

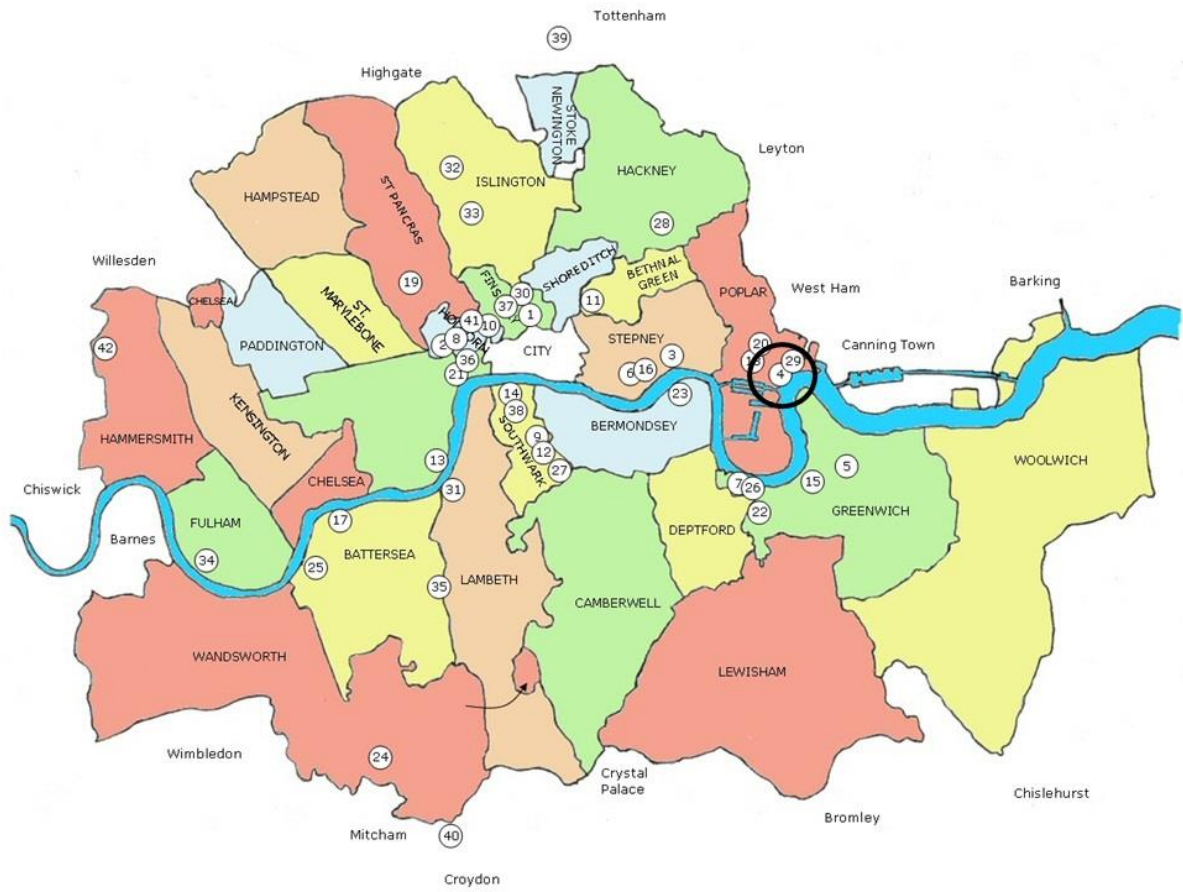
Housing the Workers

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

**Martin Stilwell
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Part 3 - the schemes in detail

4 - Blackwall Tunnel clearance (North of the Thames)



Blackwall Tunnel Scheme (north of Thames)

Council Buildings, Yabsley Street, Poplar, 1897

Built as part of rehousing for the Blackwall Tunnel construction

The Blackwall Tunnel project was a major undertaking by the Council and was the second road crossing of the Thames to be built east of London Bridge; Tower Bridge being the first (opened 1894). The project was originally commissioned by the MBW and was opened by the Prince of Wales on the 22nd May 1897. The original tunnel is still used today and is the current tunnel's western bore. The eastern bore is wider and straighter and was opened in 1967.

