

Housing the Workers

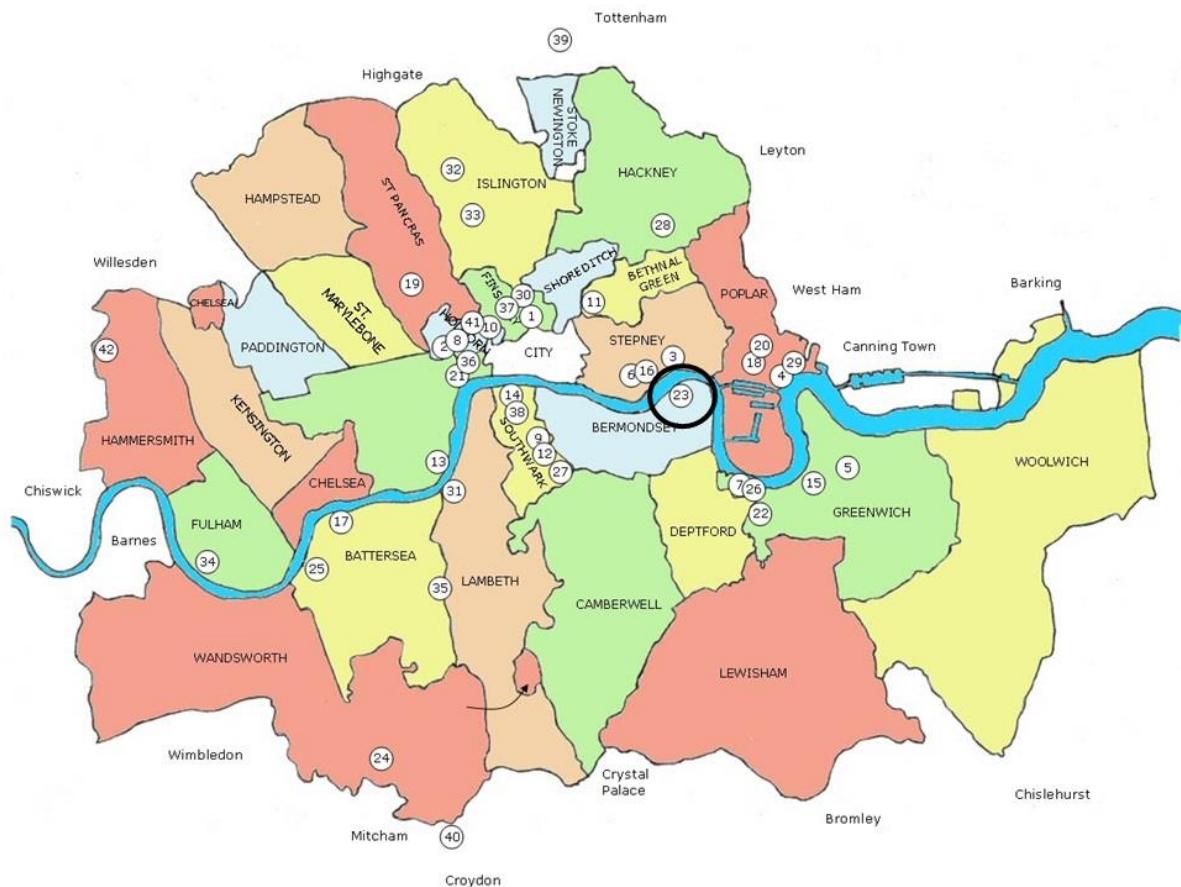
Early London County Council Housing

1889-1914

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Part 3 – the schemes in detail

23 – Rotherhithe Tunnel scheme



Rotherhithe Tunnel scheme

Swan Lane - Winchelsea, Rye, Sandwich, Hythe and Seaford Buildings (1902-4)

Ropemaker's Fields - Brightlingsea Buildings (1904)

London Street - Bekesbourne Buildings (1907)

The next scheme in the chronological sequence of new housing was forced upon the Housing Committee because of the building of the Rotherhithe Tunnel. The scheme was another one where the numbers legally required to be re-housed was not matched by the actual numbers willing to rent the new accommodation. The Council was left with a large number of vacancies but they built the new housing in stages and were able to obtain permission to close the scheme early before the capital spend for the final buildings had been committed.

