

Housing the Workers

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

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Part 3 - the schemes in detail

7 - Hughes Field Scheme (Lewisham Cottages)

Hughes Fields scheme, Greenwich

Lewisham Cottages, Jan 1895

Built under the 1882 Artizans' Dwellings Act

This scheme follows the early LCC approach of building in outlying areas where land was cheap and disruption was minimal. As with all the early schemes, the LCC inherited it from the MBW.

Hughes Field was a large area of $15\frac{1}{2}$ acres in Deptford that was insanitary and had been the subject of investigations on medical grounds since 1877. The population was estimated to be 3,700 and this must have been a factor in the decision in 1883 not to re-develop the area under the Acts in place at the time as the sheer size of the project would have caused major administrative and legal problems. A new scheme of $6\frac{1}{2}$ acres was submitted in 1884 that covered just the densest housing area. The housing in question was considered insanitary in many cases and was known as the origin of a number of outbreaks of diseases.

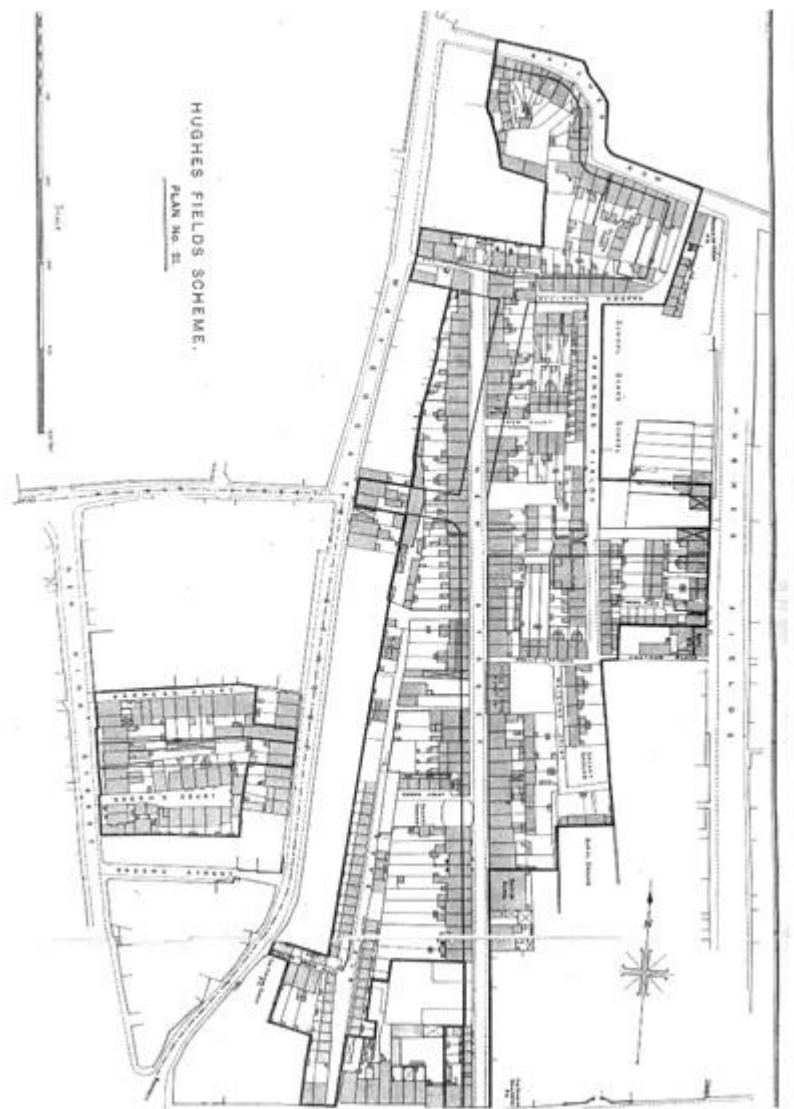


Fig. 1: Hughes Fields plan before clearance ⁱ

The plan above gives no impression of the supposed insanitary state of the housing but does give the impression of a large area. However, as can be seen in the area from the 1916 OS map in Fig. 3, the area is actually relatively small indicating how densely packed the original site was. Although the photograph in Fig. 2 below is from the 1920's, the housing shown is typical of the type in the Hughes Fields area.



