

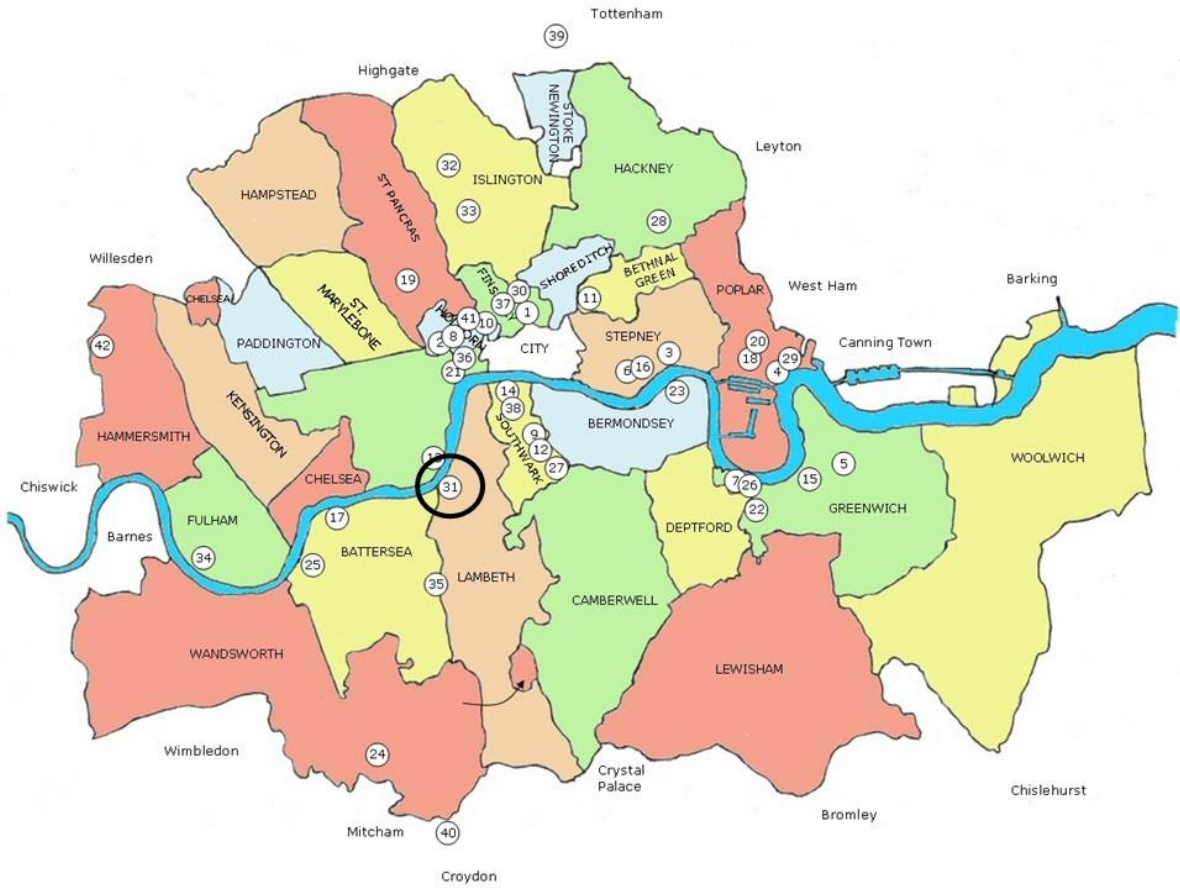
Housing the Workers

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

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Part 3 - the schemes in detail

31 - Nine Elms Lane widening, Battersea



Nine Elms Lane street widening scheme, Battersea Lennox Buildings and Clere Cottages, 1905

This relatively small development of a single block and some cottages was the result of the need to re-house just 69 persons displaced during the widening of the Nine Elms Lane in Battersea. The Council acquired a site in nearby Wandsworth Rd, close to Vauxhall Cross, and designed a block called Lennox Buildings, and seven cottages called Clere Cottages.



