

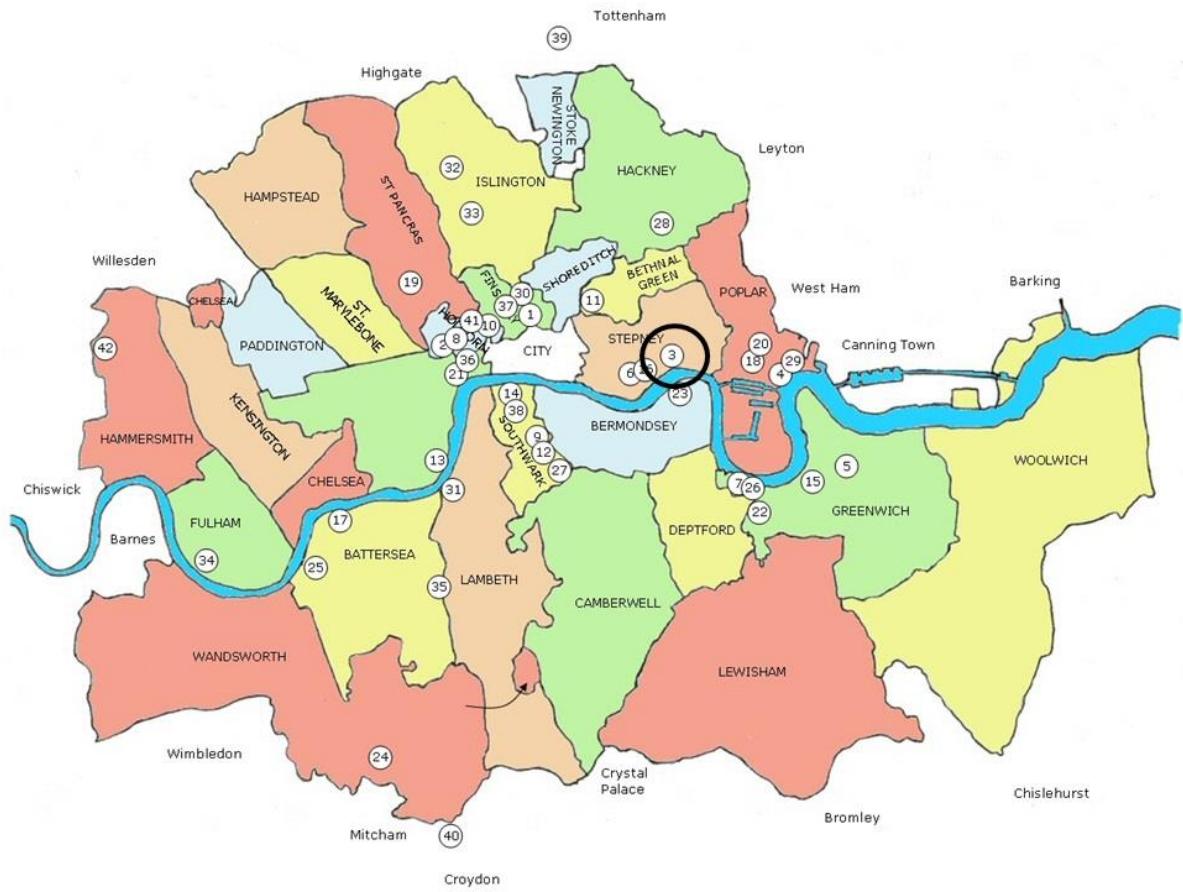
**Housing the Workers**

**Early London County Council Housing  
1889-1914**

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August 2015**

**Part 3 - the schemes in detail**

**3 - Brook Street, Limehouse scheme**



## Brook Street, Limehouse scheme

**Beachcroft Buildings 1894 and Cranford Cottages 1900  
Built under the 1882 Artizans' Dwellings Act**

This Brook Street clearance scheme was first discussed on 26<sup>th</sup> July 1876 by Limehouse's medical officer, Mr G.A.Rogers M.R.C.S.

