

# 100 Years of Council Housing in Brighton & Hove 1919 - 2019

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Brighton & Hove University of the Third Age

Local History Group

# Social Housing in Brighton before 1919

Brighton (and to a lesser extent Hove) had long been an area with a large number of poor people who could not afford decent housing.

In 1795 – The Percy Almshouses were built for six widows, in Lewes Road, by the Level and Elm Grove

In 1859 – the Wagner Almshouses were added to the Percy building

Reports by Edward Cresy in 1848 and Dr Wm Kebbell in 1849 (Inspectors for the General Board of Health) painted sombre portraits of life in Brighton's slums, and Kebbell set up a charitable trust to build 'Model Dwellings For the Poor' in Church Street and Clarence Yard in the early 1860s.

# The Percy and Wagner Almshouses, 1795 and 1859





Kebbell's  
Model  
Dwellings  
in Church  
Street and  
Clarence  
Yard,  
1860s



# The Revd Arthur Wagner and others

Between 1870 and 1895, it is estimated that the Revd Arthur Wagner, Vicar of St Paul's Church, spent around £40,000 building houses for the poorer people of Brighton. That is equivalent to about £3.5 mn today. Most of these houses were along the lower slopes and streets of what is now Hanover, and also between Lewes Road and Upper Lewes Road, where his churches of The Annunciation and St Martins now stand.

The 'working classes' were heavily dependent upon philanthropists such as Wagner and others to provide decent accommodation at affordable prices.

# Slum clearances

Brighton had long been notorious for its slums, particularly in the Pimlico and Carlton Hill areas.

The town did arrange for some early clearances – notably around Air Street in the 1840s, Pimlico in the 1870s and St James's Street in the 1890s, but they were not replaced with 'social' housing.

Instead, they were purchased by developers who then replaced the slums with fashionable residences.

So, those displaced by slum clearances inevitably found themselves moving to other slums.



Before -  
Pimlico in  
the 1870s



After –  
St James's  
Avenue, built  
in 1899 on a  
slum clearance  
area

# The 1890 and 1900 Housing Acts

Various attempts had been made at legislating to solve the problem of poor housing. Everyone recognised that private enterprise could not supply the deficiency of suitable housing for the working class, and slum clearances only aggravated the problem.

The only solution was seen as being direct assistance by the Exchequer, and a national subsidy to aid private builders and local authorities.

In the 1890 Act the case for council subsidisation of housing was openly declared, if still not generally accepted. But this and the 1900 Act were still only 'permissive' and not 'mandatory'.

# Impact of these Acts

The 'Housing of the Working Classes Act' of 1890 empowered local authorities to buy land for this purpose, and councils were permitted to build houses themselves, but it was hardly encouraged. It applied specifically to the LCC in London, but was occasionally used elsewhere.

The Housing Act of 1900 extended this power to all boroughs and allowed them to purchase land for this purpose outside their boundaries.

It is estimated that, by 1914, around 24,000 council houses had been built in England, of which around 10,000 were in London. They varied from 'garden' estates, to blocks of tenements.

# How Brighton Borough Council Reacted

At the turn of the century, Brighton Borough Council, using the new powers of the 1890 Act, built its first council houses in St Helen's Road, off Elm Grove and opposite the Workhouse (now the General Hospital).

They used land gifted to them by Henry Abbey and Daniel Friend in 1897 in honour of Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee, and the houses were first let in 1900 for 7/6d a week.

Hove Borough, which did not have the same problems of slum housing, waited until the Addison Act of 1919 changed the ground rules.



St Helen's Road in 1901 – a prime location, just opposite the Workhouse! – and far removed from other residences



St  
Helen's  
Road  
today –  
where some  
houses  
bought  
under the  
'Right to  
Buy' now sell  
for over  
£370,000.

# The future design of low-cost housing

Following the success of Garden Cities such as Letchworth (1903-06), the (national) Local Government Board recommended that ‘cottages for the working classes’ should be built with wider frontages and grouped around open spaces which would form recreation grounds, that they should have three bedrooms, a large living-room, a scullery fitted with a bath and a separate WC to each house with access under cover.

The comparison between that ideal and the actual living conditions in Brighton at that time is striking . . .



“The  
Ideal” -  
Letchworth  
Garden  
City, 1903

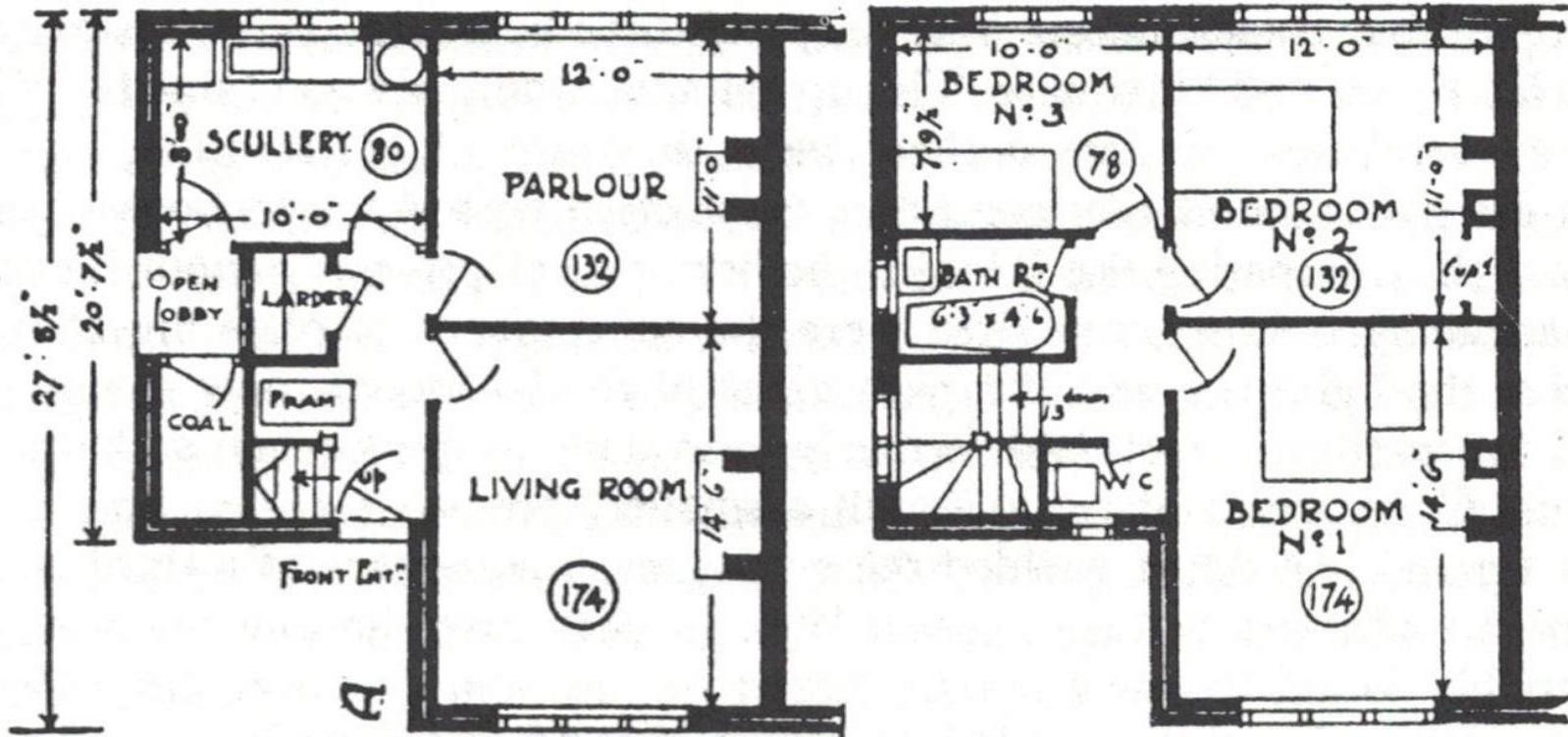
Reality – Brighton in 1912 looked like this: Leicester St and Sun St



# The Tudor Walters Report of 1918

Against the background of a predominantly Victorian inheritance, the recommendations of the Tudor Walters Committee on the standards of post-war local authority housing were revolutionary, being a major innovation in social policy and in the future character of working-class life.

