

THE BRADY STREET SCHEME: HOMES FOR THE POOREST LONDONERS IN THE EARLY 20th CENTURY

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Many who before regarded legislation on the subject as chimerical, will now fancy that it is only dangerous, or perhaps not more than difficult. And so in time it will come to be looked on as among the things possible, then among the things probable ... and so at last it will be ranged in the list of those few measures which the country requires as being absolutely needed. Such is the way in which public opinion is made.

Anthony Trollope, *Phineas Finn*, ch LXXV

SUMMARY

The provision of housing for those with very low incomes was the most widely discussed social problem of the later 19th and early 20th centuries. To complement existing studies of legislative and philanthropic action in this field evidence is here presented of conditions experienced by the inhabitants of one street in Bethnal Green whose extreme poverty placed them beyond the intended scope of such action. This street was included in the Brady Street Scheme of housing redevelopment which will be traced from its inception in 1904 through the many difficulties its proponents sought to overcome to bring about its implementation in 1922.

THE BRADY STREET AREA BEFORE 1904

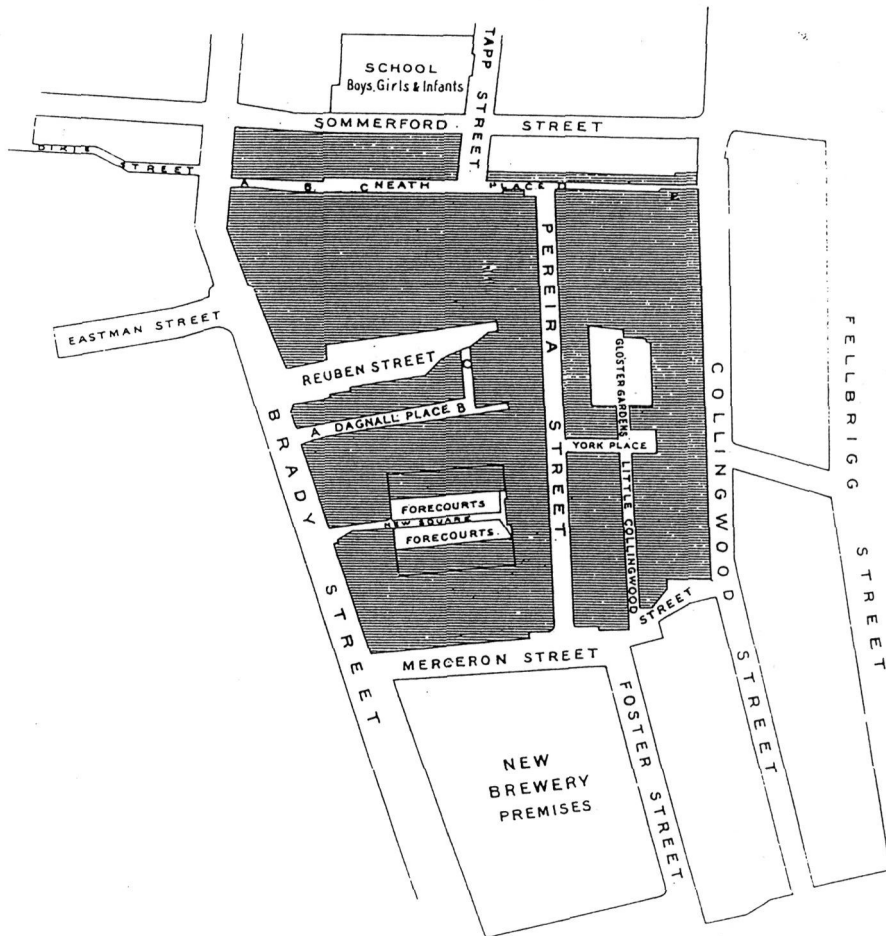
In 1904 the Medical Officer of Health for the Metropolitan Borough of Bethnal Green submitted to the London County Council an official representation under Part I of the Housing of the Working Classes Act 1890.¹ It concerned an insanitary district in the south-west of the Borough referred to as the Brady Street area (Fig 1) and requested, '... an improvement scheme for the re-arrangement and

re-construction of the streets and houses in the area'. It was not, however, until November 1921 that Bethnal Green Council received a letter from the LCC stating that the Minister of Health had decided, subject to certain modifications, '... to confirm the London (Brady Street) Improvement Scheme, 1920'² which enabled the construction of sound and sanitary dwellings to begin in October 1922.

In the period of almost 18 years between the inception and implementation of the scheme, families in the narrow alleys and cramped courts around Brady Street continued to experience in their daily lives not only the basic problems of poverty but conditions exacerbated by the implementation of the very legislation intended to ameliorate their lot. The area for which the scheme was proposed lay just within the southern boundary of the Borough, north-west of the junction between Whitechapel Road and Cambridge Heath Road. The Minutes of the Parish Vestry and the Metropolitan Borough which succeeded it show that any changes that took place in this area in the last decade of the 19th century were for the worse. An impression of it can be gained from the categorisation of households on Charles Booth's Descriptive Map of London Poverty, 1889, North-Eastern Sheet K4+5.

The condition of those living on Brady Street and Collingwood Street was judged to be, 'Mixed. Some comfortable others poor'. Inhabitants of the remaining streets, courts, and alleys are described as, 'Poor. 18s and 21s a week for a moderate family', or 'Very poor, casual.

— Plan of —
BRADY STREET,
 Housing Scheme.



Distance between house walls fronting the undermentioned streets
NEATH PLACE. A 7'11" B 11'6" C 16'0" D 8'10½" E 3'7"
DAGHALL PLACE. A 13'6" B 15'5" C 9'10"
LITTLE COLLINGWOOD STREET. 9'10" average
YORK PLACE 13'8"

Fig 1. Plan submitted to the LCC by the Medical Officer of Health for Bethnal Green with the 1904 representation requesting an improvement scheme. (Tower Hamlets Local History Library and Archives)

Chronic want'. Those dwelling in Neath Place, which runs between Brady Street and Collingwood Street north of Pereira Street, were assessed as, 'Lowest class. Vicious, semi-criminal'. The proposed scheme thus aimed to include within its scope the poorest people, the very ones for whom the philanthropic housing ventures were not able, or chose not, to provide. In the opinion of City Alderman Sydney Waterlow, who formed the Improved Industrial Dwellings Company in 1863, for example, such people were, 'Least likely to appreciate the comforts of a decent home ...'. The LCC in its early years also decided to concentrate on provision for, '... classes of the population a little above the very lowest'.³ Since, according to Booth, members of the lowest class were housed there, it is the living conditions in Neath Place that will be given particular attention.

NEATH PLACE

Neath Place was built between 1807 and 1813 on land belonging to John Bacon of St Marylebone. At that time it consisted of two south-facing terraces of two-storey dwellings, Cumberland Place to the east of Tapp Street and Trafalgar Place to the west, named no doubt in honour of Nelson's then recent victory. The Cumberland Place properties are first mentioned on a lease dated 7 September 1813.⁴ In addition to properties in Somerford Street and Tapp Street a terrace consisting of Nos 11–16 Cumberland Street was leased by John Bacon of the Parish of St Marylebone to Edward Bumford of Bethnal Green Road and John Bumford of Jewin Street in the City of London.⁵ The eastward spread of London into what had been for Pepys a pleasant, fashionable, and secure rural retreat, well separated from the City, was fast continuing at this time. The continuation of a rural self-sufficiency is hinted at by the appearance of a 'Pig sty' at the rear of No. 2 Tapp Street on a plan on the lease. Some idea of the noxious and offensive trades thought likely to be carried on in the area is given in the following list of those prohibited to tenants by the terms of the lease:

Slaughterman, Tobacco pipe burner, Dyer, Melter of Tallow, Soapmaker, Corkburner, Sugar baker, Fellmonger, Farrier, Scavenger, Nighthman.

It is in fact very hard to imagine how a trade of any sort could have been carried on in one of

the properties. The dimensions of the plot with its division into dwellings appear on the lease with the interior arrangement of one dwelling shown in detail (Fig 2). It was a little over 10ft wide and 11ft deep (3m × 3.3m), these being the external dimensions, and a staircase led to a single room of identical size. The interior floor space on each level was thus about 90 sq. ft (c.9.9m²) of which the staircase and fireplace occupied a considerable amount. A single-storey wash-house jutted into the rear yard, its chimney occupying space in the adjacent privy, but the total length of both these structures was only 6ft 8in (c.2m).

