with modern housing.