Fig. 2: Housing in the Hughes Fields area, 1920s (LMA ref: SC/PHL/02/0737)

The property on the land to be cleared housed 1,786 persons, including 140 in lodging houses. The scheme, as proposed in 1889, included the widening of a number of roads as well as the building of housing and the provision of open spaces. The Secretary of State rejected the plan as he felt that it was too large and expensive a project for the LCC to take on. He also claimed to have information that there were vacant rooms in the vicinity that could house 532 persons. As a result, the Council modified its plans to cater for housing for 893 persons and to make the roads even wider, at 40 feet. Quite how they came to the conclusion that 1,786 persons, less the vacant rooms for 532 persons, made a new requirement of 893 persons is not recorded. One suspects that a scheme for 1,254 persons (1,786 – 532) would have still concerned the Secretary of State. This new scheme also enabled the Council to sell some land and so offset the considerable costs. The Secretary of State passed the scheme in January 1891.

Whilst the decision on the modified scheme was being discussed the Council were purchasing the property. After arbitration, all the property had been purchased by March 1887 for £84,333 (including legal expenses). This is a substantial sum of money for what was claimed to be

property in an insanitary area, and leads one to suspect that many landlords were less than honest in their financial dealings. Another clue as to the poor state of the existing buildings is that the sale of materials realised the sum of just £820 in April 1888. The street widening and sewer work was carried out by Messrs J. Mowlem and Co. and was completed by December 1888 for £5,991. Note that this clearance and widening had been completed whilst the modified plan was still being considered by the Secretary of State. This delay between the clearance, started in 1884, and the construction of the cottages in 1895 must have created considerable overcrowding in the surrounding area.

One would have expected that a proportion of the purchase and clearance costs could be recovered with the sale of surplus land, but one plot was left as open space, a second sold for just £400, and the third sold to the London School Board for £850. The £1,250 total being just 14% of the total purchase price. Fortunately the Council were able to sell two plots for £1,460 to the Provident Association who built working class cottages for 240 persons (reducing the council's commitment from 893 to 653 persons). Despite the reduction from the original requirement for 1,786 persons to just 653 persons, the Council applied to the Secretary of State for relief from the obligation because of a perceived lack of demand. The request was rejected and the Council decided to build cottages themselves. The designs are attributed to A. M. Philips and are somewhat plain but functional. The laying of the foundations and construction of buildings were carried out by the Works Department for £32,862 and was completed in January 1895 and provided accommodation for 668 persons. As the Council predicted, they had problems with letting the cottages but they were reported to be fully occupied by 1900. Lewisham Cottages are to the left and top of the area outlined in Fig. 3 below with the Provident Cottages opposite.

