

# **Housing the Workers**

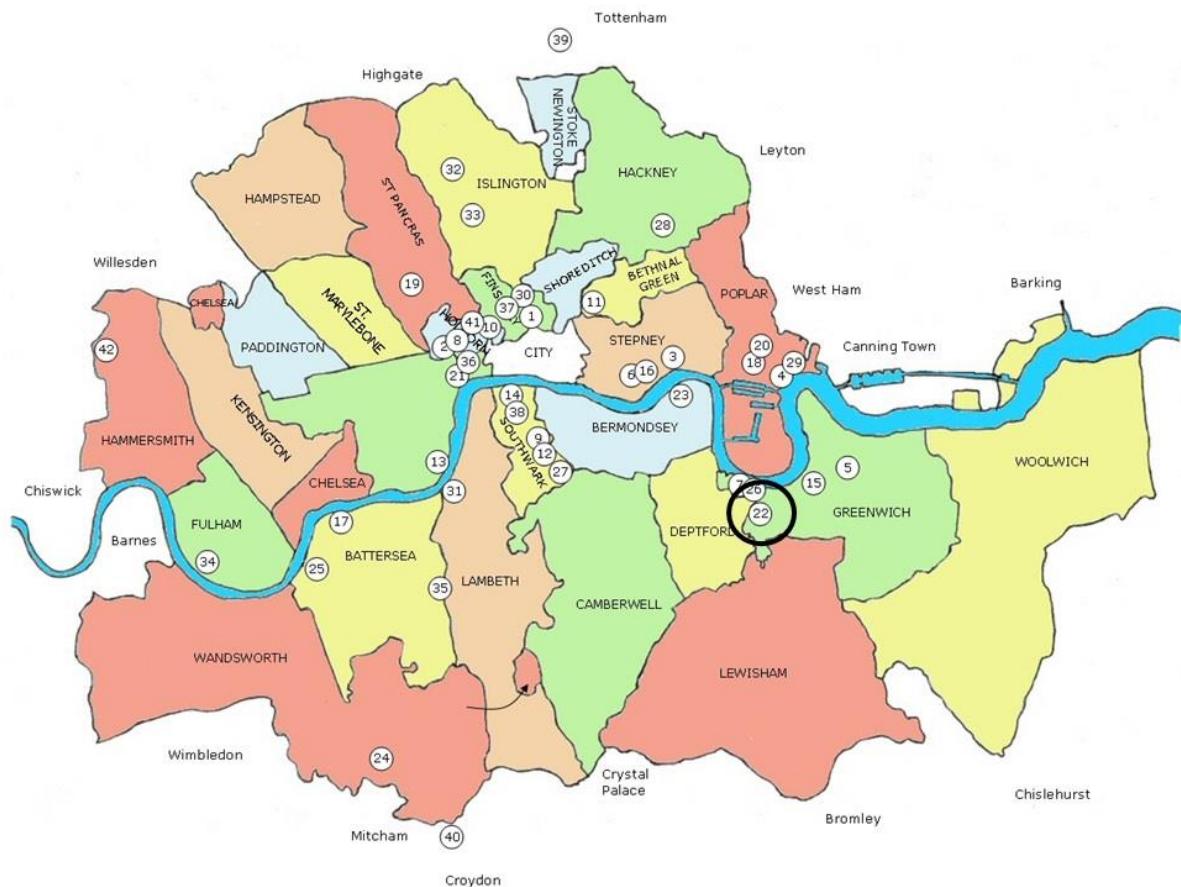
## **Early London County Council Housing**

### **1889-1914**

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**August 2015**

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

##### **22 – Mill Lane, Greenwich scheme**



## Mill Lane scheme, Greenwich

**Sylva Cottages (1902) and Carrington Lodging House (1903)**

**Built under Part II of the 1890 Housing of the Working Classes Act (Sylva Cottages) and Part III (Carrington House)**

Apart from the purchase of the already-built Parker Street Lodging House in Shelton Street, the Council had managed, so far, to avoid building lodging houses. There is no hard evidence as to why the Council were reluctant to build these but it was probably a combination of three things: the reputation lodging houses had because they attracted single people who earnt the lowest wages; the lack of a need for such housing because there were sufficient in the locality; and the inevitable high maintenance costs that resulted from an itinerant population who had little care for their surroundings.

