

Housing the Workers

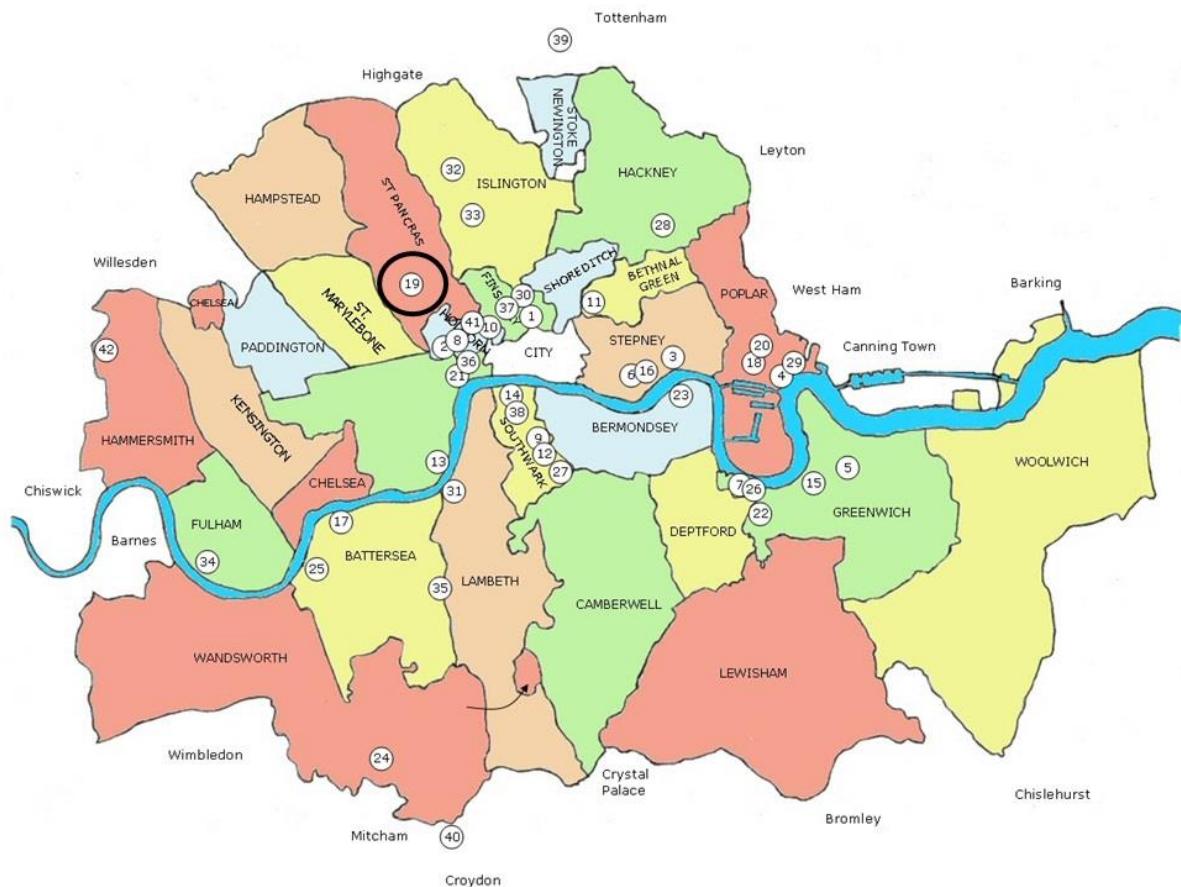
Early London County Council Housing

1889-1914

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August 2015

Part 3 – the schemes in detail

19 – Churchway, St Pancras



The Churchway scheme, St Pancras

Wellesley, Somerset and Seymour Buildings, 1901

Built under Part I of the 1890 Housing of the Working Classes Act

This slum clearance scheme resulted in Wellesley, Somerset and Seymour Buildings, built in 1901 under Part I of the *1890 Housing of the Working Classes Act*.