The construction of the tunnel and, in particular, the long approach roads either side of the Thames displaced an estimated 1,210 persons, and provision was made to re-house 500 persons in Poplar on the north side of the Thames and 710 persons in Greenwich on the south side. The Poplar re-housing was in Yabsley and Cotton Streets and resulted in the Council Buildings and Toronto and Montreal Buildings, and the Greenwich re-housing resulted in Colleston, Idenden, Armitage and Westview Cottages.

In 1892 the Council put all sites up for sale by auction for the construction of working class dwellings, but no sale resulted. The Council therefore decided it would manage the construction itself, but responses to requests for tenders were all in excess of what the Council considered was reasonable. As a result they decided to construct the buildings themselves and this required the Council to create a *Works and Stores Department*. Whilst this was being formed the Council had to press on with the project and therefore obtained tenders for the special concrete foundations that were needed (the soft subsoil was a problem on both sides of the Thames). Messrs. Reid, Blight and Co. won the contract for the foundations in January 1893 and started work immediately.

It is pleasing to note that the actual cost of the foundations was £1,546 9s 2d as against an estimate of £2,678 10s. This recording of a much lower actual cost against the original estimate is the first clue that the Council were not simply accepting fixed-price contracts but were tracking the costs of, and receipts from, the contractor. This monitoring of government contracts is considered by many as a modern way of working, and often as a hindrance by the contractors as they have to spend a lot of manpower in itemising everything in the invoices. Nevertheless, the Council was very keen to ensure that their contractors were giving Londoners value for money and this approach is the norm in today's government contracts.

The Works Department (as it became known) accepted the architects' estimates of £11,250 in March 1893. For the scheme, the architects made two fundamental changes to the approach of designing and building working class housing, based on experiences with the Beachcroft Buildings being constructed at the time. The first was a simple matter of abandoning the idealistic but expensive rule of a maximum of 4 storeys. Council Buildings were the first of very many 5-storey buildings. It seems that 4-storey buildings were simply too not cost-effective based on the number of tenancies on the building footprint. The second change, also from a realisation that the cost was a problem, was the move away from a rule that the costs of the buildings should result in a return of 3% per annum after allowing for a contribution to a sinking fund for future re-building. On the 18th April 1893 the Public Health and Housing Committee of the Council were informed that the cost of the foundations had not been taken into account when calculating the costs and that all the buildings for the Blackwall Tunnel Scheme would not return more than 2½% (2% for the cottages). Efforts were made by some of

the committee to refer the request back as the 3% was the Council's minimum requirements, but the resolution to accept 2½% was passed. The problems of costs had already begun, and the Council had only just started to construct buildings.¹

The resulting Council Buildings were remarkably similar to Beachcroft Buildings. The main visual difference was that Council Buildings had 5 storeys and the staircases were given large roof lights which added some visual improvement to the front of the buildings. The ground floors of the blocks are partly below street level, which is surprising as there was no housing opposite that would have caused a problem for the height of this building being more than the gap between them.



Fig. 1: Council Buildings, date unknown



Fig. 2: Council Buildings, front elevation (LMA ref: LCC/AR/HS/03/057)



Fig. 3: Council Buildings, rear elevation (LMA ref: LCC/AR/HS/03/057)

