

Housing the Workers

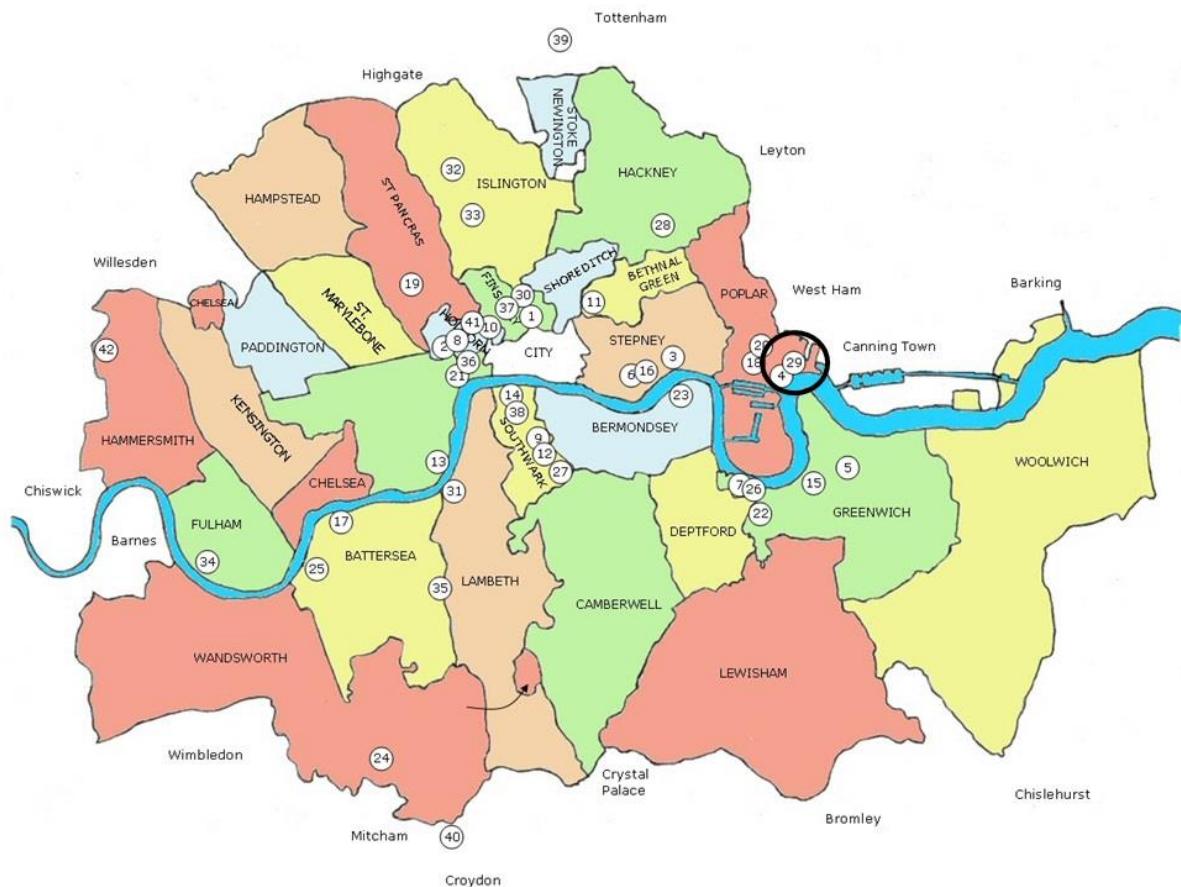
Early London County Council Housing

1889-1914

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Part 3 – the schemes in detail

29 – Burford's and Tucker's Courts and Florence St, Poplar



Burford's Court, Tucker's Court and Florence St scheme, Poplar

Ottawa, Baffin, Hudson, Ontario, Winnipeg and Quebec Buildings, 1904

St Lawrence Cottages 1904

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

This large development resulted in what many modern critics would consider the ugliest blocks to be built by the Council before WW1. But any criticism should be levelled only with an understanding of the building practices and architectural designs of the time. Most Council tower blocks built in the 1950s and 1960s are now considered ugly, especially the concrete ones, but the architects at the time no doubt considered them modern and beautiful ('cities in the skies').

The requirement for this scheme was somewhat complex and was considered a useful clean-up of other schemes that had resulted in outstanding re-housing requirements. One of the housing requirements resulted from the "*Burford's Court, Tucker's Court and Favonia Street Scheme*" These areas contained unhealthy houses and it was decided to deal with them under the single scheme. The condition of the housing in Burford Court, from the 1899 medical officer report, is worth repeating.

