

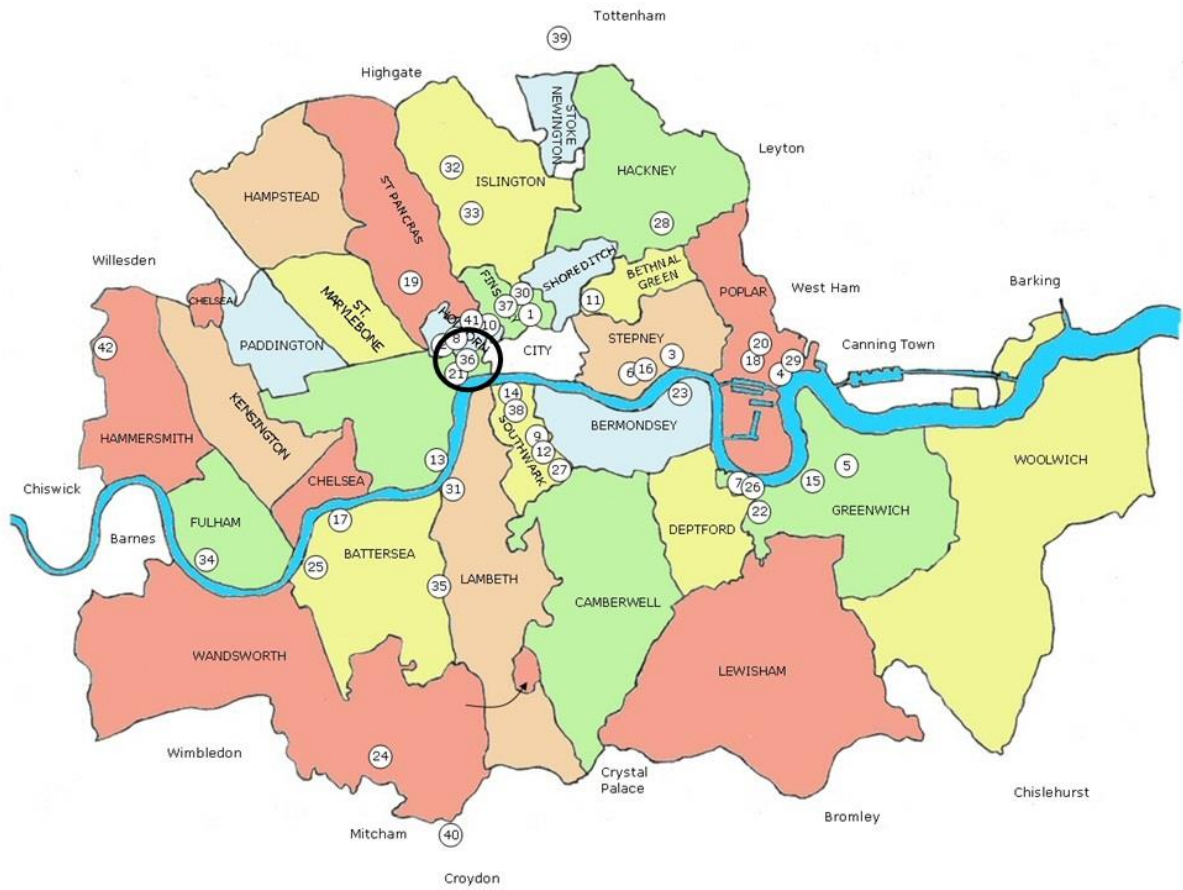
Housing the Workers

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

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August 2015**

Part 3 - the schemes in detail

36 - Clare Market & Strand Improvement - Phase 2



The Clare Market and Strand Improvement Scheme

Bruce House Lodging House, Holborn, 1906

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

Bruce House was a large lodging house that was the final stage of the re-housing for those displaced by the Clare Market and Strand Improvement schemes. This scheme had already provided housing for 4,090 at Millbank, Bourne Estate, Herbrand Street and Duke's and Russell Courts. The remaining re-housing requirement was for a lodging house for 618 persons. The designed lodging house was for 699 men (against a requirement for 618) and was approved by the Secretary of State on 21st June 1904. One unusual feature that had to be allowed for was that the Clare Market clearance included the demolition of a dispensary and this had to either be rebuilt or compensation paid. The Council decided to incorporate the dispensary into Bruce House in space on 4 floors but with separate external access.

