

Public Housing Pioneers

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To walk through EC1 is to take a journey through more than a hundred years of social housing. That journey starts with the Peabody Estate in Whitecross Street and Roscoe Street which was opened in 1883. George Peabody was a wealthy American banker who lived in London and died here in 1869. He donated £1 million (equivalent to at least £67 million today) to build good quality housing for the 'deserving poor' of London. The blocks proved to be very popular with the skilled working class. The very poor were prevented from living there because rents had to be paid promptly and tenants weren't allowed to take in lodgers. The Peabody Trust still exists as a housing association in London today.

It was not until the early 20th century that council housing appeared in the district – constructed first by the London County Council (forerunner of today's Greater London Authority) and then by the Metropolitan Borough of Finsbury. Mallory Buildings in St John Street and Chadworth House on Lever Street, both built in 1906-7 are good examples of the LCC's attempts to reduce overcrowding and improve housing conditions.



The Mallory Buildings, St John Street, built by the London County Council 1906-07

In the 1930s, Finsbury's Labour council embarked on one of the most ambitious social housing programmes ever undertaken. Housing conditions were extremely poor: one in five lived in overcrowded accommodation. Although some housing was built in the 1930s, such as Cyrus House, the outbreak of the Second World War halted further progress. At the end of the war as much as 90 per cent of Finsbury's housing was damaged and the Council embarked on a large-scale programme of reconstruction.



The Brunswick Close Estate - London's first tower block estate.

The first of the post-war estates was Spa Green, designed by the world famous architect Berthold Lubetkin who also designed Finsbury Health Centre. His belief that public housing should be of the highest quality was reflected in the Spa Green estate, which included sound insulation, central heating, hot water and a mechanised waste disposal system. Bright colours used to decorate the estate highlighted his conviction that public housing should not just be functional but also pleasing to the eye. Another famous architect, Joseph Emberton, had as much as if not more of

an influence over Finsbury social housing as Lubetkin. He designed three estates: Brunswick Close Estate (1949-1962), Stafford Cripps Estate (1951-1954) and the King Square Estate (1965). The Brunswick Estate was London's first tower block estate and upon completion the fourteen storeys made it the highest council flats in the UK. The King Square Estate replaced run down terraced housing and was designed to replicate an old style square using new buildings and the original church, St Clements, as a focal point. The third estate designed by Emberton was the Stafford Cripps Estate consisting of three identical blocks in a Y shape, ensuring maximum sunlight to every room. The estate was completed very quickly, 19 months from start to finish, and the interiors had built-in furniture to ensure the most efficient use of space.

By the early 1960s Finsbury Council had built well over 1000 new dwellings and rehoused the largest number of families of all London boroughs. The large number of housing estates in EC1 is witness to the former Council's proud record as one of the pioneers of public housing in the UK.