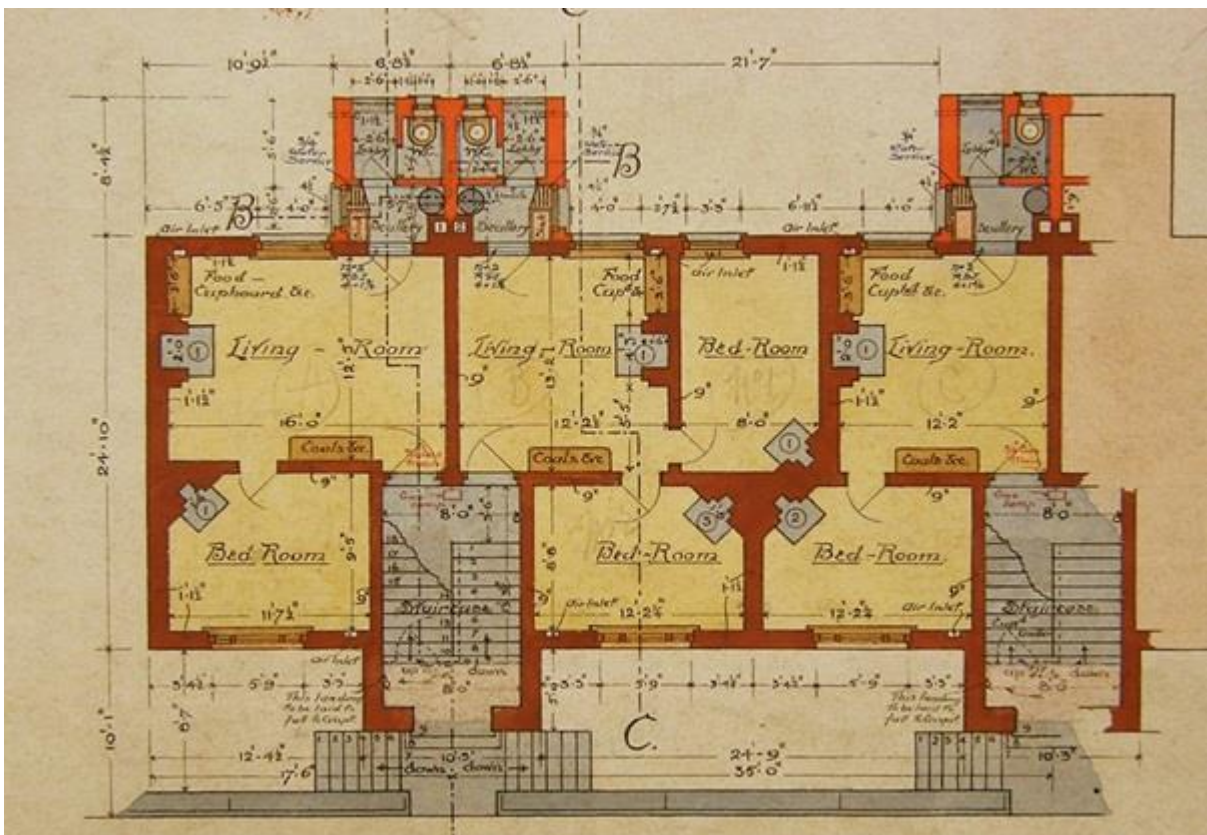


Fig. 4: Council Buildings, ground floor plan (LMA ref: LCC/AR/HS/03/057)

The layout of the rooms are similar to Beachcroft Buildings but the scullery is even smaller than the miserly space allocated in the earlier scheme. The bedrooms and living rooms are of comparable size and calculations of the floor area shows that Council Buildings have slightly larger bedrooms and living rooms, with a notably large living room on the end of the building

as shown on the above Fig. 4. All the living rooms and bedrooms were larger than the Council's ideal minimum of 144 and 96 sq. ft. respectively. Rents were between 5s and 7s a week.

The costs of the Council Buildings are as follows:

	Outgoings	Income	
Cost of land and buildings	Unknown		
Cost of foundations	£1,547		
Cost of construction	£13,840		
Value of land		£1,450	
TOTAL COSTS			£13,937
Cost per person (based on 240 persons)			£58pp
Balance of accounts, 1913-1914	£981	£762	£219 (28.7% loss)

Table 1: Cost of Brook Street Schemeⁱⁱ

The cost of the land and any buildings for demolition were part of the total cost to purchase the lands as part of the Blackwall Tunnel Scheme and individual costs for purchasing the Yabsley Street buildings and land cannot be separated. Using the Beachcroft Buildings clearance costs of £21,373 may be an unfair comparison as Poplar was more densely populated, with the site being larger and nearer the City. A fairer figure for the costs may be in the vicinity of £10,000. Using this rough estimate, the total costs per person would be approximately £100, which is still an acceptable amount for the location.