The building was named after Mr Wallace Bruce who was a long-standing member of the Housing of the Working Classes Committee and chairman five times. It was on a large scale and catered for all the men's needs. A brochure with a detailed description of the house was written for its opening on 13th July 1906ⁱ. Note in the two OS maps in Fig. 1 and Fig. 2 below that Lincoln Inn Fields is labelled as being in Finsbury in the former and Holborn in the latter.

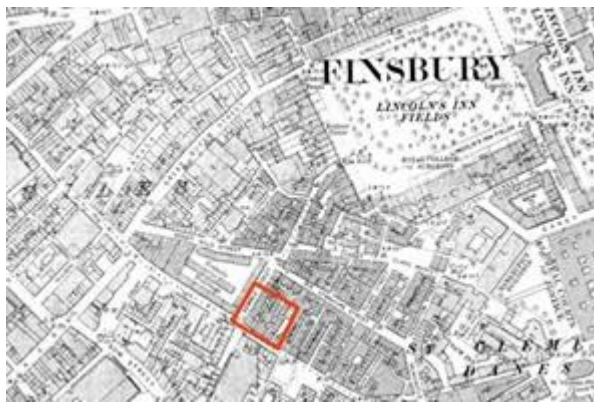


Fig. 1: Bruce House site from 1896 OS map



Fig. 2: Bruce House site from 1916 OS map



Fig. 3: Close up of the building in the 1916 OS map showing the dispensary



Fig. 4: Bruce House shortly after opening in 1907 (LMA ref: SC/PHL/02/0144)

The layout of the buildings is best described using the plans. The originals cannot be located but the Greater London Council drew new plans before modernising the building in the 1960s.