"The houses in Burford's-court are worn out and in bad repair; they have no back yards and no through ventilation. In each case the staircases rise from one room to another, there being no entrance passage and only one room on each floor. The court, in which five w.c.'s and the tap for the water supply to the houses are situate, has no proper ventilation. The houses in Ashton-street are badly ventilated and very much worn. Those in Robinhood-lane are badly ventilated, and the w.c.'s are ill-arranged, in some cases opening directly out to the living room".ⁱ

Tucker's Court and Favonia Street housing were not much better with a combined death-rate of 25 per 1000 as against an average of 20.5 for the area.

In all, 269 persons were to be displaced and 155 of these were allocated to the Ann Street scheme (Adelaide, Sydney and Melbourne Buildings) opened in 1901/2 which left the balance of 114 still to be re-housed. As usual with clearance schemes that are not immediately followed by re-housing, those 114 would have found their own replacement accommodation, but that did not remove the requirement on the Council to build the working-class housing. But an opportunity arose to 'clear the books' by combining with another re-housing requirement. By 1904 the School Board of London was in deficit as regards legal re-housing requirements as a result of many of the new schools built across the eastern part of London, from Camberwell round to Bethnal Green. Sensibly, the authorities had not attempted to carry out small-scale re-housing but the deficit was building up and was at 1,030 persons. The Council saw an opportunity to construct a large-scale block development on land in Preston's Road that remained surplus and unsold from the Blackwall Tunnel scheme. The Council took over the requirement to build housing for 1,030 from the School Board for £10,359 (such a precise figure was probably calculated as £10 per person plus costs). The Council now had a legal duty to erect working-class housing for 1,144 persons.

The map in Fig. 1 below shows how widespread the three clearance schemes were in relation to the Preston's Road site where half the numbers displaced were to be allocated. It is very

likely that, 4 years after the sites were cleared, none of those displaced would have chosen to live in the new housing.

The Preston's Road site is directly over the route of the Blackwall Tunnel which emerged to the right of the Burford's Court site.