Before looking into the actual housing, a brief description of the tunnel and why it was built will help set the following information into context.

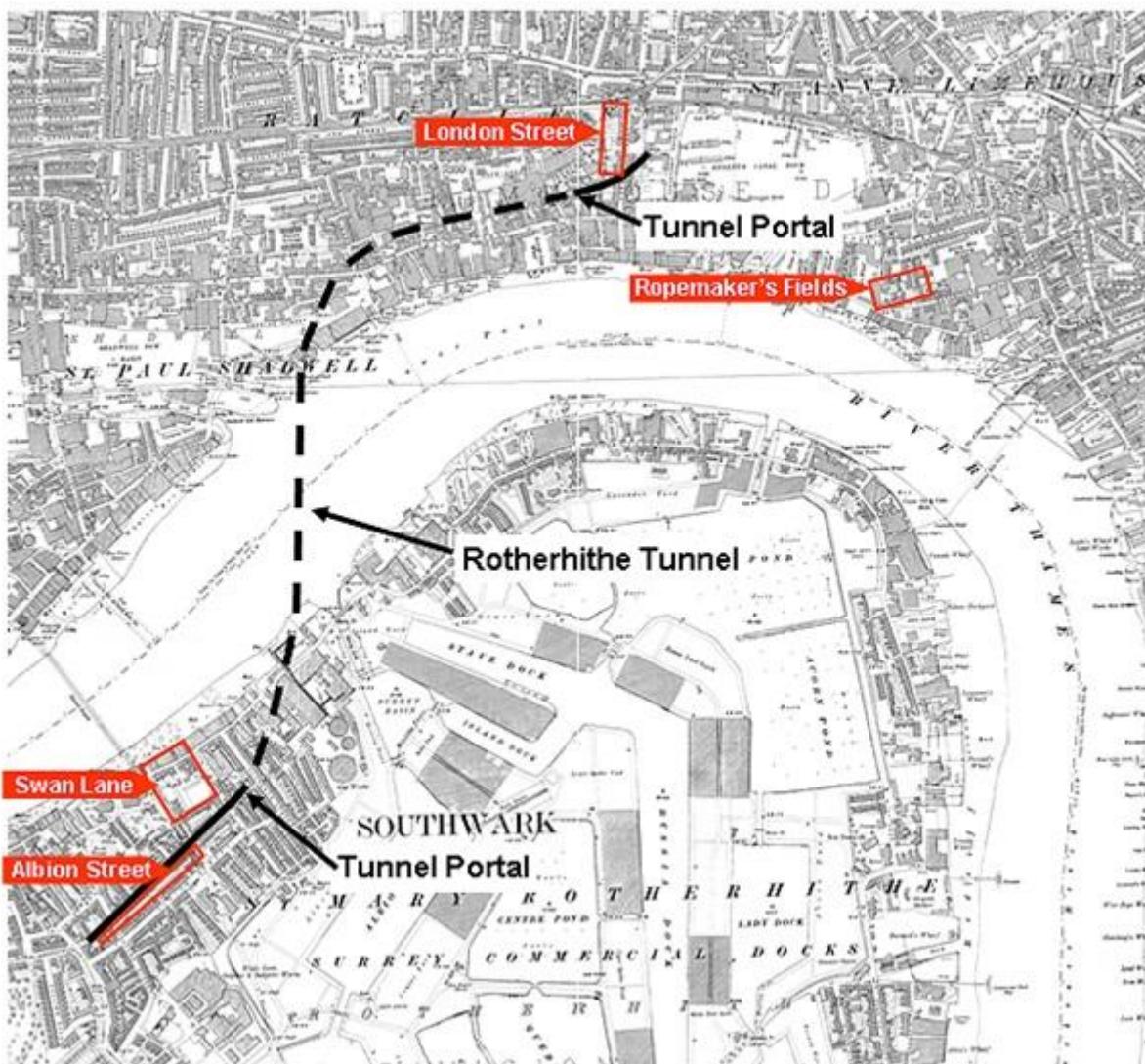


Fig. 1: Route of Rotherhithe Tunnel and locations of proposed housing (1916 OS Map)

