

# BANISHING LONDON'S SLUMS: THE INTER WAR COTTAGE ESTATES

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## SUMMARY

*Although the cottage estates were not a direct attack on slum conditions, this article makes a case for conceding them an important role in banishing London's slums. This was not their unique purpose, and varying policies and attitudes to the estates are first considered. These are then related to their built form and social character. In particular, there is an analysis of tenant composition in the mid 1930s from LCC records.*

During the whole of the inter-war period, the London County Council (LCC) divided its property into 'cottage estates' and 'block dwelling' estates. This distinction had its origins before 1914, and referred not only to the obvious difference in built form but also to the fact that the two types reflected different housing policies and programmes. Broadly speaking, the block dwelling estates were related to obligations placed on local authorities to provide dwellings in place of those demolished for slum clearance or street improvements. The cottage estates, by contrast, were intended to relieve the housing shortage and reduce rents and overcrowding. They brought municipal housing more directly into competition with ordinary private building. The distinction between the two types of estate widened, if anything, in the inter-war period because whereas the cottage estates mainly retained their original function, the block estates were increasingly used, as they had not been previously, directly to rehouse tenants displaced by slum clearance. It is a distinction peculiar to the LCC because in provincial cities displaced

slum tenants were mostly rehoused not through rebuilding on site or nearby, but through cottage estates on the periphery.

This article concentrates almost exclusively on the LCC cottage estates, because they are the best researched, and because they have this general unity of character which, I hope to show, can be related to the purpose of banishing London's slums. They were, not of course the only local authority cottage estates built in London at this time. In Greater London as a whole, council housing accounted for just under 20% of all dwellings built between the wars. This proportion was lower than in other regions of the country and relatively low in relation to London's housing needs (Bowley 1945). In turn, the LCC built about half of council housing, with the remainder roughly divided between Metropolitan Boroughs (one third) and outer authorities (two thirds). By the end of March 1938 the LCC had produced 76,784 dwellings, of which 57,375 were on cottage estates.<sup>1</sup>

## THE ORIGINS AND ROLE OF THE COTTAGE ESTATES

The cottage estates had been born around the turn of the century in great political controversy. Although the houses built then were not subsidised, they raised deep fears about how a working class electorate might use its political power. More immediately, the cottage estates had been directly associated with the division between the parties over the 'land question'. Prominent land reformers, many associated with

the Progressive Party which controlled the LCC until 1907, held that high rents and overcrowding in central London were the product of a form of 'land monopoly' which municipal building on the outskirts could help to break down. For the first time, the main political parties nationally as well as locally began to formulate distinctive programmes. The Unionist response, put forward in 1910 by Sir Arthur Griffith-Boscawen, who was also then chairman of the LCC Housing Committee, was to designate 'normal' housing as a private sector activity, while confining municipal activity to slum clearance and rebuilding, supported if necessary by limited state subsidies (Yelling 1992).

These divisions were essentially to remain intact in the 1920s, and they clearly relate to the question of how the cottage estates can be regarded as contributing to banishing London's slums. It depends evidently on how the slum problem is conceived. Arguments in favour of the cottage estates in this respect are that overcrowding and multi-occupation are equally part of the slum problem, particularly in London; that no sensible direct action can be taken in the centre unless the housing shortage is first removed; and that houses and estates needed to be designed to standards which would themselves be resistant to deterioration. It is noticeable that Addison, the former Minister of Health, writing in 1922 when 'homes for heroes' had been abandoned, called his book on the demise of his programme *The Betrayal of the Slums*. He did this despite the fact that his houses were undoubtedly lived in by the wealthier part of the working class. Between the wars the only practical alternative for municipal action was seen to be slum clearance and rebuilding. However, before 1914 few of the people displaced by such clearance had been rehoused by the Council, and reaction against the effects of clearance had formed part of the rationale for switching municipal activity to building the cottage estates. By the 1930s when larger subsidies and other factors made direct rehousing in block dwellings possible for most displaced tenants, it was less easy to reject slum clearance. Arguably, however, this development would never have occurred had the cottage estates not ratcheted up public housing to a new high level, requiring those who favoured an alternative policy to improve its results. Moreover, a strong case could still be made for the idea that dispersion to relieve pressure on the centre was still required if more

successful outcomes were to be achieved through direct methods. This was, after all, the message of Forshaw and Abercrombie's *County of London Plan* (1943).