Whatever the reason, the need for lodging houses was always present and the Council could not afford to ignore it. In fact, the Council eventually built two huge lodging houses: Carrington House, named after Lord Carrington who was chairman of the Housing of the Working Classes Committee, and the equally large Bruce House, Drury Lane, Holborn described later.

The development of Carrington House, and some adjacent cottages called Sylva Cottages was the result of a long-running plan to re-develop the Mill Lane area of Greenwich.

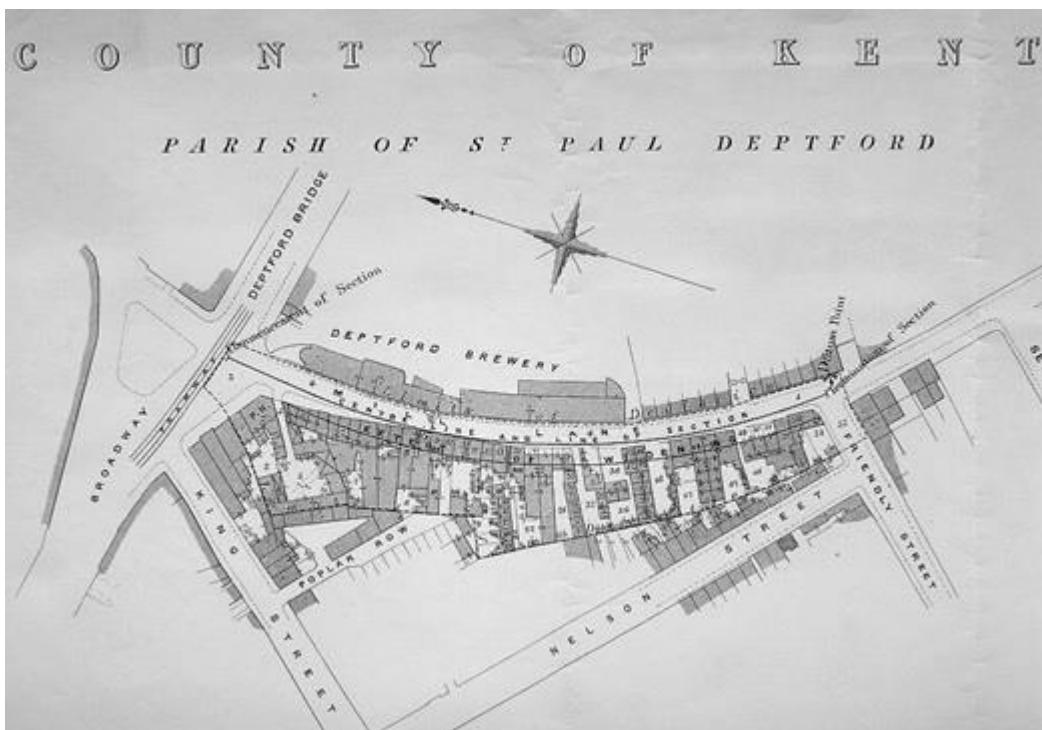


Fig. 1: The original Mill Lane layout in 1875 (LMA ref: CL/IMP/01/104)

The area was considered to be poorly laid out, poorly ventilated, damp and insanitary. The MBW was first made aware of the area in 1875 but decided not to take any action. In 1892 a serious outbreak of enteric fever (typhoid) occurred in south east London and was traced to an Italian ice cream seller living in insanitary conditions in Mill Lane. The Council was already considering the scheme again and were preparing a plan for the clearance earlier in 1892. The tracing of the outbreak of the enteric fever must have generated some urgency and the Council

started to plan for the clearance of the area. The local District Board were ordered by the Secretary of State to provide half the net cost. One unusual feature of the area in question was the high number of lodging houses. Out of a total population of 715 inhabitants, 429 lived in lodging houses. The scheme was sanctioned and confirmed in 1894 and was to provide housing for 550 people. Mill Lane was to be widened and any spare land converted to open space. This last restriction is an interesting one. By 1903 there were notable financial pressures on the Council and the sale of surplus land would have considerably reduced the financial burden of the scheme. The fact that any spare land had to be left as open space may indicate some friction between the various parties involved, or a failure for all of them to agree to a single plan.