The report recommended no more than 12 houses to the acre, with many culs-de-sac and green areas, with each house being guaranteed sunlight in winter, and of not covering large areas with houses all of one kind accommodating tenants all of the same social class. The report was clear that a third living-room, or parlour, should become the norm.



Ground Floor Plan.

First Floor Plan.

(Reproduced by permission of the Controller of H.M. Stationery Office.)

12 Tudor Walters influence. Parlour type three-bedroom semi-detached houses, designed by Ministry of Health c 1920 for local authorities. Living room 14ft 6in  $\times$  12ft (4.4  $\times$  3.7m), Parlour 12ft  $\times$  11ft (3.7  $\times$  3.4m), Scullery 10ft  $\times$  8ft (3.0  $\times$  2.4m), Bedrooms also correspond to these sizes. From *The Houses of the Workers* by A. Sayle, published by Fisher, Unwin in 1928.

A Tudor  
Walters  
design (B3)

# The concept of suburban estates

Not surprisingly, the planned density of 'Tudor Walters' housing was much lower than that of the slums they were designed to replace.

The Report intended to give a particular stamp to the character of Local Authority housing, almost always in new, low-density suburban estates, which at the time was accepted unquestioningly as the best and natural way of housing the urban working classes.

At the time, little thought was given to the cost of travel, or the length of time it would take for the new residents to commute to their work in the town centres, often by walking.

# Homes for Heroes

At the same time, the Government was concerned that those returning from the war would be angered at the shortage of reasonable housing, and the fear of Bolshevism was everywhere. All parties were greatly concerned.

A massive housing programme, with greatly improved standards, came to be seen as the most important part of the policy to combat social unrest, a symbolic centre-piece which would visibly demonstrate the commitment to welfare – in short to provide Homes for Heroes.

Addison's Housing and Town Planning Act of 1919 mandated local authorities to survey the needs of their areas for housing within three months, and then to make and carry out plans for the provision of the houses needed. Any costs not met by an extra penny on the rates would be met by the Treasury – a remarkable innovation.

# Brighton, and Hove, in 1921

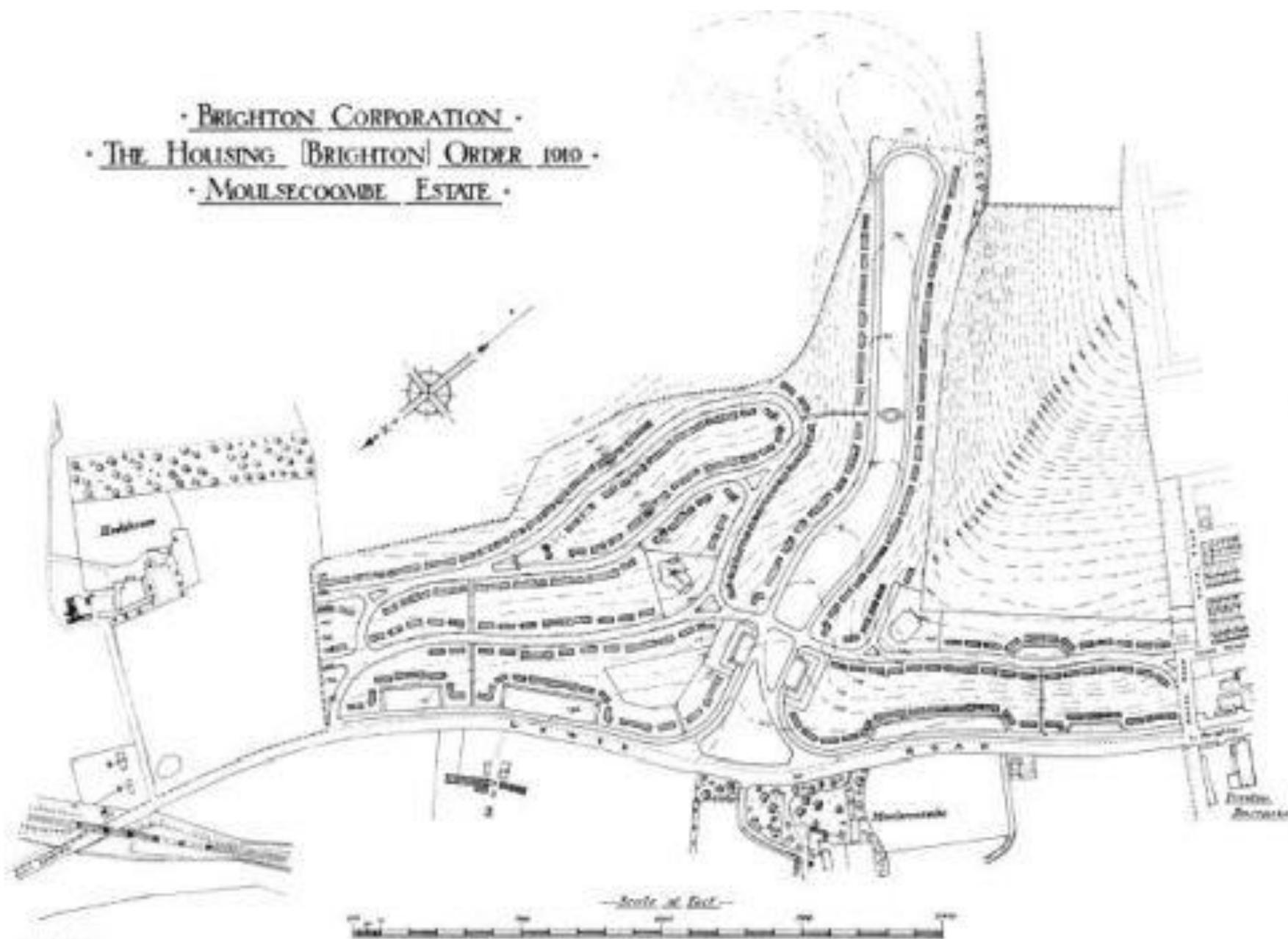
In 1921 Brighton was recorded as the most densely populated County Borough in the country with the sole exception of West Ham. The need for new housing was immense.

The first large-scale developments were made at Moulsecoomb and at Queens Park / Pankhurst Avenue in the early 1920s.

At this time the land for the first Moulsecoomb development lay outside the town boundary in Patcham Parish. 94 acres were sold by Patcham to Brighton Council in November 1920, and then annexed to Brighton Borough Council in 1923.