As can be seen from the map in Fig. 1 above, the tunnel did not cut straight across the Thames, and this was for two reasons. Firstly, the tunnel was built for horse-drawn traffic and therefore

needed long approach roads, particularly so in the case of the southern entrance. Secondly, the tunnel was built to join the Surrey Commercial Docks and the neighbouring manufacturing areas in Southwark and Bermondsey with the dockland area north of the Thames, which was much further east. A tunnel straight across the Thames from Bermondsey would have taken the north-bound traffic onto busy local roads with a slow journey on to the destination.

The areas cleared were for the construction of the approach roads and these displaced 2,773 persons. The Act required that 1,135 be re-housed on the north side of the Thames and 1,707 on the south side. As described below, these requirements to re-house the approximate numbers as displaced did not take into consideration the needs of the locals, many who did not want to, or could not, pay the rents for the modern Council dwellings, and did not want to abide by the strict tenancy rules that came with all social housing. The Council were not able to argue against these numbers when the scheme was first proposed, but decided to build the dwellings in stages and so were able to show that they had difficulty renting the tenements built and that there was no need to complete the scheme for 2,842 persons. This is not the first time that the Council had been the victim of statistical re-housing requirements, and nor would it be the last, but the experiences of difficulty in letting in some areas was becoming a real problem and the Council was getting better at arguing its case with the authorities. The sites for the new housing and the end-results are illustrated in Fig. 2 to Fig. 5 below.

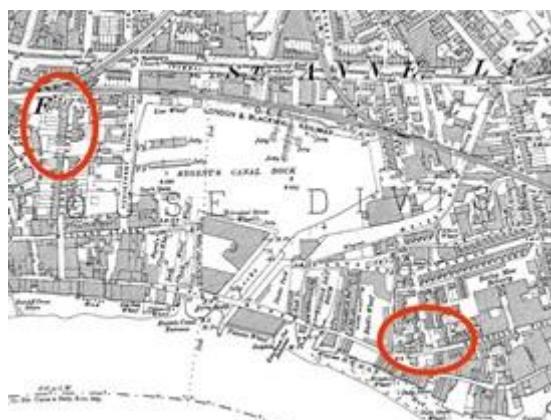


Fig. 2: London Street and Ropemakers Fields Sites from 1896 OS Map

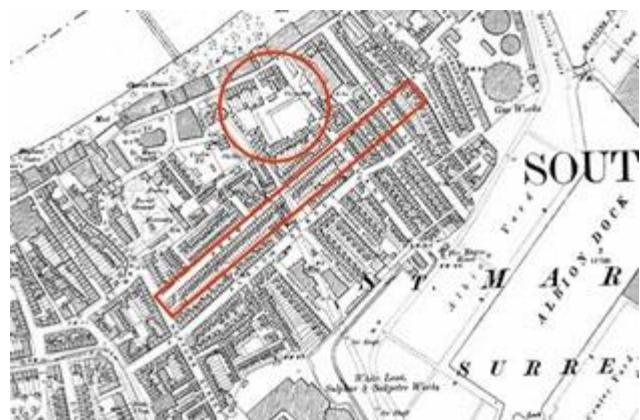


Fig. 3: Swan Lane and Albion Street sites from 1896 OS Map

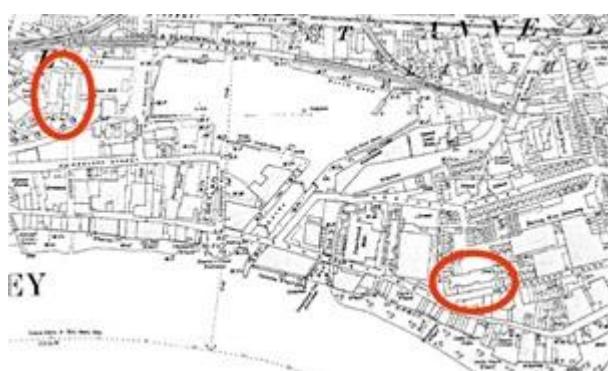


Fig. 4: London Street and Ropemakers Fields Sites following construction. From 1916 OS Map