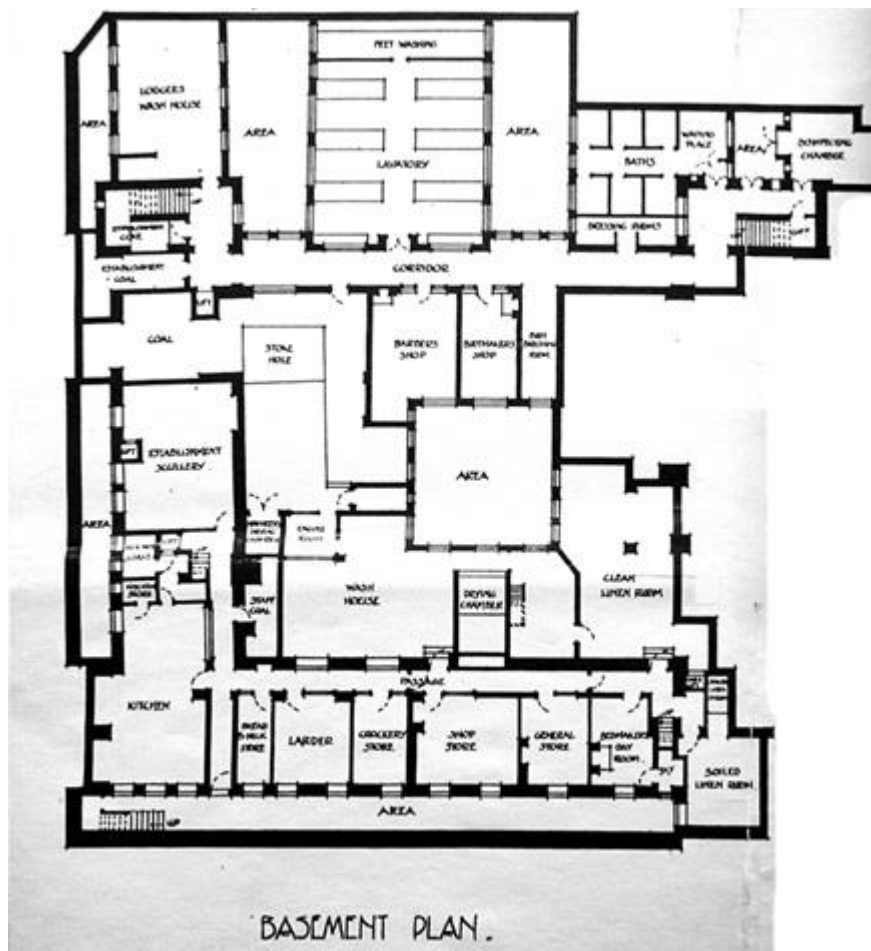


Fig. 5: Bruce House, basement plan (LMA ref: GLC/AR/BR/23/005817)

The basement was used for ablutions and to house the laundry, staff kitchen and stores. The square marked “stone hole” near the centre is intriguing, suggesting an old well or soak-away. Note the barber and bootmaker shops. The lodger’s wash house included a drying area although this is not specifically marked on the plan.

The ground floor plan below shows the typical layout of a lodging house of the time with the dining area for 360 men and cooking facilities in the middle. The reading and smoking rooms seem very generous in size. The former was supplied with books for the use of the lodgers and three open fireplaces, which must have made this area very attractive on winter evenings. Note the small writing room off the reading room. The old dispensary area is outlined to the right.