This clearance and building scheme was an awkward development for the Council; not because of the size of the resulting housing, or even the design of the buildings, but because of the problems the Council had with the land owners. The resulting buildings were typical LCC blocks of the time in both size and design.

The area in question was in Somers Town between Euston Square and the St Pancras goods depot and is highlighted in the OS Map of 1896 in Fig. 2 below.

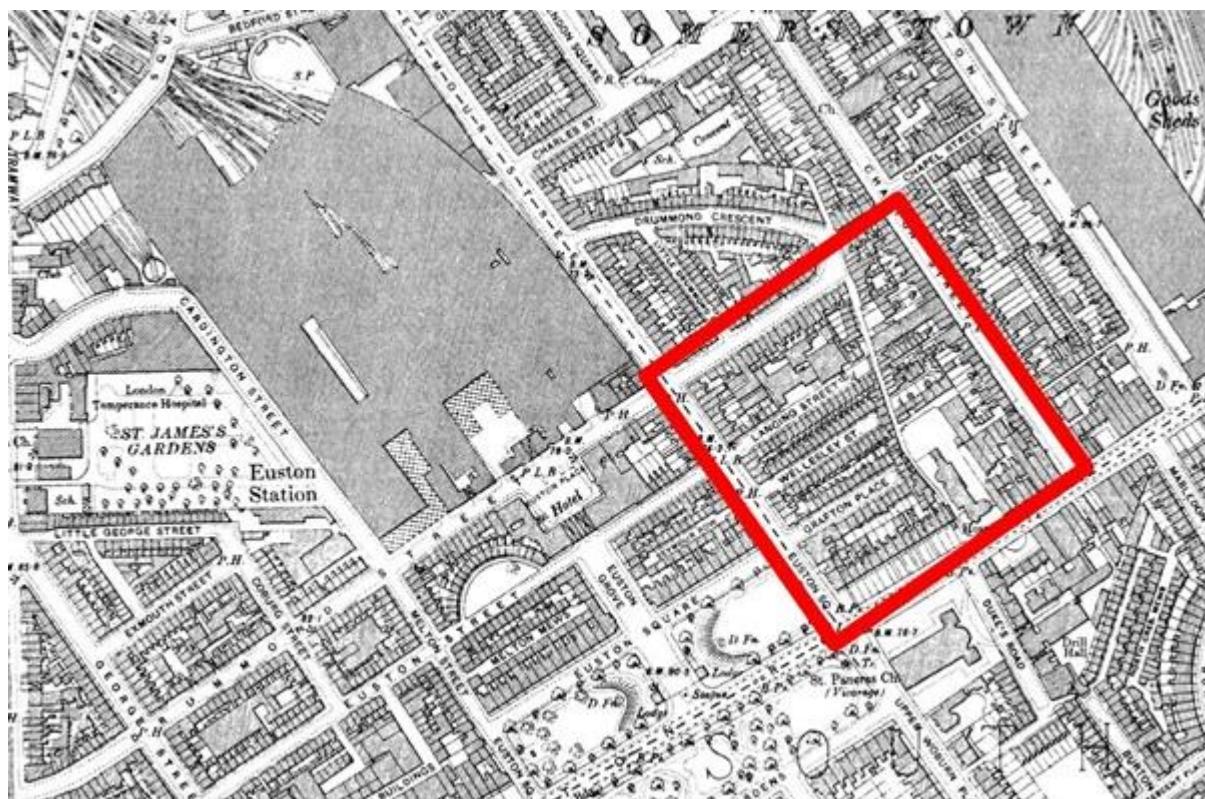


Fig. 1: Churchway in relation to St Pancras and Euston Stations

The area was brought to the attention of the vestry of St Pancras in December 1889, but the first official representation to the Council was by the medical officer for the parish, Dr J. F. J. Sykes, under Part I of the 1890 Housing of the Working Classes Act (unhealthy area).

