

Housing the Workers

Early London County Council Housing

1889-1914

Martin Stilwell
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Part 4 – Conclusions

The Legacy

The LCC continued with major building programmes after WW1 and the unfinished pre-WW1 garden estates were completed. The blocks built between the wars were similar to those built in the 1900s with the only obvious visual difference being that those with external walkways usually had the balcony walls in brick rather than the iron railings of the earlier blocks. All blocks were designed to have a fairly plain but solid neo-Georgian look with regularly-placed symmetrical windows, but few of the Art and Crafts-influenced design features to the roofs or windows that were present in the earlier blocks.

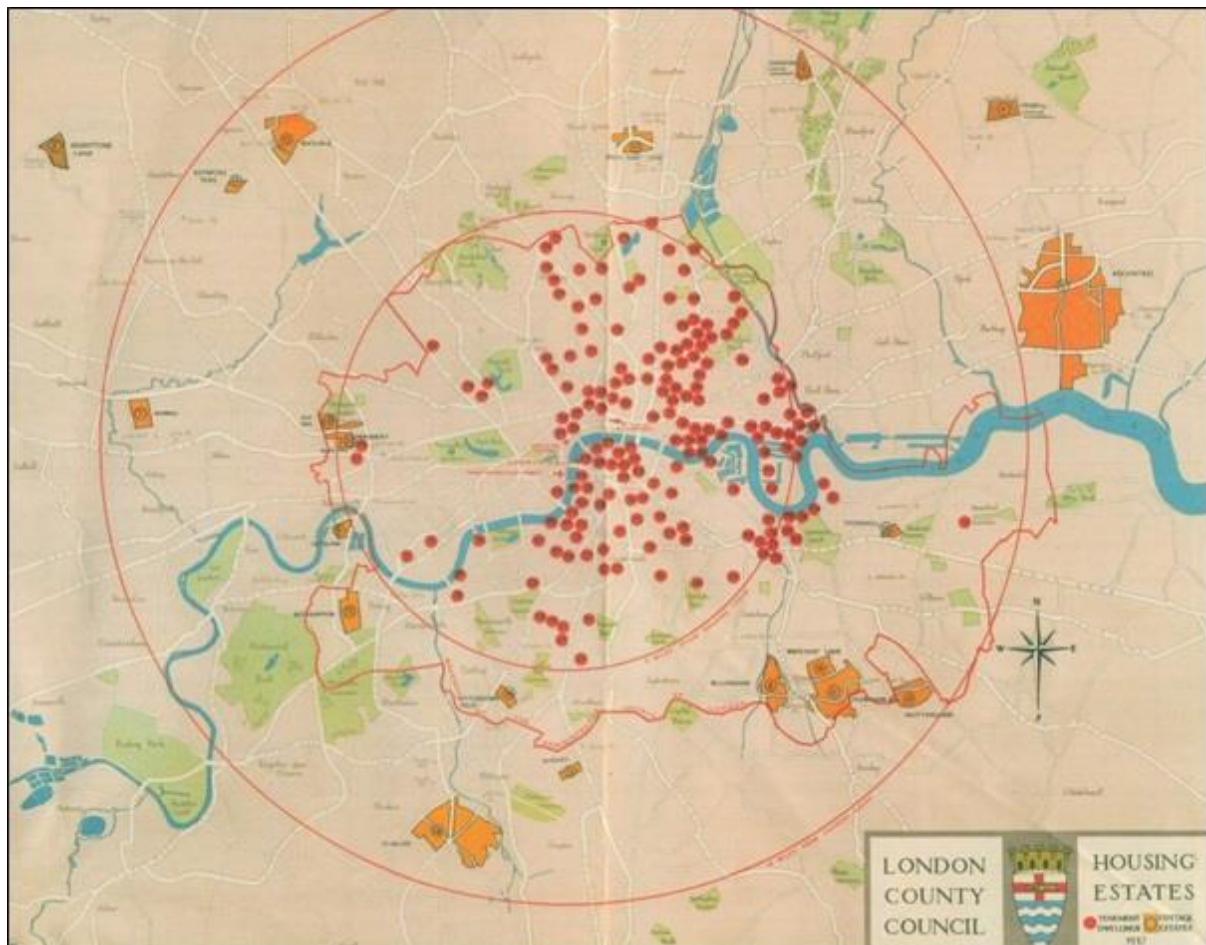


Fig. 1: All the LCC housing developments to 1937ⁱ

As can be seen from the red dots in Fig. 1 above, a considerable number of blocks were built. The first major post-WW1 block development was to continue with the Tabard Street improvement in Southwark which resulted in the Tabard Garden Estate (all blocks, despite the name). Blocks were also built in Hughes Field Deptford to accompany those built before WW1. Some schemes were very large for blocks-only developments. As examples, Clapham Park Estate (1930-36) was on 16 acres and provided for 4,900 people, and Honor Oak, Brockley (1932-24) was on 30 acres and provided for 6,800 people. Although these estates are physically large, their density per acre was much lower than for Boundary Street (368/acres on 15 acres) and Millbank (443/acre on 10 acres). The lower density of the between-wars estates is explained by larger tenements (now with bathrooms), and more open spaces on the site. One exception to the typical plain design was the 1935 Oaklands Estate in Clapham which has an Art Deco horizontal design with white external walkways at the front, wide metal-framed windows, and the top two floors being maisonettes.

The real success story of the between-Wars housing were the garden estates, indicated by the orange areas in Fig. 1. Not all the estate developments were successful. The northern section of the White Hart Lane estate was built with larger houses designed for artisans and the better-off workers due to the difficulties experienced in finding working-class tenants for the earlier Tower Gardens section. The Becontree Estate in Essex built between 1921 and 1935 was a very large development to house 100,000 people but, at the time, too large and too far from London. Most residents were relocated from the East End of London yet there was very little employment in the vicinity and the only rail stations were at the northern and southern