The general pattern of national policy between the wars is now well-known, and need only be briefly recalled here. The 'homes for heroes' campaign was launched in November 1918, and brought into being by the Addison programme which followed the Housing and Town Planning Act 1919. A government housing programme, effected through the local authorities, was to produce half a million houses on new improved lines suggested by the Tudor Walters Committee. This had advocated larger and better-appointed houses and drew on pre-war garden suburb models to support lower-density settings at 12 houses to the acre. The new cottage estates were meant to symbolise a national spirit of reconciliation and reconstruction, and to ward off threats of working class political action (Swenarton 1981). Instead, inflationary pressures, and subsequent deflationary policies, brought the programme to an end in 1921. It was revived in more modest form, mainly by the Wheatley Act of 1924, passed by the short-lived Labour minority government, and the subsequent period of *modus vivendi* between the parties, in which building was allowed to continue under this Act, was the most important as far as the cottage estates were concerned. They were cut back from 1928, briefly revived by the Labour Government of 1929, and then cut back more severely by the financial crisis and the National Government. With housing completions lagging one to two years these events explain the peaks of council output in Greater London in 1922, 1927-8 and 1931. From 1933 general housing subsidies were removed, and although building continued for the completion of estates, there was little new impetus from national legislation, with the partial exception of the overcrowding provisions of the 1935 Housing Act.

This chronology means that when the Labour Party took over the LCC in 1934, the bulk of the cottage estate programme was already over. They tried to continue it, initially with some success, but less so as costs rose after 1937. As a result LCC cottage estates were mainly produced by a Municipal Reform (Conservative) Council which was in principle opposed to this kind of enterprise. In more detail, however, one can recognise three distinct stages in terms of their approach to cottage estates. The first coincides

with the Addison programme. The Council had been extremely reluctant to go along with the wishes of the Coalition Government. Initially, they were only prepared, in return for government subsidies, to embark on a small seven year programme of 'spending £3.5m in clearing ... insanitary areas and erecting dwellings in place.'<sup>22</sup> This produced a clash with the government, which through political pressure and manipulation of the subsidy system eventually persuaded the Council into a five year scheme consisting mainly of cottage estates and costed at £30m. Even so, LCC housing under the Addison programme was slow off the mark, and it was at this stage at the start of the 1920s that the cottage estates of London boroughs and outer authorities achieved their greatest relative importance.

The main stage of the LCC cottage estate programme came in the period when Col Levita was Chairman of the Housing Committee between 1922 and 1928. In theory, Levita held to all the tenets that caused his party to be hostile to such housing. He believed that 'ultimately the economic law of supply and demand must fix rents', that 'nothing should be done to hamper the production of houses for sale by the private builder'; that council dwellings were 'a potential corruption of municipal politics' and that 'the solution would lie in the compulsory vesting of completed municipal cottages in selected trustees' (Levita 1928). He would dearly have loved to have produced a more effective slum clearance and rebuilding programme. Faced by difficulties in this direction, however, and by the opportunities opened up by the Wheatley Act, and the Conservative government's acceptance of it, he was pragmatic enough to embrace the cottage estate as the main element of the Council's housing activities. Levita, moreover, concerned himself not just with general policy but with all the stages of the production of houses. This drew him close to the LCC officials who were responsible for the programme, and there is no doubt that he took pride in the outcome of their combined efforts. He was annoyed at what he considered partisan criticism of the estates, and reposted:

The LCC develops its estates well, whereas private enterprise in the past, and some municipalities, have given endless repetition of commonplace design. ... note the variety and charm of the layout, the preservation of natural features and country environment (Levita 1928, 20).

