

Housing the Workers

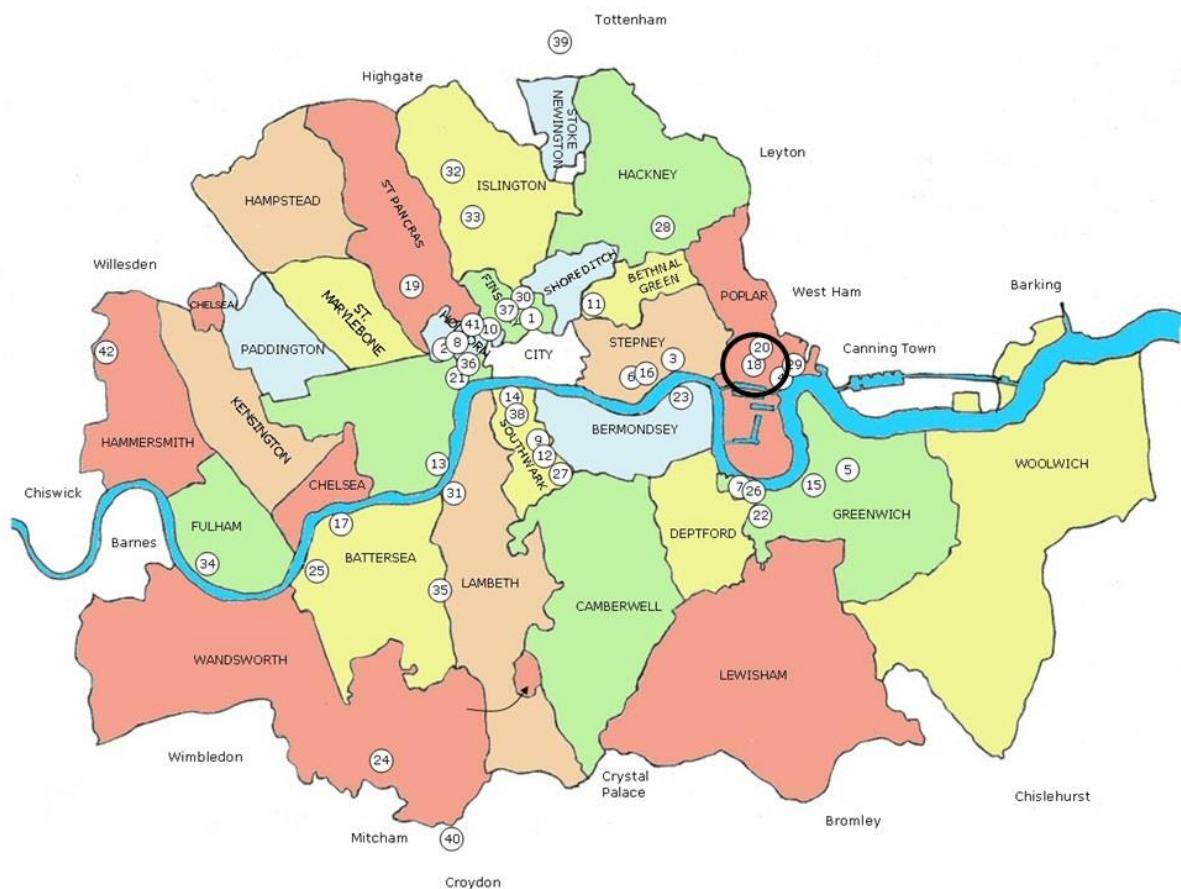
Early London County Council Housing

1889-1914

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Part 3 – the schemes in detail

18 – Blackwall Tunnel (north of Thames) Remainder of scheme



Blackwall Tunnel Scheme (north of Thames)

Toronto and Montreal Buildings, 1901

Built as part of rehousing for the Blackwall Tunnel construction

These two buildings were the second development north of the Thames for housing planned for those displaced when the land was cleared to build the Blackwall Tunnel, opened in 1897. The first housing in respect to this scheme was only the second block built by the Council, Council Buildings in Yabsley Street, opened in 1892. The delay in the construction of the remainder of the housing was as a direct result of the Council trying to sell the site for someone else to carry the expense of building the housing. The Yabsley Street dwellings were built by the Council because of the urgency to build suitable housing but, once completed, the urgency seemed to go away as far as the Council were concerned.