Once the permission to proceed had been received from the Local Government Board, the Council proceeded to purchase the land and buildings. This seems to have gone fairly smoothly as all but two claims were settled by negotiation for a total sum of £16,141. The fact that the original claims were for £34,744 shows how good the Council were by now in negotiating and settling claims. The two remaining claims were settled by arbitration for £1,049 giving a total of £17,290. The old housing was quickly demolished and the land cleared with an urgency probably brought on by the 1892 fever outbreak.



Fig. 2: Mill Lane looking south. Carrington House now fills most of the view on the right  
(LMA ref: SC/PHL/01/078)



Fig. 3: Mill Lane looking north. Sylva Cottages were built where the buildings are on the left, after Friendly St. (LMA ref: SC/PHL/01/078)



Fig. 4: Mill Lane housing, looking south.  
(LMA ref: SC/PHL/01/075)



Fig. 5: Rear of the houses  
(LMA ref: SC/PHL/01/078)

Not until the area was cleared did the Council apply to build new housing. They applied to the Local Government Board (because Greenwich District were ultimately responsible for the development) for permission to erect a lodging house and block dwellings. Greenwich District objected because they believed that the area needed cottages and so the Council applied to reduce the numbers to be re-housed to 300 to allow for cottages, but the Board then objected because they had not been consulted. The Council's riposte was to point out the problems that this delay would cause.

At this point one can easily visualise the 'big bully' LCC trying to develop what they believed was needed, with the District feeling uncomfortable about not having done anything already and trying to influence the decisions so that they could be seen to be doing something. In between was the Local Government Board who seemed to object to anything that hadn't been agreed by them in the first place. With the demolition of so many lodging house places it seems odd that only the Council was prepared to build a new one.

On the 26<sup>th</sup> July 1897 the Local Government Board objected to the latest plans and wanted the number re-housed to be reduced to 272, but also wanted the balance of those needing re-housing (278) to be provided by the Council on other sites nearby. After the Council investigated nearby alternatives and reported that there was no other suitable land, they went back to basics and started again with a plan to re-house 550 persons but without the consent of the Local Government Board as it was to be carried out under Part II of the 1890 Act. The commitment requiring Greenwich District to contribute towards the costs remained.

The Council looked at lodging houses already built by Lord Rowton. At this time (1897) Lord Rowton had erected two, in Vauxhall (1892) and Kings Cross (1894), and a third and fourth were about to open in Newington Butts and Hammersmith. These buildings were no beauties but were large and provided showers and kitchens. Importantly for the Council, Rowton imposed a strict regime on the residents and this must have been attractive to the Council. Following Lord Rowton's lead, and with advice from him, the Council decided they could build a lodging house of comparable size on the site that could house 670 persons and finalised the plans in December 1899. The narrower southern part of the site was set aside for cottage property (maybe as a way of placating both the Local Government Board and Greenwich District).

The final design of the lodging house accommodated 803 persons at a cost, including fittings, of £57,092. It contained a wash house, bathrooms, tailor and bootmaker shops, a dining room, and reading and smoking rooms. Cubicles cost 6d a night with a few furnished cubicles costing 6s a week (although not successful and subsequently converted to ordinary cubicles). Lockers cost 6d for the deposit on a key, of which 4d was refunded on return. The use of the washrooms and restrooms was free but a bath cost 1d. The residents could arrive from 7pm onwards and had to depart by 8:30am. The superintendent was completely in charge and, with his wife, ensured that cooked or cold food was available for those who wished to purchase it at cheap rates using tariffs approved by the Housing of the Working Classes Committee.