Dr Sykes was concerned that the area to be developed had not been well enough defined and requested that the Council's medical officer, Mr Shirley Murphy, clarify the boundaries of the scheme. The Council decided to deal with part of the area under Part II of the Act (unhealthy housing) and informed the vestry of the decision. As this would commit the vestry to fund the scheme they were, not surprisingly, unwilling to accept this recommendation. The Secretary of State (Mr Cubitt Nichols) acted as arbitrator and made a decision in June 1893 as to how to

proceed. His decision, in summary, was that the Council were to deal with part of the area under Part I of the Act, with all other areas to be the responsibility of the vestry under Part II of the Act. The extent of the Council's responsibility is outlined in the map in Fig. 2 below which was submitted to the Council's Housing Committee on 10th October 1893, to which they agreed in principle.

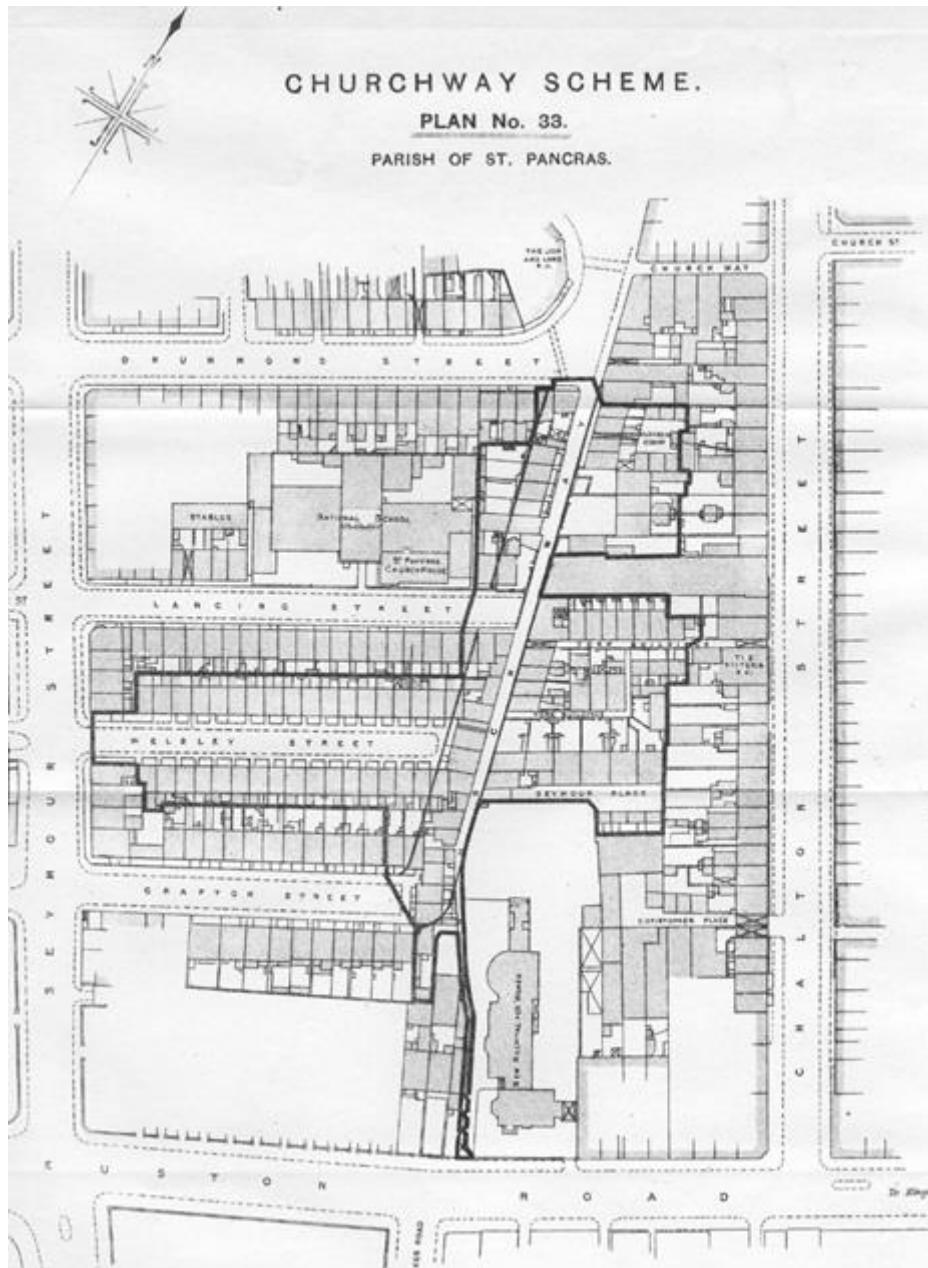


Fig. 2: Churchway Scheme, St Pancras

The area to be cleared was described thus:

'The area was in the main a valley and the soil was damp. The houses were so ill-arranged on the land as to prevent the area being properly ventilated. Generally the houses were in a bad state of repair and the yard spaces at the rear were inadequate. In most cases the houses had been built without damp courses, and many of the ground floors were below the level of the adjoining ground or footway. Moreover the closeness of the back buildings and walls in the

*rear of the houses in many instances rendered the back ground floor rooms dark and unwholesome.*ⁱⁱ

Any decision to clear a slum was largely dependent on the death rate for the area and Dr Sykes reported that the death rate for St Pancras was 20.1 per thousand, but 33.1 per thousand for the Churchway area. This was 65% higher than the death rate in the district of Somers Town and high enough to make the area a prime one for slum clearance.

The slum clearance was estimated to displace 1,086 persons and the scheme, as confirmed by the Secretary of State, was to re-house 580 persons. The housing Acts for slum clearances stated that re-housing had to be for the same number as displaced but no reasons were given in this case as to why only half the displaced number needed to be re-housed. The scheme included the widening of Churchway to 40 feet (a standard road width for the time).