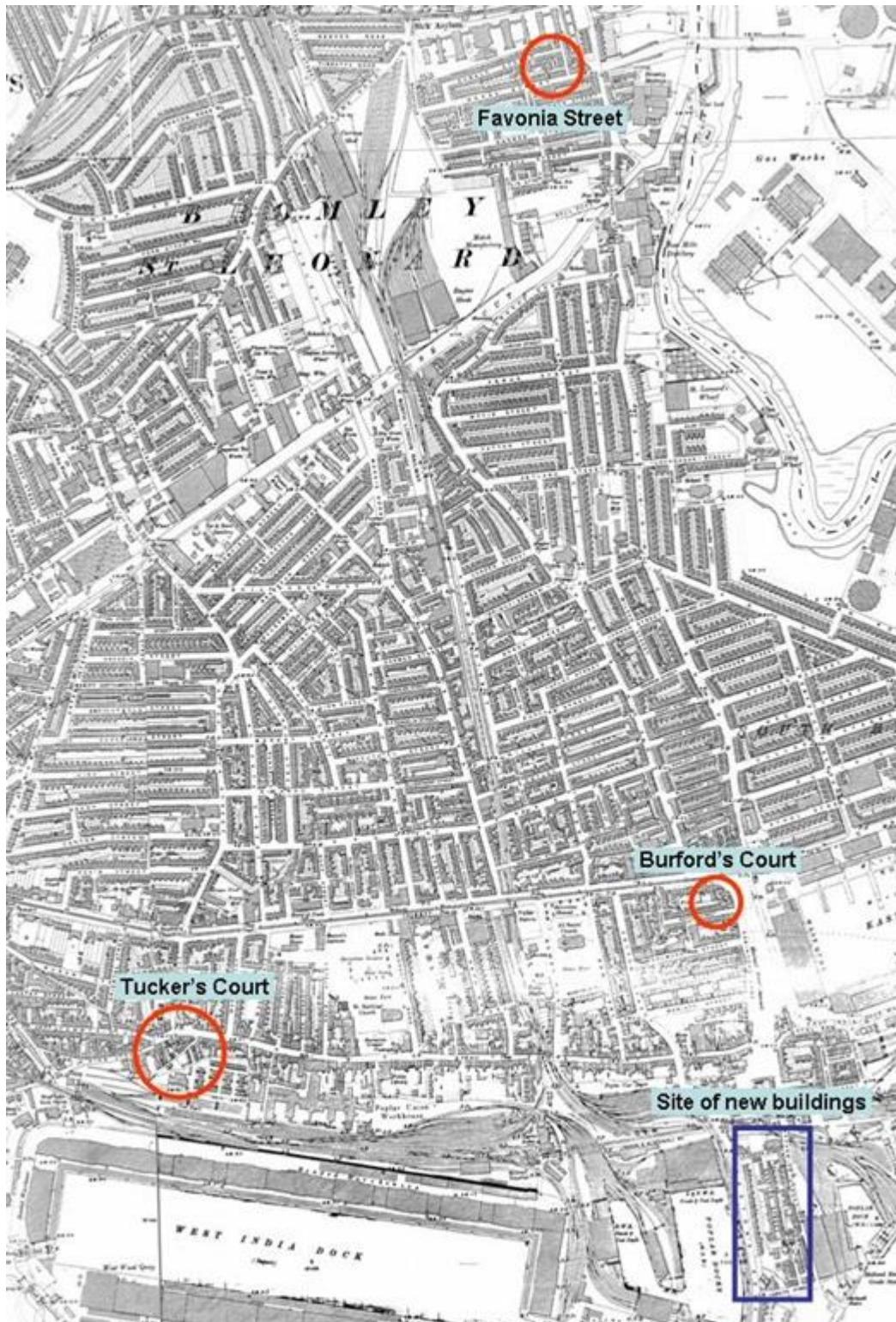


Fig. 1: The three clearance sites from 1896 OS map

The new housing was mainly blocks, but with a few cottages. The site became known as the “Canada Estate” because the blocks were named Ottawa, Baffin, Hudson, Ontario, Winnipeg and Quebec Buildings. Even the cottages had a Canadian name, being St Lawrence Cottages.

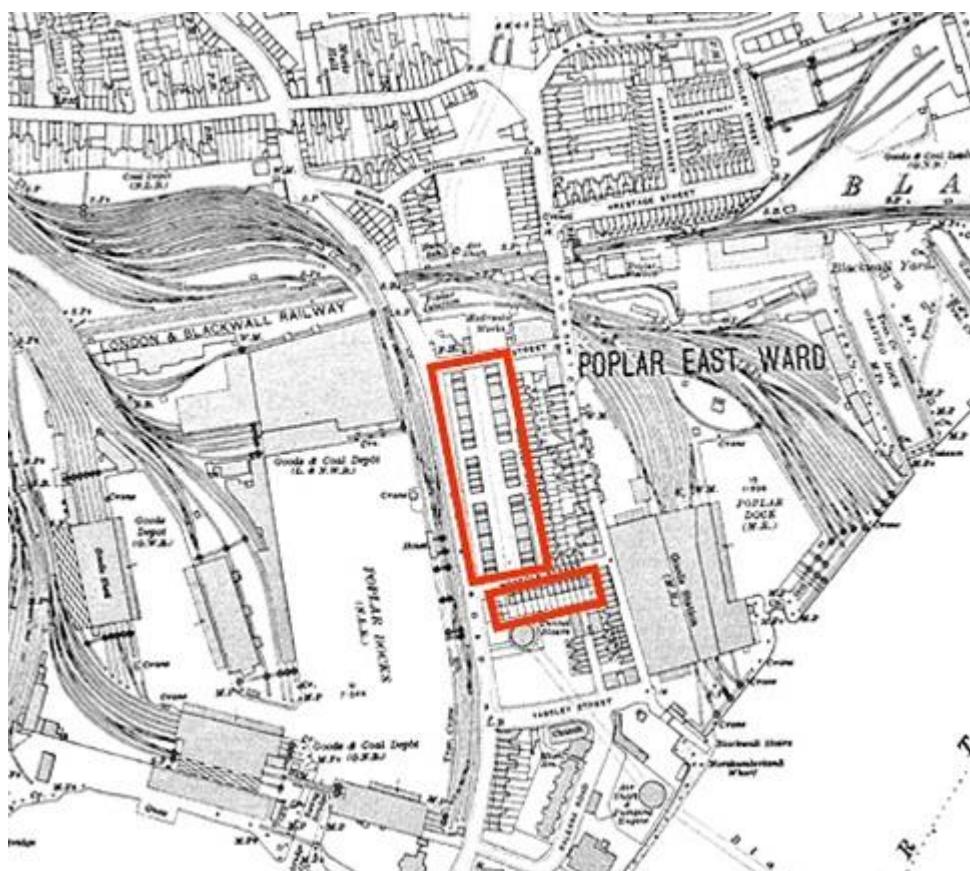


Fig. 2: Closer view of the Preston's Road site from 1916 OS map

As can be seen from the photographs below, the blocks were rather overpowering visually, and seem to have flat roofs, but actually had fairly shallow pitched roofs.