Fig. 6: Carrington House, 1907 (LMA ref: SC/PHL/02/1044)

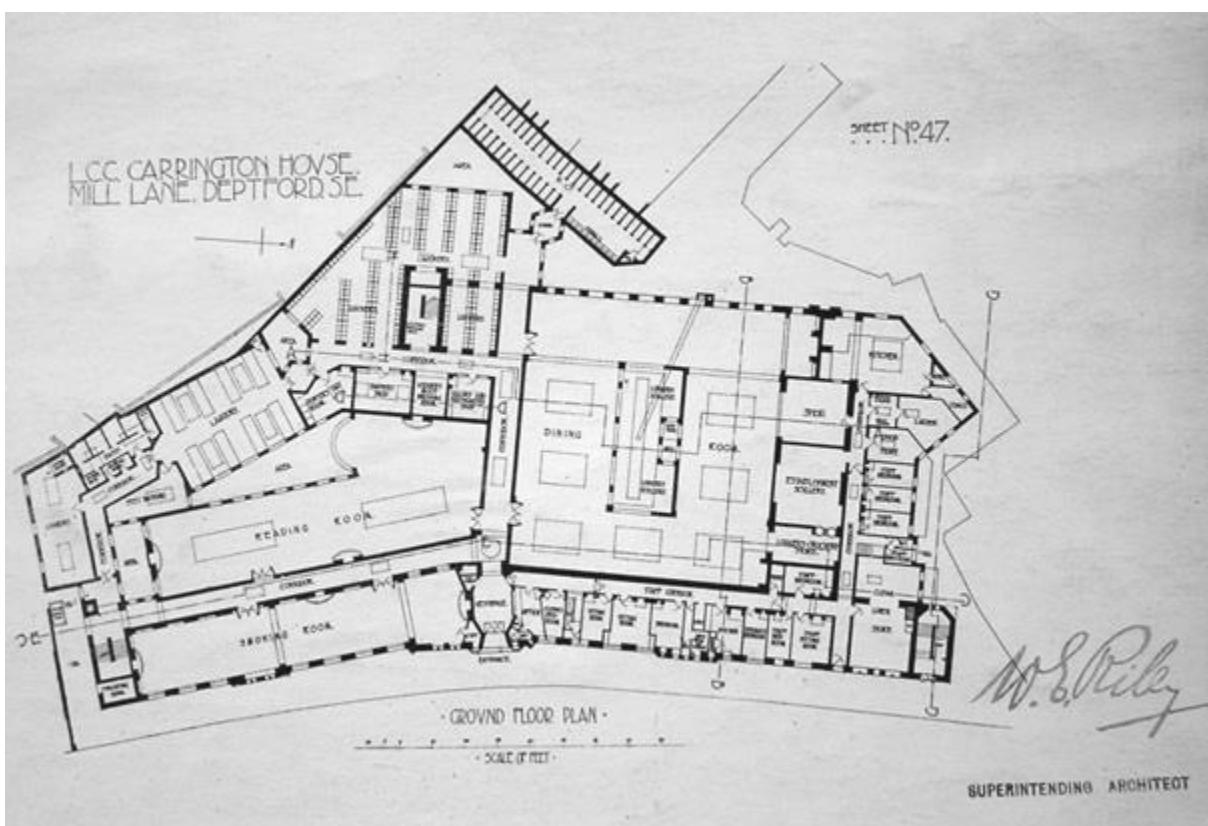


Fig. 7: Carrington House, ground floor (LMA ref: LCC/AR/HS/03/059)