The subsequent Chairman of the Housing Committee, H. R. Selley, was a less patrician figure than Levita and more closely connected with property interests. He took the stance that 'municipalities should erect homes for those of low-earning capacity and many whose families had to be assisted by the poor law.'<sup>23</sup> While houses in the Wheatley programme were already smaller in size than the Addison houses, cost cutting now began to bite more severely. Various types of cheaper dwellings were introduced, on the cottage estates 'simplified types' with passages omitted, the bath in the scullery and toilets downstairs. In 1932 there was even some mention of reverting to outside toilets. It is true that these developments followed national trends, but the LCC seemed particularly keen on the reductions. Possibly this more definite movement away from the concept of 'homes for heroes' may have helped the Labour Party to gain control of the Council in 1934, although the main Labour emphasis was on a more vigorous slum clearance drive. This emphasis, however, was not to preclude the building of cottage estates, and in 1935 a new round of land purchases for cottage estates began and output briefly revived in 1937, but it could not be sustained. Nonetheless, a cottage estate tradition was maintained, and land bought at this time also contributed to early development after the Second World War. The various inter-war cottage estates are set out in Table 1 and Fig 1.

## LOCATION, SCALE AND BUILT FORM

One of the notable features of the LCC cottage estates is their very large scale, and the degree of concentration of the stock into a few estates. Economies of scale in building and management were required to keep costs down. However, such a pattern was also an easy way for a council to discharge its housing function, particularly a council operating at a distance. As this form of housing was never established in policy with any permanency, programmes were suddenly announced and valuers had rapidly to purchase land to meet them. Patricia Garside thought that political opposition to LCC estates from local sources caused the Council to concentrate on a limited number of sites, and this opposition was then reinforced by the knowledge that any LCC development was likely to be on a massive scale (Young & Garside 1981, 173-218).

Table 1. *LCC Cottage Estates 1918–1939*

Estate Name	Area (acres)	No. of dwellings <sup>1</sup>	Population 1938 <sup>2</sup>
<i>Pre 1914 Estates</i> <sup>3</sup>			
Norbury	11	218	867
Old Oak	32	736	3519
Totterdown Fields	39	1262	—
White Hart Lane	98	783	5936
<i>Estates 1919–1923</i>			
Becontree	2770	2589	115652
Bellingham	252	2673	12004
Castelnau	51	644	2851
Roehampton	147	1212	5383
<i>Estates 1924–1933</i>			
Downham	600	7096	30032
Mottingham	202	2337	9009
St. Helier	825	9068	39877
Watling	386	4034	19110
Wormholt	68	783	4078
<i>Estates 1934–1939</i>			
Chingford	217	1540	—
Hanwell	140	1587	6732
Headstone Lane	142	n.a.	—
Kenmore Park	58	654	2078
Thornhill	21	380	1598
Whitefoot Lane	49	n.a.	—

NOTES: 1. Estimated number on completion, including extensions before 1939; 2. Estimated numbers on inter-war development only; 3. Estate dates are those when land was purchased, and normally when building began. Mottingham was not begun until 1935.

In any event, the immediate consideration of making housing land available was paramount. There was little detailed consideration of how development should be related to other property. The best that could be done was to pay some attention to public transport possibilities and to general location in the various sectors of London, so as not to exhaust the market. Much of the land on which the cottage estates were built was purchased in a few short bursts, notably in 1919–1920 and in 1924–5. In the former period the LCC bought land at Bellingham (Lewisham), Roehampton (Wandsworth) and above all 2,770 acres at Becontree in Essex (Fig 2). Even by 1938, when other estates had been completed, Becontree's population of over 115,000 made up 44% of those housed on the cottage estates. In 1924–5 land was purchased for three other large estates — St Helier (Morden), Downham (Lewisham) and Watling (Hendon), which when completed provided jointly for some 89,000

people or another 34% of the cottage estate population.