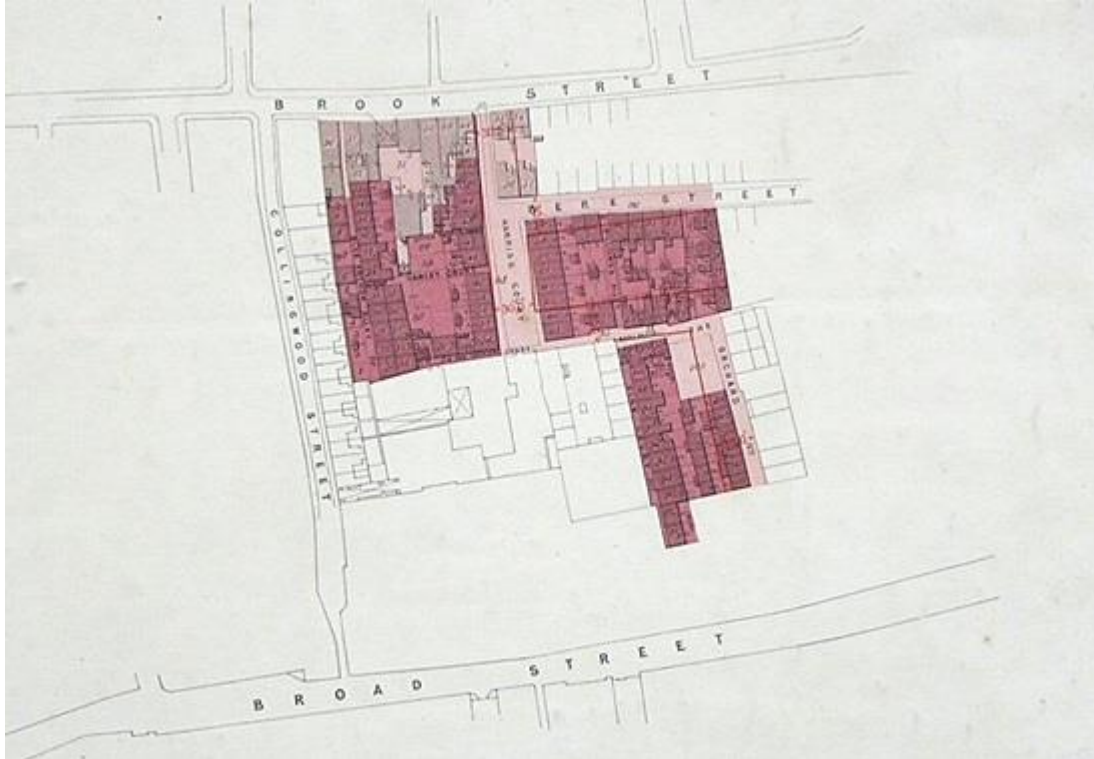


Fig. 1: Plan of Brook St. clearance area (LMA ref: MBW 2646)

The area in the map in Fig. 1 above would be quite difficult for a present-day traveller to find as only Bere Street has kept its original name. Brook Street is now Cable Street and Broad Street is The Highway. The remains of Collingwood Street are now Heckford Street. The northern bore of the Rotherhithe Tunnel crosses almost underneath the line of the old Broad Street. Limehouse Station is close to the top right-hand corner of the image.

The area in question was crowded and unhealthy but it took many representations until 1882 for the scheme to be considered a slum clearance on health grounds. The scheme required the clearance of unhealthy housing which would have displaced 562 persons, and new housing was to be built to house the same number of working class people. The purchase of the slum property and the land, after arbitration, cost the MBW £21,988. Demolition and clearance was complete by April 1887 and the sale of material and interim rents, pending demolition, realised the suspiciously round figure of £500 (£244 12s 6d for materials and £155 7s 6d for rents). Paving and sewer work was carried out on the cleared site at a cost of £1,519. The result was two plots suitable for building; one on Brook Street and the other on Bere Street. Surplus land was sold for commercial purposes but one plot was sold to the London School Board with the condition that it should not be built upon. It is not clear what this land was to be used for but one can assume that the Board wanted it for a playing field or playground. This sale of surplus lands realised £1,690 but the last plot was not sold until 1891.

Following the clearance in 1887 the MBW offered the plots for sale for the erection of working class housing. This was not successful and MBW's successor, the LCC, tried a number of variations to complete the scheme. The various schemes to sell the site are typical of those carried out in this period where the aim was to sell the site to a private developer for erection of working class housing. It is worth listing the different schemes chronologically as an example of the problems the MBW and the LCC had in getting the housing completed.