Fig. 5: Swan lane and Albion Street sites following construction. From 1916 OS Map

The map of Swan Lane and Albion Street in Fig. 3 shows the earlier Thames Tunnel crossing the Rotherhithe Tunnel approach road at right angles. The former was built by Isambard

Kingdom Brunel and opened as a foot tunnel in 1843 but converted for rail use in 1869. The sloping approach road to the Rotherhithe Tunnel portal actually goes over the rail tunnel despite the approach road already being some way below street level at this point. It is also interesting to note that the road adjacent to the northern boundary of the approach road was called Adam Street in 1896 but Brunel Road in 1916.

The Swan Lane site was purchased by auction under Part III of the 1890 act and involved no housing clearance. The Council paid £3,000, and the area was enlarged when the Council purchased an adjacent property for £1,800, giving a total site of about 1 acre. The Council erected Winchelsea, Rye, Sandwich, Hythe and Seaford Buildings (named after Cinque Ports) between September 1902 and December 1904 on the south side. They housed 1,270 persons, which was 337 short of the target set by the authorities. On the north side of the Thames, Brightlingsea Buildings were erected on the Ropemakers Fields site and opened in September 1904 to accommodation 380 persons. The Council then had a problem as the scheme stipulated that the housing north of the river must be completed by March 1906 but it was likely that this date would be missed because there were problems with the foundations of the Bekesbourne Buildings which was being erected on the London Street site, near Limehouse Station. The Council were already running late with the first portion of the building which was eventually opened in July 1907 to house 240 persons. The main issue was with the second planned building as this was adjacent to the wall of the tunnel approach road. If the building was to be erected before the retaining wall was built, the foundations of the building had to be dug particularly deep. If the construction could wait until the retaining wall was built then the costs would be much lower. The Local Government Board agreed with the proposal to delay construction, much to the relief of the Council. Both Brightlingsea and Bekesbourne were named after Cinque Port Liberties (a Liberty is a town affiliated to a Cinque Port). In the case of Brightlingsea, this is connected with the Cinque Port of Sandwich, and Bekesbourne is connected with Hastings.

Thus, by 1907 there was accommodation for 720 persons on the north side of the Thames and 1,270 on the south side. It is very likely that the Council knew exactly what they were doing as the tunnel opened in June 1908 and there was no more demand for new housing even two years later. The Council made enquires and established that there was good vacant accommodation for 1,600 persons in the London Street area and for 1,738 persons in the Albion Street area. The Local Government Board agreed and released the obligation for the Council to finish the scheme.

The buildings were of the standard design for the Council by this time and the plans (see below) show that the rooms continue to get narrow although most are larger than the minimum recommended.