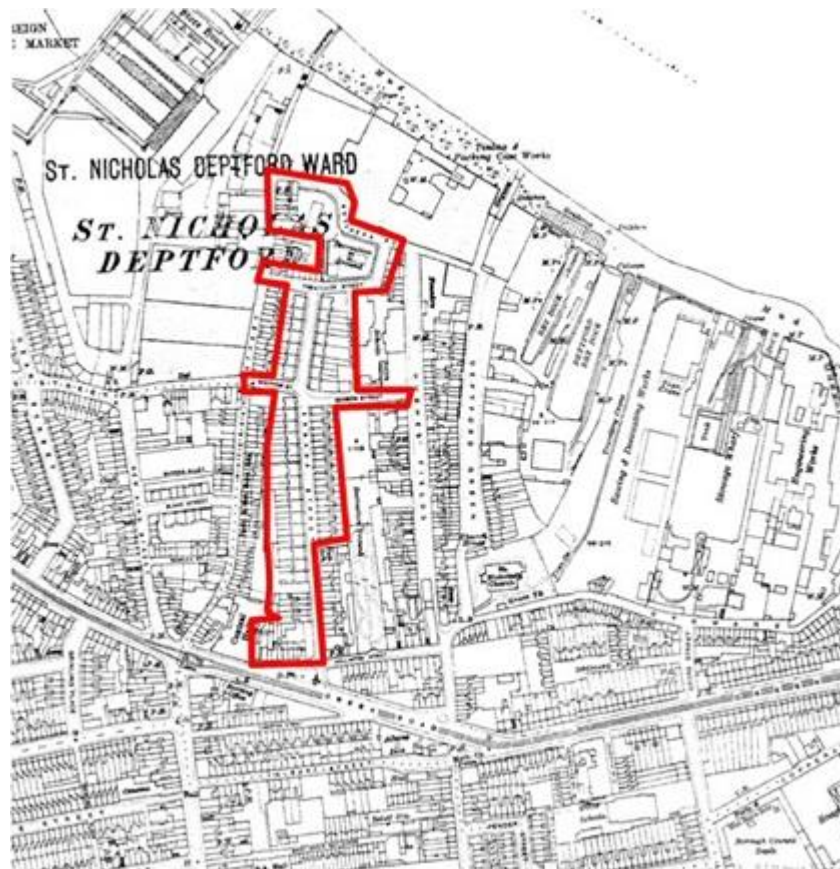


Fig. 3: The Hughes Fields area from the 1916 OS map

Most of the cottages were two storeyed but five were 3 storeyed. Each 2-storeyed “cottage” was split into 4 tenements, typically with 2 x two-roomed and 2 x three-roomed tenements. The three-storeyed cottages consisted of 5 tenements.



Fig. 4: Lewisham Cottages (LMA ref: SC/PHL/02/0813)

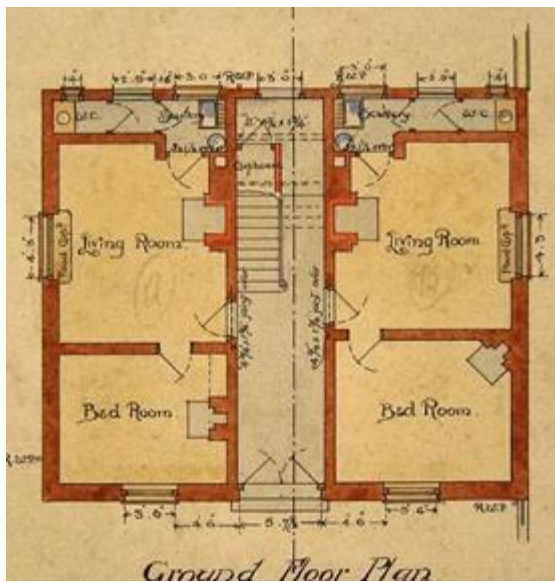


Fig. 5: Hughes Fields Cottages, Type H ground floor plan (LMA ref: LCC/AR/HS/03/027)

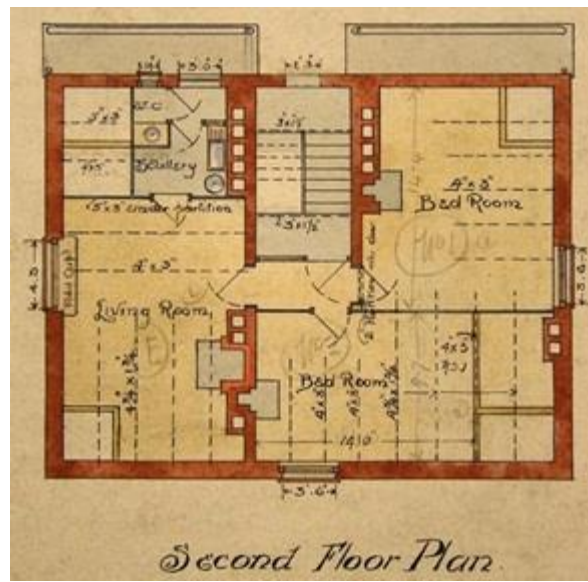


Fig. 6: Hughes Fields Cottages, Type H second floor plan. (LMA ref: LCC/AR/HS/03/027)

The costs of the Hughes Fields Cottages were as follows:

| | Outgoings | Income | |
|--|-----------|--------|--------------------|
| Cost of land and buildings | £84,333 | | |
| Street works | £5,991 | | |
| Sale of building materials | | £820 | |
| Sale of land to Provident Association | | £1,460 | |
| Sale of surplus lands | | £1,250 | |
| TOTAL CLEARANCE COSTS | | | £86,794 |
| Cost of construction | £35,464 | | |
| TOTAL COSTS | | | £122,258 |
| Cost per person (based on 668 persons) | | | £183pp |
| | | | |
| Balance of accounts, 1913-1914 | £2,199 | £1,662 | -£537 (32.3% loss) |

