

Housing the Workers

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

**Martin Stilwell
August 2015**

Part 3 - the schemes in detail

26 - Hughes Field, Greenwich, Phase 2

Hughes Field scheme, Greenwich (Phase 2)

Benbow and Raleigh Buildings, 1904

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

Drake Buildings, 1904, Greenwich Electricity Station rehousing

Using surplus land from the Hughes Field scheme the Council decided, in 1903, to purchase two plots to build blocks. These resulted in Benbow and Raleigh Buildings. Also at this time the Council was required to house 216 people as a result of displacement from the construction of the Greenwich Power Station and they constructed Drake Buildings to cover this. All the blocks built on the site were all named after famous sailors in recognition of the relationship the area had with nearby Greenwich Naval College and the dockyards. The three buildings in question were named after Admiral John Benbow (1653-1702), Sir Francis Drake (1540-1596) and Sir Walter Raleigh (1552-1618). Others built on the site after WW1 include buildings named after Admirals Hawkins, Blake and Grenville.

Benbow and Raleigh Buildings were simply the result of a requirement by the Council to build block buildings under Part III of the 1890 Act and would have been in response to a need for housing in the area. Although the scheme is always described as being in Greenwich, Hughes Field is actually in Deptford and it was a solid working class area with considerable industry to the east (towards Greenwich) and well established ship building and wharfage trades nearby.

The requirement to rehouse the same number as displaced by the Greenwich Power Station was another one of the legal requirements forced upon the Council. The power station was a mile to the east, on the River Thames, and just the other side of the Royal Naval College. The fact that the Council chose to build replacement housing such a distance away shows that they knew that those displaced were very unlikely to choose to live in Council property. The land was available as part of the Hughes Field scheme and so the opportunity was taken to satisfy this legal requirement in the most convenient and cheapest way, and Drake Buildings was the result.

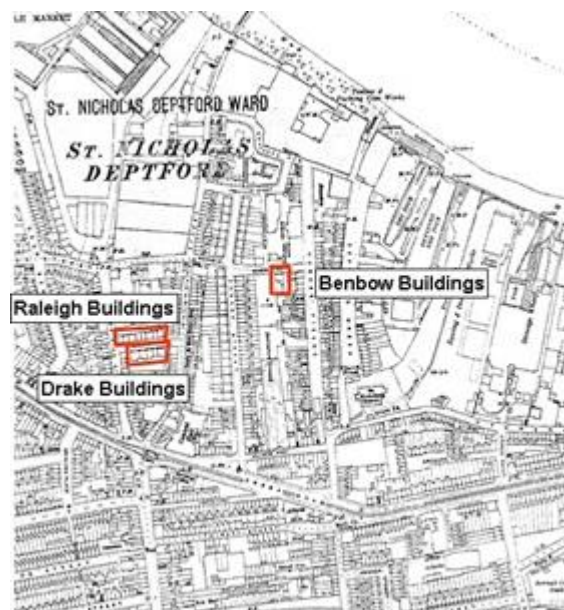


Fig. 1: Site of Benbow, Drake and Raleigh Buildings on the edge of the Hughes Field development area

All three buildings are on plots of the Hughes Field development that the Council were unable to sell. It made sense to build Drake Buildings here rather than try and procure a site nearer the power station when the experiences of earlier re-housing projects forced on the Housing Committee had shown that those displaced were rarely in the queue for the new buildings, especially when there was a noticeable time gap between clearance and re-building.

All three buildings were constructed by Messrs Martin, Wells & Co. Ltd to very similar designs. Drake buildings were started in August 1903 and completed in September 1904, and housed 220 persons. Raleigh and Benbow Buildings were completed shortly after, in November 1904.

The buildings are of standard Council design for the time and show none of the artistic features of earlier blocks. No photographs can be found of the buildings in their early days but the Council photographed them in the 1960s, shortly before renovation.



Fig. 2: Benbow Bldgs before renovation, 1960s. (LMA ref: SC/PHL/02/0813)



Fig. 3: rear of Benbow Buildings post renovation (LMA ref: SC/PHL/02/0813)



Fig. 4: Drake Buildings (LMA ref: SC/PHL/02/0813)



Fig. 5: Drake Buildings (LMA ref: SC/PHL/02/0813)

The costs for Drake Buildings are not possible to calculate as the cost of demolition was part of the Greenwich Power Station scheme and the cost of the land for the new buildings was included in the original Hughes Field scheme. However, the costs for Raleigh and Benbow Buildings are stated in the 1913 LCC Housing report¹.

	Outgoings	Income	
Cost of land	£855		
Cost of Buildings	£16,375		
NET COST			£17,230
Cost per person (based on 440 persons)			£39pp
Balance of Accounts 1913-14	£1,802	£1,608	-£194 (12.1% loss)

Table 1: Costs for Raleigh & Benbow Buildings

The cost of the land is suspiciously low and is probably its value rather than the proportioned cost from the original Hughes Field slum clearance. The loss of 12.1% recorded in 1913-14 is surprising as Benbow and Raleigh Buildings were built under Part III of the 1890 Act and so part of a pro-active development. It is possible that the construction of Drake Buildings in response to the need to re-house the same as displaced by the construction of the Greenwich Power Station may have generated too much capacity, but surely the Council would have realised this? If so, they would not have built both Raleigh and Benbow Buildings. Either the Council mis-calculated demand or the numbers simply did not add up and the costs were too high to sustain a profit on the scheme with the rents prevalent in the area.