None of these properties is shown on the 1807 Horwood map but by the time of the 1813 survey the Trafalgar Place terrace had also been built. It too was part of the Bacon Estate, leased in 1832 to John Schachman, a shopkeeper of 33 Somerford Street, part of which backed on to Trafalgar Place. The plan included on the lease (Fig 3) shows that the whole terrace of Nos 1–12 Trafalgar Place and No. 1 Tapp Street occupied an area 128 by 20ft (c.39.0m × 6.1m) which gives an external width of just under 10ft (3m) for each dwelling. No measurement is given on the plan of the depth of the properties but it appears to be about half of the 20ft depth of the site and no outhouses are shown jutting into the rear yards.

On this lease an open ditch is shown running parallel with the whole length of the terrace and about 7ft (c.2m) from it, emptying at the junction with Tapp Street into quite a large pond, the north bank of which can be seen on the Horwood map to run along the front of Cumberland Place. Another quite large fish pond adjacent to the Jews Burial Ground was only a few minutes walk to the west and there were stretches of open field equally close, but there were patches of development all around. Laurie and Whittle's map of 1819 shows that these open spaces still existed between the fully built-up metropolitan area and other pockets of development in Bethnal Green. Cruchley's New Plans of London of 1829 and 1839 show that no properties had been erected opposite the existing terraces and that the pond, though smaller, still existed. By the time the Poor Law Commissioners presented their report in 1842 their map illustrating mortality rates in 1838 shows that two streets of what must have been extremely small dwellings had been built over much of the pond's area. The OS map of 1849 shows that further building

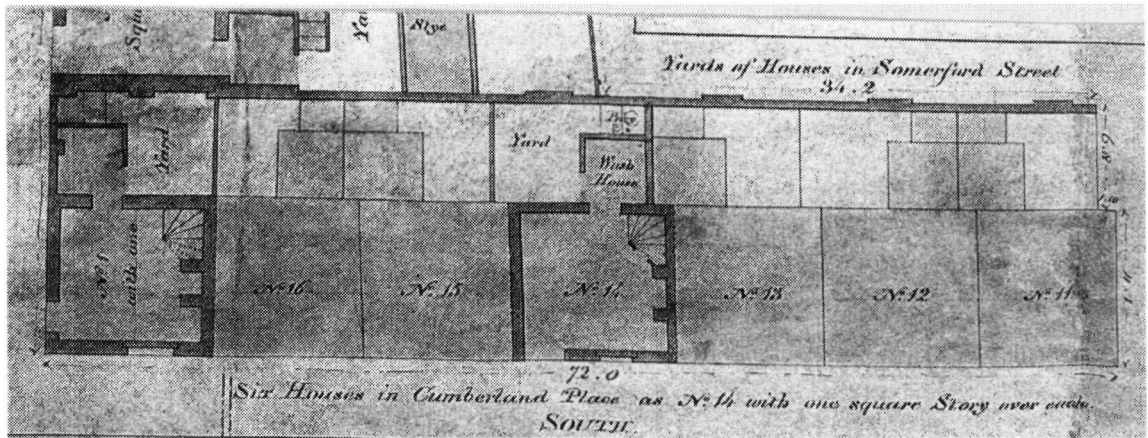


Fig 2. Plan of Cumberland Place from a lease of the Bacon Estate 1813. (London Metropolitan Archives)

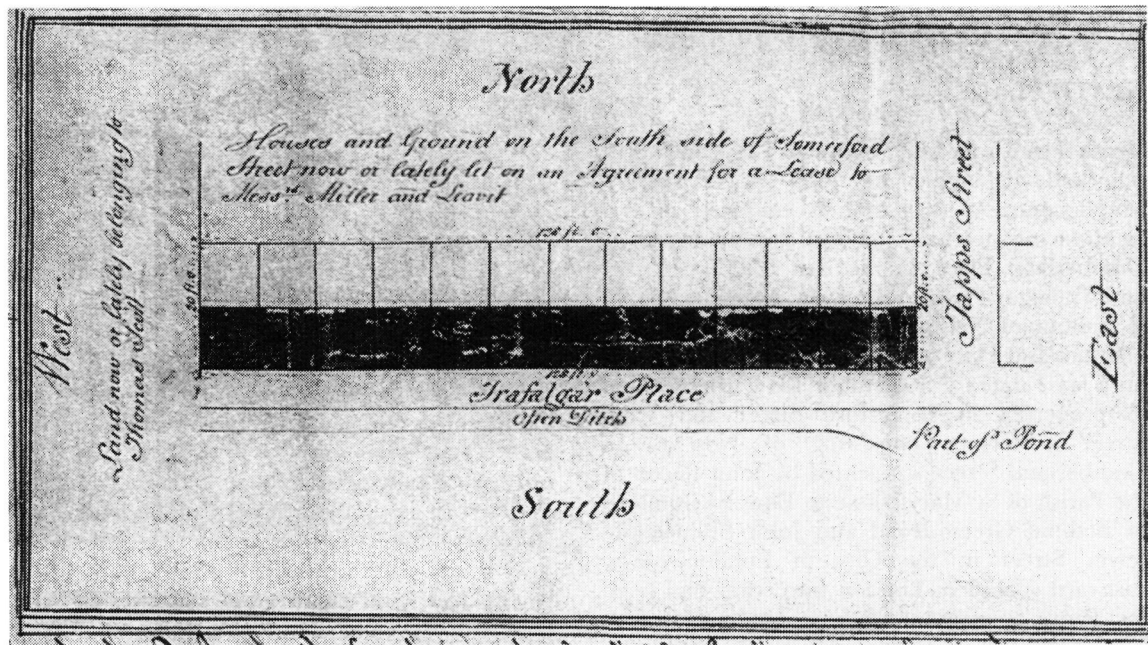


Fig 3. Plan of Trafalgar Place from a lease of the Bacon Estate 1832. (London Metropolitan Archives)

opposite Trafalgar Place and Cumberland Place had produced the narrow, cramped alley that became Neath Place.

THE NEED FOR THE SCHEME

In his official representation to the LCC in 1904 Dr George Paddock Bate, Medical Officer of Health for the Metropolitan Borough of Bethnal Green, listed the following three factors which

he considered brought the Brady Street Area within the scope for action offered by Part I of the Housing of the Working Classes Act, 1890.

1. Many of the houses within the said area are unfit for human habitation.
2. The narrowness and bad arrangement of some of the streets and houses within such area, and the want of light, air and ventilation are dangerous and injurious to the health of the inhabitants of the buildings in the same area and of the neighbouring buildings.
3. That the evils connected with such houses and the sanitary defects in such area cannot be effectually

remedied otherwise than by an improvement scheme for the re-arrangement and reconstruction of the streets and houses within the area.⁶

Defective and overcrowded dwellings

Dr Bate supported his condemnation of the dwellings thus:

The houses were originally constructed in the cheapest manner, and of inferior materials; many are mere two-roomed huts with a small yard in rear, and without exception the buildings are worn out and insanitary.⁷

The ground plan of the 'two-roomed huts' in Cumberland Place is shown on the Bacon Estate lease of 1813 (Fig 2). These properties had been demolished and not rebuilt in 1904 (Fig 4) but photos of the similar Trafalgar Place terrace taken in 1915 (Figs 5-6) have been used to produce elevations with internal arrangements conjectured from the 1813 plan (Fig 7). Assumed brick course heights were used to calculate vertical dimensions and the roof slope. The position of the chimney indicated that of the fireplace where there may have been some kind of cooking range. The small chimney half way along the roof of the rear outhouse suggests that there may have been a coal- or wood-fired copper. This would have allowed sufficient water to be heated for laundry and bathing, though the hanging bath tubs belong to the much larger



Fig 5. Neath Place north side looking west from Tapp Street junction (Fig 4, A). Date unknown. (Tower Hamlets Local History Library and Archives)

properties in Somerford Street. Taking in laundry was certainly an occupation frequently noted on Census returns for the area. The further section of each outhouse contained the WC, probably connected, eventually, to mains drainage since the MOH's evidence refers to the remodelling of drainage in nearby streets at the turn of the century.⁸ These outhouses with their minimal sanitary facilities were not shown on the lease of 1832 and it is not clear whether they were added later or were original features not shown on the rather schematic plan which was obviously