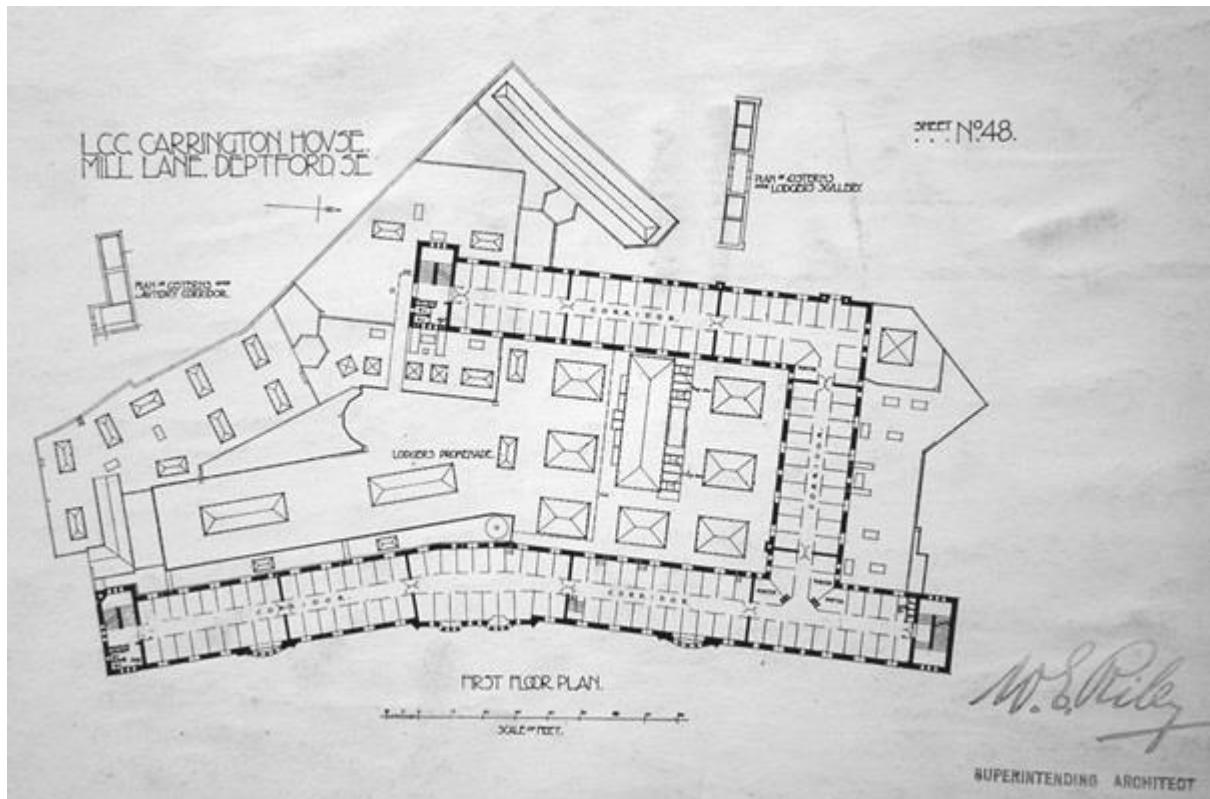


Fig. 8: Carrington House, first floor (LMA ref: LCC/AR/HS/03/059)



Fig. 9: Carrington House dining room  
(LMA ref: LCC/AR/HS/02/1044)



Fig. 10: Carrington House wash room  
(LMA ref: LCC/AR/HS/02/1044)

The design of the building included emergency staircases to ensure that there would always be a safe exit in the event of a fire. Each cubicle was 4' 10½" wide by 7' 4½" long and each had a window. There were 4 WCs and 2 sinks on each floor.

Whilst all the argument and planning was going on, the Council had decided to build cottages on the southern end of the clearance area. These were rather plain 2-storey cottages, although each cottage was actually a 2-bedroomed dwelling (left and right), and were built by the

ubiquitous Mr Holloway. They were named Sylva Cottages after Sir John Evelyn, who owned the land around Mill lane from 1674 and who sometimes went under the name “Sylva”. The cottages opened in 1902, a little before Carrington House.