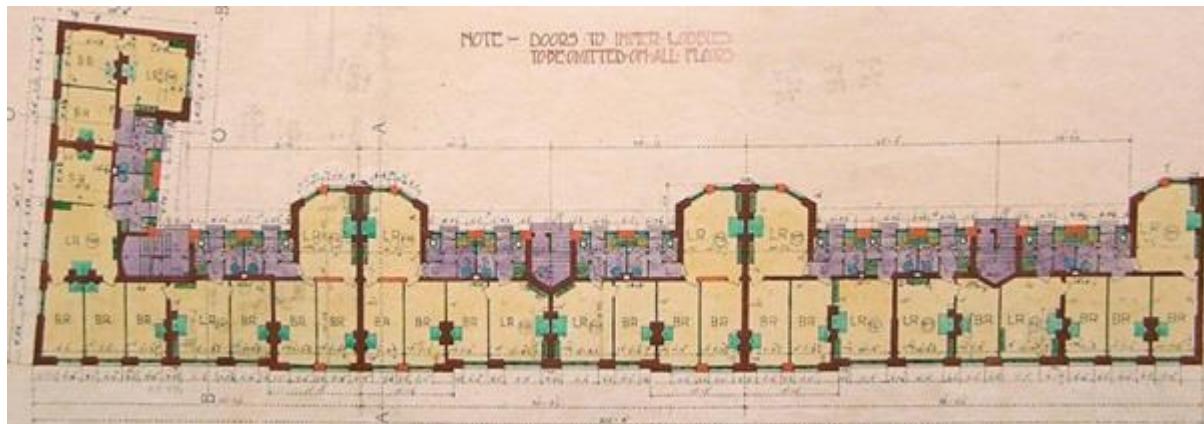


Fig. 6: Brightlingsea Buildings floor plan (LMA ref: LCC/AR/HS/03/009)

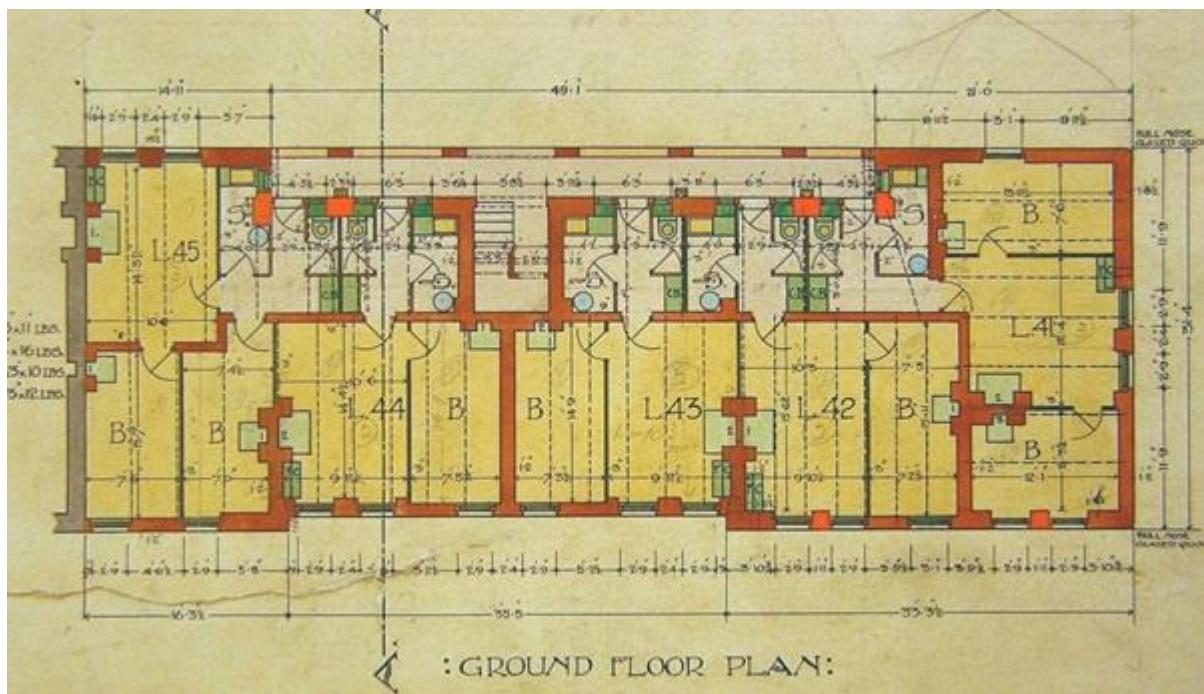


Fig. 7: Winchelsea Buildings, ground floor plan (LMA ref: LCC/AR/HS/03/048)



Fig. 8: Swan Lane and York Place, 1903
(LMA ref: SC/PHL/01/040)



