

Housing the Workers

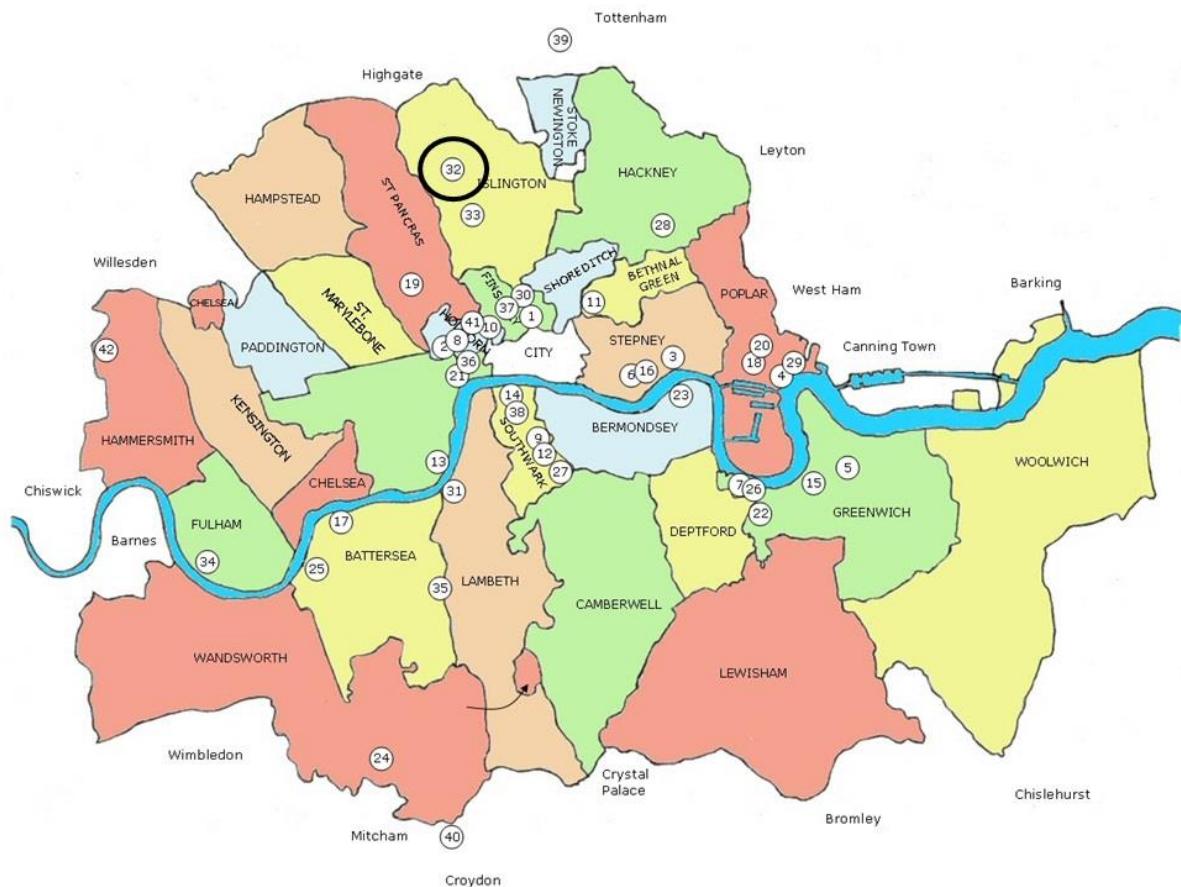
Early London County Council Housing

1889-1914

Martin Stilwell
August 2015

Part 3 – the schemes in detail

32 – Wedmore Street, Islington



Wedmore Street scheme, Holloway Road, Islington,

Wessex Buildings, 1905

(now Wetherbury, Northcombe and Melchester Houses)

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

The Wessex Buildings were the result of a straightforward purchase of some land close to the Holloway Road in Islington under Part III of the Housing Act.