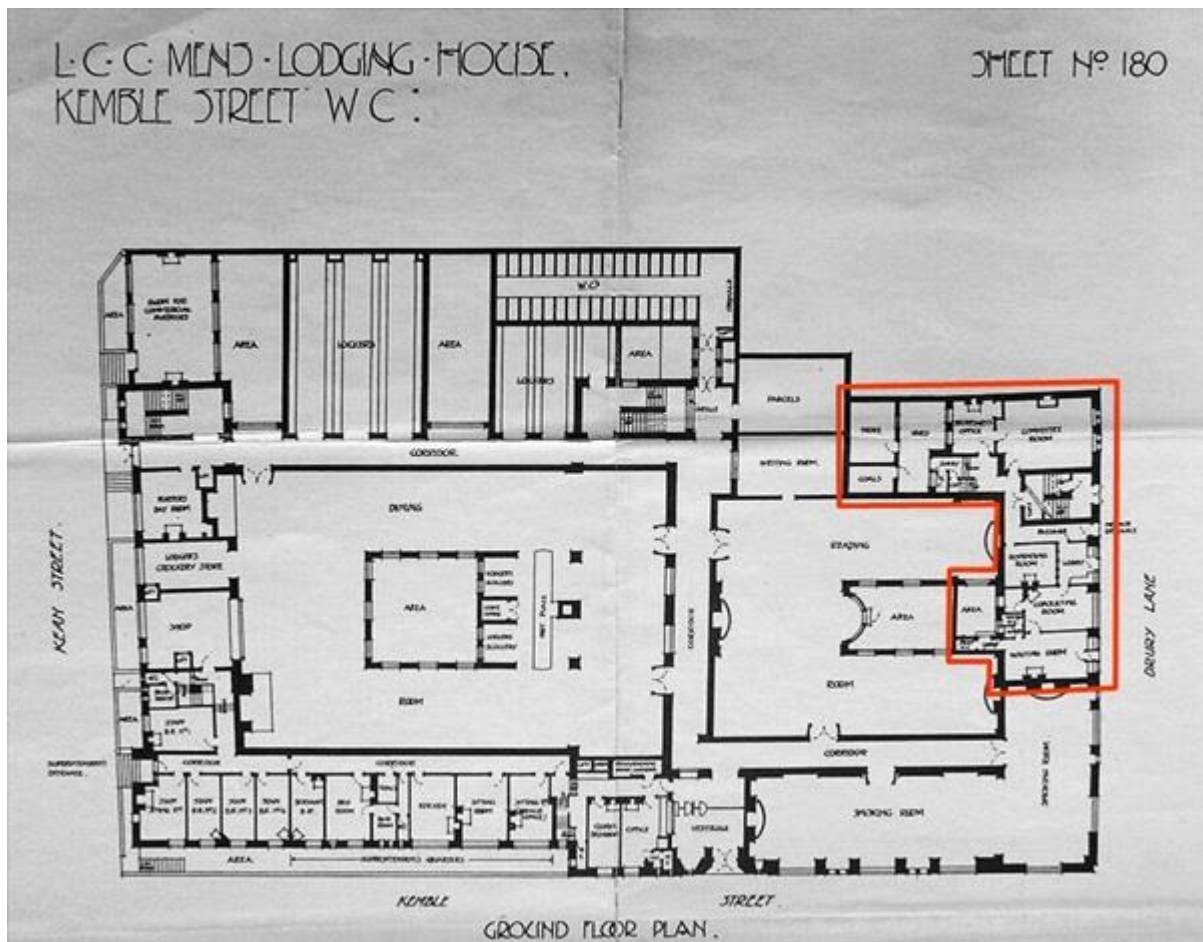


Fig. 6: Bruce House, ground floor plan (LMA ref: GLC/AR/BR/23/005817)

The second, third and fourth floors are all the same layout, shaped like an “E”. These floors all contain sleeping cubicles. The shape allowed the maximum light and air to the cubicles.

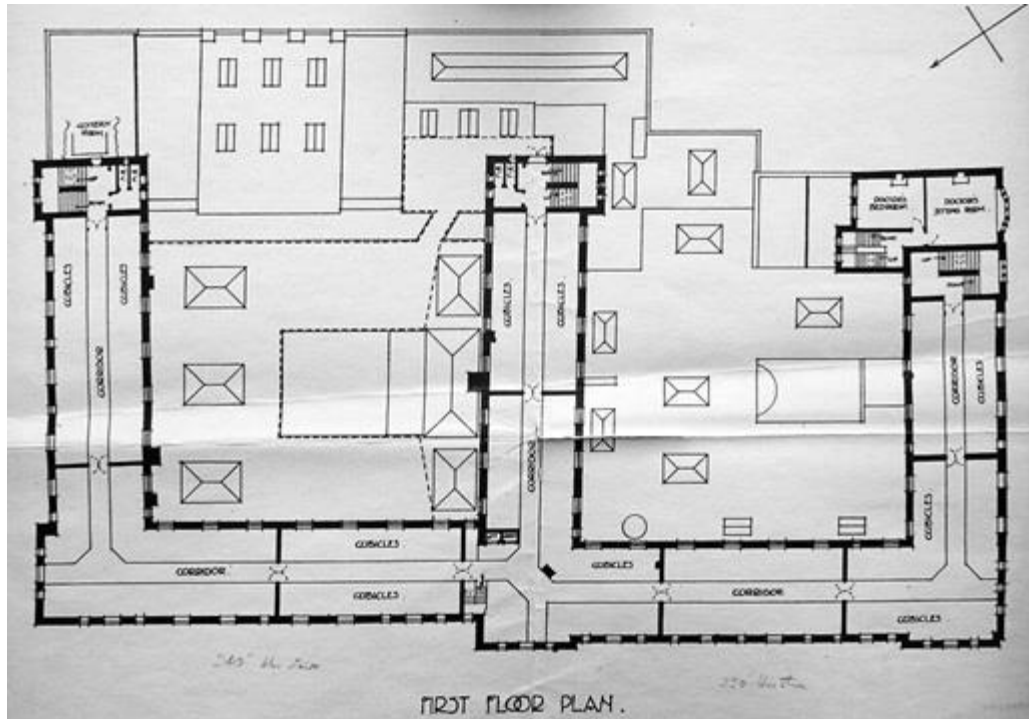


Fig. 7: Bruce House, upper floors plan (LMA ref: GLC/AR/BR/23/005817)

The upper floors looked down onto the roof of the ground floor which was designed as an area to walk around and was called “*The Promenade*”.



Fig. 8: Bruce House Promenade, 1906 (LMA ref: Page 5 LCC/CL/CER/03/005/072A)

Unlike earlier lodging houses with lodgers sleeping in boxes squeezed one against the other, Bruce House followed the Council practice of providing cubicles each of which was a minimum of 4' 10½" wide. Each cubicle contained an iron bedstead with a sprung mattress.