boundaries of the estate. This made travelling back to the east end for work or family visits a time-consuming and relatively costly journey. To compound the misery of the early residents (but presumably not the children) there were too-few school places. The saviour for the estate was the Ford Motor Company who, in 1931, built a large factory alongside the Thames at Dagenham to the immediate south of the estate. Ford's workforce had secure jobs that were well paid (although the work was very monotonous) and they had the opportunity to rent clean and modern LCC housing nearby. The estate did provide good, if somewhat bland, housing for thousands of workers along with amenities, open spaces, and a chance for the residents to better themselves.

In comparison to Becontree, most of the other garden estates were an immediate success because of the quality of the housing and their proximity to transport and employment. One of the earliest was the Dover House Estate in Roehampton (1921-27) in the southwest corner of the county. This estate was built with very high quality housing, wide roads and grass verges, open spaces, and a considerable proportion of the land set aside for allotments. The quality of the housing resulted in high costs and this was compounded by the failure of one of the building contractors. By comparison, nearby Castlenau Estate in Barnes was an experiment in reducing the cost of construction. The houses were built by Henry Boot and Sons using their system of pre-cast concrete pillars (piers) with cast-on-site concrete panels as in-fill. The pillars were locked in place by horizontal beams at ground, mid and roof levels. The walls were pebble-dashed to hide and seal the joints. The system resulted in solid, dry and relatively warm houses because of the cavity walls – almost unheard-of before 1932. The concrete construction has meant that some estates have suffered badly with corrosion of the mild-steel used for the ties and internal strengthening of the piers. Although the houses retain their structural integrity even with this corrosion, they suffer visually and can develop dampnessⁱⁱ. The houses in Castlenau have weathered very well due to good maintenance during their ownership by the LCC and the GLC. Despite what must have been housing that was good value for money, the LCC did not build another estate using this method. One of the most successful garden estates between the wars was the St Helier Estate in the boroughs of Merton and Sutton (1928-36). This large estate had good transport links at its north edge via London Underground's Morden Station terminus (from 1930) and considerable employment opportunities down the Wandle Valley to the north and east of the estate.