The Council decided to purchase eight semi-detached houses with vacant land behind. Although the state of the original housing is not recorded it must be assumed that this housing, although not old, was of such a state that sale and demolition was the best option. The site was purchased for £11,650 and gave the Council a large square plot in which to build block dwellings.

The buildings that originally stood on the site were not grand or imposing, but were still substantial as can be seen in the photograph below, taken just before demolition. The houses do not look old or decrepit.



Fig. 1: Wedmore Street site shortly before demolition in 1905. (LMA ref: SC/PHL/01/197)

Seen from the maps below, the site sits squarely in a residential area. There is no obvious large-scale working class employer in the immediate vicinity of the site. One can only assume that the Council saw a need for housing for working classes who were prepared to commute the short distance to north London by foot, tram or bicycle. The large LCC Holloway Tram Depot opened in 1907 just to the west, and the Wedmore Street scheme does seem to have been designed to provide housing for the workers in that depot.



Fig. 2: The Wedmore Street site from the 1896 OS Map.

Fig. 3: The same site with Wessex Buildings from the 1914 OS Map. Note LCC tram depot.

The ground floor plan in Fig. 4 below shows a typical interior layout, but there are substantial dividing walls between some of the tenements. The dimensions of the bedrooms show a further reduction of the width and some sculleries seem to be particularly small. Despite this, all rooms are up to 10 sq. ft. larger than the minimum of 144 and 96 sq. ft. respectively for living and bedrooms.

The overall results, as seen in Fig. 5 and Fig. 6, show that some style and thought has been put into the exterior design with a substantial gambrel roof at the front containing the top two floors. As with Lennox Buildings in the previous section the buildings look substantial and not unpleasant.

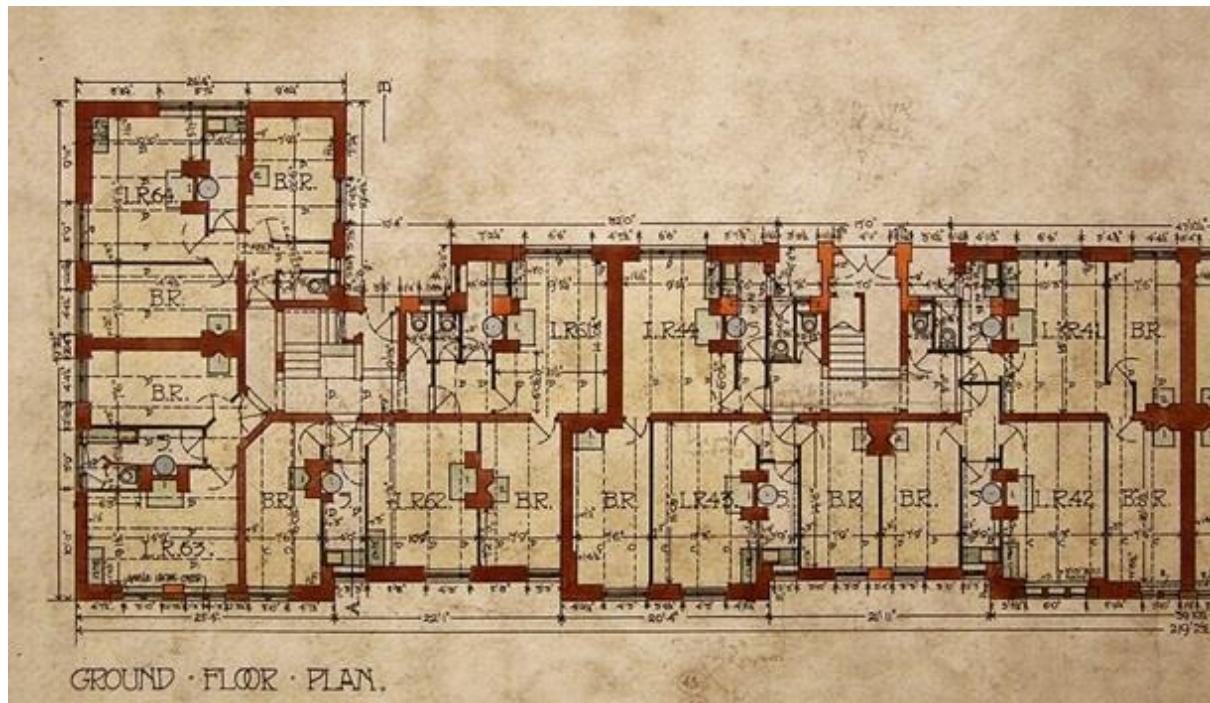


Fig. 4: Ground floor plan, Wessex Buildings, front block. (LMA ref: LCC/AR/HS/03/054)



