

***SOME HOMES FIT FOR HEROES
IN S.E. LONDON, 1920-23***



MICHAEL PASSMORE

In a previous talk to the Society, I explained that the Guild Estate, Charlton, was the first housing scheme of Greenwich Metropolitan Council and that it was constructed by the London Guild of Builders, a form of workers' cooperative. I mentioned that some features of the architecture are commended in the Pevsner guide for South London in *The Buildings of England* series.



Figure 1. Plaque (or tablet) on semis at Fairfield Grove corner opposite the Assembly Rooms.

Legislation of 1919, known as the 'The Addison Act' after the Minister responsible, Dr Christopher Addison, required local councils to build to meet local needs. In return, the Government paid local authorities a housing subsidy for the first time. New housing had to follow a manual with model designs that conformed to the 1918 Tudor Walters Committee's report for improving the standards of working-class housing. The architect-planner Sir Raymond Unwin, the main influence on the report, insisted that designers should avoid unnecessary ornamentation and specify standard components where possible.

Homes Fit for Heroes was an ambitious campaign to tackle a dire shortage of working-class housing, most of which was in poor condition. Throughout the country, councils under the control of all political parties participated with development projects.

I have chosen the following examples from SE London to illustrate the low-density cottage housing that the proponents of the campaign sought to achieve, or in one case a departure from their original policy.

Bellingham Estate

The government looked to London County Council (LCC) to be the main housing provider of homes in the capital with its good reputation of building cottage homes. LCC planned to build the vast estates at Becontree (Essex) and Downham (Kent), but experienced early difficulties. However, immediate success was achieved with Bellingham Estate, to the south of Catford, that was effectively completed by the time the government wound up the Homes Fit for Heroes programme prematurely.

The building of 2000 homes there began in October 1920 and took only about two years to complete. So that building could go-ahead rapidly, LCC extracted sand and gravel locally and arranged for a new railway siding for delivery of other building materials. Although LCC succeeded in the quantity of homes built here, the designs lacked the flair shown by its architects before 1914.



Figure 2. Bellingham Estate: typical short terrace.



Figure 3. Corner housing on green.

The scheme included allotments and sports facilities; the road layout radiates out from the spacious Bellingham Green.

In Charlton, the provision of recreation space was met in a different way.



Figure 4. Bellingham Green.

The Charlton Estate

The Charlton Estate comprises almost 450 semi-detached and terraced houses on sites that stretch from the eastern edge of The Village to Kinveachy Gardens and run northwards to Pound Park Road. Local architect, Alfred Roberts, followed the requirements of the official housing manual, but was able to include some distinctive features in the exterior designs.



Figure 5. Original features: tiled mansard roof over roughcast rendered walls with metal casement windows.



Figure 6. Original sunrays motif.in brickwork.

The estate layout includes the green strip along the top section of Charlton Lane off Charlton Park Road. This highway extension was constructed with the new estate.



Figure 7. Charlton Lane: green strip along 1920s section.

The location of the housing conformed to the recommendation on recreation space as it skirts three sides of the woodland that LCC was acquiring from Maryon-Wilsons for a public park.



Figure 8. Maryon Wilson Park.



Figure 9. Home next to the park.

Most Addison homes were two or three storeys high, but I have found that in a few congested districts of London, Whitehall allowed blocks of flats to be built.

Silver Walk Flats, Rotherhithe

A scheme to build multi-storey flats could be controversial. Many women's groups around the country were against them, which was evident when Tudor Walters consulted them on some limited aspects of building design. Some prominent figures in the Labour movement also opposed tenements including Dr Alfred Salter and Ada his politically influential wife. Alfred led the Labour

group on Bermondsey Metropolitan Council, where the Liberals were in control at the time.

Early in 1920, together with Ada and local women's groups, Dr_Salter unsuccessfully fought against building of flats under the Addison Act. The outcome was that the Borough Engineer erected a block of 30 flats at Silver Walk, off Rotherhithe Street, close to what was then Surrey Docks.



Figure 10. Silver Walk flats today renamed Filigree Court in a gated community.

Sunray Estate, Dulwich



Figure 11. Sunray Estate.

In 1919, Camberwell Metropolitan Council adopted a policy which was in line with the Salters' thinking. They employed Sir Frank Baines of HM Office of Works to design about 300 cottage homes on land either side of Red Post Hill, close to North Dulwich railway station. The land was taken on 200-year lease from Dulwich Estate Governors who insisted that the development should follow a road layout drawn up by their own architect. The authors of the Pevsner guide comment that the estate is admired for the quality of its

architecture and is, 'one of the most celebrated products of the Homes fit for Heroes campaign'.

Avoid unnecessary ornamentation, the architecture differs from Baines's Well Hall Estate, Eltham, which architectural historians describe as 'picturesque'. In Dulwich, Baines succeeded in building the cottage homes with largely unadorned exteriors laid out in attractive landscaping and along winding roads.



Figure 12. Homes with steeply sloping roofs and plain brick walls facing greens with hedges and trees.



Figure 13. Part rendered walls.



Figure 14. Short terrace on Red Post Hill.

The estate is enhanced by the inclusion of Sunray Gardens Park, which was originally part of the grounds of a demolished house.

Closing comments

The design guidance in the manual adopted for the Homes Fit for Heroes programme was influential on subsequent council housing of the inter-war years and even longer. Also, the approach to designing small houses was

adopted in modified form by many private developers. However, a downside was that even with a government subsidy, the rents were on the high side because of spacious room layouts that included bathrooms and electric lighting. The estates featured here and throughout most of London are still standing which speaks highly of how well they were designed and built.