Unfortunately, the Council's financial resources were stretched at that time and they approached the two owners of the land for financial assistance. One of the owners was the redoubtable Lady Henry Somerset (née Isabel Somers-Cocks), wife of Lord Henry Somerset, 2nd son of the Duke of Beaufort. Their marriage was not a successful one and Lady Somerset immersed herself in philanthropic activities and became president of the Women's Temperance Association in 1890. She studied poverty and was convinced, like many prominent Victorians, that drink was at the root of most poverty. She agreed to help the Council, but with her philanthropic leanings it would have been surprising if she had not. Once the Council had an agreement for financial help from Lady Somerset they wrote to the other landowner, Lord Southampton. This land was in the ownership of 'the trustees of Lord Somers's and Lord Southampton's Estates' and, although controlled by trustees, Lord Southampton was the key trustee. His Lordship was young, recently married, and living in Brigstock, Northants at the time. The Council received a definite refusal from him as regards financial support. It is easy to be critical of Lord Southampton, but as a land-owning Peer of the realm, it would have been a surprise to find him agreeing to help a Progressive-run Council.

Lady Somerset was willing to cover the costs of any scheme that included her property and this was estimated to be £12,500; a sum which made the scheme much more financially attractive. The Council continued with the scheme even though the contribution from Lady Somerset required the Court of Chancery to sanction it. This was because she was 'tenant for life' and not the owner of the site 'in perpetuity'. In retrospect, the decision of the Council to go ahead with the scheme whilst waiting for the decision was not a wise one.

The scheme was approved by the Council on 15th October 1895, and passed by an Act of Parliament on 29th March 1897 (schemes administered under Parts I and II of the 1890 Act needed to be approved by a local Act of Parliament). The Local Act stated that of the 580 person to be housed, 232 were to be in the eastern side of Churchway and 348 on the western side. The scheme included the assistance of Lady Somerset in repaying all expenses for all her property and that she would erect the necessary dwellings on that land (east of Churchway). Unfortunately for the Council the Court of Chancery were not convinced as to the financial viability of the scheme as proposed by Lady Somerset.

