

Historical Background 2 - Property Ownership in 19th Century London

The families I focus on in this chapter all experienced frequent changes of address and this poses a number of questions about working-class housing between around 1850 to around 1920 when both Charles and Ellen, and Leonard and Harriet seem to have settled into the same house for extensive period of time. Why did they move, sometimes short distances, sometimes up to 10 miles away? Why did they move so often? Why did this all seem to stop after World War I? How did they arrange accommodation? When did they join the property-owning class? A question I must admit I previously gave little thought to is about how people arranged their accommodation in the 19th and early 20th centuries, particularly in the fast developing yet overcrowded areas of London.

Property ownership and renting in London during the 19th century underwent significant changes due to urbanization, industrialization, and social shifts. Much of the land in London during the 19th century was owned by aristocratic families or wealthy landowners. These individuals often held vast estates, which included both urban and rural land. The 19th century saw the rise of the middle class, who increasingly became property owners. With the growth of industry and commerce, many middle-class individuals acquired wealth and invested in property, including townhouses and suburban villas. Property ownership in London was often divided between leasehold and freehold. Freehold ownership meant owning the property and the land outright, while leasehold ownership involved leasing the land from a landlord for a specified period. The 19th century witnessed significant property development in London, with new neighbourhoods and suburbs being built to accommodate the city's growing population. Property developers played a crucial role in transforming undeveloped land into residential and commercial areas.

Much property was rented. In the early 19th century, much of London's working-class population lived in overcrowded and unsanitary tenement housing. These buildings were often owned by wealthy landlords and rented out to multiple families, sometimes in appalling conditions. The Victorian era saw the construction of terraced houses, which became a common form of housing for both renters and homeowners. These houses were typically built in rows and rented out to middle-class families. Landlords had considerable power over tenants in the 19th century. They were responsible for maintaining the property, collecting rent, and enforcing tenancy agreements. Disputes between landlords and tenants were not uncommon, and tenant rights were limited compared to modern standards. Although there were no formal rent controls in place during much of the 19th century, some attempts were made to regulate the rental market in response to housing shortages and poor living conditions. However, these regulations were often inadequate and inconsistently enforced. For many working-class families, renting property in London during the 19th century was precarious. Evictions were common, especially for those who fell behind on rent payments or violated tenancy agreements. This instability contributed to social unrest and housing activism during the period.

In the 19th century, finding rental properties in London relied on a combination of methods, some of which were quite different from modern practices. One of the most common methods was through word of mouth. People often relied on recommendations from friends, family, or acquaintances who were familiar with available rental properties in the area. Newspapers played a crucial role in advertising rental properties. Landlords and letting agents would place advertisements describing available properties, including details such as location, size, amenities, and rent. Prospective tenants would scan these ads and respond to ones that suited their needs. Some people would simply walk or ride around neighbourhoods they were interested in, looking for "To Let" signs on properties. Landlords would often display signs outside their properties indicating they were available for rent. Community notice boards, such as those found in churches, town halls, or marketplaces, sometimes displayed rental advertisements. These boards served as a means of communication within the local community and were used for various purposes, including advertising rental properties. Similar to word of mouth, personal networks and social circles played a significant role in finding rental properties. People often relied on their connections within the community to learn about available rental opportunities. In some cases, prospective tenants would approach landlords directly to inquire about available properties. This method was more common for smaller landlords who owned a limited number of properties.

Historical Background 2 - Property Ownership

These methods varied in effectiveness depending on factors such as social status, access to information, and personal networks. Overall, finding a rental property in 19th century London required a mix of proactive searching, networking, and reliance on available resources such as newspapers and community notice boards.

In the competitive capitalist economy of late nineteenth-century Britain, housing was generally rented from private landlords rather than bought. The housing market was structured around the renting of accommodation; it was seen as the 'normal' means of obtaining somewhere to live. However, it is clear that some sections of society did desire to own the home in which they lived. As late as 1914, approximately 90% of all houses were rented from private landlords, most of the remainder being occupied by their owners (DoE, 1977)

House prices were very high in relation to general wage levels and as compared to most other 'necessities' of life, particularly for the working class. Consequently, few people could afford to buy their accommodation outright from income. The urban working class moved frequently and generally over quite short distances. As Common was later to recall: "At that time [1900s] people were always moving. There were houses to let everywhere" (Byrne and Darner, 1980, p. 67)

In large towns in England and Wales, the ordinary holding of the working class was a weekly tenancy, though monthly and quarterly tenancies were not uncommon amongst the better paid and more regularly employed. Middle-class households often held yearly leases, whereas so-called 'occupation lease. (Kemp, 1982, pp 1437-8)

Housing in Edmonton 1880-1930¹

Leonard Robinson and the Philpott family each settled in Edmonton around the time it was undergoing rapid development. Originally open fields within the county of Middlesex, it came to be seen as a future suburb of London. This was no doubt a reason why both migrated there. Being labourers and brickmakers there must have been employment opportunities as large estates of the landed gentry were gradually sold off for development. The Gates family and the Titchens also gravitated to Edmonton a little later.

Victorian estates of mass-housing were intended as state-of-the-art rented accommodation for the working-classes, with facilities that were modern at the time, close to shops and within walking distance of a school. The accommodation was small, but comfortable and the housing was very much in demand with long waiting lists. To avoid confusion if these mass-housing estates were being built today, we would call them 'affordable housing', but these houses were rented, not bought. Long blocks of houses were the norm for these mass-housing estates. The houses were terraced, i.e. all joined together, and the roads were laid out on a grid, all straight unless there was good reason for the occasional curve. These estates developed over time as the experience of the Huxley Estate shows. On the Huxley Estate, building started in the late 1800s and went on into the early 1900s. The Huxley Estate in Edmonton was owned by various trusts which took care of the outside maintenance. The same was probably true of similar estates. The rest of the Huxley estate, including the farm and fields north of Hedge Lane and east of Great Cambridge Road, was sold in lots in 1930-32 and built up shortly afterwards. Residents rented their houses, and, in time, were able to buy them. When the Trust which owned the Huxley Estate was wound up in the early 1970s, all were offered to purchase their homes as sitting tenants. (Source: <https://www.1900s.org.uk/1900s-victorian-terraces.htm>).

Ughtred James Kay-Shuttleworth gave a detailed speech in the House of Commons in 1874 on the dwellings of working people in London.

¹ Material here is developed from the websites www.british-history.ac.uk/vch/middx/vol5 and www.1900s.org.uk.

Sources

- Byrne D. & Darner S. (1980) "The state, the balance of class forces, and early working-class housing legislation". *Political Economy of Housing Workshop Housing, Construction and the State Political Economy of Housing Workshop*, London, pp 63-70
- DoE, (1977) "Housing Policy Review: Technical Volume, Part III" *Department of Environment* (HMSO, London)
- Kay- Shuttleworth, Ughtred James and Waterlow Sydney (1874) *Dwellings of working people in London. Two Speeches Delivered in the House of Commons May 8, 1874* (<https://archive.org/details/dwellingsofworki00kays/page/34/mode/2up>)
- Kemp, P. (1982) "Housing landlordism in late nineteenth-century Britain", *Environment and Planning A*, vol:14, pp. 1437-1447
- Morris, S. (2001) "Market Solutions for Social Problems: Working-Class Housing in Nineteenth-Century London", *The Economic History Review*, Vol. 54, No. 3 (Aug., 2001), pp. 525- 545.