Fig. 11: Sylva Cottages, 1904 (LMA ref: SC/PHL/02/0869)

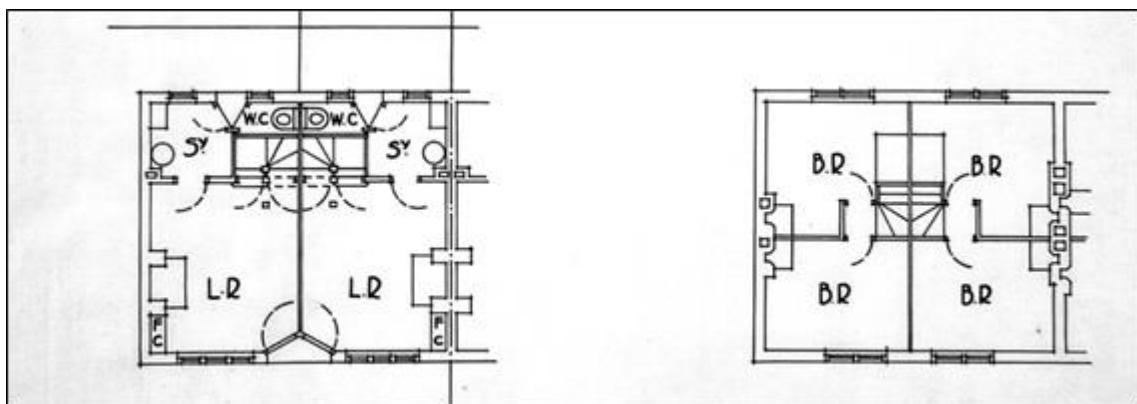


Fig. 12: Sylva Cottages plan showing 2-bedroom dwellings side by side (LMA ref: LCC/AR/HS/03/059)

The costs of the buildings are below. The cost per person has been calculated but it is not comparable to other LCC housing because the majority of the costs apply to the lodging house. The cost of Sylva Cottages cannot be separated from that of Carrington House.

Of significance is the considerable loss of 28.4% that Carrington House returned in 1913-14. Sylva Cottages were much more successful.

	Outgoings	Income	
Cost of property	£20,251		
Cost of works	£2,202		
Receipts for land and materials		£1,500	
Cost of Carrington House & Sylva Cottages	£54,937		
Contribution from MB of Deptford		£10,478	
NET COST			£65,412

Cost per person (based on 947 persons)				£69pp
Balance of Accts 1913-14, Carrington Hse	£5,996	£4,671	-£1,325 (28.4% loss)	
Balance of Accts 1913-14, Sylva Cottages	£414	£463	£49 (10.6%)	

Table 1: Carrington House and Sylva Cottages costs

From the 1911 census the Sylva Cottages seemed to be a success. The 48 cottages are all occupied and the heads of household are typically more experienced workmen and artisans. Only one of them states his occupation as a labourer. The predominance is for engineering trades which is in keeping with the ship-building industries nearby. However, only 9 of the 48 cottages are headed by someone born locally. The occupancy is 103 persons against the maximum of 144. The cottages rarely appear in any further communications, suggesting they continued to be rented out successfully.

This is in complete contrast to the adjacent Carrington House, which was never a financial success and a number of plans were put forward to increase the occupancy of the cubicles. The Council approached the Salvation Army as early as 1907 with an offer for them to take over the building, but the plan came to nothing. The idea of allocating some of the building as a women's lodging house was also considered but the cost of providing a separate women's entrance plus other conversions were not financially viable and that plan also foundered. A number of other schemes were put forward including the allocation of the top floor for night workers and they even allocated £20 for advertising this facility on trams and hoardings in the area. This scheme was taken up and the top floor was, for a while, allocated to night-shift workers with the entrances to other floors locked up. However, the average number of beds let per day was only 6 and the scheme was soon abandoned.

The 1911 census lists 451 lodgers, 11 support staff, and the Superintendent with his wife (the Matron) and 4 year old daughter. The superintendent is surprisingly young at 33 and was recorded as a compositor in Lambeth in the 1901 census. With the problems renting the lodgings it would have been expected that the superintendent would be an older person with experience in managing buildings and people, and probably ex-military. The occupations of lodgers are almost all of the labouring classes but with a high proportion being born locally. There are some more unusual occupations such as a male nurse, a photographer's canvasser, a 59 year old golf caddie (who cannot be traced on earlier census returns), two musicians, an ecclesiastical glass painter, a married accountant from Scotland, and a veterinary surgeon. The last of these was an inmate of Wandsworth Gaol and a dock labourer in the 1901 census, suggesting a less-than-truthful registration.