Fig. 1: Site of Lennox Buildings and Clere Cottages from 1896 OS Map



Fig. 2: Lennox Buildings and Clere Cottages from 1916 OS Map

Lennox Buildings housed 194 persons and Clere Cottages, 42 persons. The buildings were opened in May 1905.

The total costs of the development cannot be identified as they are included in the Nine Elms Lane Widening scheme. However, it was recorded in 1908 that the original valuation of the site would have resulted in a deficit of £821 on the whole development. The deficit was the result of the Council's way of estimating costs as the sinking fund was calculated by taking the cost of building the new housing and its estimated value after erection. The architects estimated that the value of the site was £1,560, but the lowest tender for the construction would have left an £821 shortfall, which would need to be passed onto the rate payers. To balance the books the Council simply increased the paper value of the site by £821.¹

The plans in Fig. 3 below show that the majority on the rooms were about 10 sq. ft. above the minimum of 144 and 96 sq. ft. respectively for living and bedrooms. However, the Council seems to have resorted to a ruse to ensure that they maintained adequate room sizes for two of the tenements. The two upper left tenements each have something called a "bed recess" which is only 81 sq. ft. The wall between the recess and the living room is labelled as 6' 6" high, which would have been 18" short of the ceiling. This was a clever way of introducing more bedrooms without breaking regulations although the description to the left states that there were only 2 tenements in the whole of Lennox Buildings with this extra bed recess.

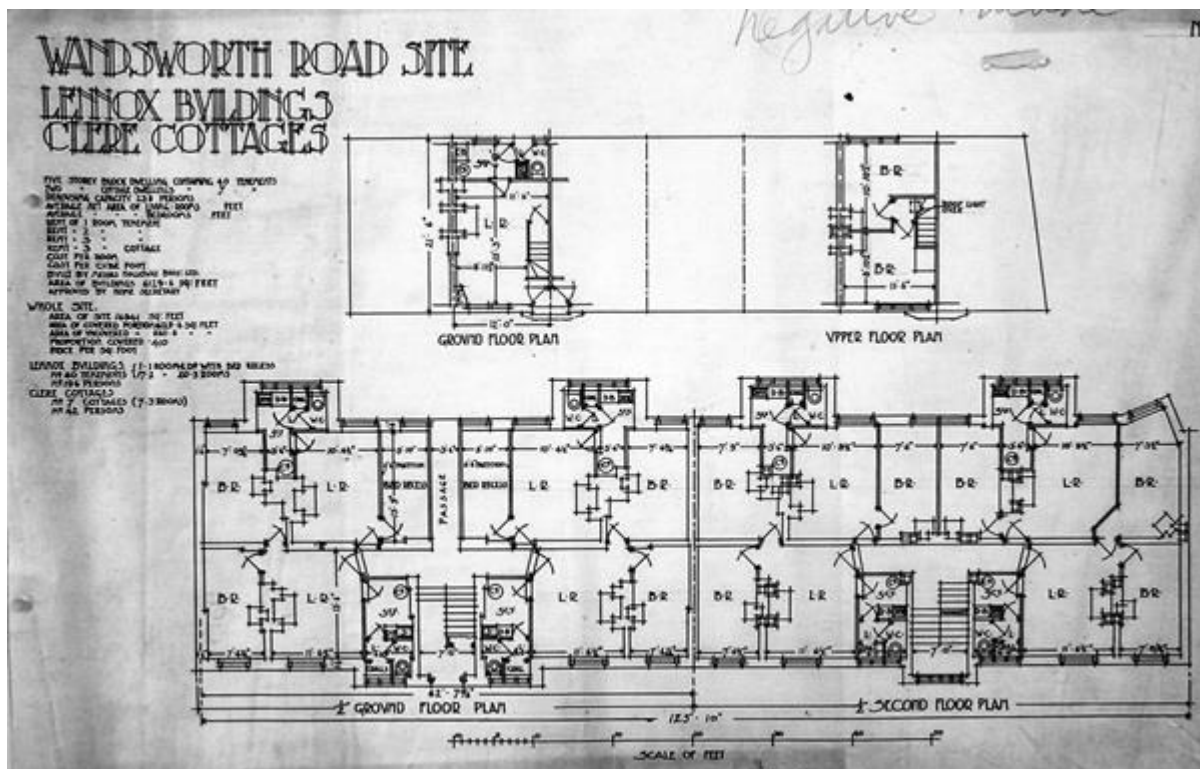


Fig. 3: Plans for Lennox Buildings (bottom) and Clere Cottages (top) (LMA Ref: LCC/AR/HS/03/057)