Post WW2, many garden estates were built by the LCC in the surrounding counties. The housing in these estates following the same style of simple but functional boxes often with a simple concrete porch cover over the front door held up by a pole at each front corner. The houses did not contain any semblance of style or panache, but were very welcome by the new residents who had survived the war and were looking to improve their lives.

A number of well-meaning Housing Acts came in during the post war period, many with the aim of trying to increase the quantity of local authority housing. Some Acts were counter-productive. The most significant Acts that had a long-term negative impact were:

- 1) *The Housing Subsidy Act 1956* which favoured the construction of high-rise blocks over more traditional housing. However, the pressure on local authority finances was already persuading the LCC to consider building this type of housing.
- 2) *The Housing (Homeless Persons) Act 1977* which forced authorities to house homeless local people, or those in local employment. This meant that the LCC were unlikely to evict bad tenants or those in arrears as they would still be responsible for housing them. The result has been the collection of bad tenants in “sink” estates, leaving the better housing to those who pay the rent and abide by the rules.
- 3) The Conservative Government’s *Housing Act 1980* which gave tenant’s the “right to buy”. Although a commendable utopian idea, which allowed thousands of tenants the opportunity to purchase a home for the first time, only half the proceeds were returned to the owning authority and this resulted in insufficient funds (and even less inclination) to build replacement housing.

With the benefit of hindsight

One of the biggest weapons in the historian's armoury is hindsight. Using knowledge and evidence of the subsequent events the historian can look back on the schemes and projects and make a valued judgement. The question to ask as regards the early LCC housing is: so did all this housing make a difference to the working class of London, and even to London itself?

On a general level, one impact that was felt throughout the building trade was the raising of standards of the new dwellings. This was felt across the UK and was the result of the applications of the new Acts, linked to a desire by local authorities to improve the housing standards. The LCC's buildings were designed to be spacious and with all amenities. There were minimum standards for the size of rooms, thickness of walls and pitch of roofs; rules for maximum capacity per dwelling; advanced design features such as external walkways; architectural features from the Arts & Crafts movements; and the creation of early garden estates. It was very much a case of the LCC leading and the regulations catching up. All the lessons learned applying these features in London were gradually incorporated into UK-wide building regulations. Some regulations were altered for application in Scotland and Ireland where differing standards applied, such as the long-established popularity in Scottish cities of tenement blocks, even within the artisan and professional classes. In cities such as Glasgow and Edinburgh the tenements were not seen as just for the working classes and the building standards were adapted to meet the slightly lower expectations that prospective tenants had. Despite these local differences, the regulations continued to be applied with successive Acts and the legacy was most felt between the wars when good quality Council Housing (as it started to be called from the 1930s) was built, either as low-rise blocks in inner city areas, or as spacious garden estates both inside and outside the LCC or authority boundary. Efforts to improve housing immediately after WW1 – “Homes Fit for Heroes” – were generally impeded by external influences such as a materials and skills shortage and rapidly escalating costs as the survivors of the trenches fought for higher wages and shorter working hours. Even the first Minister of Health, the much respected Christopher Addison, found progress was slow despite his best efforts.

The first significant post-WW1 Act was the 1919 Housing and Town Planning Act; known as the Addison Act after the new Minister. This attempted to provide the legislation to enable authorities to build those “Homes Fit for Heroes”. This Act tried to address some of the funding problems encountered before WW1. It introduced treasury funding of losses incurred in building under Parts I and II of the principal Act but it could almost be a case of ‘too little, too early’. What the Council wanted were subsidies to improve the finances of funding social housing, but even if they had the money the infrastructure was simply not in place in 1919. The Addison Act was not a total failure as 312,000 homes were built across the country by 1922 but few of the poor, who needed them most, could afford the rents. These early developments were mainly small cottage estates in suburban areas because the land was cheaper. They can often be visually identified today because of the impact of materials shortage on the designs. Bricks and skilled bricklayers were both expensive and in short supply, but timber could be acquired from northern Europe and Canada. The result was a design where the roofline was lower with the upper windows as dormers in the roof. The amount of timber used for the roof was little more than for the traditional two-storeyed houses, but the design used about $\frac{1}{3}$ rd less bricks than traditional 2 storey cottages. Another solution, although only short-term as it wasn't successful, was to build the walls using pre-cast concrete sections.