In their housing composition and built form, individual estates naturally reflect the conditions of their particular period of development, and in the case of the largest estates, different phases of development. The earliest developments contain the larger houses, while later there are more smaller houses and cottage flats. At St Helier 31% of the houses were of the simplified type mentioned earlier. This naturally has some effect on built form, often producing longer terraced blocks, but nonetheless it is I think right to stress the overall similarity of design and layout on these estates. The provision of much open space, often in small patches, is a feature of their planned design, but also in some cases owes a little to economics. In practice, many houses were built at Downham, St Helier and elsewhere at 15 to the acre, and the overall average brought down to 12 by leaving patches of open space. This economised on site infrastructure costs. General reaction to the style of the estates still tends to depend a good deal on the resonances of 'private' and 'council' housing. Oliver and others in their book *Dunroamin* (1981) have gone out of their way to contrast the style of these estates with those of contemporary private development, arguing in effect that the one is imposed by experts, and the other the natural choice of the people. This, however, seems to me to ignore the way in which such opinions are shaped by culture and politics, not least in the 1980s when this book was written.

## THE TENANTS

Information on the population of these estates is not as complete as one would like. However, some data on a sample of cottage estate tenants was collected by Llewellyn-Smith as part of the *New Survey of London* (1929–31) and results from this were also used in Terence Young's study of *Becontree* (1934). Some of these figures may be compared with those available in LCC records of the period 1935–8 which provide data on about 4–5,000 'ordinary tenants', the great bulk of which were moved to vacant lettings on cottage estates.<sup>4</sup>

The *New Survey* found that at the end of the 1920s the 'chief earner' on a cottage estate had a median wage of £3 15s. At Becontree, 9% earned over £5, and thus would be placed in the