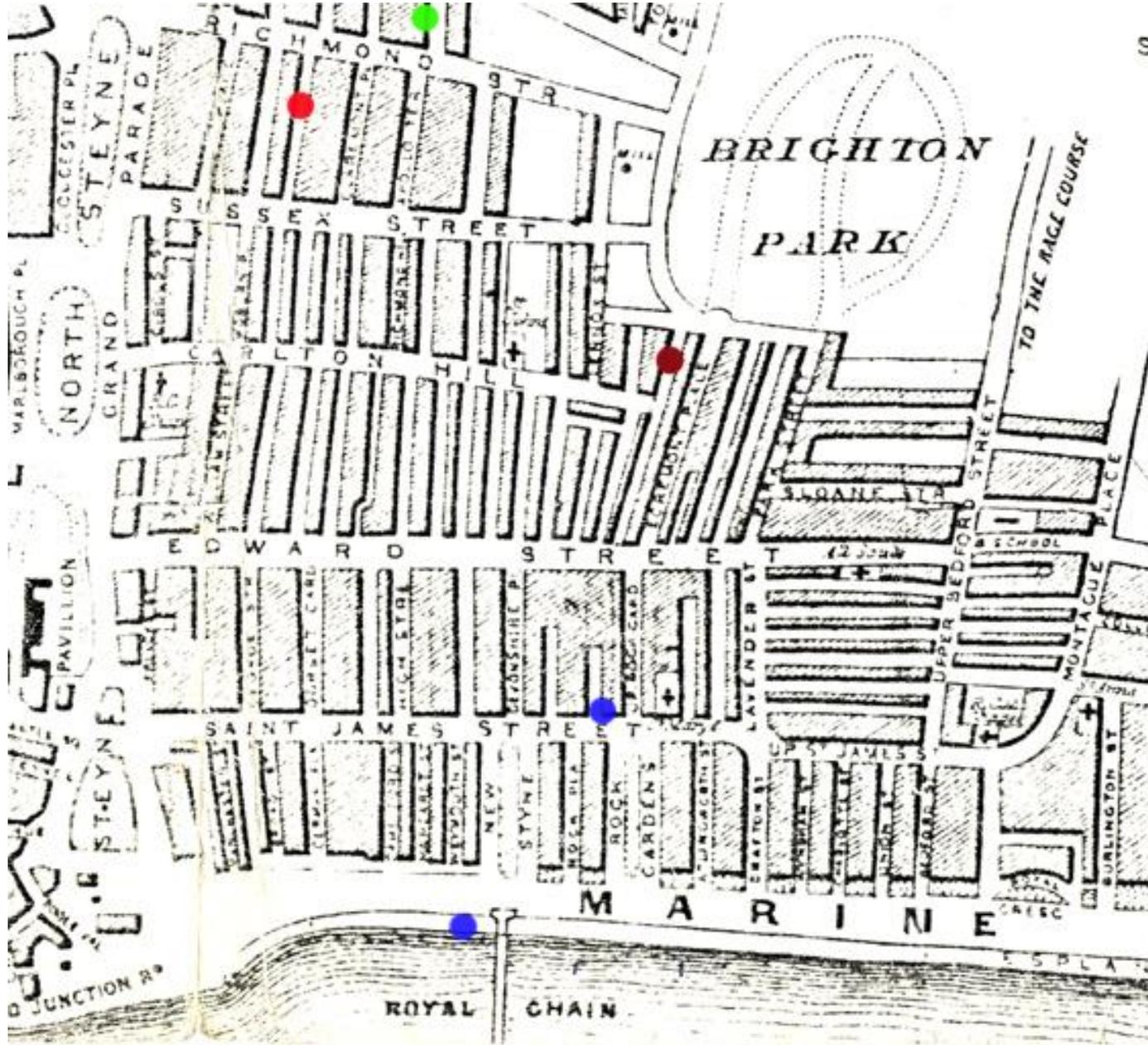
The original estate covered The Avenue, The Crescent, The Highway, Hillside, Southall Avenue and part of Natal Road

• BRIGHTON CORPORATION •  
• THE HOUSING (BRIGHTON) ORDER 1910 •  
• MOULSECOOMBE ESTATE •



Archd. W. B. B. Esq.

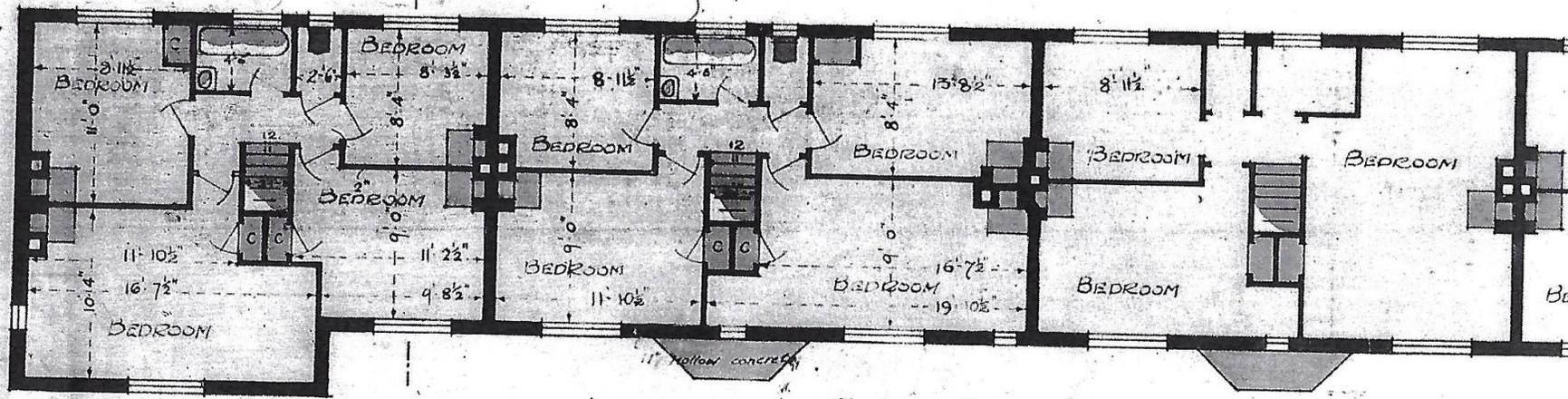
BRIGHTON



And what it sought  
to replace - the  
Carlton Hill area  
(Prudden's Map of  
1860)