- 1) 1887: MBW put both sites up for sale (offer price unknown) - unsuccessful.
- 2) March 1890: Reduced the housing requirement to 281 persons and made the Bere Street site an open space – unsuccessful as the Secretary of State did not approve it.
- 3) July 1890 and April 1891: Reduced numbers to 281 (agreed by Sec. of State) but all to be housed on Brook Street site only – sale unsuccessful.
- 4) November 1891: Reduced the numbers to 281 but with cottages on both sites – sale unsuccessful
- 5) April 1892: LCC decided to erect the housing itself. Block dwellings on Brook St. plot and cottages on Bere St plot – Messrs. Reid, Blight and Co. tendered successfully for erection of the block (known as Beachcroft Buildings). Tender for cottages on Bere St plot unsuccessful.
- 6) September 1894: Beachcroft Buildings opened for the housing of 198 persons.
- 7) January 1899: Tender for erection of 2-storey cottages on Bere St. plot by Messrs. Leslie & Co. accepted after some difficulties. Cottages for 108 persons built in 1900.

As can be seen from the above, there were many difficulties in achieving the desired aim of building suitable working class accommodation that would have resulted in a small return on the investment, taking into account the relatively low rents prevalent in this dockside area at that time. This scheme must have been a big learning exercise for the LCC as the resulting buildings were far from satisfactory. The original plan to house 562 persons was reduced to 306 with the permission of the Secretary of State. The photograph below is of Beachcroft Buildings (named after Richard Melvill Beachcroft, a leading member of the LCC). Even allowing for the fact that it is an old sepia photograph, there are few positive architectural or design features. No other LCC photograph of the time can be found, suggesting that the LCC were not that proud of the building either, especially when compared with much of their later housing.



Fig. 2: Beachcroft Buildings. Date and provenance unknown

There is one important architectural feature that is almost unique to this early LCC building; it was designed to only have 4 storeys. The Council’s original aim was to build only 4 storeys high but they learnt very quickly with this development that this rule was not financially viable. Note the next building to be erected are nearly identical (see “Council Buildings” in Blackwall Tunnel North scheme) but had 5 storeys and was actually opened a few months earlier than Beachcroft, even though it was a later scheme.

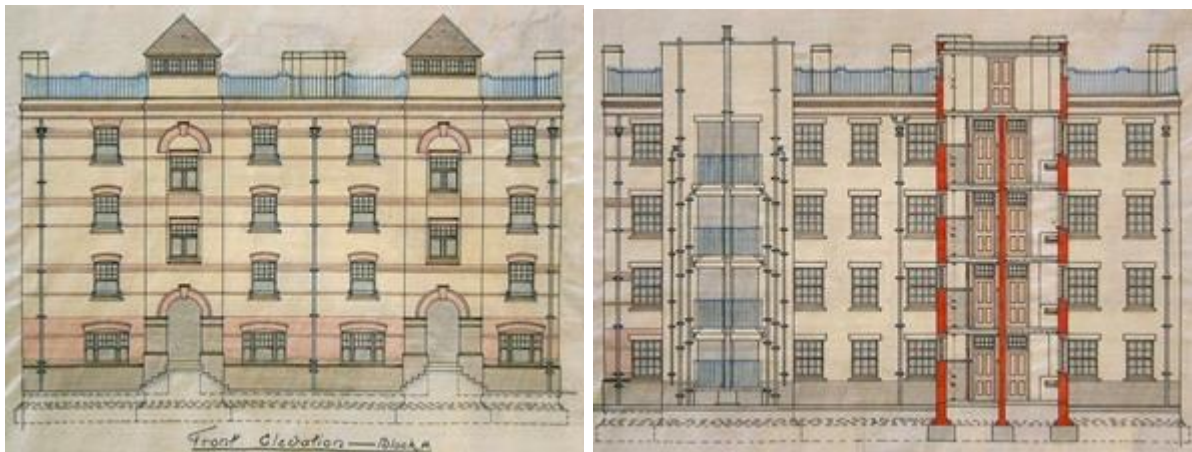


Fig. 3: Front and rear elevations of Block A from building plans (LMA ref: LCC/AR/HS/03/010)

The elevations above show that there were meant to be roof lights over the stair wells, but these do not seem to be present from the photograph in Fig. 2. These roof lights were present in Council Buildings, the next block to be designed.

The floor plan in Fig. 4 below shows the somewhat compact tenements, especially when compared to buildings designed only a few years later. However, all tenements have private sculleries and WCs – not something that is seen on all of the comparable philanthropic dwellings of the times. It is also interesting to note the tight fit of the building to the site as this

block has an angled wall on the right. Also note the substantial walls between all rooms which was a design feature that was often sacrificed in later buildings on the grounds of cost reduction.

