

Housing the Workers

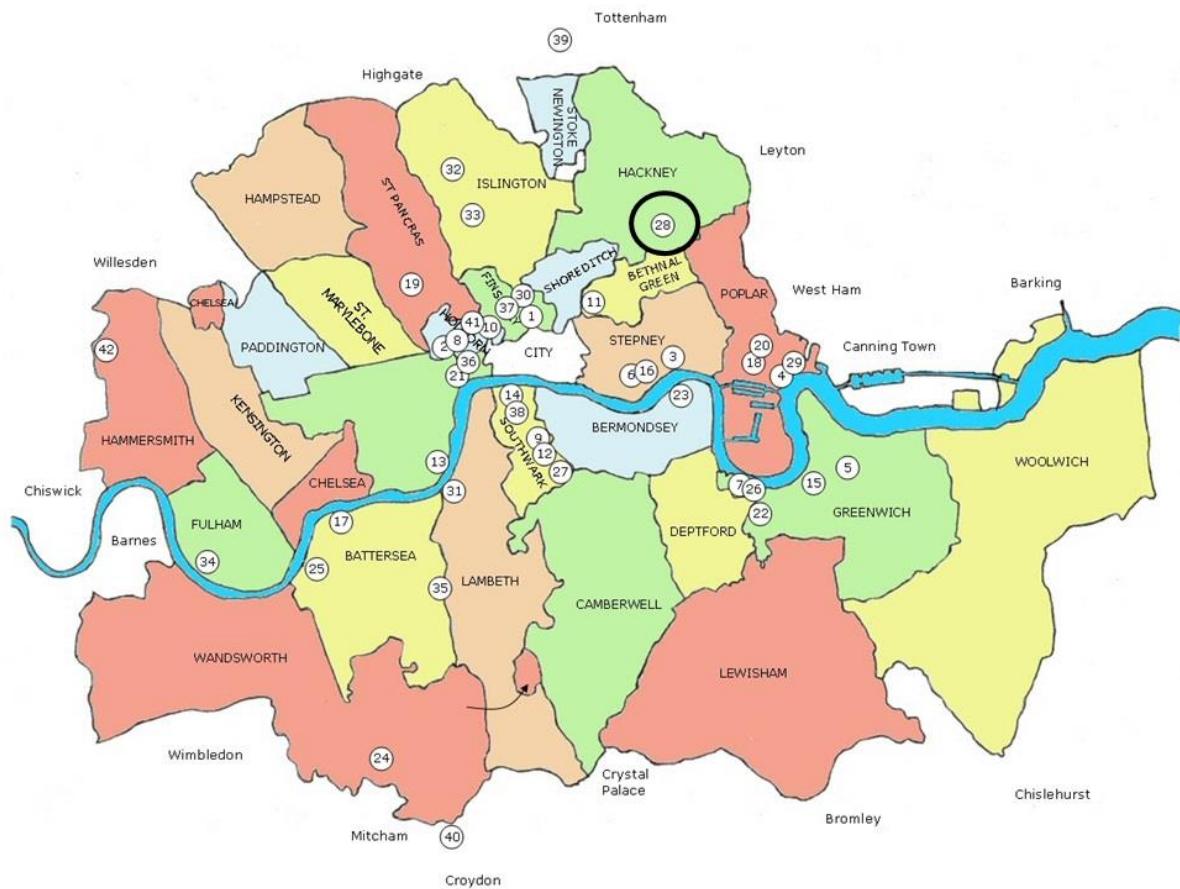
Early London County Council Housing

1889-1914

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Part 3 – the schemes in detail

28 – Mare Street, Hackney



Mare Street Widening Scheme, Hackney

Darcy (1904) and Valette (1906) Buildings

This rather forgotten development was result of a protracted scheme to widen Mare Street, Hackney, towards its northern end, just south of the North London Railway bridge. The resulting buildings, erected to re-house the displaced, were of high quality compared to other Council buildings being erected at this time. The whole Mare Street widening scheme needs describing as that was not without its own problems.