Fig. 5: Wessex Buildings 1905
(LMA ref: SC/PHL/02/0890)



Fig. 6: Wessex Buildings 1905
(LMA ref: SC/PHL/02/0890)

The three blocks were completed by October 1905 and housed a total of 1,050 people in 5 tenements of one room, 140 tenements of two rooms, and 80 tenements of three rooms.

The costs are as follows:

	Outgoings	Income	
Purchase of buildings and land	£11,650		
Road works	£169		
Construction	£46,060		
NET COST			£57,879
Cost per person (based on 1,050 persons)			£55pp
Balance of Accounts 1913-14	£3,823	£4,038	£215 (5.3%)

Table 1: Wedmore Street scheme costs

The net cost of £55 per person is an extremely good figure and must have been one of the most cost-effective block developments at that time. The fact that the site originally consisted of only eight houses and that it was not in central London made big difference to the costs. The 1913-14 profit of 5.5% is also one that would have pleased the Council and was slightly above the desired profit margin.

The 1911 census returns indicates that the buildings were popular and were meeting the needs of the area. Of the 225 tenancies only 8 are vacant, which would be a typical number to find unoccupied because of tenant turnover. The overcrowding is slightly higher than typical at just under 10% although most of those have just one extra occupant than officially allowed. As to the occupations of the heads of household, Fig. 3 above shows the proximity of Wessex Buildings to the new LCC Tram depot built in two phases in 1907 and 1909, and there is an expectation that Wessex Buildings was to provide housing for the tram workers. The census returns show that this example of joined-up government was successful as 54 tenancies (24%) are headed by someone working for the LCC Tramways. Most were drivers and conductors, but car washers and permanent way labourers are included. As for the remaining heads of household, they fit the typical cross-section of manual skilled labourers. There are some white-collar workers such as clerks and salesmen, but most tenancies are headed by skilled workers. A small surprise is the low percentage of people working on the railways as the area is criss-crossed by many railways, including the London Underground. Only 16 households are headed

by railway workers. Another small surprise is the predominance of tenants who are not local born. Only 22% are born in the immediate area. In particular, only three of the 54 Tramway employees are local people and only seven others are from north or east London. The employment of “country” people because of their skill in handling horses would be understandable in earlier years, but the Holloway depot was for electric trams and was never used for horse-drawn trams. It is possible that many of the Holloway tram drivers were experienced men from other depots who had started their career on horse-drawn trams.

One third of the rear block (now Melchester House) was demolished and rebuilt at the end of WW2 as a result of bombing. The damage was quite severe to one end of the back block as can be seen in Fig. 7 below. One suspects that the window glazing in the tenements to the right of the damage had been replaced indicating that there was no structural damage to that part of the building and so remained occupied despite being so close to the bomb damage.



Fig. 7: WW2 bomb damage (LMA ref: SC/PHL/02/0890)

The blocks still stand today and look in reasonable condition. The three blocks are now known as Wetherbury, Northcombe and Melchester Houses with a between-wars block next to it taking over the old name, being called Wessex House. The building's new names are fictitious

Wessex place names from Thomas Hardy novels. Wetherbury is the name Hardy gave to Tolpuddle in Dorset; Northcombe is a misspelling of Norcombe and is Hardy's name for Hooke in Dorset; and Melchester is the name Hardy gave to Salisbury in Wiltshire.



Fig. 8: Wetherbury House, 2009



Fig. 9: Wetherbury House, rear, 2009



Fig. 10: Melchester House, front, 2009