The buildings are very similar to other Council dwellings at the time with a gambrel roof containing the upper floor, and which has a generous overhang. The design is not unpleasant and exudes a feeling of solidity. The cottages also look to be a standard design of the time and almost identical to St Lawrence Cottages in Poplar described earlier, with left and right halves to each cottage.



Fig. 4: Lennox Buildings, 1906
(LMA ref: SC/PHL/02/0884)



Fig. 5: Clere Cottages, 1906
(LMA ref: SC/PHL/02/0884)

Unusually for a development that had to be carried out somewhat reluctantly by the Council the 1911 census shows that they were clearly meeting a local need. Of the 40 tenements and 7 cottages only one tenement is unoccupied. The heads of household cover a wide spectrum of trades with no clear pattern. The cottages would normally be expected to house families who could afford higher rents and so be in the more skilled trades, but the heads of households

follow the same pattern as for the tenements. There is almost no overcrowding and the occupancy is a low 152 against the maximum of 237 equating to 64%. Possibly reflecting that the buildings were not to replace slum clearances but to house those displaced for road widening, there are few local-born people as head of household. A mere 11 tenements of the 46 occupied have local born heads. Even those born in London account for just only just over half the households. This clear indication of a successful development is reflected in the 1913-14 financial returns. The block and cottages were showing a reasonable profit against income of 5.5% in that financial year. For a development forced upon the Council as a result of street development, this can be considered a financial success.

They did not fare so well towards the end of their planned life. The buildings were demolished by Lambeth BC in the early 1980s as part of the major Vauxhall Cross street improvements. The building seems to have finished its life in a very sad condition having been occupied by a local Housing Association. A Hansard report of 17th December 1980 of the Commons debate on the level of government assistance for those living in Greater London included a description of the condition of Lennox Building:ⁱⁱ

“There is a building, the Lennox Building, in Parry Road, by Vauxhall Cross, which basically should be condemned and where the life scheduled for the property is only another two years. The conditions in that building, under the supervision of St. Mungo's, are absolutely staggering. I visited several of the flats concerned. Some of them have no connection between the sink and the drainage. The water is literally dripping from the sink. There are loose power points. There is wire hanging loose and inadequate wiring. There is seepage from lavatories. The conditions are thoroughly unsatisfactory. I am awaiting the report of the environmental health inspector on more than one flat. Yet when I submitted to St. Mungo's that it has a responsibility to those who are its tenants to undertake repairs and a certain amount of maintenance—because in many cases, although some of the flats are zero rated, it is charging £10 and £16 a week to couples—I find that little or nothing is being done.

For example, I have studied the case of a Mr. Carr. The windows in his flat are falling apart. They do not have sash cords. They cannot be properly closed. A reply from St. Mungo's dated 11 September stated: you will just have to prop your windows open. In another case a gas cooker has not been provided, so there are no cooking facilities. In the case of a Mr. Boyle in one of the flats that I visited earlier in the year, there appears still to be no cooker in the kitchen, while water seepage and flooding render the floor damp and unhygienic.”

St Mungo's Housing Association is now a respected charity providing sheltered housing for the homeless. Founded as a charity in Battersea in 1969 they occupied vacant buildings in the early days and this probably explains the very poor condition of Lennox Building described in the Hansard report above.

Footnotes

ⁱ LCC; Report of the Finance Committee; 11th June 1907

ⁱⁱ Hansard, 17th December 1980, Commons Sitting