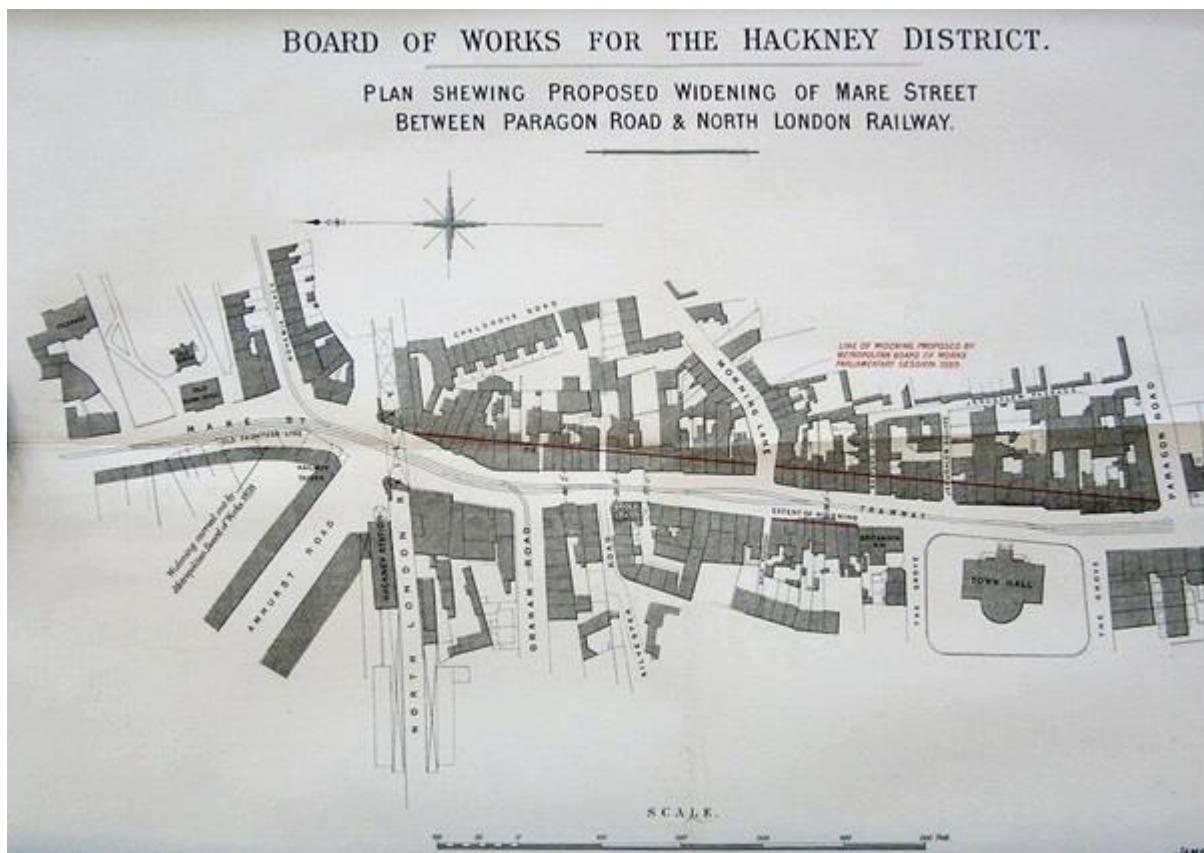


Fig. 1: The original plan to widen Mare Street, 1900 (LCC ref: LCC/CL/IMP/1/127)

Looking at the line on the map above one would not imagine a large number of working-classes to be displaced. Much street-front property along the main thoroughfares would not consist of typical homes for the working classes, but the clearance scheme produced a surprising number of displaced persons. The Council minutes of the time state 486 were to be displaced but later Council publications state 526 (probably based on those actually displaced by the clearance). The reason both these figures are high for such a simple street widening is that it was not just the street front properties that were demolished, but also many of the properties behind, and particularly those between Morning Lane and Paragon Road. Fig. 2 and Fig. 3 below are photographs of Jerusalem Square and Jerusalem Passage, opposite the Town Hall, taken in 1899. The narrowness of part of Jerusalem Passage is not obvious from the plans above.



