

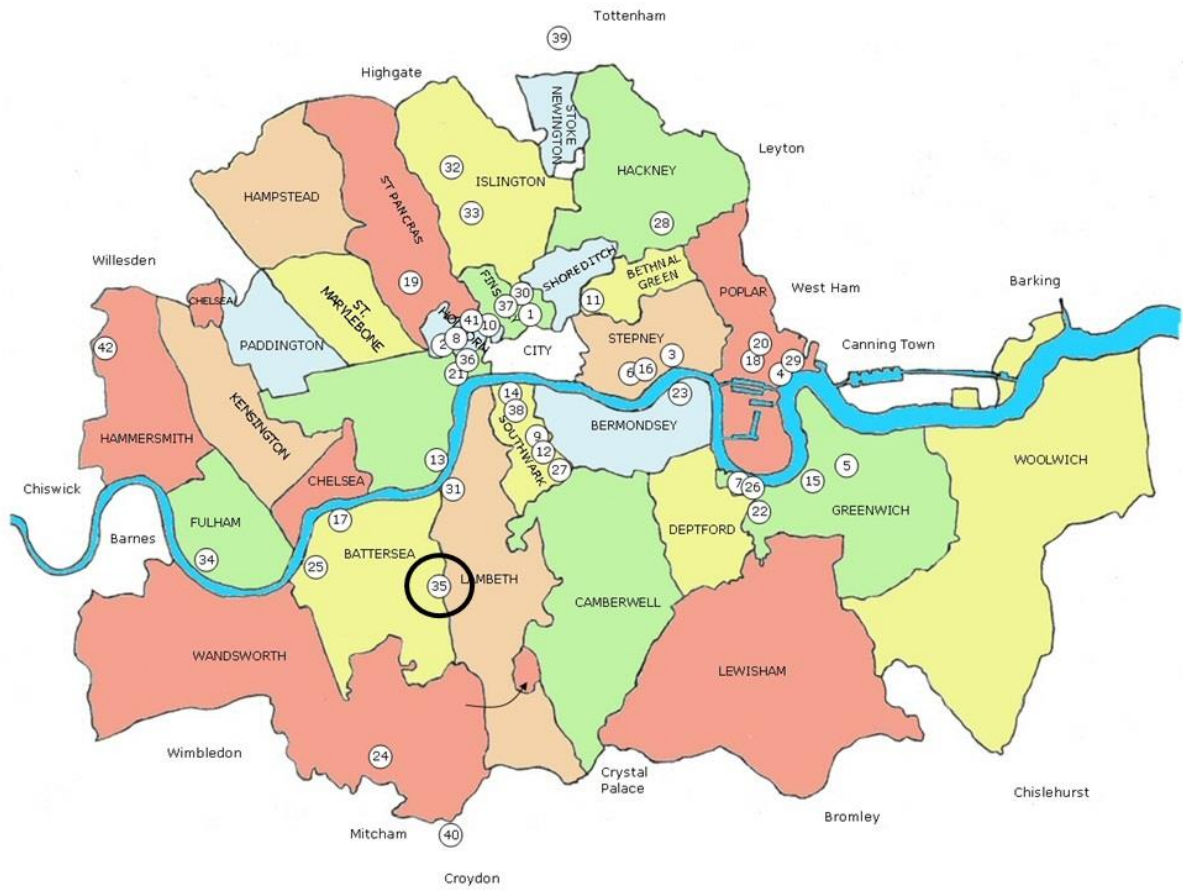
Housing the Workers

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

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August 2015**

Part 3 - the schemes in detail

35 - Briscoe Buildings, Brixton Hill



Briscoe Buildings, Brixton Hill, 1906

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

This development was undertaken within Part III of the 1890 Housing of the Working Classes Act whereby the Council simply decided to purchase an available site at an advantageous rate and build block housing to meet the housing needs of the area. This area of Brixton had a surprising mix of wealthy and working class. Some of the finest housing in south London was in Brixton and some fine villas were on the Brixton Hill directly opposite the site. Yet behind the one acre development site was Brixton Prison and along one side was Lambeth water works.

The reasons for purchasing the site are not clear. It could be assumed that the blocks would house some of the prison staff, and that may have been the case, but the blocks were designed to house 718 persons which is far more than needed for that purpose.



Fig. 1: Brixton Hill site from 1896 OS Map



Fig. 2: Brixton Hill site showing completed 4 blocks of Briscoe Buildings

The site was purchased in June 1903 and the resulting buildings were called Briscoe Buildings and had little architectural merit apart from the pronounced overhang of the mansard roofing of the three rear blocks and a clever use of coloured glazed bricks on the front of the main block. The development was completed in October 1906.



Fig. 3: Front block of Briscoe Buildings, 1907
(LMA ref: SC/PHL/02/775)



Fig. 4: One of the rear blocks of Briscoe Buildings, 1907
(LMA ref: SC/PHL/02/775)

Note in Fig. 3 the large front garden which must have been a welcome feature. This garden may have also placated some of the middle-class residents opposite by moving the building back from the road and well behind the established trees. It is also disappointing to note in Fig. 4 that the stairwell at the rear had windows open to the elements and of a design that spoils the symmetry of the building.

The plan in Fig. 5 below shows a conventional interior layout with the proportions of the rooms being typical of that time as being only just larger than the 144/96 sq. ft. minimum. Some of the walls between the tenements are still very thin but there are no obvious signs of cynical cost-cutting.