The Times of the 23rd March 1899 has a transcript of the case before the Court. It is difficult to establish the exact problem with the proposition but it hinges on Lady Somerset's ownership of the land which was for her lifetime only and the result of an inheritance through her Somers ancestors. On her death ownership of the land would revert back to the trustees of the estate.

The justices clothed their response in polite and legal wording but the crux of the matter was that they were unhappy that some land had already been sold by Lady Somerset and that the expected revenue of the new working class housing would be less than for the slum dwellings already demolished. The court was sympathetic towards her but the underlying decision to refuse permission for the scheme seems to be as a result of the Court's opinion that she had overstepped the mark. The result was that she could not build housing on the land, even though most of it had already been purchased and cleared by the Council. There is no clear information as to why she could not simply donate the cost of the housing out of her own pocket, but there must have been some legal reasons and she had to withdraw from the scheme. This left the Council with a financial problem and they had to temporarily abandon plans to build on the east side of Churchway.

Following the court's decision, the Council modified their scheme to exclude the east side of Churchway and some smaller buildings on the west side. The Secretary of State gave permission on 23rd March 1899 but still required some modifications of the scheme for housing on the west side of Churchway around Wellesley Street (see Fig. 2). Whilst the plans were being modified and considered, and the courts were still examining Lady Somerset's proposal, the land and slums on the west side of Churchway was being compulsorily purchased. As with all compulsory purchase schemes many owners and tenants filed claims for higher amounts than offered, but a very high proportion of the claims were settled by negotiation with only five of the 62 claims requiring arbitration. The total cost of the acquisitions was £32,062, which included sale of building materials and income from rents, pending demolition. The Council's own Works Department was commissioned to build the block of housing for 360 persons on the west side and the result was named Wellesley Buildings. The Council at that time typically named its housing blocks after people from literature or the church, but they seemed to be short of ideas when it came to naming this building. The building, opened in March 1901, was designed to house more people than the minimum stated in the Act, which was 232 persons. All tenements were let by 13th May 1901 – just two months after opening. The rents were 7s 6d and 8s per week for two rooms and 10s 6d for 3 roomsⁱⁱⁱ.

Despite the financial problems of the scheme, on the 19th December 1899 the Council applied to the Secretary of State to build two blocks on the east side of Churchway. Permission was granted in January 1900 and the Works Department commenced the construction. The resulting blocks were named Somerset Buildings and Seymour Buildings (as it was sited over the demolished Seymour Court), and were to house 490 persons (as against the 348 stipulated in the Act). The naming of Somerset Buildings indicates that the Council did not hold Lady Somerset responsible for Court's decision not to allow her to purchase the slums and fund the replacement housing. Seymour Buildings was opened in 21st July 1902 and Somerset Buildings on the 14th August 1902. All tenements were occupied within 5 weeks.

It is interesting to note that the three buildings were designed to house 850 persons in total and this comfortably exceeds the minimum of 580 as stated in the Churchway Scheme Act as passed on 21st March 1897. This voluntary increase in the size of the buildings must have been a pro-active decision by the Council based on the needs of the area. The fact that all the tenements were taken up soon after completion shows that they seemed to be correct with this decision.