Fig. 2: Jerusalem Square, 1899 (LMA ref: SC/PHL/01/086)



Fig. 3: Jerusalem Passage, 1899 (LMA ref: SC/PHL/01/086)

The Council seemed to be learning fast that the purchase of freehold and leases constituted the larger proportion of any costs and they decided, in this case, that the widening scheme was not urgent and they would wait for leases to expire rather than purchase the remaining time. As a result of this delay it was not until 1904 that the area was finally cleared and the widening could go ahead. This decision to protract the works resulted in side-effects that many modern tenants would understand. The area became 'blighted', in the modern parlance, with many locals suffering. The delaying tactics by the Council may have not been the best financial solution as they suffered through having reduced commercial rates income for 4 years and had to contend with extra compensation for those who suffered as their business deteriorated. Most vociferous of all were the costermongers and stall holders who used Mare Street to park up and sell their wares.

Even with the Council trying to keep costs down (although their success at this was debatable) they knew that any replacement housing would have to have lower rents than desirable to compete with existing property in the area. To ensure that the sinking fund for the new buildings would not be adversely effected, the valuation for Darcy Buildings was set artificially at £0, but was later amended to a low valuation of £1,250 (the same approach as made when projecting the Barnaby Buildings sinking fund).

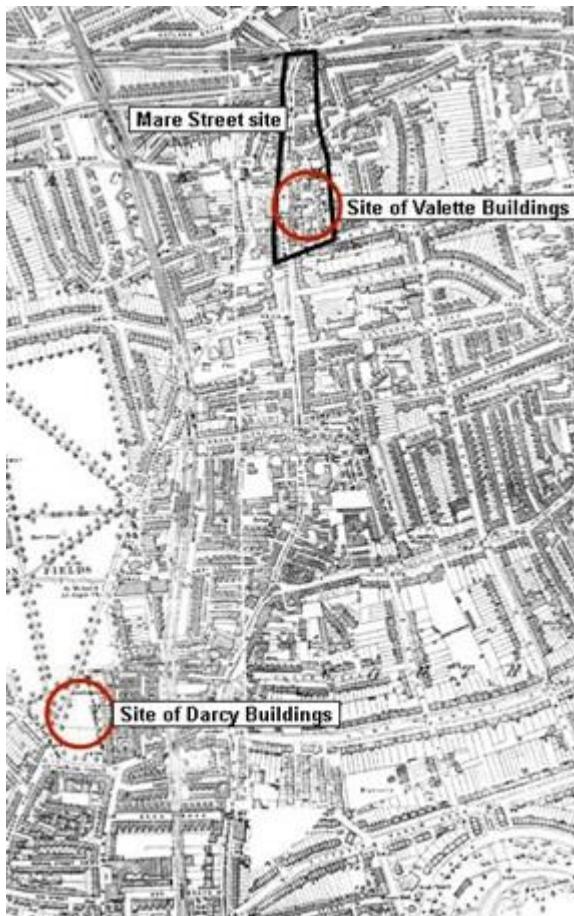


Fig. 4: Mare Street site from 1896 OS Map



Fig. 5: Mare Street site from 1916 OS Map

As can be seen from the floor plans below, Darcy Buildings show no particular architectural features apart from a neatness in placing the WCs and sculleries along the walkway side which resulted in most of the living and bedrooms having views across London Fields. The plans for Valette Buildings show a refreshing return to thick party walls and generously proportioned rooms.