The 1901 census is showing that most of the tenants were local people working in the dockyard or on ships. Despite the buildings only having been in existence for 4 years there were already a number of tenements that are officially overcrowded. Two of the 3-roomed tenements had 8 occupants with one of those only having one person below the age of 14. One tenant was a teacher and was renting a pair of tenements (5 rooms in total) despite the family consisting of husband, wife, step-daughter (24), son (17, and an assistant teacher) and another son (15). The only other tenant who did not fit the typical tenant is the Rev Frank Hulme and his sister. He was the vicar of St Nicholas' in Yabsley Street. He went on to become Archdeacon of Bloemfontein in South Africa. Only two tenements were unoccupied and the total occupancy was 184 persons equating to a low 77% of the notional maximum (1.54 people per room).

The 1911 census is showing a similar distribution of local trades but more of the tenants were from much further afield. Overcrowding seemed to be generally under control with just a few 2-roomed tenements with 5 of 6 occupants with all having at least one young child. Of the 50 tenements, 10 were unoccupied which must have been worrying for the Council. One tenant, living with his wife, was Samuel Frost a professional footballer at Millwall FC. After such a good start, if the 1901 census is to be believed, the building seemed to have become a problem to fill. The widespread origins of the heads of household indicates that the locals started to look elsewhere. Note that the large nearby Preston Road estate was completed in 1901 and this would have given many tenants the opportunity to move to this larger building (see). The 20% unoccupied tenancies in this building also indicates that the Preston Road estate has generated an over-capacity.

One tenant on the 1911 census was worthy of more investigation. A Kathleen Medley, single, aged 27 from St Michaels in the Hamlet Lancashire is living alone in No. 8. Her occupation is given as "none". Her full name was Kathleen Ida Mary Medley and she was the daughter of

Francis Medley a Liverpool soap factory owner and his much-younger second wife Katherine. Francis died whilst daughter Kathleen was still young and the daughter subsequently lived in Surrey and Kent with her widowed mother or relatives. Kathleen graduated in Classics at Sommerville College Oxford and became very interested in social work. After studying social work in a London college for a year she moved into Council Buildings in 1909 to be close to the people she felt could benefit most from her social work. Her occupation of “none” on the census is a little confusing as she was also working as secretary at the recently-opened Wandsworth Labour Exchange. She eventually gave up that job to concentrate on her social work in Poplar and this may well account for that lack of occupation on the census return. Whilst working at the Labour Exchange she met wealthy fellow-socialist Thomas Attlee, and Thomas moved into the nearby LCC Brightlingsea Buildings in Poplar in 1912. This move was probably as a result of hearing from Kathleen about her social work experiences in the area. Also at the same Brightlingsea address, gaining experience in social work, was Thomas’ brother, and future Prime Minister, Clement Attlee. Kathleen became a local councillor for Poplar in 1912 and she and Thomas Attlee married in 1913 and dedicated themselves to social work in Poplar. They became disillusioned with the government and socialism in WW1 and moved to Cornwall after the war into a house purchased with money from a legacy. They became much respected local notaries, albeit a little eccentric and with little regular income.

The building’s balance of accounts for 1913-14 shows a very worrying deficit of 28.7%. This is not easy to explain from the published figures. The buildings were considered quite desirable by the Council as the front windows had views over the Thames. One reason for the deficit may be the distance from any other habitation, resulting in low occupancy and/or lower rents, although the 1913-14 accounts show a loss of rent of only 4.47% from empties. The map in Fig. 5 below shows how distant the buildings were from established residential areas to the north, but how convenient they were for those working in the industry and docks in the area. Amazingly, despite the proximity to the docks, the building survived the WW2 bombing without major damage.



Fig. 5: Council Buildings from 1916 OS map

Footnotes

ⁱ LCC Minutes, 18th April 1893; held at LMA

ⁱⁱ C. J. Stewart; The Housing Question in London; LCC; 1900; p284