

Housing the Workers

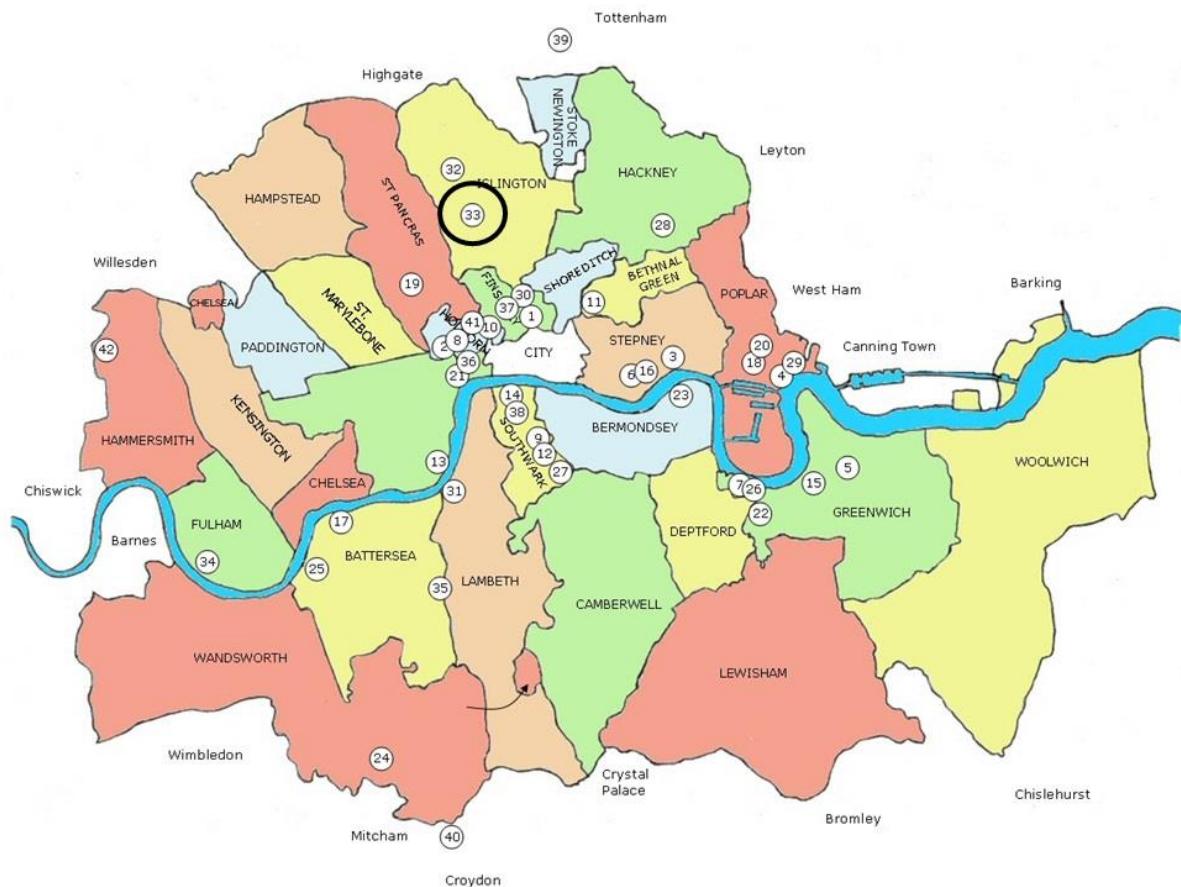
Early London County Council Housing

1889-1914

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Part 3 – the schemes in detail

33 – Caledonian Estate, Islington



The Caledonian Estate, Islington

Bruce, Knox, Burns, Scott and Wallace Buildings, 1906

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

This scheme was the result of an opportunity to purchase some land at a fair price in an area where the Council believed cheap social housing was needed.

The opportunity arose as the result of trustees of The Royal Caledonian Asylum deciding to move their orphanage to the country. Unusually, it was an orphanage specifically for Scottish orphans and has an almost unique history. It was built in 1826 to house Scottish children who were roaming the streets of London having been orphaned during the Napoleonic wars. The trust had been formed in 1808 but the fund raising and legislation took until 1819 when a school was opened in 1819 in Hatton Garden before moving to the purpose built school (although still called an asylum) in Caledonian Fields. The school moved to Bushey in Hertfordshire in 1904 and still stands. It is affectionately known as "*The Caley*" and continues to educate children of Scots who have served in the Armed Forces, or the children of poor Scots living in the London area.

When The Caley moved to Bushey in 1904 the London County Council purchased the site for £15,764. It was not an ideal site for housing as it was adjacent to Pentonville Prison, and this was the main factor in the decision of the school to move to the country. The maps below show the site before and after development. Not only is the proximity to the prison clear from the maps but it is also interesting to note the employment opportunities in the industries to the west and the abundance of suburban terraced housing to the east. The Caledonian Road was a major tram route and this must have also helped with any commuting the residents were expected to do.