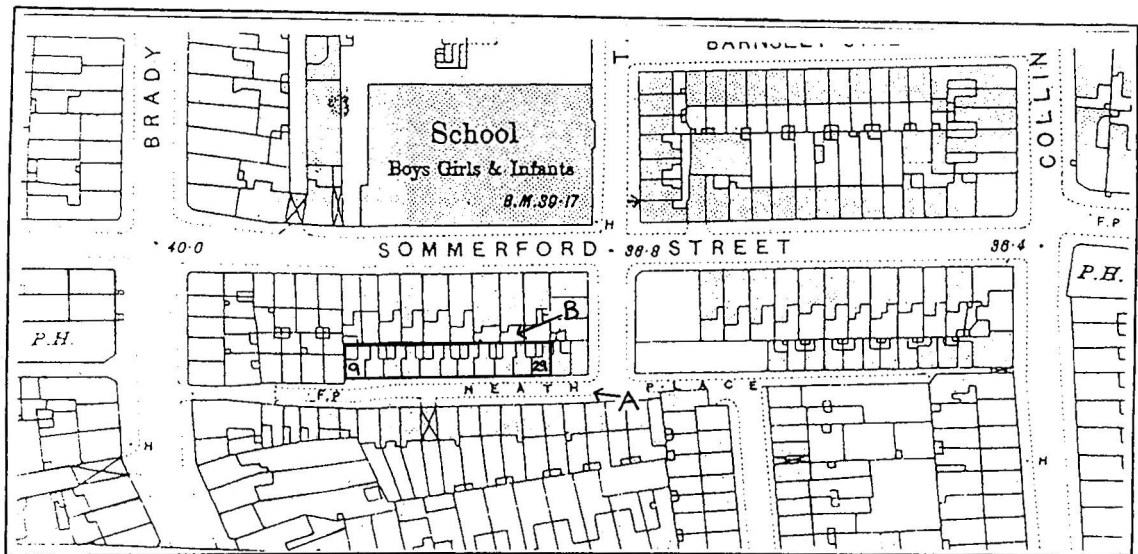


Fig 4. Neath Place. North side terrace Nos 9-29, showing viewpoints of photographs in Fig 5(A) and Fig 6(B). (Based on OS map 1904)



Fig 6. Rear of houses in Neath Place (left) and Somerford Street (right), 1915 (Fig 4, B). (Tower Hamlets Local History Library and Archives)

concerned chiefly with the total area of land involved.

The concept of a dwelling that was ‘unfit for human habitation’ was a fundamental one in

terms of improvements in housing. It was the Nuisances Removal Act of 1855 which contained the phrase and thus set an, albeit very low, minimum standard of housing. In the same year the Metropolitan Board of Works was set up as the central administrative body for London under the Metropolis Local Management Act and the appointment of Medical Officers of Health in London was made compulsory. Most legislative provision relating to public health and housing in this period was permissive rather than mandatory which rendered many of its applications useless, but the work of the MOHs was to prove vital in increasing knowledge and understanding of both problems and potential amelioration among those with power, influence, and, increasingly, administrative authority.

It was the MOH who was required to notify the local authority – the Parish Vestry until 1899 then the Borough Councils – of any dwelling which was deemed unfit. The property was then closed for habitation and not reopened until repairs were carried out. Part of Neath Place was



Fig 7. Schematic reconstruction of two-roomed terrace dwelling in Neath Place c.1915. This is one of the original Trafalgar Place dwellings which became Nos 9–29 Neath Place

dealt with in this way in 1888, the houses being reopened after partial rebuilding. The variation in exterior treatment of the front wall of houses in Fig 5 may be evidence of such repair or rebuilding under one of the relevant Acts. Certainly they had been invoked in respect of the majority of properties in the Brady Street area and the MOH's references to the results of the interventions shows that the actual effect of the legislation was often to exacerbate the problems.

He had personal experience of over a thousand notices under the various Sanitary Acts being served on owners with respect to houses in the area. Some dwellings remained closed for years and were eventually demolished but not rebuilt. Comparison of the OS maps of 1875 and 1904 (Fig 8) shows that some demolition had occurred in Neath Place since Nos 33 to 41 near the junction with Tapp Street do not appear on the 1904 map. In the Census Enumerator's Book for 1891 only No. 35 is shown as occupied, No. 33 is unoccupied and Nos 37 and 39 are unoccupied and condemned. No. 41 is not listed. These six dwellings were demolished under legislation intended to improve housing conditions but the actual result was an approximately 12% reduction in the number of dwellings in Neath Place.

This must have placed considerable pressure on occupancy rates since displaced people often had no option but to move into neighbouring areas, often to share accommodation with members of their extended families. This usually led to a chain of downwards displacement in which the poorest inevitably fared the worst. For those just able to keep their heads above water the arrival of homeless relatives must have been a major blow. Those with a roof, however crumbling, over their heads are likely to have faced rent increases when demolition decreased the availability of accommodation. The necessity to live close to sources of even short-lived or casual working opportunities prevented such tenants from moving far: having to leave an area in which they were known and could perhaps obtain short-term credit and practical help might be catastrophic.

Comparison of the 1875 and 1904 OS maps (Fig 8) shows two developments which were potentially of tremendous value to the local people but which also had the effect of decreasing the availability and raising the cost of housing. In 1880 Somerford Street school was built and in 1891 the newly-widened stretch of the Great

Eastern Railway came into use. Both of these involved the demolition of swathes of housing, the former alone causing the loss of 35 dwellings.

Even when repairs were carried out to unfit dwellings the results were not remotely satisfactory. In the letter supporting his 1904 representation⁹ Dr Bate pointed out that in general '... any repairs carried out are mere surface work', and in any case '... structures were too old and decayed to be worth repairing'. In 1893 most houses in Little Collingwood Street were closed under the provisions of the Housing of the Working Classes Act 1890 but were subject to what according to Dr Bate were '... so called repair ...'. Four years later the same Act was invoked to close many houses in Collingwood Street and Dr Bate made brief reference to the events that followed:

A piteous appeal was made to the Sanitary Committee on behalf of the tenants, and the owner was permitted to close a few houses at a time, patch them up, and shift the tenants backwards and forwards until the whole of the houses were dealt with. The so-called repairs were of the roughest description but were allowed to pass muster, with the result that the houses are at the present time very little better than they were before they were closed ...

Only a sentimentalised conception of the resilience of the urban poor could fail to conceive the physical and psychological damage that must have been caused by such inhumane treatment of vulnerable people. For this to be a rare occurrence in otherwise comfortable lives would be bad enough. In Neath Place and its environs it was an ever-present threat and frequent dire reality.

The precarious existence eked out by the very poor often involved frequent changes in tenancy, but the Census Enumerator's Book of 1891 suggests something about the households that contained those judged to be 'vicious and semi-criminal' in Booth's survey of four or five years earlier, in particular that they were overcrowded. It is important not to read too much into the entries which will have resulted from what could have been an uneasy confrontation between householder and enumerator, but data on age and sex are likely to be accurate.