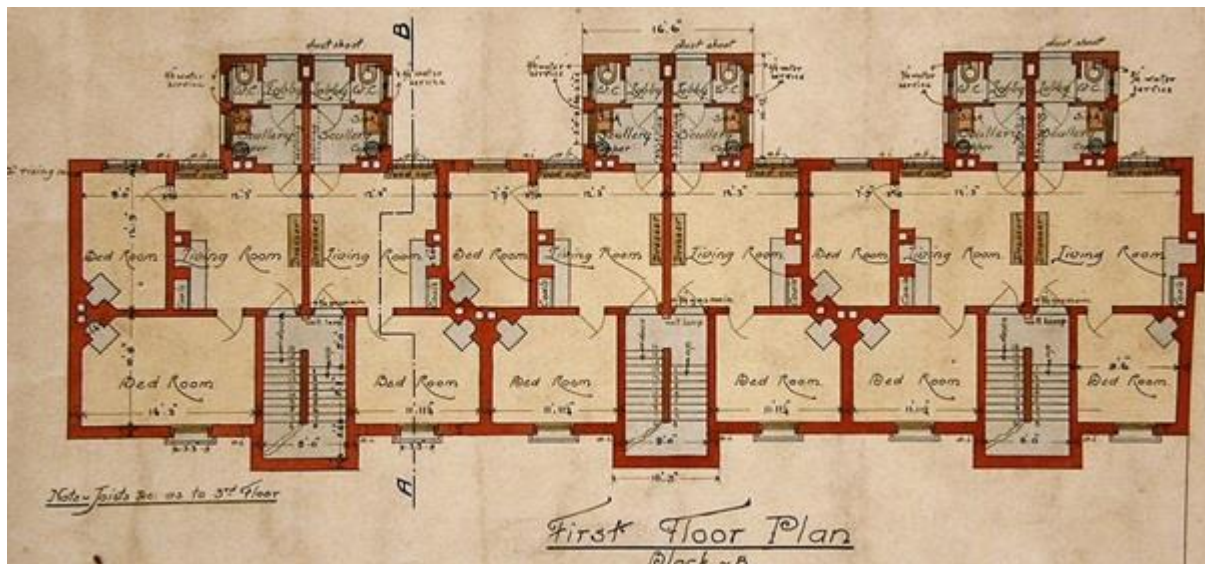


Fig. 4: First floor plan of Block B (LMA ref: LCC/AR/HS/03/010)

The number and size of the bedrooms vary considerably even on one floor. From the left the tenements comprise: 2 bedrooms (with one of commendable size); 1 bedroom; 2 bedrooms; 1 bedroom; 2 bedrooms; 1 bedroom. Although the rooms look very small, the smallest bedroom size is 12' 9" x 7' 9" - close to the measurements of the main bedroom in many modern starter homes and still 3 sq.ft. more than the Council's minimum of 96 sq.ft. The smallest living room in the above plan is 12 sq.ft. more than the Council's minimum of 144 sq.ft. for the main room in the dwelling. The blocks has been demolished although the cottages, discussed below, remain.

The costs of the Brook Street Scheme (blocks and cottages) are as follows:

	Outgoings	Income	
Cost of land and buildings	£21,988		
Street works	£1,619		
Rents pending demolition		£155	
Sale of demolition materials		£245	
Sale of surplus lands		£1,690	
<b>TOTAL CLEARANCE COSTS</b>			£21,588
Cost of construction	£15,934		
<b>TOTAL COSTS</b>			£37,451
Cost per person (based on 306 persons)			£122pp
Balance of accounts, 1913-1914	£1044	£988	£56 (5.6% loss)

Table 1: Cost of Brook Street Scheme<sup>1</sup>

The cost per person of £122 is reasonable for an early LCC building but compares badly to many philanthropic organisations who could buy readily available cleared land at commercial rates. Their target at that time would be approximately £50 per person. By 1913 the buildings were showing an annual loss of £56 for the year which equates to 5.6%. This would affect the sinking fund and the Council would need to either transfer funds from a profitable building's

accounts or apply to recover the loss from the rates – something that was never popular with rate payers.

