

# THE BATTLES OF Boundary Street

**London's first council estate is celebrated for marking a new era in progressive approaches to housing the poor. But with just 11 of the original 5,700 evicted residents moving into the new flats in the late 1890s, it was in fact an early example of 'social cleansing', discovers Sarah Wise**

"It was a district of almost solid poverty, in which the houses were as broken down and deplorable as their unfortunate inhabitants... The whole place deserved destruction." This epitaph for the Old Nichol neighbourhood, in central East London, was written by Charles Booth – social investigator and creator of the famous Poverty Map of London, published in 1889. Decades of jerry-building, rack-renting, a corrupt local vestry inspectorate and municipal indolence had created a slum of a square quarter-mile that by the 1880s was tottering to the point of collapse.

Here lived a population of 5,700 souls, 40 per cent of whom were under the age of 15. Its mortality rate was double that of the streets that surrounded it, while its statistics for overcrowding were among the highest in the capital.

London would not have its first fully empowered unitary authority until 1889 – years after Britain's other major cities had modernised their local administration. Members of the first London County Council (LCC) had been elected with an unforeseen swing to the 'left' (London was safely Conservative during parliamentary elections in these years), and so the so-called Progressive Party had a huge mandate for driving through measures to improve the working and living conditions of the city's poor. The most urgent arena for reform was the housing of the working class – the subject of both a massive (but ultimately toothless) Royal Commission of 1884-5, and no fewer than 25 acts of Parliament since 1847. Despite these, undersupply and the squalor of much of the existing stock became



Map of the Old Nichol from 1872

more intractable problems as the years passed.

The new LCC therefore asked Londoners at large to write in with their suggestions for which district was most in need of demolition and rebuild. The overwhelming answer was: the Old Nichol.

The council was not permitted to build low-







rent premises for the low-waged: its powers were restricted to undertaking the demolition using rates money and then offering the cleared land for sale to a charitable housing provider – one of the ‘Five Per Cent Philanthropists’ organisations, such as Peabody, the Guinness Trust and Sydney Waterlow’s Improved Industrial Dwellings Company.

However, as the long process of compulsory purchase, eviction and demolition was under way, between 1890 and 1895, it became clear that no philanthropic company was willing to come forward. And so, very reluctantly, the home secretary permitted the LCC to construct the dwellings, on the understanding that these would quickly be sold on to the charitable sector.

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The LCC was not to act as a landlord. Antipathy towards state intervention in housing was put most colourfully in Parliament by the member for Portsmouth, who told the house that such a thing was “monstrous”, and that “if such a principle were admitted, I do not know where it will stop. The next demand made of Parliament might be to provide clothing, if not carriages and horses, for the poor”.

#### **Red brick and terracotta**

But change was in the air. Arguably, the state provision of public housing in Germany may have prompted Westminster to see that a better housed and healthier working population made for superior military recruits and industrial workers. Certainly, papers in the National Archives at Kew show the home secretary gradually coming round to the idea of the LCC not just building housing but acting as a landlord. And that is how London’s first planned council estate came into being.





Court in the Old Nichol

The Boundary Street Estate was, and remains, magnificent. The LCC's architects' department created 22 blocks of red brick and terracotta that while fully harmonising with each other, nevertheless allow for whimsy and picturesque variation. Set around a central (fake) hillock with a terraced garden, seven broad, tree-lined avenues radiate outwards. Each step along the streets presents a new vista to the eye, like a slow-dissolve kaleidoscope.

The *British Architect* magazine of February 1897 was scathing, though, describing the development as 'a workman's paradise', where he would become "a pampered pet... [who will] pass from the partly useful to the wholly ornamental".

More damning was Dr George Paddock Bate, the local parish vestry medical officer of health, who had campaigned hard for local sanitary reform. Bate told Charles Booth's survey team (compiling data for Booth's 17-volume *Life & Labour of the People In London*) that: "No attempt [has been] made to rehouse the people displaced... not five per cent are original residents. Those who largely occupied the spot were costermongers, little cabinet-makers and those who required stabling and workshops, but instead of trying to provide for them, the Council has built extravagant blocks, quite unsuited to them, and beyond their means."

He pointed out that many of the former residents were now having to crowd even more densely into foetid lodgings nearby in Bacon Street, Sclater Street, the northern end of Brick Lane and so on. Instead of

**"JUST 15 OF THE 1,069 NEW FLATS CONSISTED OF ONE ROOM ONLY, BUT HALF OF THE NICHOL POPULATION HAD LIVED IN SINGLE-ROOM LODGINGS IN THE SLUM"**

the Boundary Street Estate being a revolution in sanitation, it had forced many of the locals into property that was even more dangerous to health.

How on earth had this happened? An LCC architects' department crammed with men who self-identified as 'progressive' (holding either Radical Liberal or Socialist views) had managed to create 1,069 high-quality, publicly subsidised apartments that were being inhabited by clerks, teachers, policemen, artisans, a vicar – people perfectly able to rent a decent London home on the open market. And yet the 5,700 Old Nichol residents had been slung out with very little compensation, despite the estate having been promoted as a place in which the poor could 'improve' themselves.

It's a conundrum: but examination of the large caches of LCC documentation held at the London Metropolitan Archives

suggests the (slightly messy) answer. In 1890, the architects had presented a somewhat unambitious scheme for the replacement of the Old Nichol. As can be seen in the plan (right), it amounted to no more than a widening of the streets on a retained grid system. However, in a noteworthy example of *fin de siècle* people-power, a meeting of Bethnal Green residents and ratepayers urged the LCC to be more adventurous.