It was at this time that the work of the MOHs was revealing the close correlation between crowded dwellings and high mortality rates and concern was being expressed about the moral implications of overcrowding which was given a specific definition in 1891.¹⁰ A dwelling was deemed overcrowded if there were more than

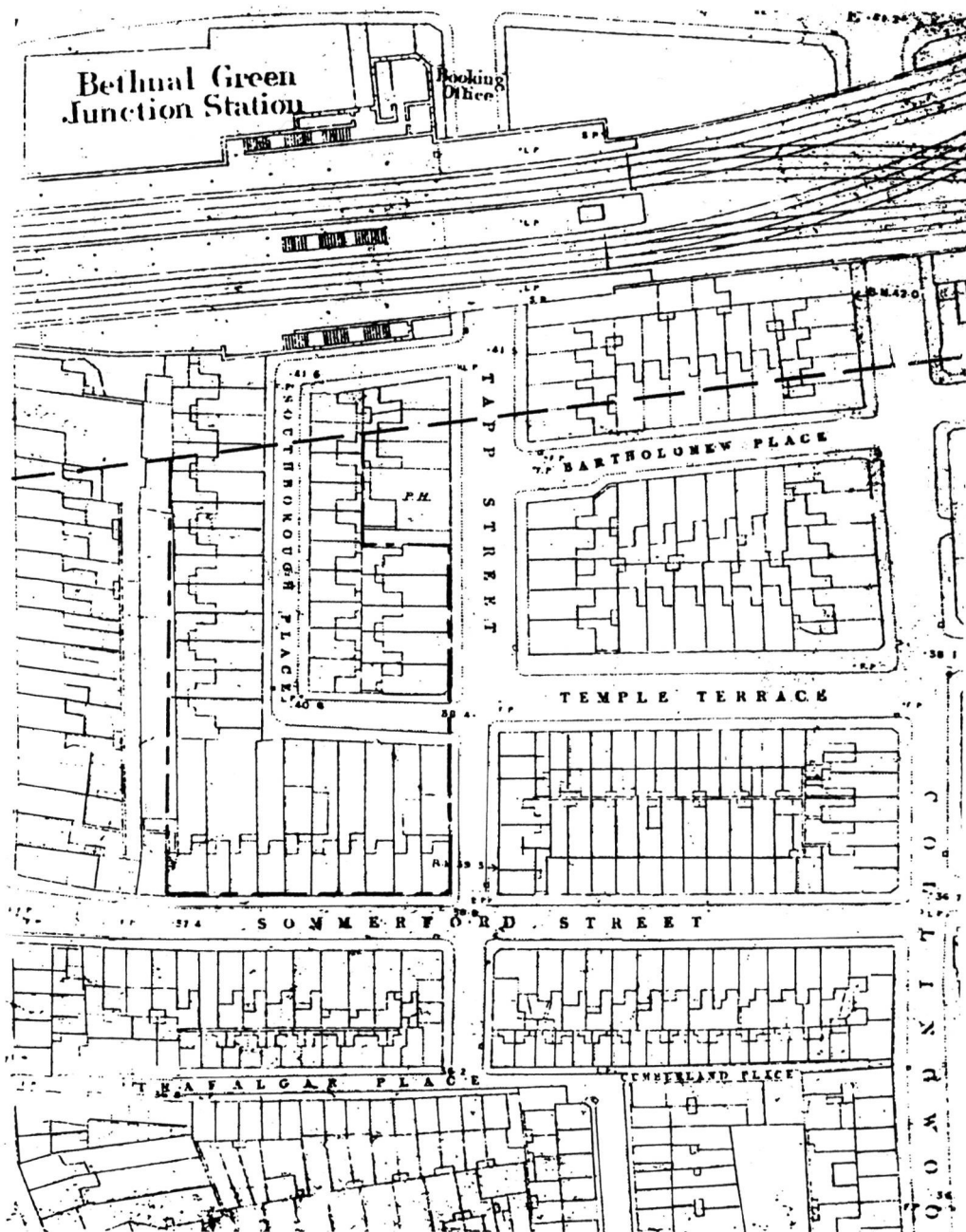


Fig 8. Houses demolished between 1875 and 1904 in the Brady Street area. Outlines superimposed on 1872 map show:
 - - - - - widened railway track
 - - - - - Sommerford Street School.

Note changes of street names: Neath Place shown as Trafalgar Place and Cumberland Place. (Based on OS maps 1872 and 1904)

two persons per room but only adults and children over ten counted as persons; children under ten counted as 0.5 person and babies under one year were not counted. Table 1 shows

that, although each two-roomed 'hut' in Neath Place housed between two and eight persons, only two were classified as overcrowded: No. 25 in which a couple lived with sons aged fourteen,

Table 1. Overcrowding in Neath Place 1891: Occupancy rates in two-roomed dwellings Nos 9–29 Neath Place prior to demolition of many dwellings in the area

Number	Number of persons					Adults and children over 10		Children under 10			Babies
	Actual		Notional			M	F	Actual		TOT	
	M	F	TOT	TOT	Per room			M	F		
9	Unoccupied										
11	2	3	5	4	2	1	2	1	1	1	–
13	Unoccupied										
15	1	2	3	2.5	1.5	1	1	–	1	0.5	–
17	2	1	3	3	1.5	2	1	–	–	–	–
19	3	–	3	3	1.5	3	–	–	–	–	–
21	2	4	6	3.5	2	1	1	1	2	1.5	1F
23	1	2	3	3	1.5	1	2	–	–	–	–
25	4	4	8	6.5	3.5	2	3	2	1	1.5	–
27	1	2	3	2.5	1.5	1	1	–	1	0.5	–
29	4	4	8	5	2.5	2	1	2	2	2	1F

Figures rounded up to nearest 0.5.

Source: Census Enumerator's Book, South-West Bethnal Green 1891.

eight, and four and daughters aged twelve, ten, and one, and No. 29 in which a man lived with his wife, brother, sons aged seven and six and daughters aged four, two, and two months. It is almost beyond belief that such families could have existed in two rooms, each of which had a floor area only about 130 times the area of a double page spread in this volume.

Unhealthy surroundings

Defects in the fabric of houses in Neath Place could be remedied, however ineffectually, but once they had been built nothing could be done about the lack of light and air which were, as Dr Bate stated in his representation, 'dangerous and injurious to the health of the inhabitants ...'¹¹ In support of his view he tabulated the average death rates in streets in the Brady Street area in the years 1900–1902, listing zymotic, tubercular, respiratory, and general diseases. The average death rate per 1,000 of the population in Bethnal Green as a whole in this period was 21.5 whereas in Neath Place the figure was among the worst in the Borough at 39.8. As in the other streets included in the scheme there was a high proportion of deaths from 'tubercular diseases', the area as a whole having a tubercular death rate almost double that of the rest of the Borough.

The urgent need for more light and air to penetrate is clearly demonstrated in the plan submitted to the LCC in 1904 in support of the representation (Fig 1). The importance of access to open stretches of clean, clear air and the proper ventilation of areas of housing were well appreciated by this time, the belief that most infectious diseases were airborne being still current. In London an extension of the Metropolitan Building Act of 1894 had laid down minimum widths for streets, alleys, and mews and the Form of By-Laws which accompanied the Local Government Act had as early as 1858 made recommendations about the spatial aspects of housing. The Local Government Board, the responsible body in these matters, had, however, no powers to compel local authorities to adhere to these standards and if they had done so the result would almost certainly have been increases in rents to compensate for the increased building costs. There was consequently firm opposition to such recommendations as the Model By-Laws of 1877 which proposed that streets over 100ft (30.5m) in length should be at least 36ft (11m) wide and open at one end to full width and height. Neath Place fell well below this standard. Its maximum width was 16ft (4.9m), its open western end was 7ft 11in (2.4m) wide and its eastern end was a passageway just 3ft 7in (1.1m) wide beneath the first floor of a Collingwood Street building.

The ground plan of a Neath Place dwelling (Fig 7) shows the tiny yard at the rear which has an area of about 40 sq. ft (3.7m²), allowing just a few paces in each direction. This may be compared with a further recommendation in the Metropolitan Building Act of 1844 that every new dwelling house should have an open area at the rear of not less than 100 sq. ft (9.3m²). Under the Model By-Laws of 1877 this was increased to 150 sq. ft (14m²), yet up to the time when the buildings were demolished in the early 1920s Neath Place families had only 40 sq. ft (3.7m²) for their exclusive use. Legislation on housing had continued in the later 19th century to require more spacious and well-serviced developments. The Sanitary Law Amendment Act of 1874, for example, laid down requirements concerning ventilation of streets and in the following year improvements in housing standards, including sanitation, were required under the Public Health Act but these Acts were permissive, not mandatory and applied, like all earlier ones, only to new building works. The benefits of the new legislation could, therefore, only be felt by those already possessed of the means to move to the newly expanding suburbs. Thus the residents of Neath Place occupied houses which continued to fall ever further below what were increasingly regarded as proper standards of housing.