Fig. 1: The Royal Caledonian Asylum site from the 1896 OS Map



Fig. 2: The site now occupied by the Caledonian Estate. From the 1916 OS Map

The five blocks made good use of the site and, in memory of the site being the former Caledonian Asylum, were named after people from Scottish history: Scottish hero Robert Bruce (1274-1329); religious leader John Knox (1514-1572); poet Robert Burns (1759-1796); novelist and poet Sir Walter Scott (1771-1832); and knight and Scottish independence fighter

William Wallace (1272-1305). The plans indicate the controlling architect was John Greenwood Stephenson.

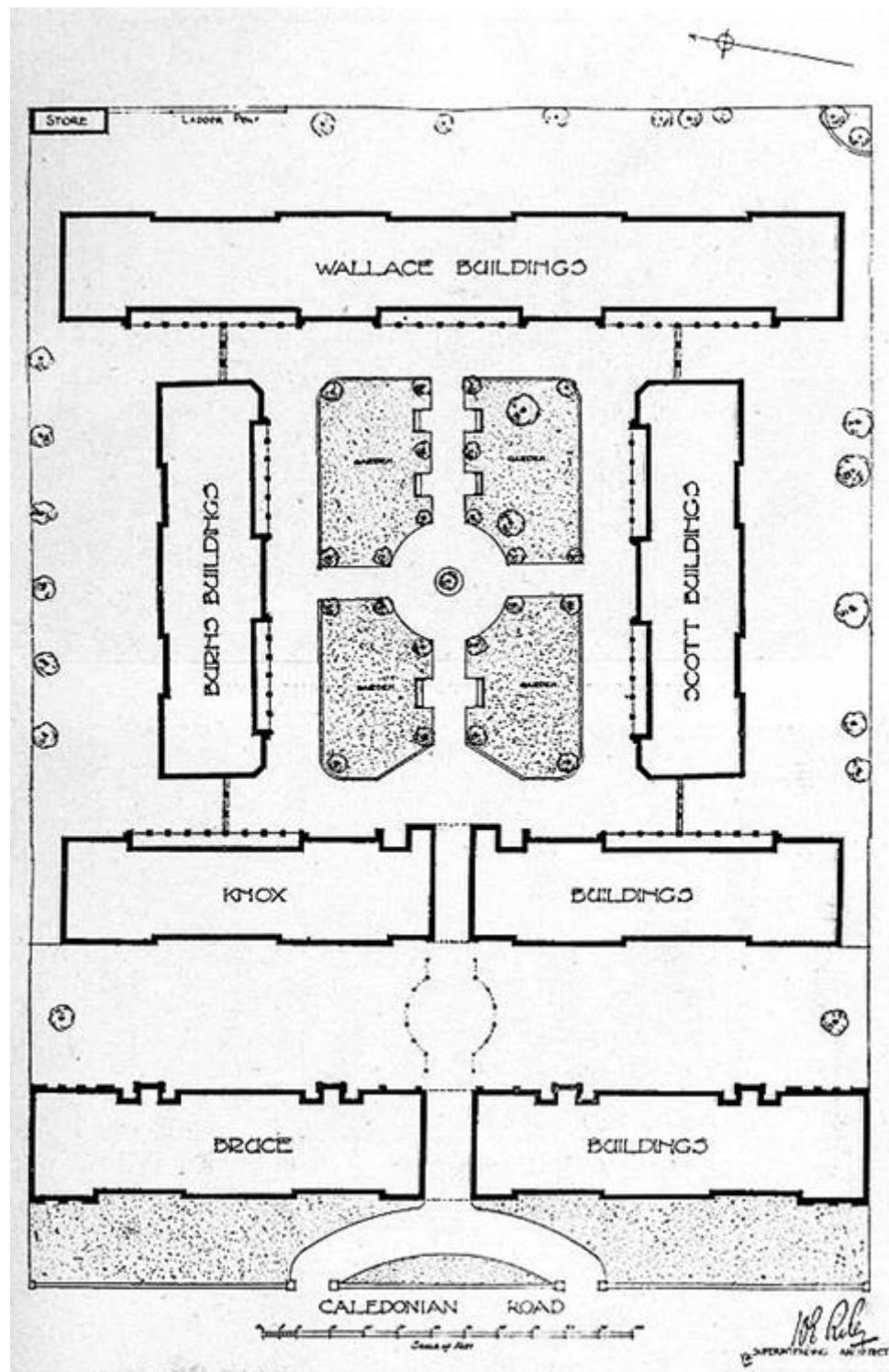


Fig. 3: The Caledonian Road estate¹

Bruce Buildings, facing the Caledonian Road, were built with internal landings but the other buildings were of the more desirable external walkway type.

From the floor plan in Fig. 4 below, the rooms generally appear quite generous in their proportions, but the narrowness of some of the rooms quite pronounced. The rooms are all over the minimum of 144/96 sq. ft. for living and bedrooms respectively. The layout of the dwellings and access to the sculleries and WCs has been quite imaginative, indicating a desire to make the best use of the space as possible. In Fig. 5 the seven tenements have been highlighted showing the effort that has been made to make best use of the space. Three of the seven have separate WCs across the landing.