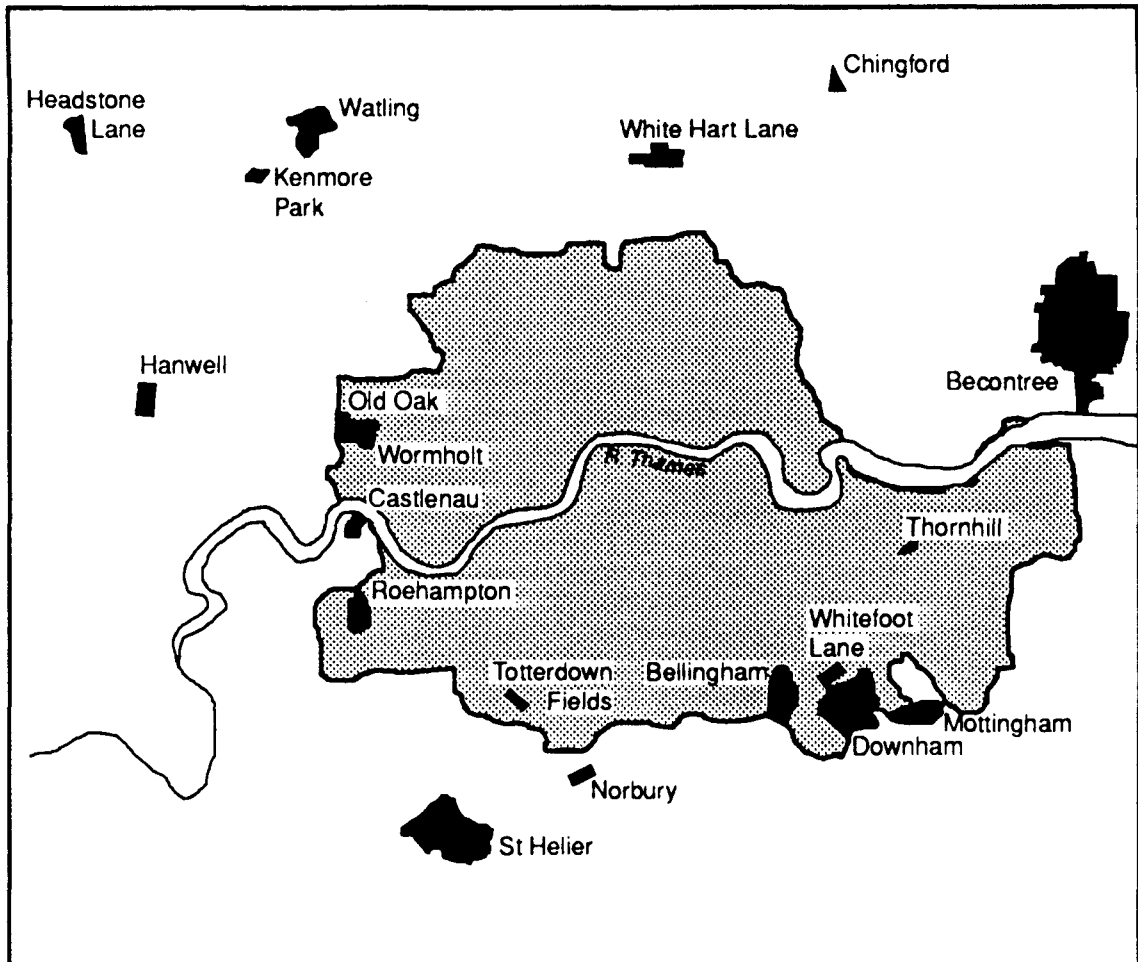


Fig 1. LCC Cottage Estates 1918-1939 (based on figures in Young & Garside, 1982)

'middle class' category of the Survey; 31% earned over £4 and under £5, and 50% between £3 and £4. Together at 81% these groups fell into the 'skilled' category of the Survey, in which 43% of the County population was placed. The other categories were 'unskilled' (£3-4) in which 9% at Becontree and 28% in the County were placed, and 'poor', below £2, with respectively 1% and 10%. This was therefore a skilled population, but with half falling into the lower part of that category. Young describes them as 'manual workers possessing some element of skill in a trade and ... a small but substantial minority with skilled jobs' (Young 1934, 120). At this time the median wage of the chief earner on block estates was just over £3. The cottage estate population had fewer earners per family,

consisting mainly of younger families with children.

However, the *New Survey* also revealed two other features. First, there was the surprise that prior to moving the cottage estate families had lived at a higher number of persons per room (1.92) than those moving to block estates. Young reports that 58% of Becontree families in the sample had been overcrowded according to the standard of Charles Booth in the 1890s (two or more persons per room). Sixty per cent of families had lived, prior to moving, in one or two rooms. Their overcrowding was related to the number of children, but also to the fact that in this period of housing shortage poorer (and particularly older families) were protected by rent control. Even comparatively high earners among



Fig 2. Becontree: Junction of Porters Avenue and Markgate Road, June 1933 (Greater London Record Office photo collection)

new families therefore had to seek their accommodation elsewhere. The other feature was that the inhabitants of cottage estates were drawn from much the same parts of London as the block estate dwellers. Inner London was far more heavily represented than might have been expected. Reviewing these matters, Llewellyn-Smith concluded:

The cottage estates appear to be vindicated as an essential element in the solution of the housing problem. They have provided an outlet for numerous families who, while ready and able to afford better homes at a distance, had hitherto been condemned by the shortage to live under conditions of serious congestion (Llewellyn-Smith 1931-5, 215).