Total redevelopment

The Brady Street Scheme was formulated under the terms of the Housing of the Working Classes Act which came into force in 1890, a year after the institution of the LCC. The Act incorporated the Artizans' and Labourers' Dwellings Improvement Act, 1875 and its amendments of 1879 and 1882 but was still permissive rather than mandatory. Part I allowed the local authorities, initially the Parish Vestries and District Boards of Works, later the Borough Councils, to draw up schemes for the improvement of whole areas but actual building was to be done by private enterprise. In exceptional circumstances the authority was permitted to build but dwellings had to be sold within ten years and no subsidies were available. Part II of the Act permitted but did not compel an authority to take action in cases of individual unfit houses. An amendment to the Act later allowed the authority to close an unfit property

without also serving a notice to render the premises fit for habitation if it was felt that the property concerned was not capable of being made habitable. That such an amendment was enacted says much about the perceived state of the nation's housing stock.

The Metropolitan Borough of Bethnal Green was set up in 1900. The Council instituted no proceedings under Part II of the Act between April 1903 and March 1904. Being closer to the realities of the situation than the legislators they saw that piecemeal repair and removal were a totally inadequate response to the housing problems in the Borough, of which those in the Brady Street area were acknowledged to be the worst. They and the Parish Vestry before them had seen their implementation of probably well-meaning legislation make bad conditions even worse. As Medical Officer of Health Dr Bate had had close and extensive experience of the failure of small scale remediation and concluded his representation thus: 'In my opinion nothing short of clearing the area and rebuilding the houses would be effectual'.¹² It is clear that at least a majority of Councillors was prepared to take his advice, feeling that the time had come to make away with the squalid properties and replace them with well-planned buildings in a healthy environment.

This question of a Part I scheme as against Part II proceedings – redevelopment of the whole area as opposed to continued piecemeal responses – continued to be the main focus of negotiations between the Bethnal Green Council and all the other bodies from whose doors the problems were much more distant. The LCC was the executive authority under the Act and took more than a year to respond to the Council's representation. The Brady Street Scheme was, of course, just one of a myriad serious problems with which the LCC was attempting to grapple and its reply stated that the action proposed was not a justifiable use of public funds since private enterprise redevelopment of the area was soon likely to take place. Among enthusiasts for the scheme disappointment at this refusal must have turned to anger and despair at the LCC's advice that they should continue to attack the evils of such as Neath Place by using the very Public Health and other legislation that had so obviously contributed to the deterioration of the area. The LCC quoted the short leases under which many of the properties were held in the Brady Street area in support of its contention that private

redevelopment would soon solve the problems. London had certainly seen a phenomenal amount of speculative building at the turn of the century when the costs of land and building materials rose higher even than in the rest of the country, and rents followed them. However, there was a swift downturn in 1903 and all prospect of any development in the area disappeared.

The short leases, though inimical to private development, were not to everyone's disadvantage. Profiteers acquired short-lease properties extremely cheaply and in an area of housing shortage charged inflated rents. Any repairs they made, as the MOH had demonstrated, were overdue, minimal, and ineffectual and when, inevitably, the properties were declared unfit, they succeeded in realising inflated claims for compensation. Legislation protected the interests of property owners who, however, were often absent from the scene, their day-to-day management – such as it was – of properties left in the hands of 'house jobbers', 'farmers', and 'knackers' who collected the exorbitant rents, often passing on only minimal amounts to owners. While a sympathetic response to the plight of the tenants is appropriate, it must be suspected that landlords or their agents used high rents as an insurance against those who could not be coerced into paying or simply did a moonlight flit.

Like the MOH the 'agents' were continually brought into close contact with the implementation of housing legislation and must have been experts in the field. When an Act of Parliament was invoked to compel repairs to a dwelling they would raise the rent on the mere promise of action, backing demands with the threat of eviction or any other injurious measure the imagination can contemplate. Since their livelihoods depended upon it, they knew how to manipulate all facets of the housing problem to their own advantage. By reiterating that Bethnal Green Council should use its existing authority over the owners of insanitary properties the LCC was in fact asking it to rely for the amelioration of housing conditions on people described in an 1874 edition of *The Lancet*, voicing the combined experiences of MOHs, as '... the most unscrupulously dishonest class amongst us'.

NEGOTIATIONS WITH THE LCC

The Council continued to press the LCC for action and in April 1912 the MOH submitted

a further representation involving a slightly enlarged area, again under Part I of the Act. The LCC Housing Committee responded by once again recommending closure of individual houses for repair and in July 1913 declined to take action pending the enactment of legislation which would make land acquisition for improvement schemes less costly. The Council, stressing the growing urgency of the situation, then communicated directly with the Local Government Board, a central body required under the Housing and Town Planning Act, 1909, to press local authorities for action on housing. On 22 September 1914, just after the outbreak of war, the Board made an Order to the LCC to prepare a scheme but once again this was to be under Part II of the 1890 Act. This followed a long period of negotiation between the LCC and the Board into which the Bethnal Green Councillors felt powerless to inject their understanding of the situation which pointed to the need for complete clearance and improvement of the whole area – a Part I scheme. The ultimate decision, however, lay with the Treasury which in April 1915 informed the LCC that while the war continued no loan-based expenditure was to be undertaken.

At the request of the Public Health Committee, the Town Clerk, David J Keep, wrote to the Treasury in July 1915¹³ requesting that financial constraints be lifted in respect of the Brady Street Scheme. The letter referred to the problems of the area with considerable restraint, being specific only about 'abnormally high death rates' and suggesting urgency in more general terms: '... the Council regards the removal of the housing evils existing in the Brady Street area as a pressing necessity...' and: 'vital statistics ... conclusively show the urgent need for the clearance of that area.' 'Clearance' indicating once again the need for a Part I scheme. By December of that year the Council had received only a formal acknowledgement of the letter.

At the full Council meeting on 22 December 1915 the letter was presented as part of the Report of the Public Health Committee on the Brady Street area.¹⁴ Even in the sober account of reports, recommendations, and resolutions carried in the official Minutes the strong feelings of the Members are apparent: they are revealed with fuller vigour in the report published on 15 January 1916 in the *Eastern Post and City Chronicle*. The Minutes give the Chief Sanitary Inspector's statement that, '... in his judgement, the conditions of the housing question are as

acute in this Borough today as they were in 1890'. More specific details followed. In Neath Place the condition of some properties was so bad that the LCC had had to shore them up with timber to prevent accidents. Photographs of these properties, 'taken for the purpose of record' (Fig 12) were displayed in the Members' Room. Sober, factual descriptions of the state of dwellings in Neath Place, Scott Street, and Dixie Street were presented:

In one case the roof has collapsed, and in certain instances the outbuildings were collapsing, in others the front walls, back walls, and other portions of the structure have had to be taken down whilst the houses were occupied, and as a consequence several families are now living and sleeping under the most unsatisfactory conditions.

We understand that, for a time, some families were in occupation of rooms, the rear walls of which had been removed, such families being thus exposed to the inclemency of the weather.

The views of Councillor O'Grady, Chairman of the Public Health Committee, were expressed in much stronger terms according to the account of his speech moving the adoption of the report in the *Eastern Post and City Chronicle* on Saturday 15 January 1916.

The LCC and the LGB were allowing something to continue which was a disgrace to civilisation. If people kept pigs in such habitations the law would soon be put in operation against them. (Hear, hear.) A more disgusting picture could not be found anywhere. The places were reeking with filth, the walls were falling out, and the roofs were falling in. Only recently owing to the falling of a roof, two little children had to have medical attendance. In spite of money being required elsewhere, it was paltry and mean and disgraceful to refuse it for this improvement. (Hear, hear.) He did not oppose libraries, but it was scandalous that the council could make a rate for a public library and not spend money on providing decent homes for the people.

Councillor Vaughan had brought notes for a long speech attacking the Committee itself for ineptitude and having viewed the properties he confessed that,

... never in his wildest moments had he imagined such a picture as it presented. It was an atrocity to allow the plague spot to continue in existence. The place was nothing less than a CESSPOOL OF MUCK AND FILTH, not fit for a pig. One would not bury a dead dog there if one had any respect for the dog's body.

Councillor O'Grady defended the Committee's efforts and pointed out that '... the man who took rent for such property was an EXTORTIONER AND A ROBBER OF THE HELPLESS POOR'.