In particular, they asked the architects to include far more open space, particularly for children to play in. (They also called for the owners of the rotten houses in the slum to be named, shamed and prosecuted, rather than compensated.)

As the project dragged on, Owen Fleming and his team devised the radical new topography for the site.

### Social cleansing

A researcher at the American Academy of Political & Social Science wrote to Fleming in June 1896, as the estate's first blocks were being let, asking him how the scheme had come about. Fleming's lengthy reply (never seen by the general public) reveals that he had never, in fact, intended the estate to be lived in by the residents of the Old Nichol.

He wrote that it was "difficult to let the dwellings to the class of persons who have been displaced. In many cases, the people have been



so long accustomed to live in dirty rooms that they cannot be induced to keep these rooms clean, nor do they desire to live in rooms of this class. In fact, they very rarely apply for these dwellings”.

This amounts to deception, because throughout the project, the public, the residents, the government, Dr Bate and other professionals had assumed that the flats were intended for those Old Nichol people who did want to live in them. But no one had thought to ask the architects, therefore Fleming had not needed to reveal his true purpose. He merely allowed an assumption to continue, while believing that the chronically poor “could not be designed for”.

It didn't matter that the LCC had indeed (as required by the home secretary) kept rents to the average charged on the open market in East London, because in spatial terms alone, most Nichol people were priced out of Boundary Street. Just 15 of the 1,069 new flats consisted of one room only, but half of the Nichol population had lived in single-room lodgings in the slum. Some 34 per cent of Old Nichol people could not have afforded even a one-room flat on the estate.

Those former slum-dwellers who did apply for a council flat often found that their home-based trade (furniture or textile manufacture; foodstuff or flower-hawking, for example) was not

**“MIGHT FLEMING HAVE ADDITIONALLY BEEN GUILTY OF WHAT WE CALL TODAY STARCHITECT SYNDROME?”**



Gentrification has seen privately-owned flats become increasingly sought-after. But around two-thirds of the premises remain under Tower Hamlets' control



permitted on LCC premises.

When eventually challenged, Owen Fleming fell back on the ‘levelling up’ theory (similar to our ‘trickle-down’ concept). He claimed that as lower-middle-class people moved on to the estate, the lodgings that they had vacated in the vicinity would be moved into by the people of the Old Nichol. No such thing happened.

Fleming also said that he had wanted the high quality of his project to act as a role model: to show architects that blocks for cheap rent did not need to look like barracks or prison wings.

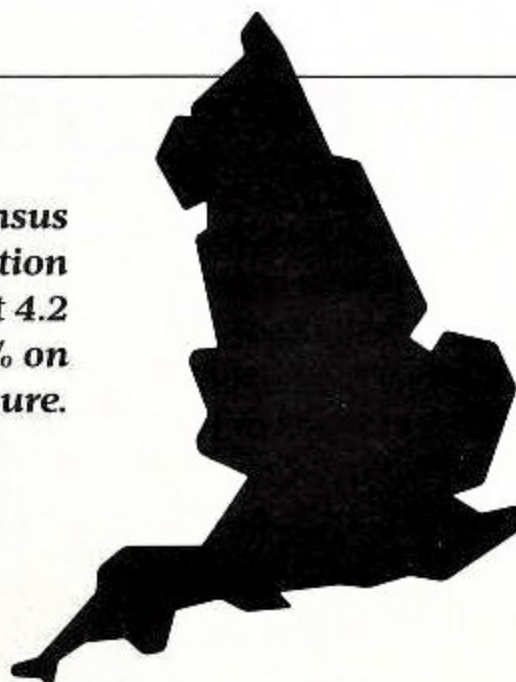
And might Fleming have additionally been guilty of what we call today Starchitect Syndrome – choosing beauty over utility? He knowingly designed out the poor, while nevertheless maintaining that these were to be homes for “the working classes”.

The Boundary Estate is viewed benignly today as a massive progressive step. But the archival evidence suggests that it was, in fact, a prototype

of the ‘social cleansing’ that many councils are engaged in today. As Dr Bate bitterly stated, with regard to the LCC and its dealings with the chronically poor and needy: “They are afraid to touch ‘the real thing’.”

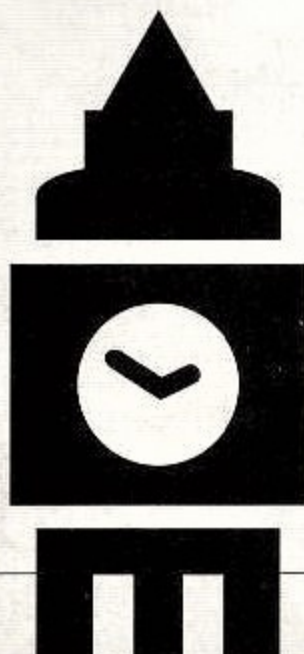
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● In 1891, the Census put the population of London at 4.2 million – up 10% on the 1881 figure.



● 34% of Londoners in these years were born outside London. In the Old Nichol, that figure was just 12%, making it the most native-Cockney place in London.

● Average death rate in the Old Nichol slum: 40 per 1,000. Average death rate in surrounding district: 22 per 1,000. Average death rate in London: 18 per 1,000. Old Nichol death rate of children under-one: 252 per 1,000.



● The population of England and Wales was 29 million, 14.5% of whom lived in London.



● Booth found that 35% of East London's population could be termed ‘poor’, or ‘very poor’, but that figure was 83% for people of the Old Nichol – the highest rate in London.