For all the good intentions of the 1919 Addison Act it was generally considered a failure and was abolished in 1921. It was replaced in 1923 by the Chamberlain Act which took a different view and tried to encourage private builders to take on the responsibility for those “Homes Fit for Heroes”. The Exchequer paid a £6 subsidy per house to the authorities as an incentive. This helped, but ultimately had little impact in accelerating the building programme and the poor were often unable to afford the resulting rents. The Wheatley Act of 1924 introduced a £9 subsidy per house and was a more thought-through Act to provide a partnership between the government, local authorities and builders, and set targets for the authorities. This was more successful and enabled the local authorities, including the LCC, to build larger garden estates in outlying areas.

From the above it can be seen that the early housing developments enabled the authorities to understand where improvements were needed and to eventually persuade central government that social housing would never be profitable if funding was only permissible through rents. Social housing needed to have other ways of funding it and the payback would be a content workforce who lived close to their place of work with rents that were acceptable to them. This fell short of a utopia with every worker happy in high quality housing and with ready access to gardens, but the garden estates with their well-equipped cottages and their gardens came close to providing this for many of the working classes who had regular income. With the 1930s expansion of industry to the suburbs, these estates were ideally placed to provide a suitable workforce.

When looking at the more recent history of these older buildings and estates, the problem of trying to manage them from County Hall becomes more apparent. Before and immediately after WW1 most philanthropic developers and many provincial authorities managed their buildings using the well-proven scheme developed by Octavia Hill of having a local manager. The benefits of having a manager on site, and particularly a female one, were reflected in the popularity of the dwellings and the total cost to manage the buildings. The LCC did not see why they should have local staff carrying out certain functions that were already being provided from County Hall, which included financial and rent-collection functions. This left the local representation of the housing in the hands of a lowly employee who could do little more than portage. The garden estates warranted estate managers but the Council again suffered because there were no recognised housing estate management skills or qualifications in the marketplace. The Octavia Hill-trained staff were highly skilled but either did not want to become civil servants, or warranted higher wages than the Council were willing to pay. The problems became particularly acute after WW2 when modern high-rise blocks were built, often in inappropriate locations, and required skilful estate management. The building materials used were also sometimes not to the high standards desired and the combinations of these factors resulted in dissatisfied tenants and the estates falling into early disrepair. Some post-WW2 developments in inner-city areas had a criminally short life before being demolished. The race to build cheap housing had resulted in cheap construction, using less-than-ideal materials, with poor designs (such as tower blocks joined by walkways) and in locations that were not always ideal. The situation was rescued in some cases by introducing good estate management, but many of the authorities could or would not employ managers with the right combination of character and skill, and the rot set in early.

Returning to the pre-WW1 housing that is the subject of this paper, the question still remains: was it a success? Were the LCC the only people to suffer with the conflict between costs and quality? How did the Council’s buildings compare to others? The type of the housing being built was already being questioned within the Council itself as early as 1901. On the 14th May