Fig. 3: Preston's Road site with Ontario Buildings in the foreground (LMA ref: SC/PHL/02/0847)
 Both the blocks and the cottages were erected by Messrs F. & T. Thorne. The sequence of opening was: Ottawa and Baffin, March 1904; Hudson in July 1904; Ontario in August 1904; and Winnipeg and Quebec in September 1904. The cottages were completed in July 1904.

The blocks housed a total of 1,220 persons in 140 2-roomed tenements and 110 3-roomed tenements, and the 14 cottages housed 84 persons and were all 2-storey, 3-roomed.

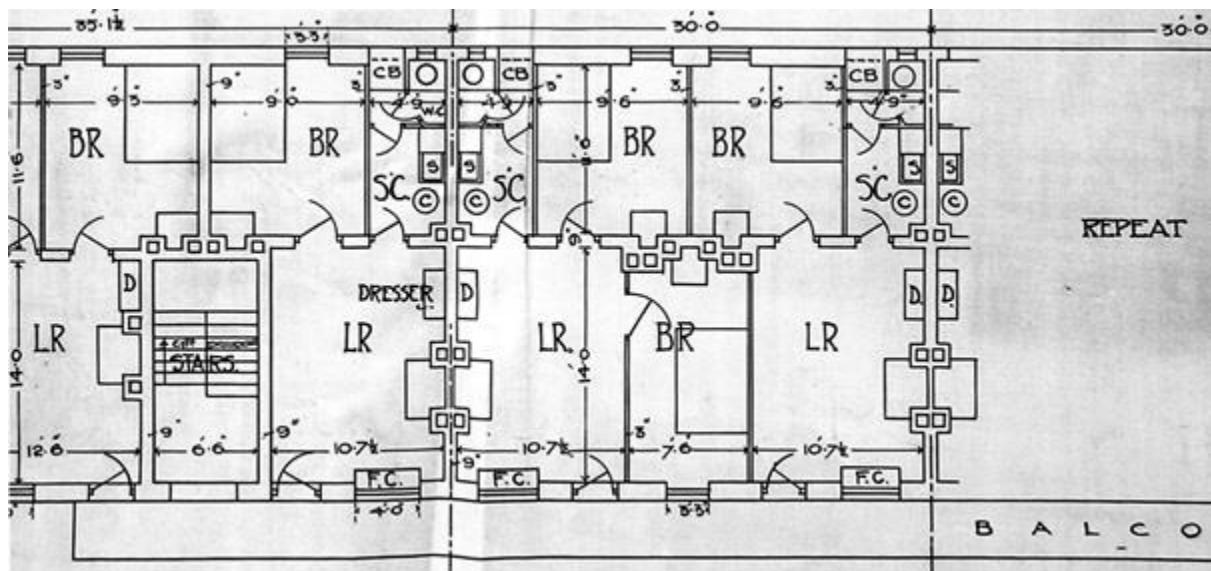


Fig. 4: Preston Road buildings floor plan (LMA ref: LCC/AR/HS/03/059)

Although the blocks seemed plain and ugly externally, the tenements were quite well fitted out for the time and seemed popular with the tenants. Although the rooms seem reasonably generous from the plans above, most appear a little smaller than the minimum size of 160 and

110 sq. ft. respectively for living and bedrooms for post-1897 housing built under Part I of the 1890 Housing Act. When seen in the photographs below, the living rooms seem adequate, at best.



Fig. 5: Ontario Buildings living room in the 1960s
(LMA ref: SC/PHL/02/0847)



Fig. 6: Ontario Buildings kitchen in the 1960s
(LMA ref: SC/PHL/02/0847)

As regards St Lawrence Cottages, their living rooms were right on the Council minimum of 144 sq. ft. but the bedrooms were, on average, 10 sq. ft. larger. In the plans below the left hand cottage represents two end cottages (seen clearly in Fig. 9) whilst the right hand cottage is representative of the 12 remaining terraced type where two cottages share one porched front entrance.