Personal and political antagonisms obviously underlay much of what was said but the Council

was united in a desire to 'force the pace' and 'judge of the real earnestness of the LCC and whether they would or would not help them'. Their situation is reminiscent of Bernard Shaw's view when he served on the Health Committee of St Pancras Borough Council that, 'We were as ignorantly helpless politically as the mob of ratepayers that elected us'. Their frustration at the helpless position in which they found themselves is succinctly spelled out in a paragraph of the Minutes:

The worst possible conditions are existing in this area today and the sanitary officials can only report the facts to us, whilst we in turn can only discharge our responsibility by reporting to the Council with a view to the immediate attention of the Government Authorities and the London County Council being directed thereto.¹⁵

POST-WAR RECONSTRUCTION PLANS

At the same time as the Council was pressing for action on the Brady Street Scheme they were under pressure from government departments which under the coalition government were planning during the war years for post-war reconstruction.¹⁶ When the Board of Trade required figures on accommodation in Bethnal Green for persons of the working class the Town Clerk used his response to press for action on the Brady Street Scheme.¹⁷ As well as information the government wanted action. The Borough was required to provide a tuberculosis dispensary, to employ Health Visitors to care for infants, and to set up a scheme to deal with outbreaks of measles.¹⁸ The Council fully supported these developments but assessed them as attacks on the branches rather than the roots of the evils of areas within the Borough which they realised had an adverse effect on the health of London as a whole.

Two months after this meeting, considering that action on the Brady Street area was 'sheltered behind war conditions', the Council decided to make simultaneous representations to all those possessed of the power and authority that it itself lacked. At the suggestion of Councillor O'Grady copies of the Report of the Public Health Committee relating to the Brady Street area¹⁹ were sent in March 1916 to:

The Prime Minister
The President of the Local Government Board
The London County Council
The Lords Commissioners of the Treasury

Local Members of Parliament
Local Members of the LCC²⁰

In spite of these efforts, however, the Mayor reported in his review of the municipal year that all efforts to forward the Brady Street Scheme had been 'without success'.

The First World War sharpened both the need for housing and the force of the argument for some sort of statutory public funding. In its annual report for 1913 the Local Government Board had stated that, '... private enterprise has always been and, so far as can be foreseen, will continue to be the main source of the provision of houses for the working classes'. The war-time coalition government set up the Salisbury Committee to consider post-war housing. This committee's report in August 1917 to the first Committee of Reconstruction proposed, in contrast to the LGB's view, that local authorities should be given not merely the opportunity but the duty, by law, of providing housing. The Committee of Reconstruction itself, however, had no executive authority and the miserable dwellings in Neath Place continued in use.

AN APPEAL TO THE PUBLIC

It is clear from newspaper reports that by 1919 the Brady Street area was the most notorious of those in need of clearance and to increase the momentum for change a report on the area was produced by the Bethnal Green Public Welfare Association.²¹ Mr Garnham Edmonds of the LCC was chairman of the Association and Mr Douglas Eyre, Head of Oxford House, a University Settlement in the area, was one of its honorary secretaries. On Sunday 23 February 1919 these two men joined the Mayor of Bethnal Green, Lieut. Col. W J Lewis, JP at St Martin-in-the-Fields to speak at a public meeting about the conditions described in the report. The vicar at St Martin's, Rev. H R L Shepherd, had arranged the meeting '... to support the case for immediate action ...' and the speakers used lantern slides to make clear the desperate needs in Bethnal Green as a whole and the Brady Street area in particular. The Mayor reminded his audience that, 'The best West End tailoring and the manufacture of the best boots and shoes emanated from Bethnal Green ...'.²² He also raised a topic which was becoming a widely felt matter of shame and related it to his Borough. Bethnal Green had sent a larger proportion of

men to the war than any other part of London and their total death rate was the highest of any in the metropolis yet survivors were returning to conditions totally unfit for human beings. He stressed that the only conceivable action was for these 'plague spots' to be utterly swept away. He reported that when he had recently taken local MPs to view the area one of them remarked that his donkey lived under better conditions. More specifically, in one house he found that they were unable to stand upright and that it was quite possible to push a stick through the outer wall and make a hole through which the street could be seen. In this one room in Brady Street a soldier's wife whose husband had been declared missing lived with her four children. The dwellings had been built at the beginning of the 19th century and by 1854 had already been condemned as small and worn out. The Mayor reported that 60% of them were now absolutely unfit for human habitation and that immediate action was demanded.

Lieut. Col. Lewis, the Mayor, was described in the *Bethnal Green News* on 27 March 1919 as, '... one of the most democratic of the chief citizens of the London areas ...' and his close knowledge and experience of the borough is shown in the description of him in the *Daily Express* of 18 March 1919:

Lieut. Col. Lewis knows Bethnal Green. He lives there. He is not one of the wealthy Mayors. He is just the secretary of the Working Men's Club, in Pollard Row, which runs down beside the Red Church in Bethnal Green Road. He lives in a little house in a row of little houses, just beyond the club. It is probably a little smaller than Mr. Will Crooks' house in Poplar. Lieut. Col. Lewis does not need a splendid house to make him a splendid kind of man. Bethnal Green found him out and made him mayor six years ago, and it has kept him mayor ever since. He loves and lives for Bethnal Green. His boy died in Gallipoli.

ROYAL CONCERN

His speech at St Martin-in-the-Fields had an immediate effect in one quarter. Queen Mary heard of the meeting and on Friday 14 March, within three weeks of the public meeting, the Mayor was at Buckingham Palace summoned by the Queen to acquaint her personally with the nature of the social and housing problems of the Brady Street area. He used maps and plans to aid his explanations and repeated much of what had been revealed at the meeting, including the fact that during air raids some of the houses,

although they had not been hit, had partially collapsed because they were so insubstantial. He used two boxes to demonstrate the nature of the back-to-back houses in Digby Walk, explaining that as the whole of the sanitary arrangements were located close to the front door Her Majesty could imagine what the conditions of life must be. 'Horrible' was the Queen's reported reply. He also raised two matters which were crucial to the understanding and solution of the underlying problems: rent levels and public investment. *The Bethnal Green News* reported that: 'The Mayor suggested that the (London County) Council was too considerate of private interests, and that explained its inclination to leave the improvement largely to private enterprise'. The Queen was, of course, unable to comment on such a matter but her much-quoted final response to what she heard was, 'It is pretty clear to me that when I have visited the poorer districts I have been taken mainly to the highways and not to the by-ways'. The genuineness of her concern is shown in the fact that on the following Monday afternoon she was actually walking through Neath Place.

Up to this point the views and decisions of professionals and officials – legions of them – have predominated. In newspaper reports of the Queen's visit we hear the voices of the people who actually lived in Neath Place and can enter their homes. The Queen spent more than an hour visiting dwellings in several of the streets and alleys off Brady Street accompanied by the Mayor, the Town Clerk, Mr Keep, and the Chief Sanitary Inspector, Mr Foot. On the following day *The Times* and the *The Morning Post* gave almost identical anodyne accounts of the visit. Other, livelier newspaper reports²³ featured details of the houses visited and quoted snatches of conversation which give an impression of life in Neath Place. There are some inconsistencies in the various accounts but in general the reports corroborate each other's details.

THE PEOPLE OF NEATH PLACE

Mary Hayes (Fig 9) who was twelve years old, was scrubbing the bare floor of No. 53 Neath Place when the Queen arrived and asked the Queen to excuse her because she was dirty. She explained that her parents were at work, her father at the brewery, possibly the Mann, Crossman and Paulin premises on Whitechapel

Road, and her mother at the paper works. Being Irish, she explained, she was on holiday from school for St Patrick's Day. The *Daily Mirror* reporter described her scrubbing the kitchen: the room concerned was, in fact, the only downstairs room and the photo shows her in the cramped corner by the fireplace which has a small cooking range. Some of the pride and care taken in attempting to make a home of this hovel is shown in the decoration of the mantelpiece with its alarm clock and vases reflected in the mirror which must have helped give an illusion of a little more space. The *Evening News* reporter commented that both tiny rooms were spotless. The house appears on one of the photos taken as a record for the Bethnal Green Council in 1915 (Fig 10). This is the terrace of houses once called Cumberland Place on the north side of the alley and the archway that led into Collingwood Street can be seen. The patch of sunlight on the right probably came through Pereira Street which ran roughly north-south at that point, and beyond it the sunlit frontages on the left suggest that buildings opposite, which had been built on the site of the pond, had been demolished. The woman with two children is in the doorway of No. 51: whether the person in the doorway of No. 53 is related to Mary Hayes is not known. Superficially the houses seem habitable until it is realised that the windows illuminate the only rooms. These are still the two-roomed huts the MOH condemned in his original representation to the LCC in 1904. The rear view of the same terrace shows that there were no rear windows and that outhouses, attested to by the still standing chimneys, no longer existed, presumably being among those that had fallen down and never been rebuilt. There is no sign of lavatories in the yards so the sanitary arrangements can only be guessed at.