of that year a motion by Mr B S Straus was carried and a resolution passed stating the following: *“That it be referred to the Housing of the Working Classes Committee to consider the principle advocated before the Council for the housing of the very poor inhabitants of London, and to report the conditions upon which such principle could be accomplished without any charge upon the rates”*. This simple-sounding resolution was not taken lightly as it took until 17th June 1903 – over two years – for the Committee to reply with a detailed report and statisticsⁱⁱⁱ. The Committee had been busy in those two years as they had collected information on designs and costs from Liverpool City Council and the Guinness Trust. The report tried to compare the four factors that make up the total costs of any scheme: i) cost of construction, ii) amount debited in respect of land, iii) cost of management including rates and, iv) terms for repayment of capital. The report compared Victoria Square and Juvenal Dwellings in Liverpool, the 7 estates in London for the Guinness Trust and the Council’s own Turner/Ruskin Buildings in Millbank Estate and Toronto/Montreal Buildings in Poplar. The Liverpool and Guinness buildings were stated as being of ‘associated’ type (sharing WCs and sinks) whereas the Council’s buildings were self-contained. The report did show that Liverpool’s and Guinness’ buildings had been a little cheaper to build on a per-room basis, but only Guinness were charging lower rents on a per-room basis. The Council questioned the Liverpool Council’s accounting methods as they did not include re-building costs in their accounts. The Council were also quite critical of the quality of the Liverpool buildings and they stated that this was borne out by high maintenance costs of 65.5% of rental income as against 54.9% and 52.9% for the Guinness and Council buildings respectively. The LCC rents also included rates which they claim was equivalent to 3½d per room. The Council even went as far as to state that the Corporation of Liverpool would make a loss on the housing if the latter’s accounting methods were on the same as for the LCC. The report was fairly complimentary regarding Guinness housing, and agreed that the quality of materials was equivalent to the Council’s, but stated that their buildings were to minimal standards with poor design and lack of through ventilation.

The report made it clear that the two blocks in Liverpool’s compared only to the lower standard Toronto and Montreal Buildings, and if the accounting methods were the same between the Councils the Liverpool buildings would have slightly higher rents. To make the point, the report stated that a Rye Buildings in Swan Lane had recently been constructed to the same costs as the Liverpool buildings but were of much higher standard.

The report was never going to place the Council in a bad light, but it did seem to state, and with some confidence, that their methods were the best and the Council should be proud of what it was doing. It even made the point that the Liverpool buildings were 4 storeys and so made more expensive as a result. As with any comparison, there is rarely a like-for-like and not all the facts were stated, such as the fact that the Council were proud of Rye Buildings but they proved very difficult to fill with tenants.

The question still remains; were the Council’s early buildings a success? In purely terms of providing social housing for the working-classes of London, the answer has to be ‘no’, simply because the quantity of housing provided was always a small proportion of the total potential workforce. The Council (and the MBW before them) provided housing for 94,000 people before WW1. Whilst a commendably high figure, this needs to be considered against the total population of London in 1911 of approximately 4.5m. Even if the target working class population is estimated as being as low as 1/3rd of the population this gives a target workforce of 1.5m. When the records of the time showed that many LCC buildings were experiencing problems with lower-than-expected take-up of tenancies it can only be surmised that most of the target workforce was able to find suitable accommodation from other housing sources.

Much of the low take-up would have been as a result of the need for the Council to make the buildings pay their own way and realise a small profit for the sinking fund. This resulted in rents that were towards the top end of what was acceptable for the quality of housing on offer. If the Council were able to fund social housing from other financial sources (and ultimately the rate-payers) then the rents could have been lower and this would have inevitably resulted in high tenancy rates. So, with hindsight, the simple answer of ‘no’ as to whether the Council was successful needs to be modified in the light of the rules and regulations they were obliged to meet. In some developments the Council simply failed to meet the needs of the locals. Many of the early developments were never profitable and this is excusable due to their lack of experience in the house-design and the building marketplace, but some later developments were also a disaster. Greenwich seemed to have more than its fair share of bad schemes and some of these were carried out under Part III of the 1890 Housing Act and so could not be excused by the Council as being forced on them. The Carrington House lodging house was an example of mismatching the needs to the housing built. Conversely, one area where the Council could be proud of their achievements was the building of their garden estates. Even today, these estates are pleasant areas to live and all are covered by preservation orders protecting the housing from unsympathetic alterations.