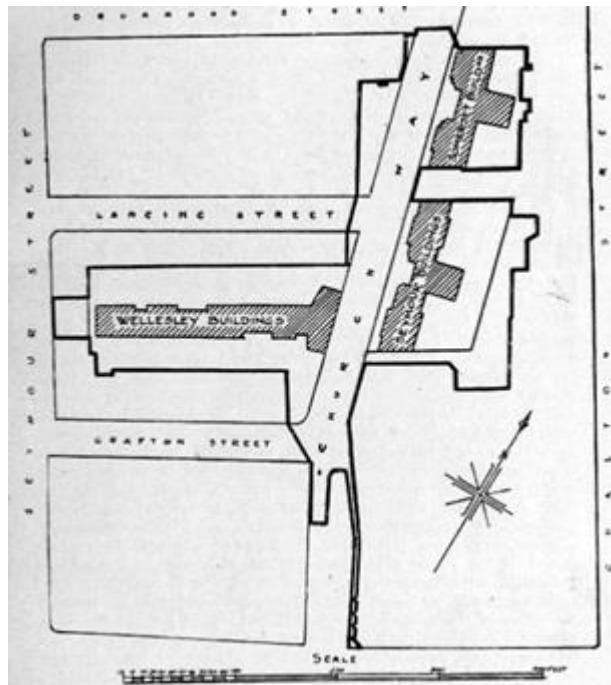


Fig. 3: Churchway Estate plan^{iv}

The costs were as follows:

	Outgoings	Income	
Cost of property and widening scheme	£32,062		
Cost of constructing all 3 buildings	£39,127		
NET COST			£71,189
Cost per person (based on 832 persons)			£86pp
Balance of accounts, 1913-1914	£3,190	£3,858	£668 (17.3%)

Table 1: The Churchway scheme costs

After all the concerns over the potential costs, it is surprising to see a very reasonable final cost of £86 per person, but some of this is the result of Lady Somerset paying for the acquisition of the property on her land, which amounted to approximately £6,000 (she did not pay for the replacement buildings). The buildings were clearly popular as they returned a very healthy 17.3% profit in 1913-14.

Fig. 4 and Fig. 5 below show the three buildings shortly after completion. They are of solid construction with Somerset and Seymour having more character and style than the slightly earlier Wellesley Buildings. Note that the store next to Somerset Buildings on the very left in Fig. 4 is advertising an ale, yet the sign above says that it is a Temperance Bar which fits in well with Lady Somerset owning the land. The building in the distance sticking out between Somerset and Seymour is the rear of a large leather works.



Fig. 4: Somerset (near) and Seymour (distance) Buildings, 1905 (LMA ref: SC/PHL/02/0781)



Fig. 5: Wellesley Buildings, 1905 (LMA ref: SC/PHL/02/0781)