Almost all the newspapers mentioned it but the *Daily News* devoted its whole report to the Queen's visit to Mrs Eliza Noon (Fig 11) at 2 Neath Place. Photos show the appearance of the front and rear of her house four years earlier (Fig 12). The front of the terrace on either side of her house had had to be shored up by the LCC and the upper rear windows have been bricked up although the crumbling outhouses remain. Mrs Noon must have experienced this situation soon after moving into the house in 1914. Her husband, serving with the London Territorials in Egypt, had joined the army, abandoning what his wife called 'good work',



Fig 9. Mary Hayes in the ground floor room of 53 Neath Place. *Daily Mirror*, 18 March 1919. (Tower Hamlets Local History Library and Archives)

and she had had to move into the cheaper house in Neath Place with their seven children. From the Separation Allowance she received from the Army she had to pay 5 shillings a week in rent.

Once again it is the question of rent that is paramount. The Queen was obviously puzzled that the women of Neath Place continued to live in such conditions and asked one woman, 'Why don't you move to a better house?' 'We should have to pay much more rent, your Majesty', she was told.²⁴ Another unnamed woman told the Queen that she would have difficulty in getting another place so cheaply, or in fact at all, and a third said, 'We cannot afford to pay more rent with the price of things double what they were before the war'.²⁵

The *Daily News* article is headed 'By Our Special Commissioner' and this reporter seems to have reviewed the day's events with Mrs Noon during the evening. The Queen had apparently been unable to believe that she was in the only downstairs room and on investigating the rear door was taken aback to find herself in the minute yard. She sent her Private Secretary upstairs to the only other room and was horrified to hear that that was where they all slept. Mrs

Noon was compelled to admit that there were too many mice downstairs to permit sleeping there, but it seems extremely likely that either she herself or the reporter mitigated the problem which was more likely, given the state of the properties in the photo, to be caused by rats.

The room contained a table and four chairs and it seems that the Queen sat on the table, much to Mrs Noon's reiterated regret at her possible discomfort. Although it was early afternoon in mid March a paraffin lamp was burning. The Queen noticed that the windows had wire netting instead of glass and when she remarked on the lack of sunlight the close and high walls opposite were pointed out and Mrs Noon, decisively, according to the Commissioner, said, 'Oh no, your Majesty, we get no sun here'.

Reviewing the day, Mrs Noon was pleased that the house had been 'done up' two weeks before with new wallpaper and fresh paint, so the Queen obviously did not see its usual state. Given that there was a gap of three weeks between the Mayor's speech at St Martin-in-the-Fields and the Queen's visit the redecoration could have been encouraged or compelled. Certainly it was the Sanitary Inspector who



Fig 10. Nos 43–63 Neath Place showing the covered entrance to Collingwood Street, 1915. Mary Hayes' house is the one with a single figure in the doorway. (Tower Hamlets Local History Library and Archives)



Fig 11. Mrs Eliza Noon with her daughter Liza, right, and four of her other six children. *Daily News*, 18 March 1919. (Tower Hamlets Local History Library and Archives)

guided the group around and probably decided which houses to visit and he would certainly have known of every dwelling and occupant. It

was the report of the Bethnal Green Public Welfare Association that stated, 'The supervision of this plague spot absorbs almost the whole time of a Sanitary Inspector',²⁶ and three years earlier Mr Foot had been granted a month's leave of absence on 'showing symptoms of nervous breakdown'.²⁷ Whatever the truth of the selection process, the *Daily News* Commissioner reported the house as 'spotlessly clean'. The *Daily Chronicle* also reported the Queen's admiration for 'the general cleanliness and splendid housewifery which she saw in evidence so abundantly' and contrasted it with the condition of the buildings themselves.

Entering some of the cottages she was very quick to observe the extreme smallness of the rooms, the defective lighting, the bad ventilation, and the frequent dampness.

The population in this area of London is a teeming one, and it is not the lack of care and pains which the poor give to their homes – a suggestion they would justly resent – but the utterly inadequate accommodation to which they have to submit.

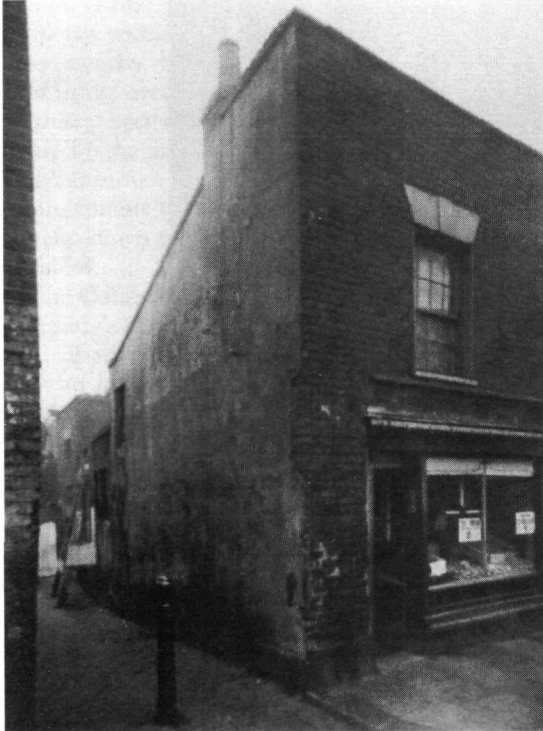


Fig 12. Neath Place from Brady Street showing timber supports erected by the LCC in consequence of defective and dangerous brickwork, 1915. Mrs Noon's house is the one without shoring timbers furthest into Neath Place. (Tower Hamlets Local History Library and Archives)

The clean state of the dwellings of the poor was an important point to emphasise to readers who were soon to be expected to approve and fund subsidies to rehouse them.

CONCLUSION

It is difficult to judge what effect, if any, could be attributed to the Queen's visit to the over one-hundred-year-old dwellings of Neath Place and the back-to-back houses of Dixie Street or her subsequent audience with Dr Addison, President of the Local Government Board. It is also difficult to agree with the *Daily Chronicle* reporter that as a result of her visit, '... many hearts in Brady-street district to-day beat with a stronger hope'.²⁸ There was hope, however, in the gradual modification of public opinion which had been taking place over decades for reasons beyond the scope of this study. Statistical reports and the findings of learned societies gradually enabled

those in influential positions to appreciate the complexity of the web of causality linking legislation and human nature. Extensions to the franchise both gave increased legitimacy to the state-directed developments and meant that MPs and others needed to take real account of the views and interests of the newly enfranchised.

The appalling conditions of those on the lowest incomes were well known. To plan and implement effective remedial action, however, required the organisation of appropriate administrative structures and some understanding of how comfortable and secure members of the population could be persuaded to make the essential financial contribution. The formation of the new Ministry of Health in 1919 with Dr Addison as its first Minister was of great importance. It took over responsibility for health and housing and it was its Housing and Town Planning Act, 1919, which allowed discussion of the practicalities of providing a scheme for the Brady Street area. This Act required local authorities to survey housing needs and make and carry out plans for necessary provision. Some balancing of central and local financing was evident in that, provided the scheme was approved by the government, any losses in excess of the proceeds of a one penny rate would be borne by the Treasury. The ratepayers of Bethnal Green would thus have a known but limited funding commitment. Of crucial importance to prospective tenants, whose means were so limited, was the requirement that rents be set independently of costs and in line with their ability to pay.