Fig. 9: Swan Lane and Railway Ave, 1903
(LMA ref: SC/PHL/01/040)



Fig. 10: Swan Lane Aug 1905, Seaford (left) and Hythe (right) Buildings. (LMA ref: SC/PHL/02/0869)



Fig. 11: Rye Buildings in the 1960s
(LMA ref: SC/PHL/02/0869)



Fig. 12: Seaford and Hythe Houses, 2009



Fig. 13: Rye House, rear, 2009



Fig. 14: Brightlingsea Buildings, Ropemakers Fields, Limehouse
(LMA ref: SC/PHL/02/775)



Fig. 15: Brightlingsea Buildings looking from the other direction (LMA ref: SC/PHL/02/775)

The costs to construct the buildings have been very difficult to establish. This is partly because some costs were included in the tunnel scheme costs, but also because it proved to be difficult for the Council to balance the books as regards the true costs, with proposals and counter-proposals submitted to transfer some costs to the tunnel scheme. A further problem is that some figures published by the Council were for estimates of the proposed scheme and not for the final reduced scheme.

The costs of the new buildings that are known are as follows:

	Outgoings	Income	
Cost of Swan Lane site	£4,800		
Cost of Winchelsea Buildings	£8,122		
Cost of Rye Buildings	£8,021		
Cost of Sandwich Buildings	£8,021		
Cost of Seaford Buildings	unknown		
Cost of Hythe Buildings	unknown		
Cost of Bekesbourne Buildings	unknown		
Cost of Brightlingsea Buildings	unknown		
Balance of Accounts 1913-14 - Swan lane	£4,107	£3,542	-£565 (15.9% loss)
Balance of Accounts 1913-14 – Brightlingsea	£1,006	£1,017	£17 (1.7%)
Balance of Accounts 1913-14 – Bekesbourne	£1,229	£1,220	-£9 (0.1% loss)

Table 1: The known costs to build the replacement housing for the Rotherhithe Tunnel scheme

The LCC minutes following the construction of the buildings are very enlightening as regards the problems of trying to let some of the tenements.

Even whilst the Swan Lane Buildings were being erected the Council reports in its minutes of 6th Oct 1903 that as notices to quit are issued prior to demolition, the tenants are offered accommodation in the buildings, but only a small number take the offer. The Council requested that the tenements, when refused by those displaced, should be opened for offer to anyone in the area, and Home Secretary agreed.

An un-dated minute held at the London Metropolitan Archives, but believed to have been written late in 1910, gives hard evidence as to the difficulty the Council was having renting out their tenementsⁱ. The rents when the Swan Lane buildings were opened were: 2-roomed at 6/- a week; 3-roomed at 8/- and 8/6d a week; and 4-roomed at 9/- a week. It was felt that 2/- per room was typical of the area, although the Council accommodation was of high quality. At these rents Swan Lane had, in 1905-6, 53.89% of tenements vacant. As a result, the weekly rents were reduced by 6d for the first three floors and by 1/- a week for the upper two floors. The impact was much lower than expected and in 1906-7 the vacancies reduced to only 35.64%. Desperation must have been setting in because the Council reduced the rents on the top floor by a further 6d a week for 1908-9 (reducing vacancies to 29.67%) and finally to give all tenants one week's free rent in the following year. The impact was fairly minimal and the vacancies only reduced to 25.96% for 1909-10. The high vacancy situation for all the buildings in the scheme was not much better by September 1910, being 22.92%. The Swan Lane buildings also suffered from high tenancy turnover with it peaking at 42.3% for 1909-10. The result was a loss on the annual accounts for the buildings and a deficit of £1,739 charged to the rates – a considerable sum.