The initial attempts to sell the site in 1892 were unsuccessful. The architects were unable to design buildings to house the required 260 persons without incurring a charge on the rates. It was something of a blessing when entrepreneur James Hartnoll offered to buy the site in 1896. Mr Hartnoll had built many popular and stylish working class housing blocks all over London and they were similar in style and size to those of Sydney Waterlow's IIDC buildings, and a little up-market from Peabody. There is no history or evidence to show that James Hartnoll allowed his buildings to be overcrowded but the Council clearly had an objection to him based on experiences with a building of his in Wells Street, Poplar, called Grosvenor Buildings. This property does seem to have been one of James Hartnoll's failures as they were poorly designed and suffered chronic overcrowding, although the latter would be the result of poor management. Factions in the Council and Poplar Vestry were adamant that James Hartnoll was not going to be allowed to purchase the Cotton Street site, although the decision was not clear-cut, but the opponents of James Hartnoll won the decision despite a second offer from him. James Hartnoll's offer was £1,400 which happens to be the value the Council put on the land once they'd completed the new buildings, so the rejection of James Hartnoll could not have simply been because his offer was too low.

Eventually the Council architects managed to design a pair of buildings that they believed would not incur a charge on the rates and this was approved in July 1899. It is probably coincidence, but James Hartnoll died prematurely in 1899 and one can't help wonder whether the stress of dealing with the Council (and the Poplar vestry) over the condition of Grosvenor Buildings was a contributing factor.

The resulting two blocks, called Montreal and Toronto Buildings, are located as in the OS map of 1916 below. Note that position of the earlier Council Buildings. There is quite a distance between the two buildings although Montreal and Toronto Buildings are much closer to the north portal of the tunnel and therefore nearer the site of any housing clearances.

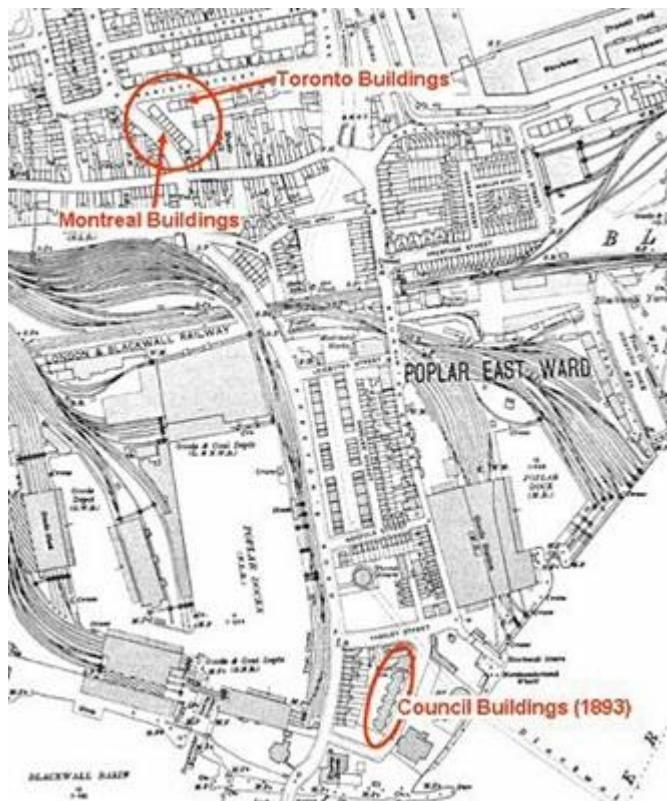


Fig. 1: Position of Montreal and Toronto Buildings (1916 OS Map).

The cost of the scheme is not possible to calculate as the cost of any property purchases are hidden in the total cost of the tunnel scheme. The buildings were constructed by Messrs Perry & Co. who submitted the lowest tender of £12,320. The buildings provided accommodation for 360 persons in 40 tenements of 3 rooms and 30 tenements of 2 rooms. The 1913-14 LCC accounts show small profit of 3.6% was made, with expenditure being £1,061 and income £1,101.

No photographs of the buildings can be found in official records. As the buildings were given Canadian names it is assumed that their design was very similar to the later blocks built in nearby Preston's Rd which were also named after Canadian locations.

The only plan that can be found is in Fig. 2 below. From the small width, and the fact that it is labelled "North Block", this is assumed to be Toronto Buildings, which is the smaller of the two. The internal measurements are not generous and the handwritten notes alongside the diagram state that the average size of the living rooms and bedrooms are right at the minimum of 144 and 96 sq. ft. respectively. Some of the party walls look very thin and it takes a keen eye to spot the entrances into the left two tenements from the external walkway. Also note the interesting symmetry with the single stairwell being identical in size to the bedroom in the tenement second from the left.