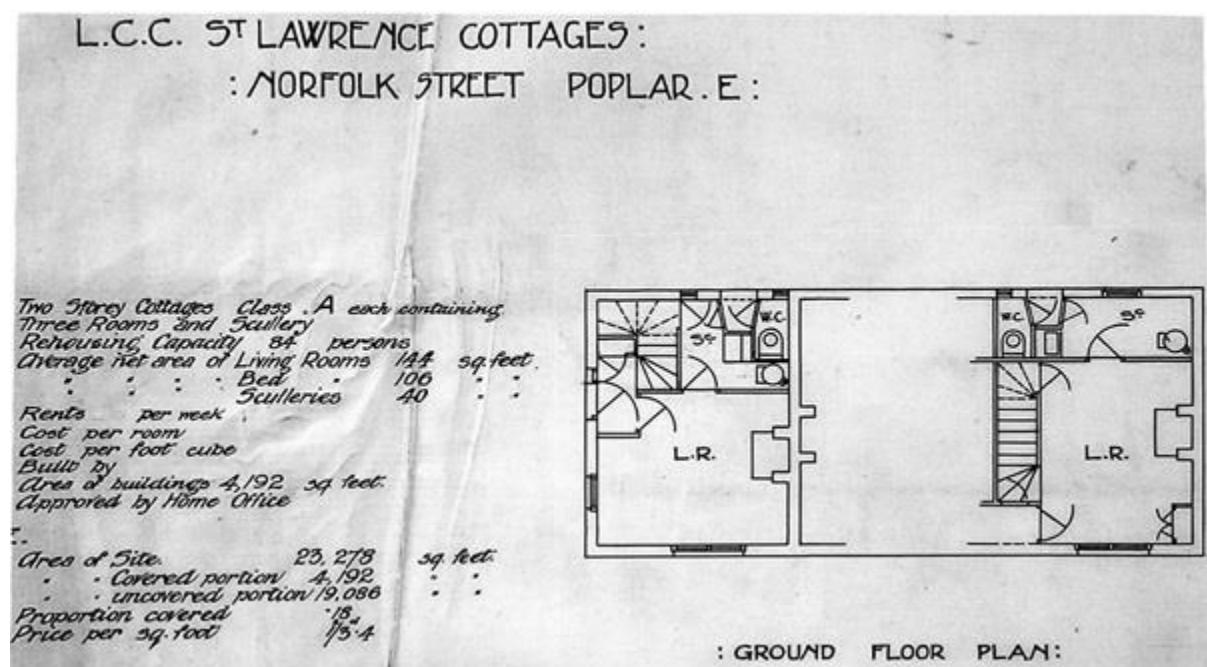


Fig. 7: Ground floor plan of St Lawrence Cottages (LMA ref: LCC/AR/HS/03/059)

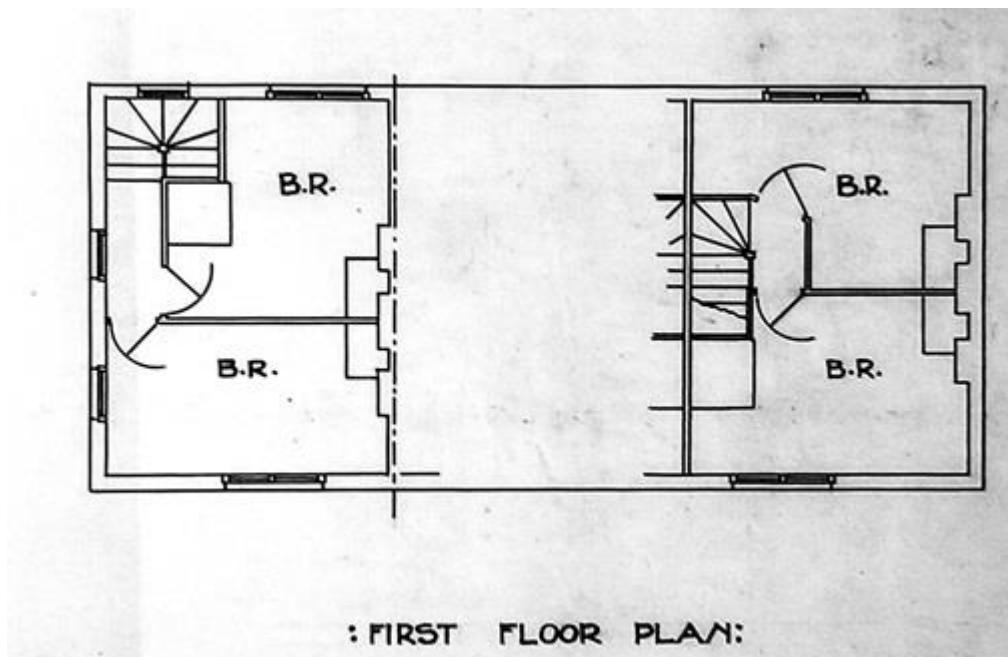


Fig. 8: 1st floor plan, St Lawrence Cottages (LMA ref: LCC/AR/HS/03/059)

The costs cannot be calculated as the land used was spare from the Blackwall tunnel construction.