The 1911 census clearly shows the difficulty the Council were having. Whereas other buildings of this time were occupied within a short time and by people of the more artisan and clerk class, the Swan Lane Buildings should a difference in the occupants. All but the larger Hythe Buildings have a high level of vacancies varying between 20 and 27% of total tenancies. Hythe Buildings has a much more acceptable 4 vacancies across the 70 tenancies. These unoccupied tenancies affects the occupancy which is only 60-65% for the smaller buildings but a more acceptable 77% for Hythe Buildings. The census records many heads of household as being labourers in local works and in the wharves and docks. There are also a number of Lightermen. The artisan classes are few are there are no Metropolitan Policeman. Another difference with other Council blocks is the predominance of local-born heads of household. The early buildings have shown a worryingly low percentage of tenants being local people. Not so in the case of Swan Lane where nearly half the heads of household are local-born and a very high 72% in the case of Sandwich Buildings. The occurrences of overcrowding is also a little higher than would be expected suggesting the Council was happy to turn a blind eye because of the difficulty to fill all tenancies. One 3-roomed tenancy in Seaford Buildings was occupied by a family of 11, headed by a locally-born lighterman. All the above indicates a set of buildings that were proving difficult to fill probably because the typical tenant was working in the wharves, Surrey Docks and local heavy industry such as the Metropolitan Gas Works, and their available income for rent was lower than the Council was planning to get for the tenancies.

The 1911 census for Brightlingsea Buildings indicates a similar pattern to Swan Lane with 11 empty tenancies out of the 65, nearly 50% occupied by heads of households born locally, and a predominance of people in manual occupations. Slightly surprising is that 9 heads of household were born in Scotland. There are a few more interesting occupations with a single 31 year-old district nurse, a medicine dispenser (his father is recorded as a chemist in Whitechapel on the 1901 census), and a life assurance agent from Wales.

The 1911 census for Bekesbourne Buildings shows a more typical occupancy seen in other buildings. The occupations are across a broad spectrum from dock labourers to clerks. There are 8 Metropolitan Policeman in residence and one dock constable. The occupancy against the theoretical maximum is a relatively low 66% despite only one tenancy being vacant. As with the other buildings in this development the local-born people are well represented at 30%.

Not only were the annual finances a concern as there was also concern regarding the full-life costs of the scheme and the ability of the Council to fund the life of the buildings without a charge on the rates. In March and May 1904 the Council meetings discussed the costs of Bekesbourne Buildings. The estimated cost was £46,277 (this was for 2 blocks) and the value of the land was £3,050 giving a net cost of £49,327. This sum needed to be recovered over a period of time via a sinking fund and despite low interest rates on the government loan.

The Finance Committee had calculated three scenarios for the full-life cost recovery and none were attractive:

- 1) Based on an interest rate of $3\frac{1}{4}\%$ for the loan and a sinking fund period of 59 years, the theoretical income would be £40,628
- 2) Same interest rate but for 79 years would be £44,493
- 3) With a small increase in rents the income would be £48,265 over the 79 years.

All these figures assume high tenancy occupation and no major overhaul of the buildings for 79 years. The standard period over which to spread costs at that time was 60 years and any extension would need government approval. It is clear that breaking-even on these buildings

over, say, 60 years, was not very likely and so either the excess would come out of the rates or some of the costs had to be moved elsewhere. The Council were obliged to take the 59 year option (income of £40,628) and so worked on a solution to the problem. They felt that, as the housing was a commitment from the Rotherhithe Tunnel scheme, some of the costs could be transferred to that scheme, and that is what was proposed. The lack of confirmation in later Council minutes either suggests that the scheme was carried out and no more was discussed, or that the plans were ignored and the scheme was never financial viable.

With the very high level of vacancies and the marginal cost recovery even at high occupancy, it is no wonder that the Council applied to be relieved of the commitment to complete the scheme as originally planned. With the very detailed statistics provided by the Council the Local Government Board would have been foolish not to agree.

Swan Lane buildings still stand and look well maintained. Brightlingsea Buildings were badly damaged by WW2 bombing but repaired. Bekesbourne Buildings were modernised in 1971 but both it and Brightlingsea Buildings were demolished in the 1980s.

Footnotes

¹ LCC; Collection of minutes pertaining to the Rotherhithe Tunnel housing development; LMA ref: CL/IMP/1/39