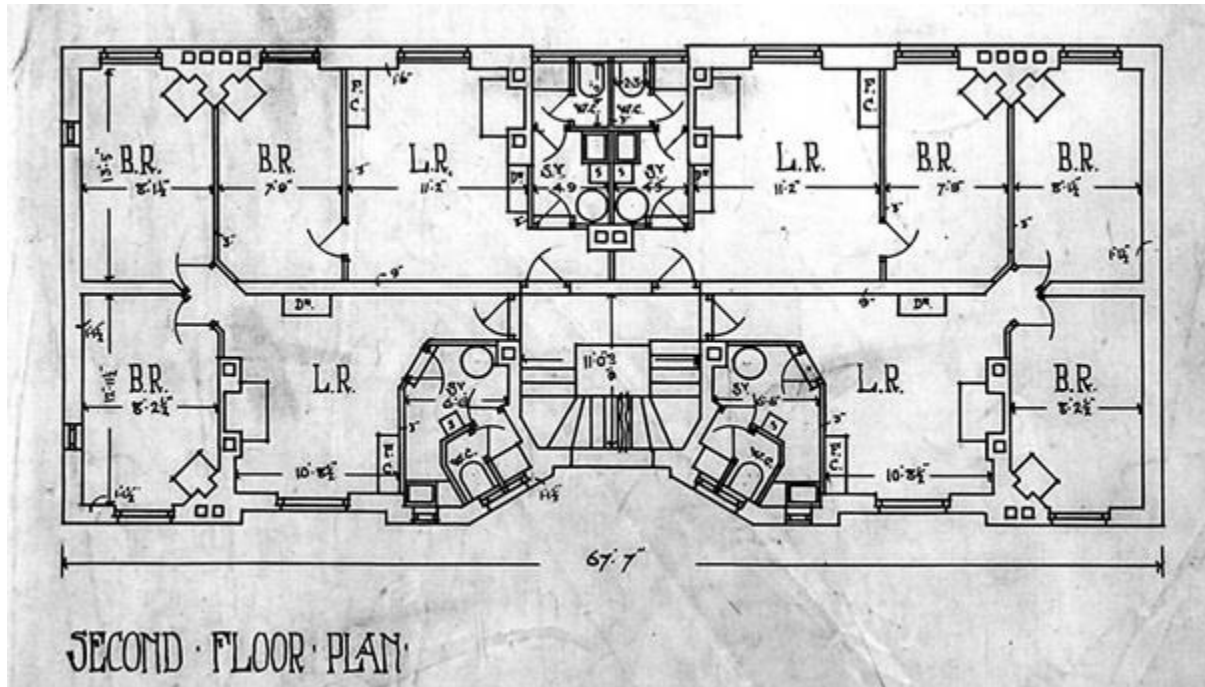


Fig. 5: Briscoe Buildings Block 2. (LMA ref: LCC/AR/HS/03/057)

The costs of the buildings were as follows:

| | Outgoings | Income | |
|--|-----------|--------|---------|
| Purchase of site | £7,040 | | |
| Construction | £27,968 | | |
| NET COST | | | £35,008 |
| Cost per person (based on 718 persons) | | | £49pp |
| Balance of Accounts 1913-14 | £2,442 | £2,444 | £0 (0%) |

Table 1: Briscoe Buildings scheme costs

Once again, the economic sense of purchasing an available site under Part II of the 1890 Act shows up in the excellent value per person of £49. The buildings broke even in 1913-14 which would have concerned the Council as a profit of at least 5.5% was needed to maintain the sinking fund.

The 1911 census returns show a building occupied by families that one would expect to see in this pleasant suburb of London and away from any industrial centres. This is first reflected in the occupancy density. Against the theoretical maximum of 718 occupants there are only 311 recorded in 1911 representing a very low 43% occupancy. Some of this low figure is the result of 15 or the 113 tenements being unoccupied, but most is the result of the tenants choosing not to overcrowd their tenements. Of the 98 occupied tenements only 2 are officially overcrowded but by just one occupant in both cases. What the census returns do show is that many of the residents have moved to Brixton from other parts of London. Only 16% of the heads of household are recorded as being born in the area, yet 40% are from other parts of London, and in particular from an arc from Bermondsey, through the east end, to Islington. The occupations also reflect the lack of local industry and the ease of reaching the London commercial district by omnibus or tram. A large 37% of heads are in what today we would call white-collar occupations and these include an author and his wife and 9 year old son plus their female servant. This occupant was traced on the 1901 census as a lecturer living in London with his wife and female servant. There are also a higher than normal number of widows living in the property, some of whom have no occupation or list it as “Private means”. The returns therefore indicate the many tenants have chosen to live in this building with its good transport to London and relatively pleasant location when compared to many of the boroughs their ancestors would have come from. The only problem seems to be the large number of unoccupied tenements which is likely to be the main cause of the development’s marginal profitability before World War 1.

The buildings still stand today and the site is known as Renton House. The red bricks for the main facing are complemented by a very interesting light brown glazed brick which has worn very well. The rear of the main block and the two smaller blocks at the back are in a more ordinary yellow stock brick that has not aged so well. As with Bearcroft Buildings in the previous section, the lack of balconies creates a somewhat oppressive block.



Fig. 6: Renton House, 2009



Fig. 7: One of the rear blocks of Renton House, 2009



Fig. 8: Detail of the light glazed brick at the front, 2009



Fig. 9: Rear of the main block, 2009. Note lack of glazed brick.