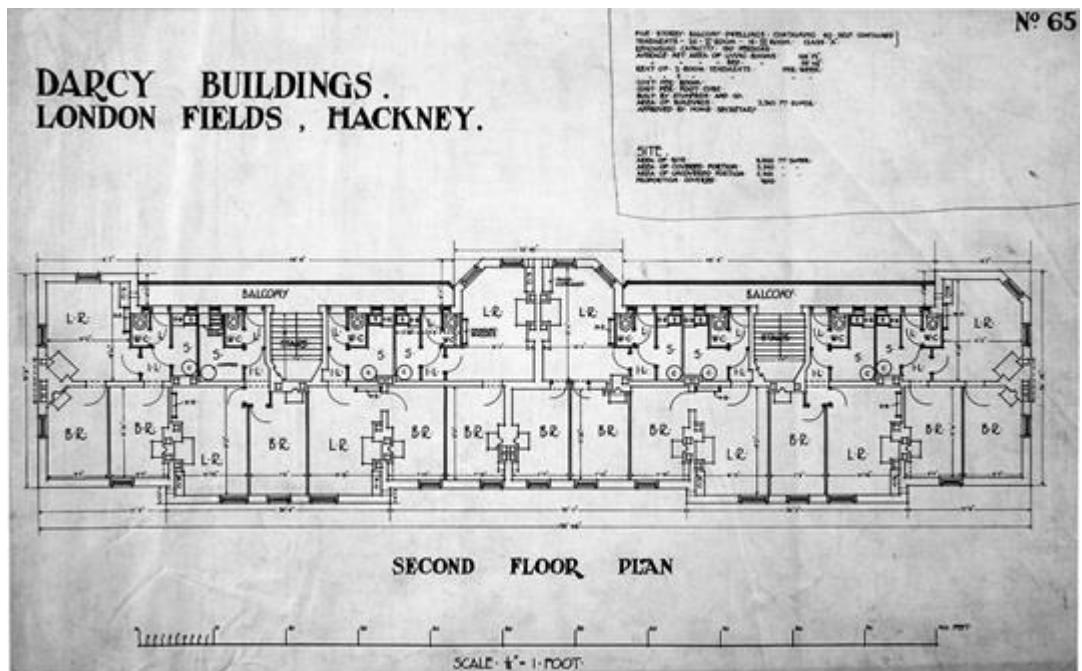


Fig. 6: Darcy Buildings floor plan (LMA ref: LCC/AR/HS/03/059)

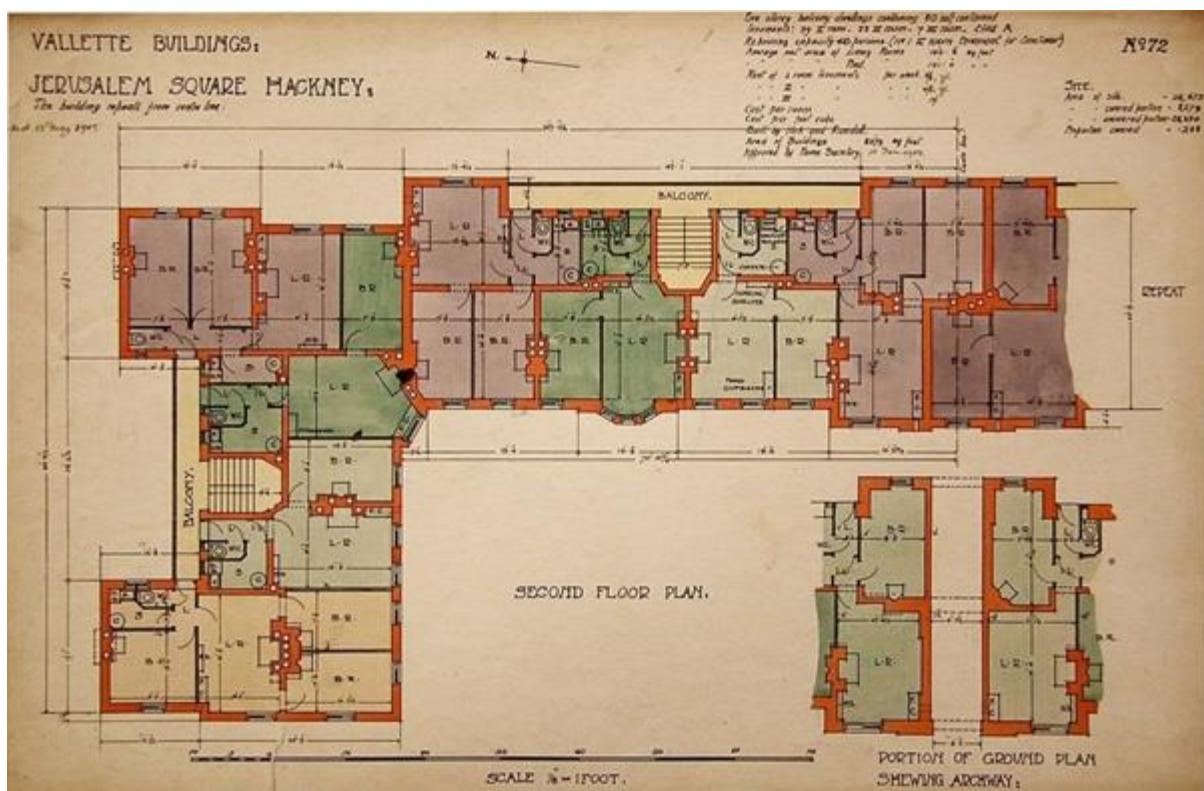


Fig. 7: Valette Buildings floor plan (LMA ref: LCC/AR/HS/03/057)

The average room size in Darcy Buildings is slightly about the minimum standard of 144 and 96 sq. ft. respectively for living and bedrooms. The room sizes in Valette buildings are a little more generous.