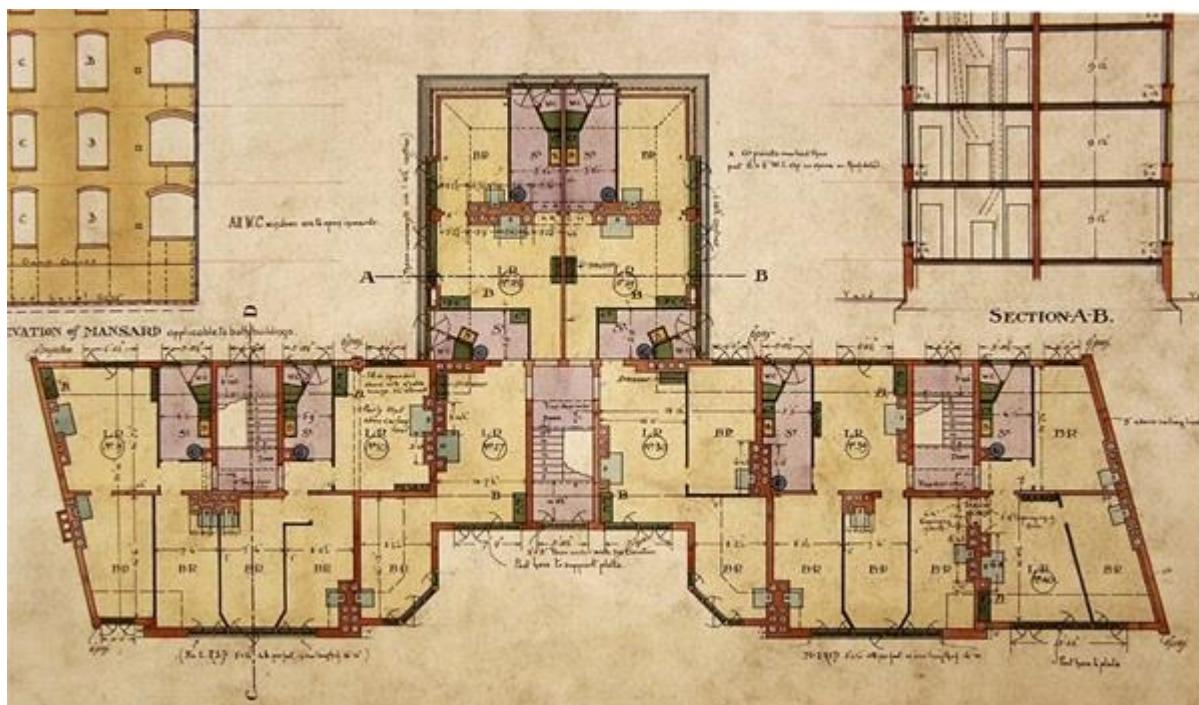


Fig. 6: Somerset Buildings, 4th floor (LMA ref: LCC/AR/HS/03/015)

The plan in Fig. 6 above shows that some of the living rooms are on the minimum floor size of 144 sq. ft. although even the smallest bedrooms are comfortably larger than the 96 sq. ft. minimum. This is a surprise as this 1901-built 'Part I' housing development should have been designed under the Secretary of State's new regulations of 160 and 110 sq. ft. respectively. The only reason can be that the parliament approval of the scheme in 1897 was before the change of regulations, even though the housing was not built until 1901. When looking at the plan of

Wellesley Buildings in Fig. 7 below, the handwritten notes state that the average size of the living rooms were 160 sq. ft. and the bedrooms 110 sq. ft. suggesting this had been designed to the new regulations.