The 1911 census returns show that the two buildings are showing such different tenancy patterns that they need to be analysed separately. The small Toronto Buildings (only 20 tenements) have 7 of them empty (all 3-roomed). Of the other 13 only one is overcrowded with 7 occupants of a 3-roomed tenancy. The occupations of the heads of household are varied but typical for the area being more towards the manual labouring trades. Apart from a baker from Glasgow and a Bill Poster from Liverpool, all Heads of Household are from east London or

just south of the Thames. Due to the unoccupied tenements the occupancy is a very low 53 against the maximum of 112.

The larger Montreal Buildings is showing an occupancy more consistent with other LCC properties in east London. Of the 50 tenements only one is unoccupied and 3 overcrowded (all by just one occupant). The heads of household are occupied in varied occupations of the kind you would expect to see in this part of London. There are no Policeman and only five working for government or local authorities, these being the LCC caretaker; an LCC teacher; two postmen and a stoker on Tower Bridge (born in Denmark). Of the 50 tenements, most are occupied by people born in the vicinity indicating that this building, like the smaller Toronto Buildings, is close to meeting the needs of local people. Occupancy of the larger building is 74% of the theoretical maximum. The difference in the occupancy of the two buildings would indicate a local, and probably temporary, problem with the smaller one.

The buildings were demolished in the 1960's and replaced in 1972 by a large and ugly concrete development called Robin Hood Gardens. This large development of two huge blocks, a prime example of Brutalist Architecture, was recently the subject of a campaign by architects to have it awarded a preservation status. English Heritage, the majority of the residents, and the Minister of Culture did not support the campaign and the certificate was refused. The local authority would like to demolish the whole estate, only a matter of 40 or so years after erection. As of 2015 the estate remains, albeit in a neglected estate and prominent architects are again trying to get the building listed and so preserved.

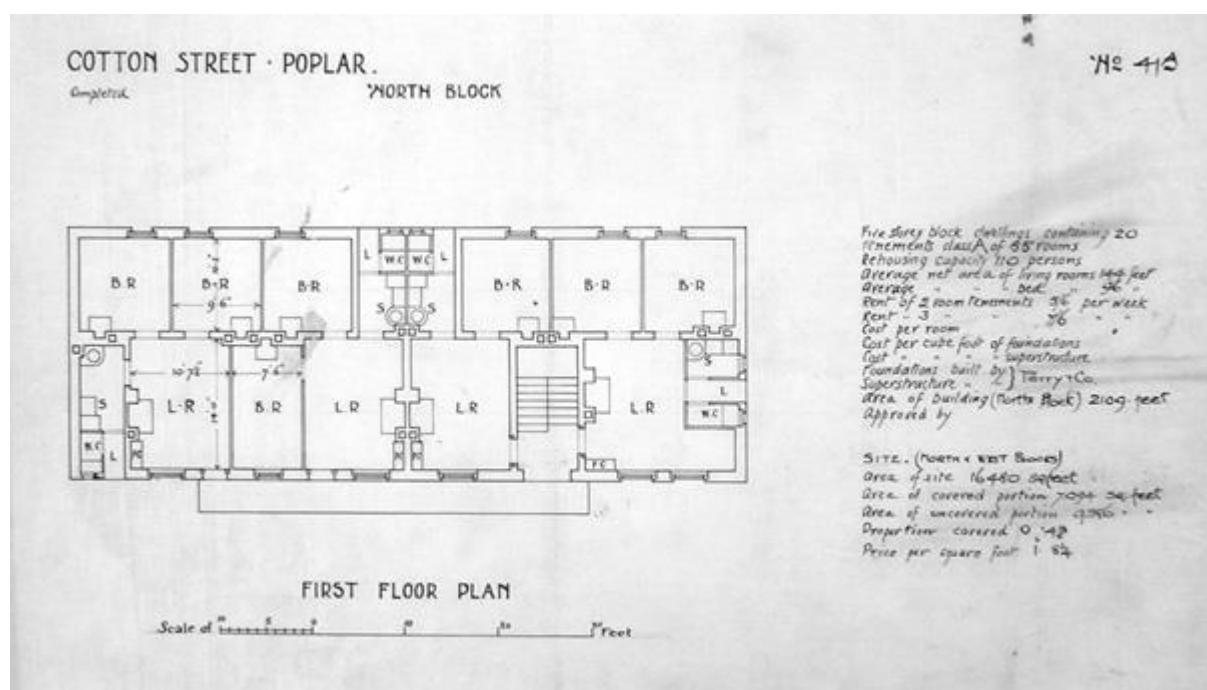


Fig. 2: Cotton Street building plan (LMA ref: LCC/AR/HS/03/059)