The reason for the lower quality of Darcy Buildings has to be the requirement to try and avoid an annual charge on the rates with the lower rents prevalent in that area reducing the potential annual income. This is despite the site itself being a particularly pleasant one with the building overlooking (and still overlooking) a large public park. The architects sensibly placed the balconies (the front of the building) facing the opposite way leaving the living and bedrooms to face across the park. The Valette Buildings to the north are quite impressive to look at, particularly from the front.



Fig. 8: Front view of Valette Buildings, 1907 (LMA ref: SC/PHL/02/0883)



Fig. 9: Rear view of Valette Buildings, 1960s (LMA ref: SC/PHL/02/0883)



Fig. 10: Walkways of Darcy Buildings facing away from London Fields, 1966 (LMA ref: SC/PHL/02/0885)



Fig. 11: Interesting view of Darcy Buildings from 1907 illustrating the expanse of London Fields to the distant right. (LMA ref: SC/PHL/02/0825-17)

Darcy Buildings was erected by Messrs Stimpson & Son between Mar 1903 and July 1904 and accommodated 190 persons. Valette Buildings were erected by Messrs Kirk and Randall between November 1903 and May 1905 and accommodated 416 persons. The total capacity was 606 persons which exceeds, by a wide margin, the requirement to re-house 526 persons.

The reason for naming the buildings Darcy and Valette is not known but both were prominent French families. Despite a lengthy search nothing can be found that links these two families to these two buildings.

The net cost of the buildings cannot be calculated as the purchase of land and property are included in the total cost of the Mare Street widening scheme.

The 1911 census returns would be expected to show that Darcy Buildings were popular because of the proximity to London Fields and that the more northern Valette Buildings were close to the employment opportunities at the newly completed London General Omnibus depot in Mare Street and the existing tram depot to the north of the building. Mare Street is also the main road directly north out of Bethnal Green and so was ideal for those born or working in the area who aspired to moving out the “the suburbs” into newly built accommodation. The returns do suggest this is the case, but it is not quite so clear cut as would be expected. The more southerly Darcy Buildings consist of 80 tenancies with an actual occupancy of 76% against the maximum of 190 people. There are 6 unoccupied tenancies, although that includes an adjacent block of 4 on the top floor, suggesting a temporary problem with the roof that required vacating them. Every head of household is in a manual trade with a few occupations suggesting a move up from Bethnal Green and Shoreditch. These include furniture, boot, jewellery and cigarette making. There are only 3 heads stated to be employed by an omnibus company. Of the 34 tenancies occupied, 19 have heads who are from the Bethnal Green and Shoreditch area; a slightly lower figure than would be expected, particularly with the severe overcrowding of the Boundary Street Estate a mile to the southwest. The Valette Buildings, half a mile to the north, show an occupancy that is closer to that expected. Of the 80 tenancies, only 6 are unoccupied with little overcrowding in those that are occupied. The occupancy is a low 66% against the maximum of 416, again indicating tenancies that were relatively easy to rent out. Of the 74 tenancies occupied, 65% state they originate from local parishes, particularly from the south. The occupations are, as with Darcy Buildings, predominantly manual trades with 20% in the boot, tailoring or furniture trades common in Bethnal Green and Shoreditch to the south.

The rentings seemed to be a success with Valette Buildings as this was showing a tidy profit of 11.9% on income in 1913-14, but Darcy Buildings could only break even. The lack of a profit from Darcy is a surprise with the desirable location overlooking London Fields, but the rents were lower in the area and so the finances of that building were always going to be marginal despite the 1911 census indicating no obvious problems with renting the tenancies.

The rear of Valette Buildings was damaged in WW2 when the building behind that was badly damaged, and is another example of the strength of the LCC methods of construction. The buildings in 2009 look in good condition and the surrounding area clean and well kept.



Fig. 12: Front of Darcy Buildings, 2009

Fig. 13: Rear of Darcy Buildings looking onto London Fields, 2009



Fig. 14: Valette front, 2009



Fig. 15: Valette rear, 2009