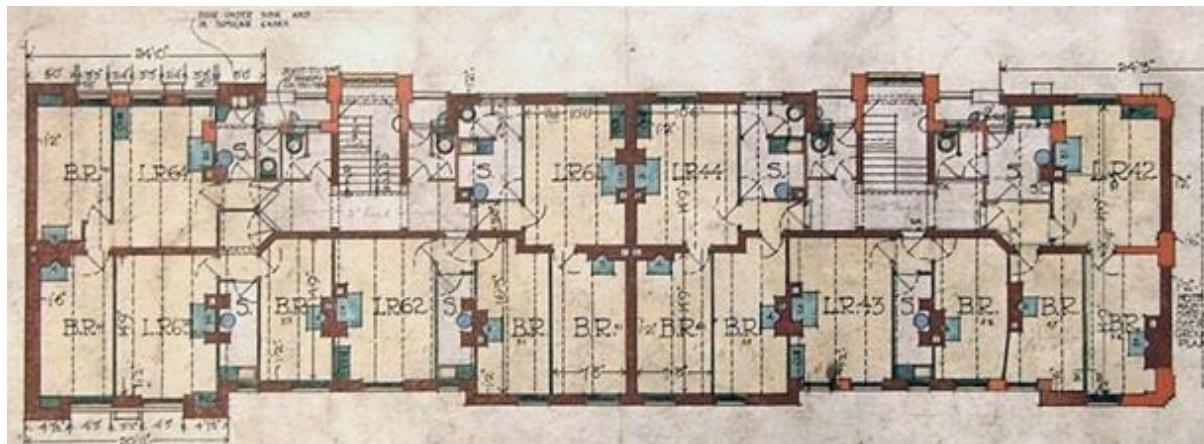


Fig. 4: Plan of the first floor of Bruce Buildings (LMA ref: LCC/AR/HS/03/011)



Fig. 5: The same floor with the different dwellings highlighted

The buildings were completed between July and October 1906 and were designed to house a total of 1,384 persons. The accommodation consisted of 6 one-roomed, 116 two-roomed, 146 three-roomed, and 4 four-roomed tenements. The photographs below show solid looking buildings without any particular merits, apart from the well laid-out gardens.



Fig. 6: Caledonian Estate, 1907, Bruce Buildings. (LCC ref: SC/PHL/02/0778)



Fig. 7: Caledonian Estate, 1907, the rear. (LCC ref: SC/PHL/02/0778)

The costs are very straightforward as there were no slums to clear.

| | Outgoings | Income | |
|---|-----------|--------|--------------|
| Cost of land | £15,764 | | |
| Cost of construction | £53,192 | | |
| NET COST | | | £68,965 |
| Cost per person (based on 1384 persons) | | | £50pp |
| | | | |
| Balance of Accounts 1913-14 | £4,813 | £5,402 | £589 (10.9%) |

Table 1: Caledonian Estate costs

The cost of £50 per person was a very low figure and it is no wonder the council took the opportunity to purchase the site and build blocks. The buildings were also showing a healthy profit of 10.9% in 1913-14.

The 1911 census returns show a development that was meeting the needs of the workers of the area. Occupation was a good 73% against the theoretical maximum with only 22 of the 272 dwellings being overcrowded, although three 3-roomed tenements had 9 people registered as living there, 3 more than the maximum allowable. The number of vacant tenements is low apart from Bruce Buildings which has a high 16% unoccupied, possibly because they face the busy and noisy Caledonian Road which made them more unpopular than the other buildings. Unlike the nearby Wessex Buildings which were dominated by LCC Tram workers, there are no obvious patterns or biases to the occupations of the heads of households. Despite being adjacent to Pentonville Prison there are very few prison wardens, and the number of railway workers is less than one would have expected with so many railway lines, yards and stations nearby. Most occupations are of the type one expects to see in LCC blocks. One small surprise that shows up in the census returns is the relatively high number of “outsiders”. Only 22% of the heads of household are local people, with another 28% from London. This means that 50% of the heads of household were born outside London.

The buildings still stand today and seem a bit dark and old, but most of this impression is caused by the mature trees on the road making the road seem narrower than it is. The dark facing brick of the side facing the road also generates a feeling of darkness and the brickwork could do with a clean up to remove stains and bring the colour out. Bruce and Knox Buildings have been renamed Carrick and Irvine Houses respectively and have impressive arches to gain access to the rear. The flats seem well cared for and there are some pot plants but, unfortunately, also

some washing hanging out. The glazed bricks on the lower part of the building and around the arches have worn well but have been damaged by high vehicles.



Fig. 8: Caledonian Estate 2009



Fig. 9: Irving House (ex-Knox) 2009



Fig. 10: Carrick House (was Bruce) 2009



Fig. 11: Detail of glazed bricks

Footnotes

ⁱ Housing of the Working Classes 1855-1912; p79