Nor were the garden estates the only successes. Certain large developments achieved a great deal in both housing those displaced and in meeting the financial constraints. The Clare Market scheme, along with the Aldwych and Kingsway streets improvements, resulted in well-designed blocks in the Drury Lane area and further north in Clerkenwell, and all of the buildings still stand.

So is ‘no’ still the correct answer to whether the Council were successful in building social housing for Londoners before WW1? Even with the caveats above, the answer is still a guarded ‘no’ but this answer should not cover all the housing. If one considers garden estates as a separate entity, the answer would be a resounding ‘yes’. Not only was the housing of high quality with everyone having access to gardens, the numbers added up both in cost to build and profits on the rents. This conclusion should be tempered by the fact that few of the houses built catered for the poorest of the working classes who could only afford small dwellings at low rents. Some individual schemes were also successful, even by modern standards, and these include the Boundary Street and Millbank Estates, the combined Union and Bourne Estates in Clerkenwell, and the Webber Road Estate. All these estates are well maintained by their current owners.

As a general statement, the blocks with external walkways, rather than internal landings, seem to have survived better and longer. The current tenants often personalise these walkways with plants to create a more pleasant environment. Conversely, there is considerable temptation to use the walkways for hanging out washing and some authorities allow it, or turn a blind eye. There is nothing more immediate for spoiling the visual impact of housing than washing casually hung out on the walkways for all passers-by to see. Titus Salt knew this back in the 1850s and personally toured his model town of Saltaire to check no resident had hung washing out and so spoil the visual quality of his town.

The surviving old cottages have not weathered quite as well, with a surprising number being demolished. The garden estates have all survived well with only some of the smallest of the Norbury housing showing signs of stress and unsympathetic modernisation carried out before the preservation order was placed on the whole area.

It is not only the actual buildings that are the legacy of the early LCC efforts. The Council not only tried to build to the highest standards they also raised the legal minimum standards of housing in London, irrespective of who built it. Without this impetus, the pre-WW1 housing would probably consist of rooms of marginal size that would have been difficult to modernise from the 1960s onwards. The fact that the majority of the housing – whether blocks or cottages – still stand shows that they were cost-effective to modernise. Many blocks were modernised by re-configuring the internal layout that resulted in approximately half the original number of tenements but each with more rooms, kitchens in place of small sculleries, and a bathroom. The garden estate cottages needed no such modifications. The impact of the early regulations on room size, window size and aspect (good daylight to every room) and quality and capacity of the infrastructure (sewers, gas, water etc.) enabled the modernisation to be cost-effective.

Based purely on financial terms and the numbers re-housed, one can only come to the conclusion that the LCC's pre-WW1 housing only made a small difference to the lives of the working classes of London. If the wider aspects of improving the housing regulations and standards are taken into consideration, then the impact of LCC housing is much greater. If one considers garden estates as a separate entity, the positive impact on the London working classes is quite significant. Not only was this housing of high quality with everyone having access to gardens, they were financially successful.

Despite all the positive aspects of the designs, the evidence points to many of the blocks not meeting the needs of those who needed them most. Higher rents than competitors such as Peabody (although for better quality tenements) allied to strict tenancy rules banning sub-letting and taking in of washing resulted in difficulties in renting all the properties. This, in turn, created a financial environment where the Council found it difficult to guarantee a profit and so were sometimes reluctant to build. Only when legislation allowed the rents to be subsidised from the rates could the finances allow volume council housing be built, but this had to wait until the 1930s. By this time the LCC were concentrating their efforts on the garden estates, for which the council had no problems with finding tenants.

Footnotes

ⁱ LCC; “London Housing”; G.H.Gator, 1937, map supplement

ⁱⁱ Building Research Establishment, “The structural condition of Boot pier and panel cavity houses” ISBN 0951250602, 1983

ⁱⁱⁱ Report reproduced in the LCC Minutes; Minutes of the Housing of the Working Classes Committee; 30th June 1903; held at LMA