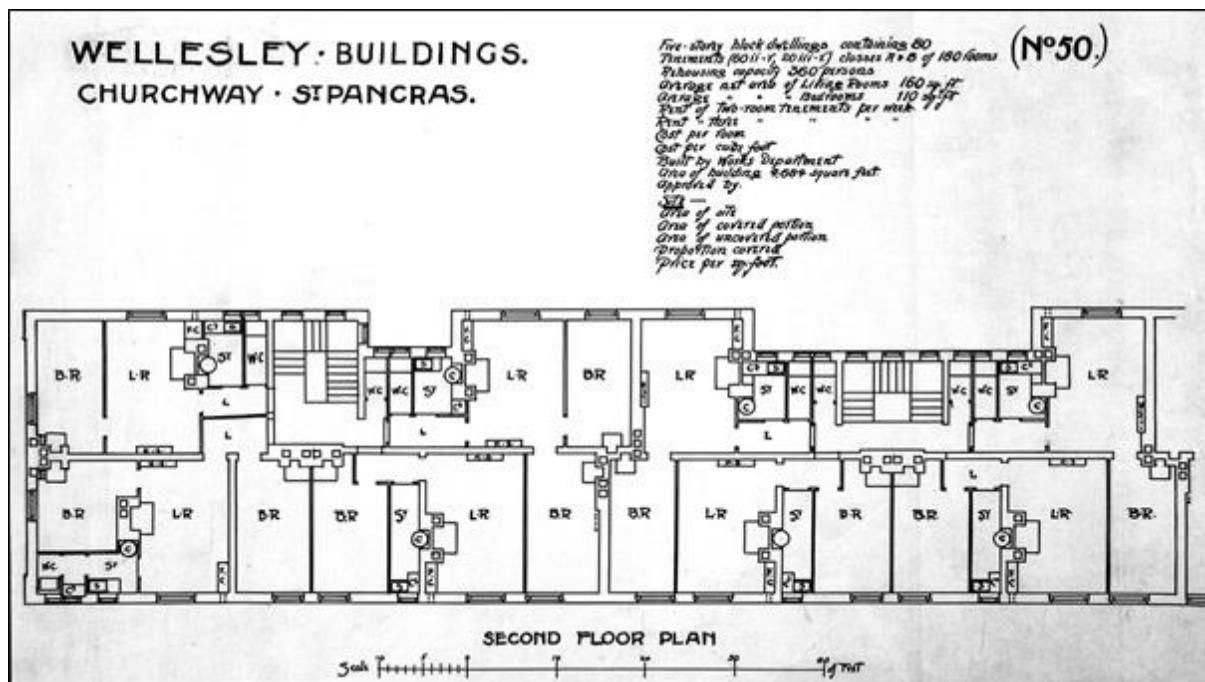


Fig. 7: Wellesley Building floor plan (LMA ref: LCC/AR/HS/03/059)

The 1911 census returns indicate buildings that are popular. Wellesley Buildings was opened first and, at 80 tenements, is larger than the other two. Somerset Buildings had 40 tenements and Seymour Buildings, 60. With a location close to major railways stations and a short distance from large hotels, it would be surprising to not find many heads of household working in these trades. The census does reflect this assumption with the majority of tenants in trades you would expect to see, with little labouring or heavy trades. Of surprise are the 6 musical instrument makers in Wellesley Buildings with all but one indicating that they manufacture brass instruments with one adding that they are military instruments. The area was known for piano making but the industry was in steep decline by 1911. The brass instrument manufacturer in the area cannot be identified. The tenants are mainly from London and the south east but with a number of Europeans all in the restaurant or food trades. There are 11 policeman but few others working for government institutions or local authorities. Overcrowding is under reasonable control in Wellesley and Somerset Buildings with 18 tenements out of 200 having one more occupant than officially allowed; 4 having 2 more than allowed and one 2-roomed tenement in Seymour Buildings with 7 occupants – a clear case of gross overcrowding. The LCC caretaker lived in Wellesley Building possible making it easier for this tenant to hide the blatant overcrowding. The total occupancy of 521 persons for the three buildings gives a total occupancy of 63% against the theoretical maximum of 832 persons. This relatively low figure reflects the general occupations of the tenants who are more tradesmen than labourers. One tenement is occupied by a family who seem to have had a more difficult childhood than most. A 2-roomed tenement in Wellesley Buildings has a 27 year-old spinster as head of family living with three male siblings of 14, 16 and 18 years old. Tracing them through earlier censuses shows that this family were often in Mitcham Union Workhouse due to the death of the parents. It is good to see that the three brothers are all in work and the older sister is acting as mother and head of the family.

The buildings were modernised by the LCC in 1961 and the photo below shows that this seemed to be well overdue.



Fig. 8: Scullery of un-named building in Churchway, pre-modernisation, 1961
(LMA ref: SC/PHL/02/0781)

The buildings stand today but Somerset Building has been re-named Winsham House. This may have been to avoid confusion with Somerset House near Aldwych when all the “Buildings” on the estate were renamed as “Houses”. All three blocks are showing their age a little but look to be in good repair. The site is a prime one being so close to St Pancras, Kings Cross and Euston Stations as well as the popular Camden Town district to the north. The old leather works between Somerset and Seymour buildings was destroyed by bombing in WW2 and the adjacent wing of Somerset Buildings (now Winsham House) was also badly damaged



Fig. 9: Winsham and Seymour Houses, 2009



Fig. 10: Wellesley House. 2009

Footnotes

ⁱ C. J. Stewart; The Housing Question in London; The London County Council; 1900; p216

ⁱⁱ The Housing Question in London; LCC; p215

ⁱⁱⁱ LCC; *Minutes of the Committee of the Housing of the Working Classes*; 7th Oct 1902; held at LMA. The nearby Peabody estate at Little Coram Street rented two rooms for 5s and 5s 3d and three rooms for 6s 3d and 6s 6d, albeit for “associated” dwellings of smaller dimensions.

^{iv} The Housing of the Working Classes, 1855-1912; LCC; 1913; p41