The 1901 census for the dwellings shows a typical mix of working class trades with a number of dock and waterside labourers, clerks, porters, carters, draymen etc. with one police constable and a mission woman. The total recorded occupancy was 146 persons, giving a capacity of 74% (an average of 1.48 per room), which is surprisingly low when compared to the design maximum of 2 per room. The majority of 2-roomed tenements had 3 people occupying them, and only one tenement was occupied by a single person (as is one 3 roomed tenement). Only 2 tenements were recorded as being overcrowded and both were 2-roomed with 5 persons. Many of the 3-roomed tenements had 5 or 6 occupants showing that much of the under-occupancy was from the 2-roomed tenements.

The 1911 census for the dwellings indicates only 3 of the 40 tenements were unoccupied. Ignoring children under 5, the census shows that only 4 tenements were overcrowded using the basis of two people per room, including one 3-roomed tenement with 10 people (but including three children under 5) and another 3-roomed tenement having 8 people (two children under 5). The total occupancy has crept up from the 1901 figure and is 165, giving a capacity of 84% against the theoretical maximum of 196 persons. The rule of no sub-letting seems to have been effective as only a few tenements had a single adult visitor, and they are recorded as being relatives, such as “bro-in-law”. Whether they were true relatives or just tenants the heads of household are trying to cover as being relatives, is debatable. However, there were very few of these. Of all the tenements, only 9 were occupied by heads of household not born locally or in east London. The occupations were typical of those you would expect to see in that part of east London with 7 heads of household being employed by the LCC or the borough council.

The control on overcrowding and the lack of single-roomed tenements impacts the average occupancy. Availability of single-roomed tenements would have given the couples and single occupants the opportunity to down-grade. This is a lesson learnt with later buildings, although the LCC restricted these single rooms to individuals and couples without children. The blocks have been demolished.

The table below shows the weekly rents charged for the tenements and a comparison with the Peabody Trust’s nearby blocks in Love Lane, Shadwell (now Brodlove Lane).

	1 roomed	2 roomed	3 roomed
Beachcroft House 1894		5/6d	7/- to 7/6d
Peabody Shadwell 1891	2/- to 2/3d	3/3d to 3/6d	4/3d to 4/6d

Table 2: Comparison of rents between local LCC and Peabody dwellings

A direct comparison is not possible as the Peabody dwellings did not have a separate scullery and the WCs were shared between 2 families. Peabody rooms also tended to be less generously proportioned. However, the difference in the rents is quite marked and Peabody was a popular and sought-after landlord. The extra 2-3 shillings a week in rent could make a big difference when the typical living wage for a family man at the time was 18s a week, with half of that being spent on food.

Also built on the Bere Street site were Cranford Cottages which were completed in July 1900 and were fairly typical of compact terraced housing of the time. Despite the LCC wanting all

of their ‘cottages’ to have gardens, the photograph in Fig. 5 below shows 2 rows of 9 cottages backing onto each other with a shared and gated back yard. The communal yard must have created a feeling of neighbourliness and privacy. The small window seen in the end house was unusual as it would have been sandwiched by the flues from the two downstairs hearths, but is quite a clever architectural feature. One suspects the architect would have been proud of this.



Fig. 5: Cranford Cottages, off Bere Street, Limehouse – date unknown (LMA ref: SC/PHL/02/0788)

The plan in Fig. 8 below shows 2 bedrooms, one living room and a scullery, on 2 floors. This equates to the maximum notional capacity of 108 persons (18 cottages x 3 rooms x 2 persons per room). However, the 1901 census shows a much higher occupancy than expected, especially compared with the nearby Beachcroft Buildings. Even with one cottage unoccupied, and the cottages having only recently been built, the 1901 census shows an occupancy of 98 persons for 17 cottages, equating to 94% of the notional maximum (1.92 people per room). This high figure for such new housing suggests that the local housing manager allowed a certain amount of overcrowding based on the dwellings being cottages rather than block dwellings. Two of the cottages had 8 occupants and five had 7 occupants. A small point of interest is that the 1901 census erroneously states that 17 of the 18 cottages were 4-roomed and not 3-roomed. The 1911 census is showing all cottages occupied with no overcrowding in any of them. The occupancy of 84 is down a little from the 98 from the 1901 census and equates to 78% of the notional maximum. Half of the heads of household were from outside the east London area and two cottages were occupied by Metropolitan Policemen.

The weekly rents charged were 8/6d for the first 8 in each row and 8/- for the smaller end cottages (hand-written notes in Fig. 8 contradict this and are assumed to be a mistake). This is only 1/- more than the less-desirable 3-roomed tenements in Beachcroft and may account for the high occupancy rate of the cottages compared to the blocks. This also points to there being careful management of the available accommodation by the authorities, with the larger families containing working-age children being moved to the cottages where the tenants felt they could afford the extra 1/- a week.