Two houses in  
The Avenue,  
Moulsecoomb  
today

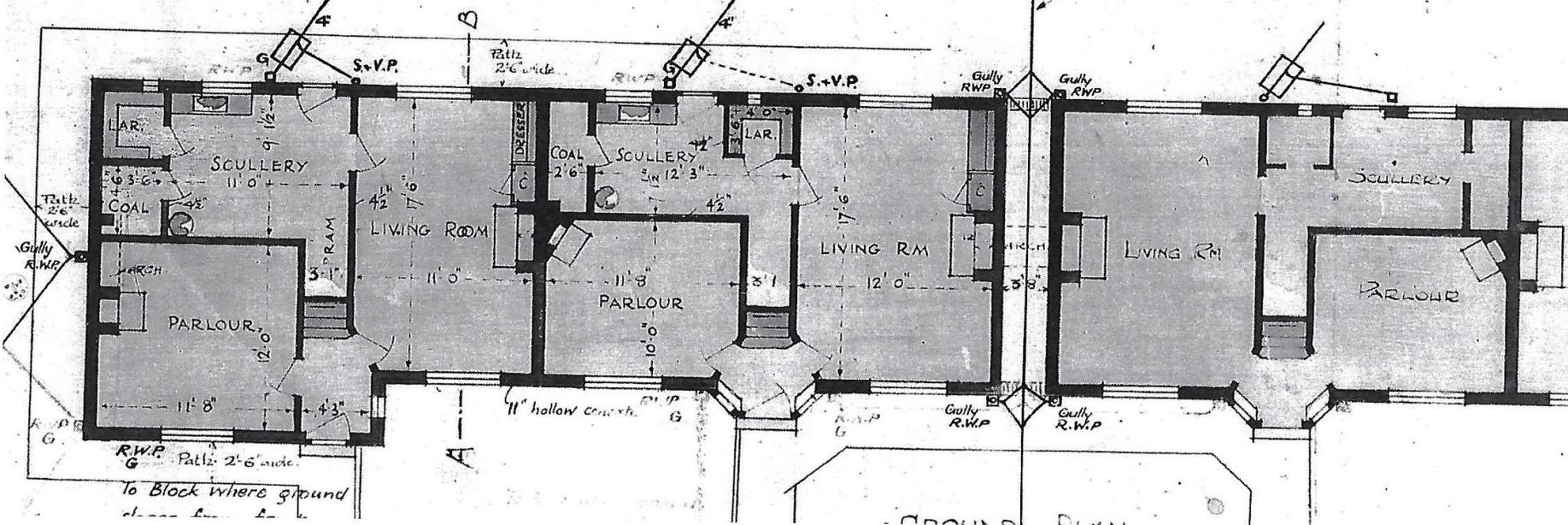


FIRST FLOOR PLAN.

Floor plans  
for houses at  
Moulsecomb

Soakaway  
To Block where ground  
slopes from back.

Soakaway  
To Block where ground  
slopes from back



To Block where ground  
slopes from back

GROUND FLOOR PLAN.

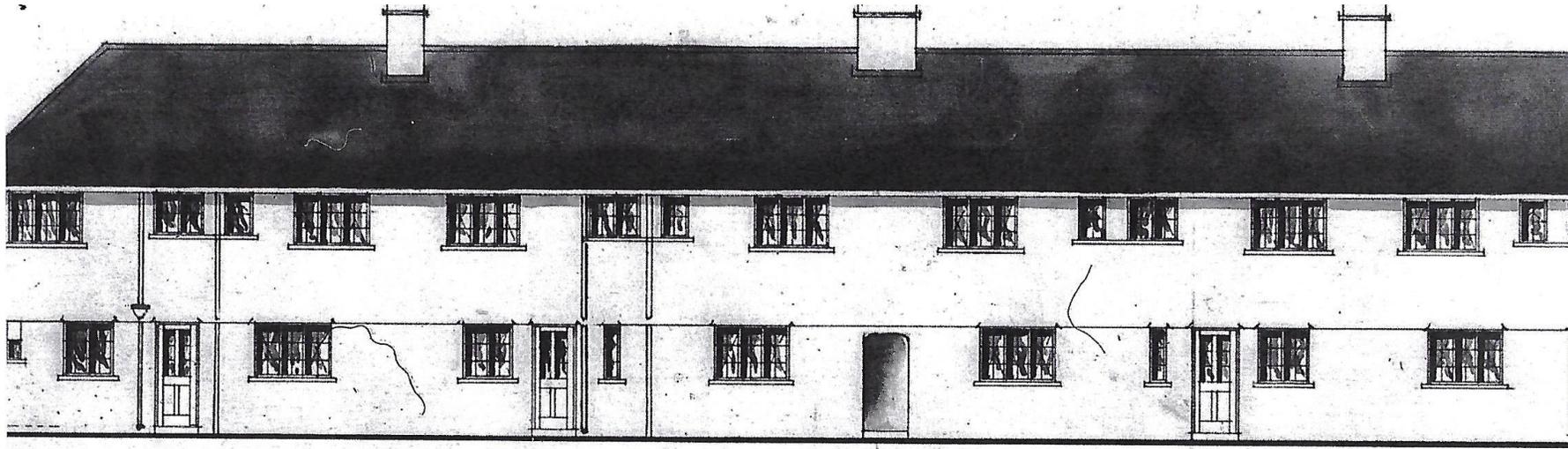
# But . . .

Although this was a model garden estate with large open spaces and two-storey semi-detached houses with large gardens, it failed in its main purpose.

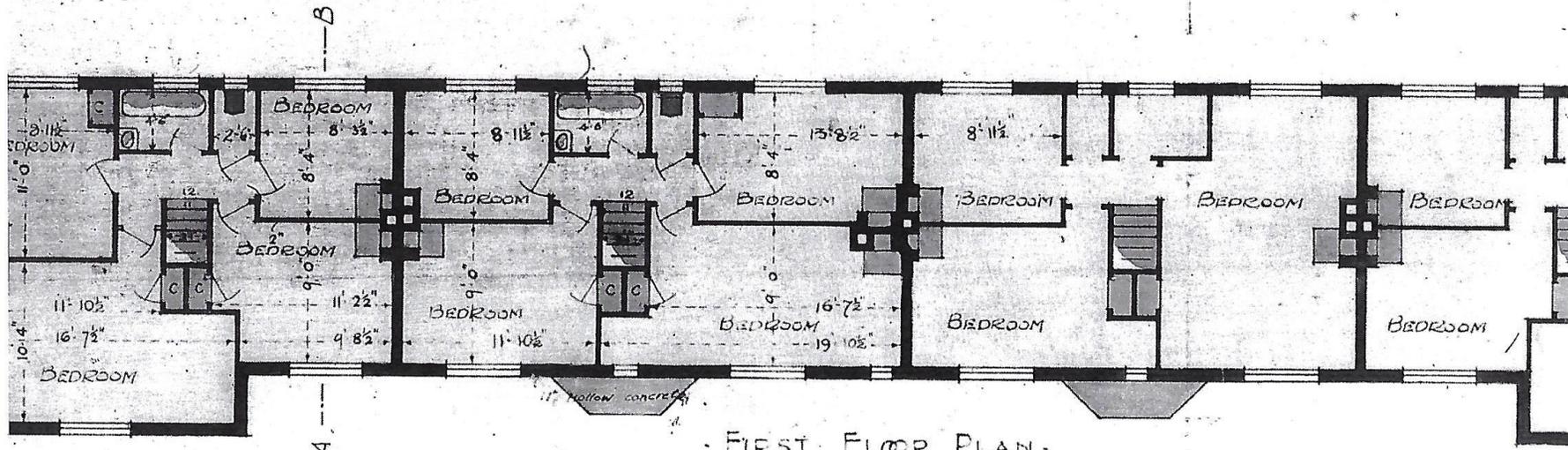
Its original 478 houses were meant to provide new homes for people in the proposed slum clearance areas of Albion Hill, but the rents that needed to be charged were too prohibitive – they ranged from 26s to 32s 6d a week, compared to 7s or 8s a week in Carlton Hill – and the bus fares to town added to the cost, as the distance from workplaces was too great for walking. As a result, the Council resorted to advertising for tenants from London and elsewhere.

The other early development, in the Pankhurst Road area, was more successful





- BACK ELEVATION -



- FIRST FLOOR PLAN -

Soakaway  
T. Bl... ..

ground

Floor plans for  
similar houses  
at  
Moulsecomb

# The 1923 Housing Act

Despite the Addington Acts, the housing shortfall, estimated at 600,000 in 1918, had grown to more than 800,000 by 1921, and Brighton was only just getting into its stride with its new estates.

The 'Geddes Axe' of 1921 removed the 1919 subsidies.