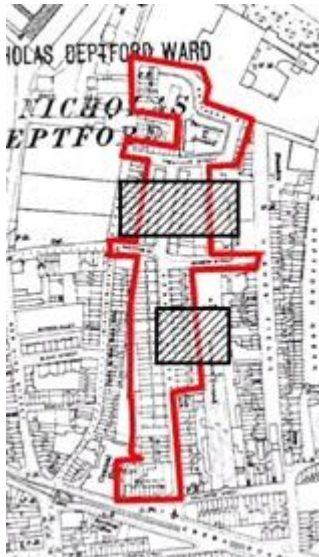
Table 1: Cost of Hughes Fields cottagesⁱⁱ

The cost per person of this scheme is a high £183 and reflects the low density of the occupancy for cottages. This would also account for the big deficit of 32.3% on the balance of accounts for the financial year 1913-14. Comparison with the costs for the nearby cottages built for the Blackwall Tunnel scheme is not possible as the cost of the land used for the cottages cannot be separated from that purchased for the whole Tunnel. This relatively high cost per person was one of the problems of building cottages, even in outer London in a relatively cheap area such as Greenwich. The Provident Association did not have to allow for the purchase of the land and property from existing landlords and purchased a cleared site for their development for a mere £1,460. The costs to erect their cottages are not known but even if their cottages for 240 persons (36% of the capacity of the LCC cottages) cost the same in proportion it would have cost them £12,767 (36% of £35,464). When added to the land purchase price of £1,460 this resulted in a cost per person of just £59 – the majority of the difference being the purchase price of the land and buildings to the Council. As a guideline, £100 per person is a typical cost for LCC buildings for the period, but cottages can cost more.

The 1901 census shows that the hard work of the housing managers to find occupants had paid off as only two dwellings of the 127 are unoccupied. However, the penalty the Council had paid was to allow considerable overcrowding. Of the 127 dwellings, 32 were overcrowded, based on 2 people per room. Some tenants seemed to have been trying to mask this from the authorities by stating on the census return that 5 or 6 people were living in a 3-roomed dwelling when it was, in fact, 2 roomed and therefore overcrowded. Some of the overcrowding is quite surprising and well beyond what a housing manager would normally tolerate. One 3-roomed dwelling had 11 occupants – nearly double the maximum capacity, whilst two others had 10 each. One 3-roomed dwelling has 9 occupants, the youngest two being 10 years old. The occupations of the tenants reflected the local industry of river transport, docks, ship building and the Foreign Cattle Market. There are few obvious artisans or clerical workers amongst the tenants recorded on the census and their birthplaces cover a wide area, although predominantly in the south east of England. The dwellings housed 629 persons, according to the census return and this is close to the theoretical maximum of 668, giving a high 94% occupancy. The concern the Council had over being able to rent the properties turned out to be well founded when one studies the 1911 census.

The 1911 census shows a completely different picture of the occupancy. Of the 127 dwellings, 37 are unoccupied, with most being 3 or 4 roomed. There is still blatant overcrowding, but it

is easy to sympathise with the Council in turning a blind eye to this with such problems filling the dwellings. Why such a change from 1901? The answer is in the same road. The Provident Cottages were built between 1901 and 1911, and are showing good occupancy in the census. Although comparison of rents is not possible as matching records no longer exist, the exodus from Lewisham Cottages surely indicates that the Provident Cottages had lower rents and attracted many tenants. There was also a shift in occupations of the heads of household in Lewisham Cottages between the 1901 and 1911 censuses. The dwellings were occupied by less labourers than in 1901 and by more artisans and tradesmen. There were less people in heavy industry and river trades than in 1901 and more in employment of local authorities or government organisations, including the LCC. With this low occupancy it is not surprising that the cottages were showing a huge deficit of over 32% for the financial year 1913-14.



The central section of Provident Cottages was destroyed by a V1 flying bomb in WW2 that impacted behind the cottages, and these were not rebuilt after the war (lower shaded area in the map in Fig. 7). The central part of the Council's cottages in the upper section of the site were destroyed or badly damaged by conventional bombing but were cost-effective to rebuild or repair after the war – a testimony to their original quality of construction. The design of the cottages with one building being typically split into 4 tenements did not lend itself to modernisation and they have all been demolished and been replaced by modern social housing and a landscaped garden.

Fig. 7: Hughes Field cottages showing bomb damage

Of the later blocks built on the site in 1904 (Benbow, Raleigh and Drake Buildings), only Benbow still stands.

Footnotes

ⁱ C. J. Stewart; The Housing Question in London; The London County Council; 1900; p176

ⁱⁱ The Housing Question in London; LCC; pp167-171