The 1911 census shows that there was a worryingly high number of vacancies in all three buildings. This low take up of tenancies is a surprise for 7 years after the buildings were finished and indicates that the whole Hughes Field development was ill-advised and provided far more working-class housing than the locality needed. The table below illustrates the problems the council was having filling the tenancies.

Building	Tenancies	Occupied	Max occupancy	Actual occupancy	Manual workers	Local born
Benbow	30	16 (53%)	160	65 (41%)	15 (94%)	12 (75%)
Raleigh	50	35 (70%)	280	176 (63%)	32 (91%)	15 (43%)
Drake	40	25 (63%)	220	107 (49%)	22 (88%)	10 (40%)

The very high percentage of manual workers in all three buildings reflects the type of tenant available and that there was other property in the area that attracted the white-collar workers. Two of the tenancies in Raleigh Buildings were occupied by Salvation Army officers and two in Drake Buildings by clergymen. None of these occupants are local people. The most surprising occupant is a single 34 year old lady of private means living in Raleigh Buildings with a 19 year-old local female servant. This lady was the daughter of a deceased lace factory owner and from Nottingham. There is no evidence to indicate why this lady chose to live in these buildings when she would have been able to afford much better accommodation nearby. The electoral rolls show that she continued to live in the buildings until 1918 when she is recorded as living in a Peabody Building just north of Moorgate. She married in 1925.

Only Benbow House remains in 2012, almost lost amongst many post-WW1 blocks built by the Council. This building was fortunate to survive without any major damage from WW2 bombing considering the damage to the nearby Lewisham and Provident Cottages. The site of Raleigh and Drake Buildings is now mainly an open space, as is the central part of the site where the Council's Lewisham Cottages and the Provident Association's cottages used to be. As with Benbow, these buildings survived the WW2 bombing despite many buildings in the immediate vicinity being badly damaged or destroyed. The estate is still a major housing development, known as Hughes Field, with many substantial post-WW1 blocks and modern 2-storey houses. Lewisham Council have carried out a number of major renovations of the post-WW1 blocks but Benbow House, as it is now called, looks a little forlorn and old.



Fig. 6: Benbow Buildings, 2009

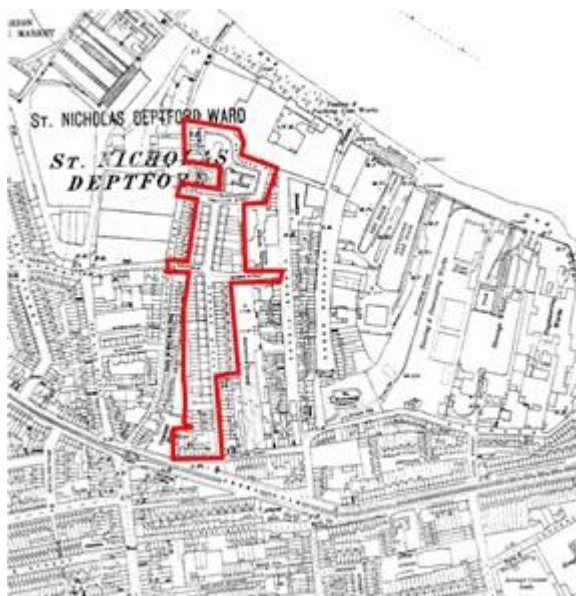


Fig. 7: Hughes Field Cottages from 1916 OS map

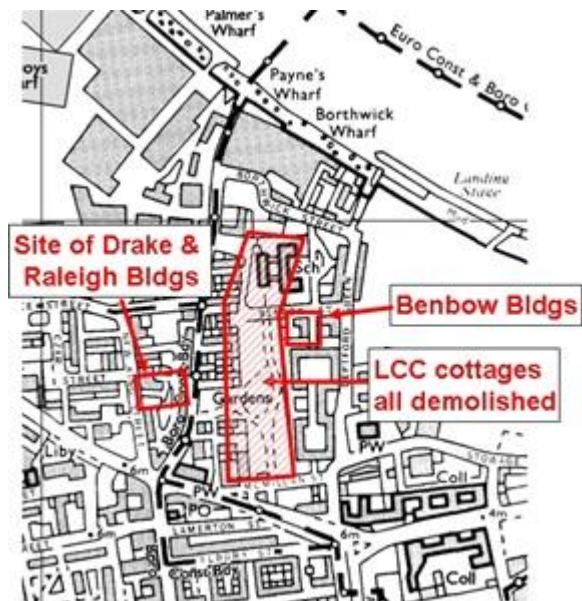


Fig. 8: 1995 OS map

Footnote

¹ Housing of the Working Classes 1855-1912; LCC; 1913; p151