And then the Conservative victory of 1923 under Bonar Law and then Baldwin replaced the Liberal government of Lloyd George and led to a new Housing Act fronted by Neville Chamberlain. It saw a complete reversal of the Addington Act, by encouraging private developers rather than Local Councils, and by reducing the size and cost of new houses. It encouraged ownership rather than renting.

# The 1924 Wheatley Housing Act

Ramsay Macdonald's short-lived Labour Government of 1924 produced another reversal. Its Act's primary purpose was to restore the local authorities to their position as house-providers, and to encourage them to greater activity by higher subsidies and the promise of a long-term housing programme.

This time, Baldwin's second government did not overturn the new act and it remained in operation until 1933.

It is generally regarded as the most successful inter-war act and led to the building of 493,000 council properties across the country.

# Meanwhile, Hove was starting from scratch

The Government required Hove (and Brighton) to survey their towns to find the number of houses which could be turned into flats “or tenements for the working classes”

Hove’s Buildings Committee’s notes said: “It appears that most of the empty houses were larger residential . . . , situate in Palmeira Square, or localities of that character. “

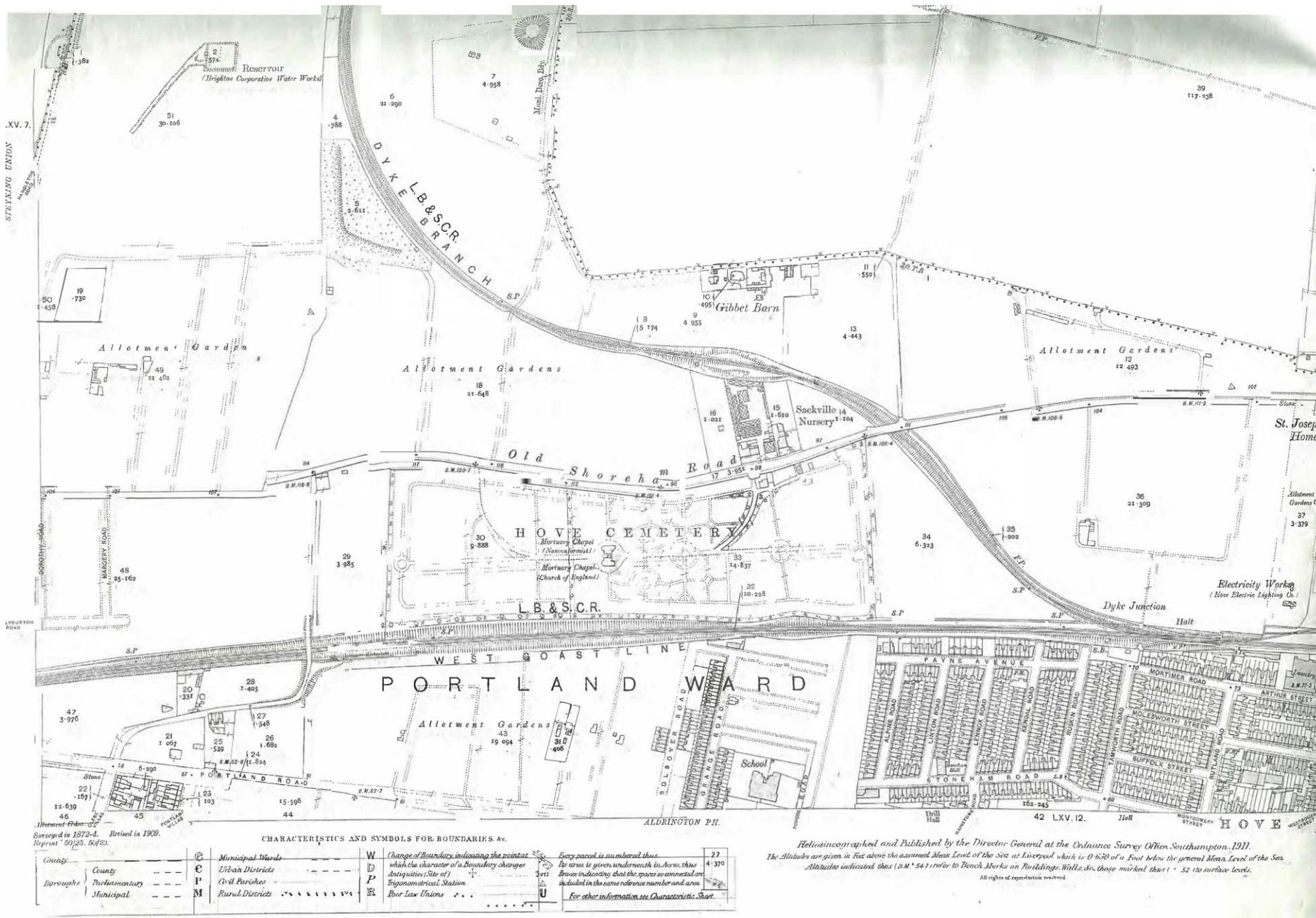
“These were not suitable” they said

“There are no houses in the borough at present which would be suitable for conversion”

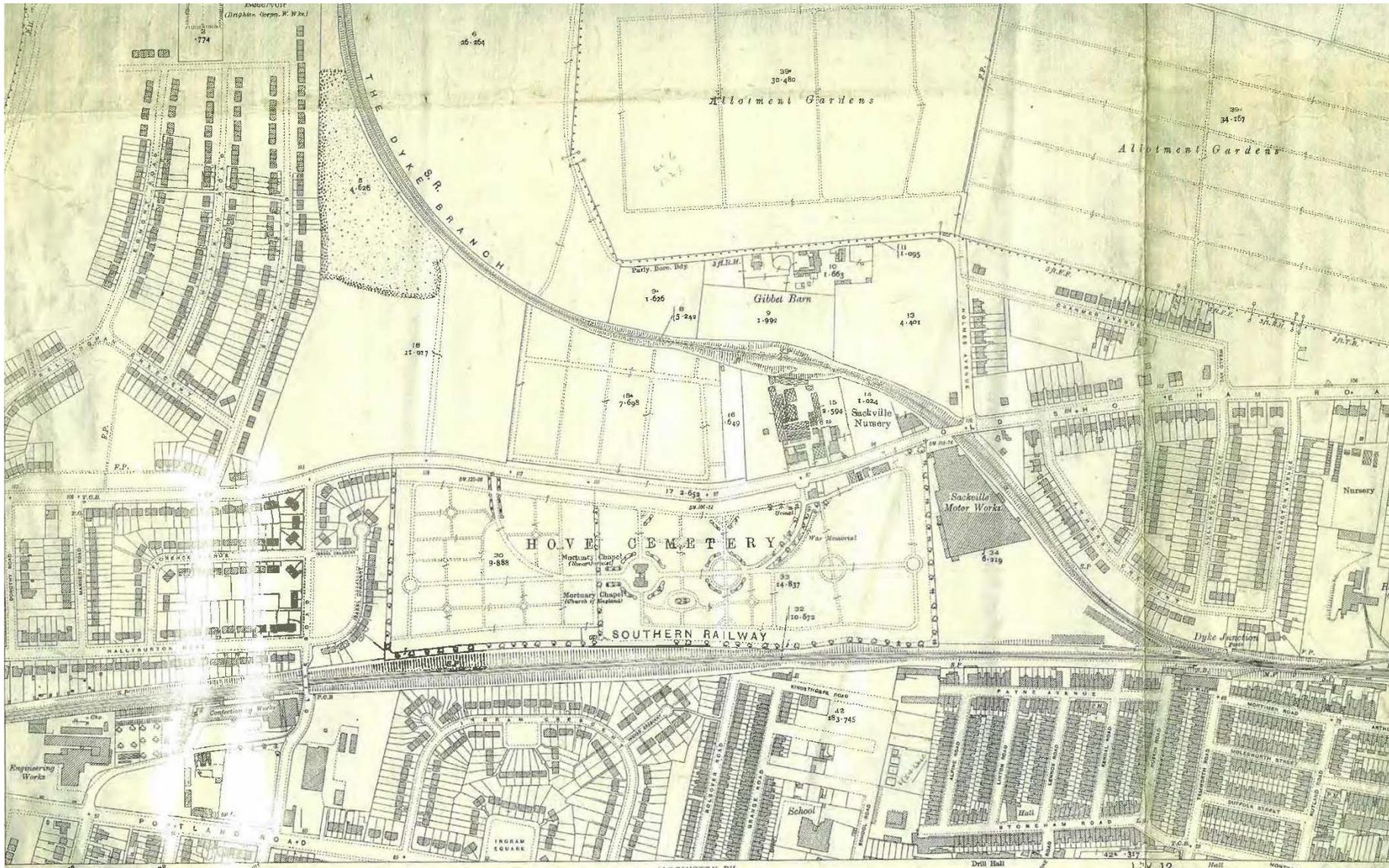
The first meeting of Hove's Housing Committee, on August 8<sup>th</sup> 1919, noted that:

- Progress with the Housing Scheme ... a site of 15 acres had been acquired between the railway and the Old Shoreham Road
- An agreed price of £7,025 (payable by a loan)
- A layout plan had been produced
- A plan for 45 houses: with living room, 3 bedrooms, scullery, bathroom
- 80 houses: as above, but with an additional parlour
- 20 houses: living room, 4 bedrooms, scullery, bathroom
- 5 shops with rooms over.
- Plus some flats, with a living room, 3 other rooms, scullery, bathroom
- and some smaller two bedroom houses

# The identified site, off the Old Shoreham Road



Helio-copied and Published by the Director General at the Ordnance Survey Office Southampton, 1911.  
 The Altitudes are given in Feet above the assumed Mean Level of the Sea at Liverpool which is 0 620 of a Foot below the general Mean Level of the Sea.  
 Altitudes indicated thus (B.M. 547) refer to Bench Marks on Buildings, Walls, &c. those marked thus ( ) 52 1/2 to surface level.  
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And as developed as the Ingram Crescent Estate; and later the Knoll Estate

Surveyed in 1872-4. Revised in 1909.  
 Existing Revised 1908.  
 10082. 3040.

County		Borough		Municipal	
C	County	C	County	M	Municipal
U	Urban Districts	P	Parishes		
R	Rural Districts				

**CHARACTERISTICS AND SYMBOLS FOR BOUNDARIES, &c.**

W	Change of Boundary, indicating the point at which the character of a Boundary changes.	27
D	Antiquities (Site of)	4.370
P	Trigonometrical Station	
R		

Every parcel is numbered thus: 15 249. Its area is given underneath in Acres, and Brackets indicating that the spaces so connected are included in the same reference number and area.

**65.8**

The Altitudes of Bench Marks and surface heights are given in Feet above the mean level of the sea, and in the figures shown in this plan only and is only approximate to actual information on application.

Altitudes indicated thus (88. & 34.7) refer to bench marks on buildings, walls, &c. The marked (-) preceded or followed by the height in surface levels.

Note.—To convert Decimal parts of an Acre into Rods and Perches, multiply by 4, this will give Rods and Decimals of a Rod, multiply this Decimal by 40 this obtaining Perches and Decimals of a Perch.

N.B.—The representation on this map of a Road, Track, or Footpath, has no evidence of the existence of a right of way.

# Ingram Crescent – some of the original designs



# The Hove minutes give evidence of the need

- “One Constable, his wife and 2 sons reside in rooms over a garage” for which he had been made an order to quit. Another, with a wife, 3 boys and 3 girls reside in “3 rooms over stables. The roof is bad, in wet weather they are only able to use 1 bedroom for the 8 persons”. Pays 10/- a week.
- Of the tenants for the first 16 flats built, all bar 2 were ex-servicemen. Present accommodation - “3 sleep in 1 bed, wife died of consumption”; “Husband in Navy”. One of the tenants selected was under notice of eviction from his current dwelling, and was given the first house.
- The list of tenants for the next 6 flats include “6 or 7 sleep in one room”; “Husband has TB”; “No convenience”
- There was a suggestion to build an additional 20 houses at a cost of £11,262. At the completion of the first scheme of 63 houses, there were 160 applicants that could not get tenancies and this number was now 200. “The cttee are of the opinion that there still exists a very great demand for housing accommodation in the borough”.

# Hove even looked at using ex-army huts for dwellings

The Council looked at providing “hutments” (ex army huts) to meet the more pressing need for accommodation.

Eastbourne Council had reported that 81 huts had been purchased at a cost of £10,000 and been converted into houses at cost of £50 each and rented for 7/6 a week.

There was a suggestion of using the ex-military huts from Shoreham camp and Portslade.

There were 35 huts in use at Portslade, and Hove Council said they could be subdivided into two, being 60 foot long. This would cost £250 per hut, and give an income of 15/ a week.

1919 huts, similar to the pre-fabs of the 1950s



# Not everyone in Hove approved!

The “Middle Classes Union” wrote objecting to the schemes.

In August 1922 a Motion was put by Cllr Bull: “no more houses to be built for the working classes.” But the Motion was defeated!

Hove actually defined the term ‘working class’:

“The expression working class includes mechanics, artisans, labourers and others working for wages, hawkers and costermongers, persons working at some trade or handicraft without employing others, except members of their own families, and persons (other than domestic servants) whose income does not exceed £3 a week.”

There were to be no single people houses, no lodgers were allowed, but two sisters were allowed to share a house. All things being equal preference would be given to people who gave up their homes to join the forces.

# Could more have been done?!

The National Federation of Building Trades Operatives complained to Hove Borough Council “of the apathy and indifference of the council to the need for working class dwellings and urging the necessity of proceeding with all possible speed”. This letter was “ordered to lie on the table” – i.e. ‘we’ll think about it’.

# No lodgers, sheds, chickens or rabbits in Hove!

- Tenants could not erect, sheds, greenhouses, fowl houses or other buildings. They were not allowed to paint, paper or drive nails into walls. Gardens must be kept clean and orderly with only flowers in the front gardens. There were to be no lodgers, no keeping of shops, nor laundries.
- In flats, stairs had to be swept daily before 10 am and washed every Saturday. NO carpets or mats were to be beaten or shaken from windows, and children were not to play on the stairs.

(Later, after researching practice in other towns, they relaxed the prohibition on subletting/lodgers, as it could not be enforced, citing the example of Eastbourne which gave permits for subletting).

# By the mid-20s, Brighton & Hove had run out of suitable land for housing development

In 1873, Brighton had grown with the addition of Preston Parish, but now almost all potential land for housing development had been used up. Only the large allotment area on the steep slopes either side of Whitehawk Hill remained.

So, culminating in 1928, the town came to an arrangement to amalgamate with the parishes of Rottingdean, Ovingdean and Patcham to become 'Greater Brighton'. It now had room for more council housing.

At the same time Hove, (which had merged with Aldrington in 1894), also merged with Hangleton and West Blatchington in 1928.