Analysis of the 'ordinary tenant' data from the 1930s reveals one important change in the pattern. The mean wage of the chief earner in 1938 was £3 5s. While this cannot be directly compared with the median wage of £3 15s reported by Smith, there can be little doubt that over the period the new clientele on the estates

had been pushed down the income scale. This was an expected development, as the housing shortage eased, but also a product of the policy of concentrating on cheaper houses, and one of the advantages of lower rents. The cost of making the jump to suburban housing had been relatively reduced. At about 20% of the chief wage earner's income, rents in the new dwellings were now a smaller advance on the rents in the old. This reflected also a reduction in overcrowding in the old dwellings so that fewer extra rooms had to be purchased. Even so, tenants in 1935 had previously lived at 1.47 persons per room and 1.34 in 1938, and, even in the new dwellings, lived at 1.13. Between 35 and 39% were drawn from the East End<sup>5</sup> and the LCC attempted to persuade tenants in block estates to move out in order to free accommodation in the centre for slum clearance tenants. Another factor was the lowering of costs of private housing in the 1930s, when the owner-occupied market undertook part

of the clientele from cottage estates. Also an unknown portion of new tenants came from the special provisions for relief of overcrowding, and there was always a small number from clearance schemes. Ruth Durant (Glass) in her study of *Watling* (1939) found that the comparative air of prosperity was due to the 44% of families that were still relatively small. As these families grew in size they became less prosperous, and she concluded that 'the standard of living of at least half of the Watling population, though not extremely poor, is rather precarious' (Durant 1939, 7).

Both Durant and Young draw attention to unemployment on the estates, which in view of the prevailing economic conditions of the time, could hardly be avoided. Young also discusses the way in which families, in order to afford the new accommodation and associated extra expenses, were forced to cut back on their food. Although families moved voluntarily to these estates, they did so within constraints of housing shortage and social expectations. Reactions to the new conditions were mixed, and sometimes a cause of dissent within families. So much is clear from the memoirs which Age Exchange produced in their publication *Just Like the Country* (1991). Not everyone liked the low densities, or the comparative lack of services. There was an element of choice involved when some returned to the city, but nonetheless these returnees were drawn predominantly from the lower paid. Yet, the alternative method of housing improvement through slum clearance involved a more definite compulsion, affected old people as well as young, and involved equal problems with rents among a poorer population.

Initially, these estates were conceived as dormitory areas, and a high proportion of tenants worked in central London. They varied considerably in respect of the provision of adequate transport. Tube extensions to Hendon and Morden were directly related to the location of the Watling and St Helier estates. Parts of Becontree, however, were according to Young relatively poorly served by public transport in the 1920s, although the situation was later eased by the extension of the District Line. Nonetheless, even from the beginning there was some local employment in building itself and transport. Later several estates, including Watling, found themselves in districts where there was a considerable growth of suburban factories. The availability of local industry had an important

effect on who could afford to live on the estates, because larger and poorer families generally depended on more than one income.

Cottage estates commonly lay on the edge of existing centres, and many of the largest were divided between different local authorities. This was notoriously the case at Becontree, which lay in Ilford and Barking, and eventually Dagenham UDC, created in 1926. It began from several different points, and only became joined together as building developed. Considered as units on their own, these estates may be regarded as over-uniform, both in physical appearance and in class structure, and as lacking in amenities. Becontree is as large as a post-war new town, and in that sense it lacks both the physical grouping around a centre and the rather wider social composition of these later creations. Viewed as part of wider communities, however, the cottage estates add to the physical and social diversity of the districts in which they are situated, and their reliance on neighbouring centres for higher order services is no different from that of other estates. That we do tend to think of them as something self-contained is partly due to the way in which, during the Second World War, all suburban areas were compared unfavourably with the ideal of new towns. But it is also because municipal housing has never become accepted as a normal feature. Both nationally and locally the cottage estates were subject to a good deal of resentment. In another way, however, that was an indication of their success.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Statistics here and later in the article are drawn from LCC *London Housing Statistics*.

<sup>2</sup> LCC Housing Committee Presented Papers 10 July (8) 1918

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in *Estates Gazette* 109, 1927, 331

<sup>4</sup> LCC Housing Committee Presented Papers Quaterly Lettings Returns 1935-1938

<sup>5</sup> The former metropolitan boroughs of Bethnal Green, Bermondsey, Finsbury, Poplar, Shoreditch, Stepney and Southwark

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