Fig. 9: Bruce House cubicle, 1907
(LMA ref: SC/PHL/02/0144)



Fig. 10: Bruce House lockers, 1907
(LMA ref: SC/PHL/02/0144)



Fig. 11: Bruce House washroom, 1907
(LMA ref: SC/PHL/02/0144)



Fig. 12: Bruce House dining area, 1907
(LMA ref: SC/PHL/02/0144)

Access to the cubicles was prevented during prohibited hours by iron gates with panic bolts that allowed anyone trapped inside to escape. The layout was designed to reduce the spread of fire and the location of the staircases was chosen to ensure all areas had an escape route in the event of a fire. Most of the fittings were of teak to reduce the spread of fire although the cubicle partitions were of lighter wood and were fitted with removable panels to simplify maintenance and repairs. One key feature to ensure cleanliness and long life was that all the internal corridors, toilets, washrooms etc. were finished in glazed bricks or tiles.

The lodgers were charged 7d a night for a cubicle and 6d a night for weekly tickets. A locker cost 6d for deposit on the key of which 4d was refunded on return. All keys were re-registered each week to prevent lodgers passing keys on. A hot bath was 1d and this included soap and a towel.

The superintendent of the lodging house was allowed to sell lodgers food for them to cook and he paid rent to the Council in return. This was also the normal practice in Parker Street House and Carrington House but the Council eventually took over responsibility for the food supplies in all the lodging houses.

The cost of building Bruce House cannot be assessed accurately as the cost of the site was included as part of the Clare Market and Strand Improvement schemes although the building cost £47,105 to erect. The Council's 1913-14 Accounts show a good profit of 7.9% which was far better than Parker Street or Carrington House lodging houses.

Based on the 7.9% profit in 1913, the 1911 census returns should be expected to show a well-occupied building on the night of the census. This was indeed the case with a building designed for 699 men actually containing 708 on the night. In addition to these lodgers, there were 15 staff: the superintendent, his wife (catering manager), five female assistants (all single or widows), seven porters (again, all single or widowers) and a one married male booking clerk. It is assumed that most if not all the staff would also be resident during their normal working week. This 100% capacity is even more surprising as the Salvation Army had a hostel, called "The Harbour", in an adjacent building. There was clearly a need for this type of accommodation for males in the area.

Of the 708 lodgers on the 2nd April 1911: 18% were locally born; 22% were born elsewhere in London; 13% born in southeast England, 37% from the rest of England, Scotland and Wales; only 6% from Ireland; and the remaining 4% being foreign born. The last figure is surprisingly small considering the building's proximity to hotels and theatres. It is less surprising to see that 85% of the lodgers stated they were single or widowed. The occupations of those lodgers are mainly in what we call in modern times the service industry. Only 58 state they are "labourers" of some kind. The remaining lodgers are occupied in trades that would be expected in the area. These include porters, newsvendors, clerks, travellers, hawkers/pedlars and valets/waiter (although only 20). A small surprise are that 15 of the lodgers gave their occupation as "Private Means". Unlike that description often applied to elderly men and women (often widowed) in housing, this description is assumed to mean that the lodgers were reluctant to give an exact occupation, but were clearly involved in some occupation. The occupation of one lodger stands out and he was 49 year old Frederick Martin who gave his occupation as "Professional Cricketer". He was a professional for Kent and the MCC who played his last match for the Kent first team in 1899. He is married and also appears on the 1911 census in Dartford living at home with his wife and three daughters.

The building still stands and is social and sheltered housing owned by the Peabody Trust. It has hardly changed from the picture in Fig. 4 but a restaurant now occupies most of the ground floor where the dispensary was located. The photographs below show what some plants can do to transform a solid, if somewhat plain, building.



Fig. 13: Bruce House, 2009



Fig. 14: Bruce House, old dispensary entrance, 2009

Footnotes

ⁱ LCC; “Opening of Bruce House”, 13th July 1906; LMA ref: LCC/CL/CER/03/005/072A