# Greater Brighton 1928

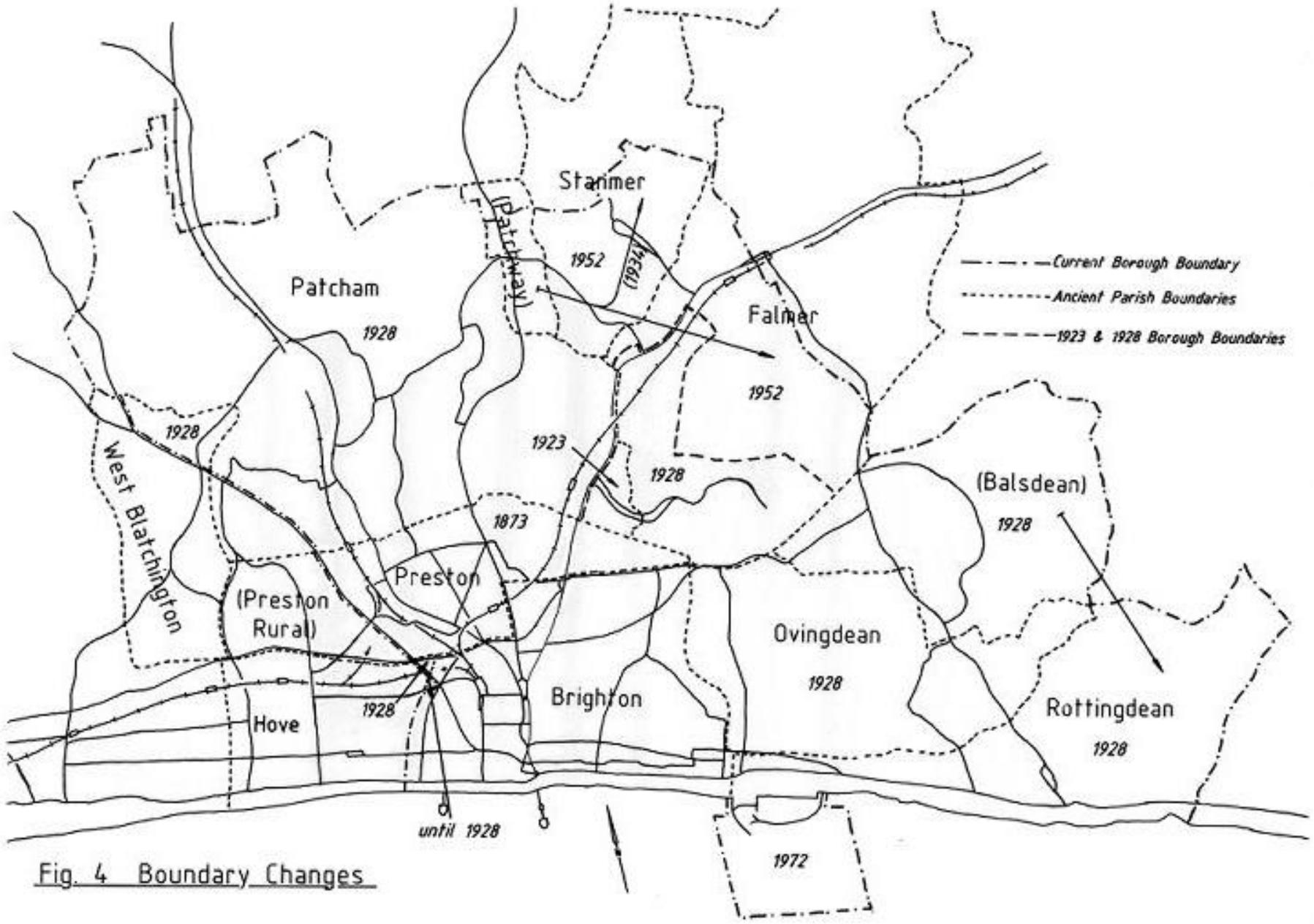


Fig. 4 Boundary Changes

# Brighton now had much more land to play with!

There was now a major planned extension of Council Housing into:

- Expansion of Queens Park Estate, 1925-1935
- Expansion of Moulsecoomb, 1925-1939
- Whitehawk, 1925-1939
- Bevendean, 1930-1934
- Albion Hill, 1931-1935
- Coldean, 1935-1939
- Manor Farm Estate, 1935-1939

# Little development occurred near the centre of Brighton

The period 1920-1933 saw Brighton try to solve its problem of overcrowding in the slum districts by building relatively expensive houses in the outer suburbs, but even some of those who were tempted to 'emigrate' to Whitehawk or Moulsecoomb, returned to the cheaper slums where their work and their friends were.

The one exception was the development of the Milner and Kingswood flats in 1934, in the middle of the Albion Hill area where there had been extensive slum clearance.

The next large blocks would not be seen until the 1960s.

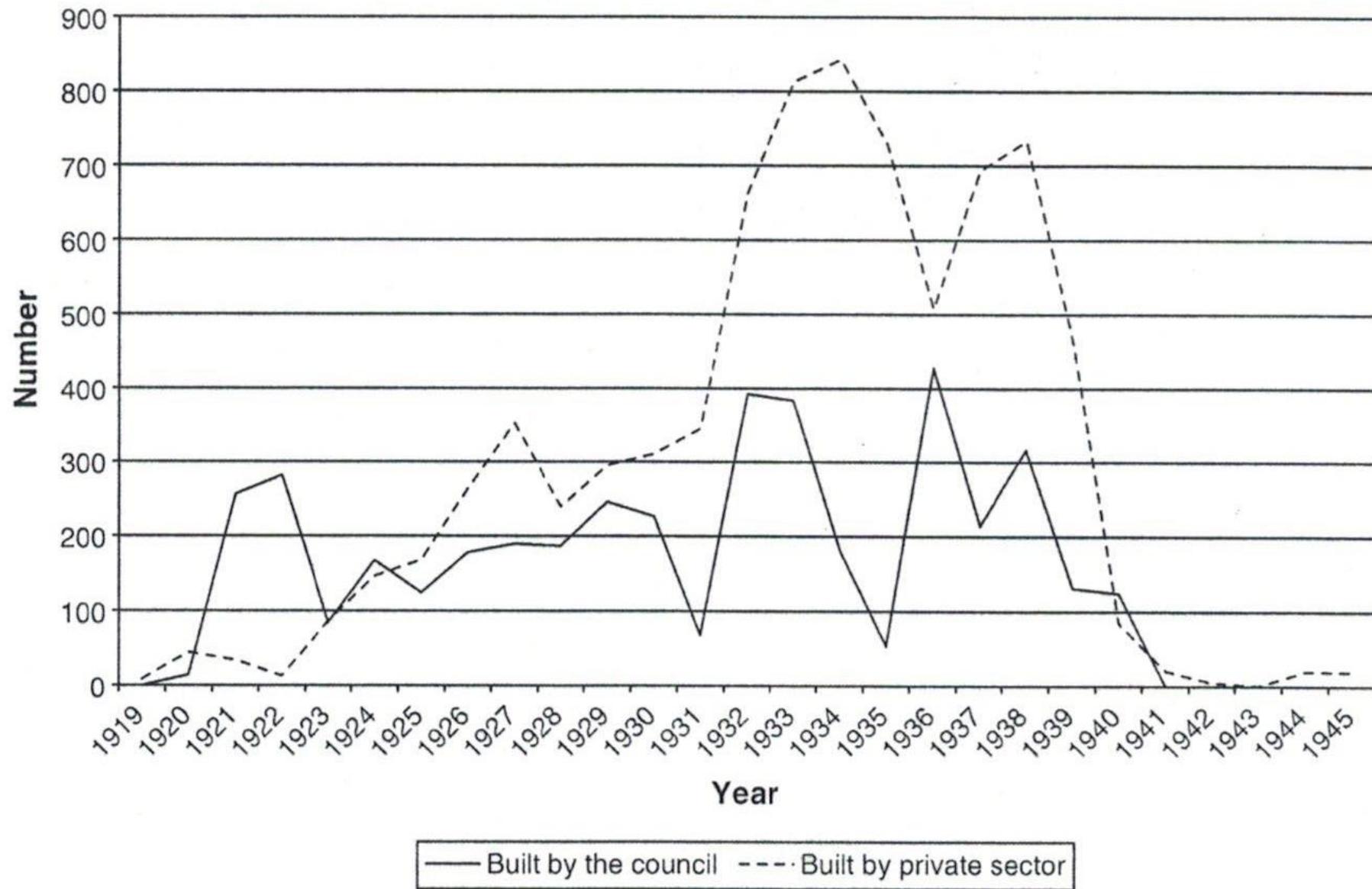
While Hove and Portslade expanded too at this time