This estate was built to house those displaced from a number of sites in Poplar, none close by although the site is close to the River Thames, rail yards and the docks and so would be expected to provide housing for many manual workers. However, the docks were well known for employing casual labour and with low wages and so the Council would need to make the rents low enough to attract the type of working class labourer who would not normally live in tenements of this type and quality. The 1911 census returns show that this was very much the case. The first important statistic is the vacancies. Of the 150 tenements in the blocks, a very high 26% were unoccupied. This alone would make the blocks financially unprofitable. All 14 of the St Lawrence Cottages were occupied. The blocks consisted of only 2 and 3 roomed tenements and all but 8 of the 67 unoccupied tenements were the larger and more expensive 3-roomed ones. This provides further evidence that prospective tenants were finding cheaper accommodation nearby, even if it was of lower quality. The need for regular income must also have been a factor in the low uptake of the tenancies. The census records 683 persons living in the tenancies as against a maximum capacity of 1304 giving a very low 52% occupancy. The returns show a higher level of overcrowding against the maximum allowable as compared with other Council buildings. There are some occurrences of very high overcrowding and these include one 3-roomed tenement with 10 occupants; three 2-roomed tenements with 7 occupants, and six 2-roomed tenements with 6 occupants. Almost all these particularly overcrowded tenements were occupied by the single family group, with just two having one boarder. Of the 193 occupied tenements, 31 were officially overcrowded, indicating that the estate superintendent (who lived in 1 Ottawa Buildings) was turning a blind eye to some of the overcrowding in order to improve the total occupancy. These statistics back up the Council's 1913-14 Accounts showing a high loss of 19.9% against income for the buildings and cottages combined.

Of the occupations of the heads of household, the census returns do show what would be expected and are summarised in the table below (based on 193 tenancies being occupied). The

occupations of the heads of the St Lawrence households reflect the higher rents and include 4 policemen.

Dock/general /waterside labourer	Other manual	Lighermen /seamen	Porters /carmen	Boilermaker /engineering	Shipwright /boatbuilders	Railway worker
43	32	20	14	13	7	6

Policeman	Warehouse /stores	Clerk	Dressmaker/ tailoring*	Char/ Cleaner*	Other white collar	No occ./ unknown
10	6	3	6	5	13	11

* Mostly female heads of household

There are two tenancies that are occupied by very heads of household that are not typical of those you would find in Council properties. One is a spinster in one of the 3-roomed cottages living alone and who records her occupation as “Sister of the Church”. The other is a very interesting occupant. He is Robert Charles Kirkwood Ensor (1877-1958) who records himself as a Barrister and Journalist. At the time Mr Ensor was a journalist for the *Daily News* and was the LCC Labour Councillor for Poplar (from 1910-1913). He was married but his wife and children were not living in Poplar. Robert Ensor was a liberal intellectual and journalist and went on to write the popular 1870-1914 section of the 14-part “Oxford History of England”.

As with the Council Buildings a few hundred yards to the south, the buildings survived the WW2 bombing almost unscathed despite their proximity to the docks. The blocks have since been demolished. The site of the westerly blocks has been used to widen Preston’s Road and the easterly blocks have been replaced by modern brick-built social/affordable housing.



Fig. 9: St Lawrence cottages (LMA ref: SC/PHL/02/0847)



Fig. 10: St Lawrence Cottages, 2009

The cottages survive and in the left hand photo above show what seem to be pleasant dwellings, with the two end cottages being a little larger than the others. They are almost identical to Cranford Cottages built in 1900 as part of the Brook Street scheme. The nearest cottages have since been demolished to widen Preston’s Road. The modern photograph on the right is from the opposite direction (towards Preston’s Road). The buildings have been rendered and painted and do not look in good condition. The cottages are surrounded by large and overpowering modern buildings and must be under threat from redevelopment.

Footnotes

¹ C. J. Stewart; The Housing Question in London; The London County Council; 1900; p232