Fig. 6: Cranford Cottages, 2009



Fig. 7: Cranford Cottages yard entrance, 2009

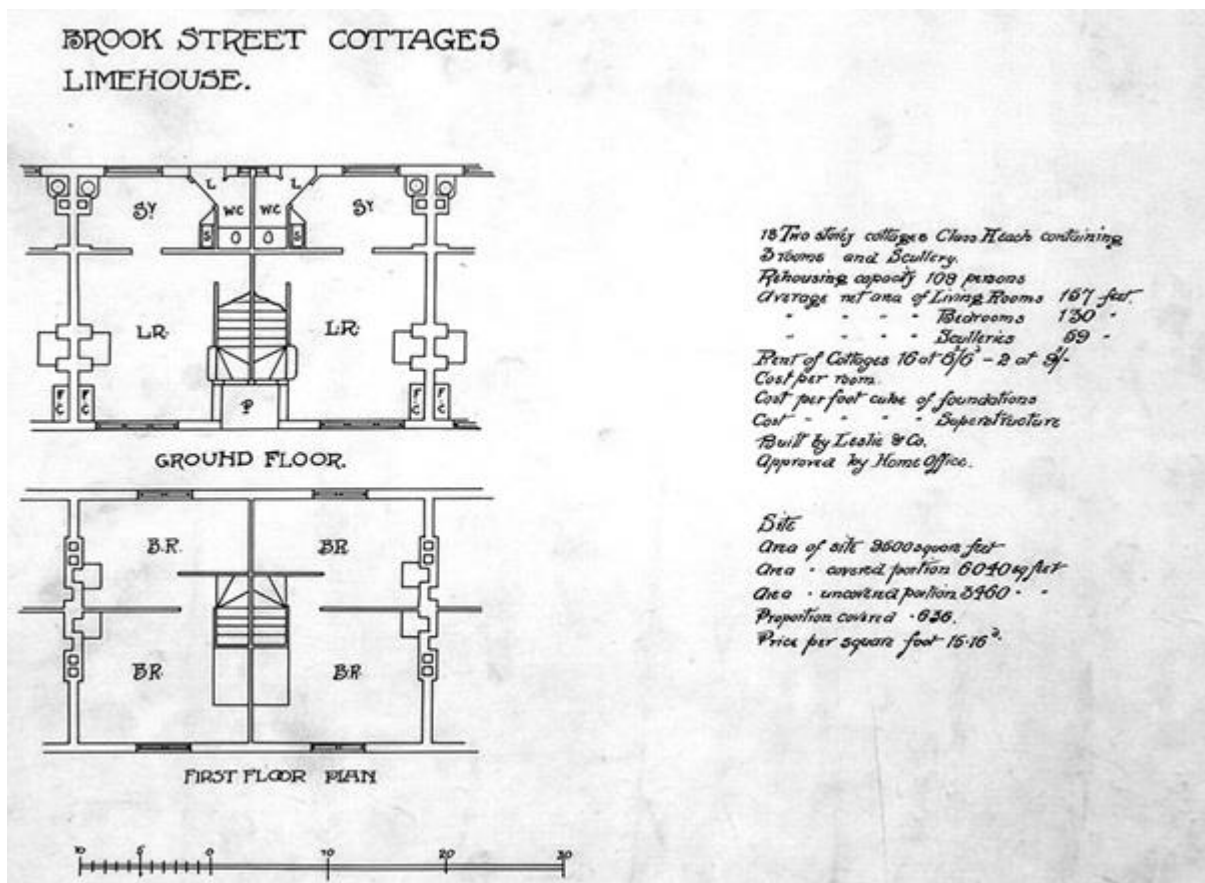


Fig. 8: Cranford Cottages plans (LMA ref: LCC/AR/HS/03/059)

The blocks and cottages survived the bombing in WW2 despite considerable damage to buildings just south of the site.

They all remain the property of the London Borough of Tower Hamlets. By 2015 they have been completely renovated with new replacement windows that match the originals. The cottages, being quite small, appear 'lost' amongst the surrounding buildings but have the advantage of being hidden from the noise and bustle of nearby Cable Street.

## Footnote

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<sup>i</sup> C. J. Stewart; The Housing Question in London; The London County Council; 1900; pp167-171