The LCC full Council Minutes for 10 February 1920 record that that body,

... in pursuance of the Order of the Local Government Board dated 22nd September 1914 doth here-by make a scheme for the improvement of certain lands situate in the metropolitan borough of Bethnal-green in pursuance of the provisions of Part II of the Housing of the Working Classes Act 1890, and of the Acts amending the same ...',

justifying the scheme by the 'closeness, narrowness and bad arrangement or bad condition of the buildings'. This scheme was called 'The London (Brady Street) Improvement Scheme, 1920' and on 1 June 1920 the legally required Local Inquiry was held at Bethnal Green Town Hall.

Individual property owners made representations with, in the opinion of the Public Health Committee, '... a view to securing compensation on a higher basis than would be payable for insanitary property ...'²⁹. Mann, Crossman and

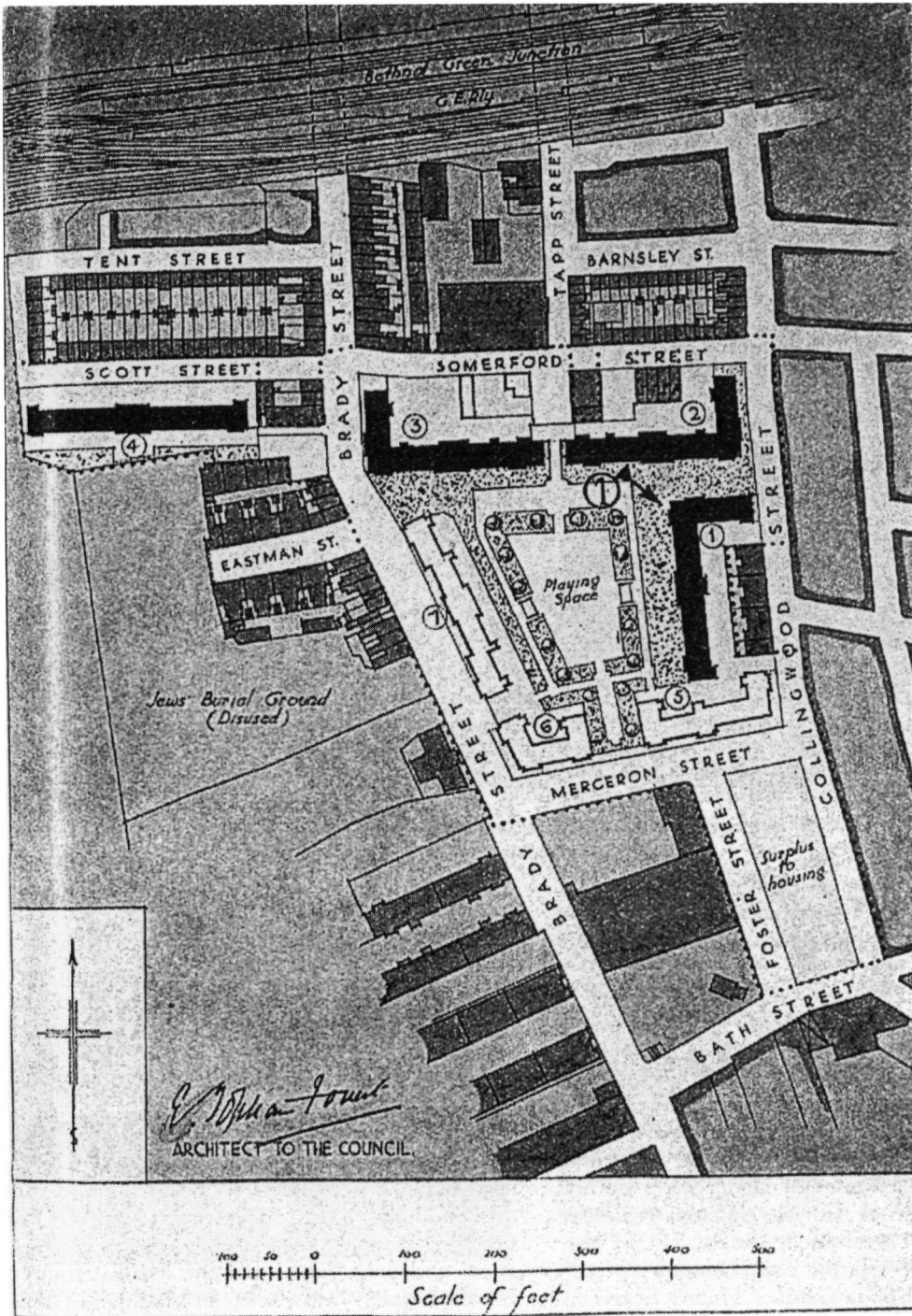


Fig 13. The Collingwood Estate Blocks 1-7 as completed. This was the name given to the Brady Street Scheme on completion. (Cox 1928)

Paulin Ltd, the brewery company, owned property within the scheme area in addition to their nearby brewery. They wanted to retain land in the area for possible extension of brewery premises and offered not only an exchange of lands in the immediate area but also a site in Walthamstow for out-of-area housing. These arrangements were considered vital by the LCC to keep down costs and help solve the re-housing problem.

The Council objected vigorously to the brewery company's proposals, understanding more clearly the disadvantages caused to people living close to industrial premises and the problems of those compelled to live '... so far distant as Walthamstow ...'³⁰ from sources of work. Nevertheless, in November 1921, the Borough Council received a letter from the LCC stating that the Minister of Health had decided, subject to certain modifications, '... to confirm the London (Brady Street) Scheme 1920.'³¹ Construction of the new properties began in October 1922 and the completed estate (Fig 13) consisted of six five-storeyed blocks of apartments facing south and west set around a central garden and playing space of about an acre and a half. A further single south-facing block occupied an adjacent site to the north-west. Approximately 100 residents were moved from the area to a new five-storey building a mile to the north in Goldsmith's Row, Shoreditch, built on land owned by the LCC and about 175 others moved to Walthamstow into 35 cottages on the LCC Sky Peals estate. There was, however, room for 1,600 residents to remain in the area in soundly built and well-maintained homes.

NOTES

¹The Metropolitan Borough of Bethnal Green, Report on the Sanitary Conditions and Vital Statistics during the year 1904 together with the Report of the Chief Sanitary Inspector (=MBBG 1904), 45.

²The Metropolitan Borough of Bethnal Green, Minutes of Proceedings and Cash Papers 9 November 1920 to 3 November 1921, Vol 21 (=MBBG 1920), 459.

³Cox (1995), 157.

⁴London Metropolitan Archives E/BN/6.

⁵LMA E/BN/6.

⁶MBBG 1904, 45.

⁷MBBG 1904, 48.

⁸MBBG 1904, 49.

⁹MBBG 1904, 48-9.

¹⁰Public Health (London) Act 1891.

¹¹MBBG 1904, 45.

¹²MBBG 1904, 49.

¹³Metropolitan Borough of Bethnal Green, Minutes of Proceedings and Cash Papers 9 November 1915 to 2 November 1916, Vol 16 (=MBBG 1915), 45.

¹⁴MBBG 1915, 44-7.

¹⁵MBBG 1915, 46.

¹⁶MBBG 1915, 47.

¹⁷MBBG 1915, 46.

¹⁸MBBG 1915, 47.

¹⁹MBBG 1915, 148-55.

²⁰MBBG 1915, 155-6.

²¹*Bethnal Green News*, 22 March 1919.

²²*The Times*, 24 February 1919.

²³18 March 1919; *Daily Chronicle*, *Daily Express*, *Daily Mirror*, *Daily News*, *Daily Sketch*, *Evening News*, *The Globe*.

²⁴*Daily Sketch*, 18 March 1919.

²⁵*Daily Chronicle*, 18 March 1919.

²⁶*Bethnal Green News*, 22 March 1919.

²⁷MBBG 1915, 148.

²⁸*Daily Chronicle*, 18 March 1919.

²⁹Metropolitan Borough of Bethnal Green, Minutes of Proceedings and Cash Papers 9 November 1919 to 4 November 1920, Vol 20 (=MBBG 1919), 424.

³⁰Metropolitan Borough of Bethnal Green, Minutes of Proceedings and Cash Papers 9 November 1921 to 19 October 1922, Vol 22 (=MBBG 1921), 208.

³¹MBBG 1919, 459.

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