Carrington House seems to be one occasion when the Council got their sums badly wrong and maybe should have listened to the Greenwich District or the Local Government Board. Things were so bad that the Council instructed the valuer to report into the finances of the House in 1921 and the numbers make interesting reading<sup>i</sup>.

The valuer reported that his department had raised serious doubts about the financial viability of a lodging house in the area for 600 persons at 5d a night. Carrington House was eventually built for over 800 persons and the cubicles were 6d a night. The valuer also reported that the viability of the original scheme was based on 6d per cubicle and no empties – something that would seem to be rather optimistic. It is therefore not surprising to read that Carrington House

was never near its maximum capacity in its first 18 years. The actual figures are in Table 2 below.

Year	Avge. no. of beds let per night	Nightly charge of ordinary cubicles	Annual loss £
1903-4	311	6d.	805
1904-5	432	6d.	1,277
1905-6	523	6d.	898
1906-7	521	6d.	1,031
1907-8	426	6d.	1,815
1908-9	423	6d.	1,789
1909-10	430	6d.	1,562
1910-11	451	6d.	1,405
1911-12	448	6d.	1,568
1912-13	449	6d.	1,536
1913-14	489	6d.	1,325
1914-15	446	6d.	1,096
1915-16	659	6d.	604
1916-17	658	6d.	813
1917-18	683	7d.	520
1918-19	606	8d.	464
1919-20	709	9d.	768
1920-21	666	1/-	2,209

Table 2: Occupancy and cubicle charges for Carrington House

The 1921 report goes on to say that the charges per cubicle were comparable to Rowton House but does state that those lodging houses, and others that were comparable, were nearer to central London. Some large businesses had closed in Deptford, including the cattle market, and that was having an impact at the time of the report. The better usage during the war years was not down to local industry or the docks needing workers to build ships and other war-time goods, but because the building was used to house particular people who had a need at the time. These included Belgian refugees, shipwrecked sailors, and itinerant soldiers. The valuer did come to a conclusion as to why Carrington House continued to make big losses despite reasonable occupancy and higher rents, as seen for the last two periods in the table above. He stated that increased costs, in proportion to the income, were due to the increased hourly rates of manual workers as settled by the Industrial Council for all local authorities. The valuer estimated that the working expenses of all the Council's property had increased by 40%. He compared the same costs for Rowton House (not affected by the same wage increases) where many of the staff were paid considerably less. As an example, laundresses in the Council employ were paid 15s a week before WW1 and 42s 9d in 1921, whilst Rowton House laundress still received 15s-17s a week, but that did include meals. The only conclusion one can come to is that Carrington House was too big before WW1, and that the running costs were based on high occupancy, but the deficit in costs became acute in the 1920s with the increase in Council wages.

With the running costs so high there was no way Carrington House was ever going to be a success. The lack of investment is evident in the picture below from 1930. The dream seems to have turned sour even by then.



Fig. 13: Carrington House dining room and lodger's scullery, 1930 (LMA ref: SC/PHL/02/1044)

Both Carrington House and Sylva Cottages are still standing. The House has been converted into flats and has been renamed Mereton Mansions. This conversion was probably the only viable solution, but it is a credit to the Council for constructing it so well that it looks today very much like it did when built. The older photographs give an impression of Carrington House being a building dominating the surrounding area but, today, the house is no larger than many buildings in Deptford Broadway and Brookmill Rd. Sylva Cottages have been converted from left/right dwellings into single dwellings. They look well cared for but lack any features or style.



Fig. 14: Carrington House (now Mereton Mansions), 2009



Fig. 15: Sylva Cottages, 2009

## Footnotes

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<sup>i</sup> London County Council; Carrington House. Housing Committee. Report by Valuer; 16<sup>th</sup> Nov 1921; LMA ref: LCC/AR/CB/02/072