The Ingram Estate was developed in the early 1920s

The Knoll Estate, 1926-28

North and East Hangleton, 1930s

But nothing substantial in Portslade in the inter-war years – not quite sure where their ‘hutments’ were placed!



Houses built  
in Brighton  
1919-1945  
(maximum in  
any one year -  
400)

*Source:* Annual reports of the medical officer of health (Brighton, 1919-1945)

*Note:* Private sector figures include gains made from flat conversions

# After the War, the Government continued with more Housing Acts

1947 The Town and Country Planning Act gave councils the ability to purchase land compulsorily and redevelop it

1964 The Housing Act set up the Housing Corporation to assist housing associations and compelled councils to ensure that all their properties had standard amenities

1980 The Housing Act gave permission to five million council house tenants to buy their houses from the council. By 1995, 2.1 million had been sold, with 85% of the receipts going to the Treasury.

Today, it has been estimated that of the 6.5 million 'social' housing units in 1980, some 4.5 million have been sold or let leasehold.

# Post-war developments

Brighton continued to push ahead with new council estates, and expanding existing ones:

Hollingbury, 1946-1964

Hollingdean, 1950s

Bates Estate, 1950s

Woodingdean , 1950s

Craven Vale, 1950s

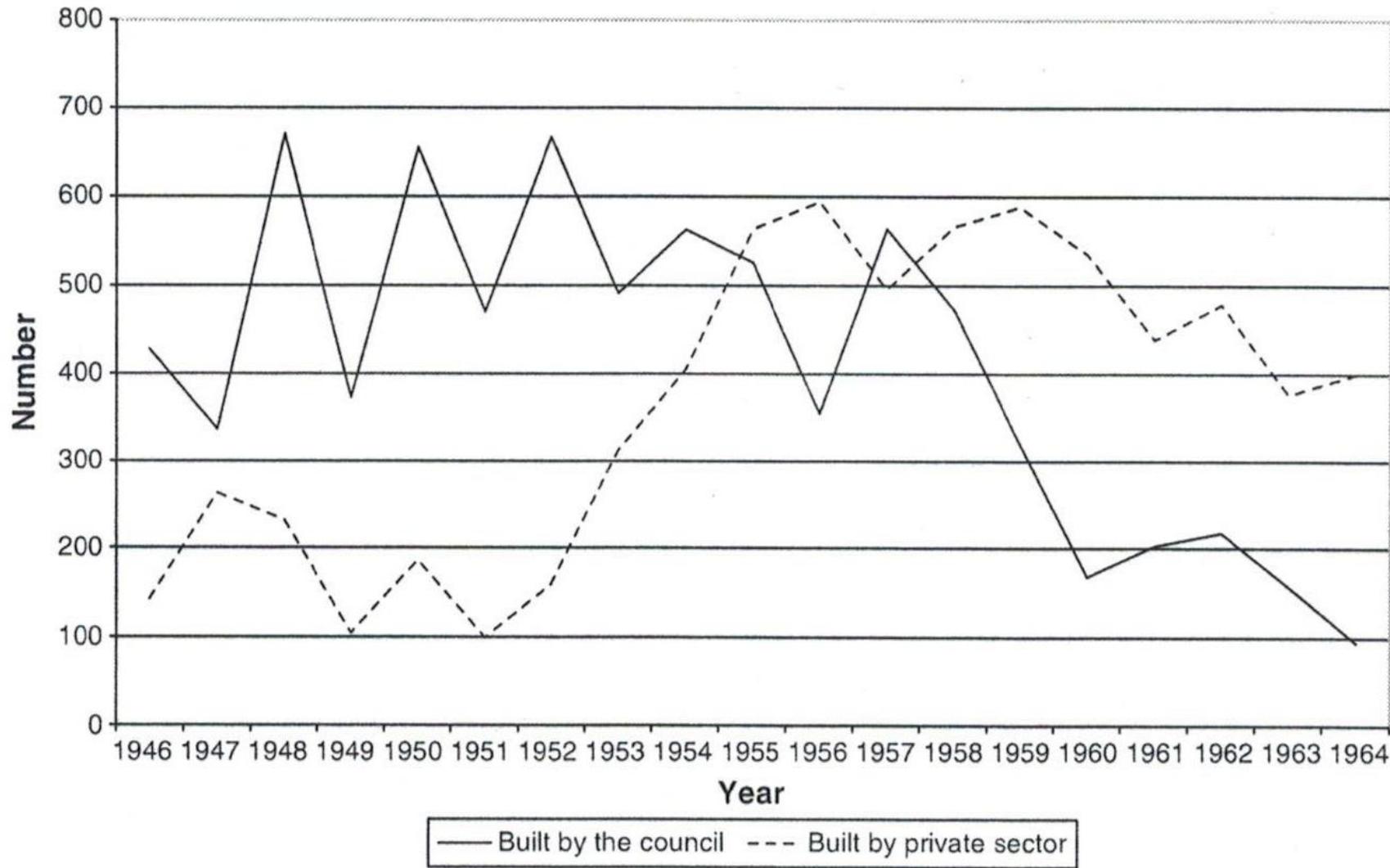
Bristol Estate, 1950s

Eastern Road, 1960s

South Hollingdean, 1960s

Albion Hill, 1960s

While, in Portslade, Mile Oak was developed in the 1960s



Source: Annual reports of the medical officer of health (Brighton, 1946–1964)

Figure 7  
 New houses and flats built by the council and private builders in Brighton, 1946–64.

Houses built  
 in Brighton  
 1945 – 1964  
 (maximum in any one  
 year - 670)

No figures have been  
 found for 1964 to  
 1980, but there were  
 substantial numbers of  
 flats built off Eastern  
 Road, in north  
 Whitehawk and in  
 south Hollingdean in  
 the later 1960s. But  
 hardly anything since.

# And the future?

Following the 'Right to buy' legislation enacted under Margaret Thatcher in 1980, all councils were required to sell properties to sitting tenants at substantial discounts; but were not allowed to keep the proceeds, which went to central government. As a result, councils were starved of the funds necessary to build more council houses, and very few have been built until recently. The shortfall was not made up by private builders or not-for-profit housing associations.

In the 1970's 42% of the nation lived in council housing – today the figure is just 8%, largely due to 'right to buy'

But - at last – permission has been given to councils to re-start the building of council housing, and Brighton & Hove are taking full advantage of this relaxation by planning to build 400 more units.



Council  
housing of  
the future –  
Kite Place