

London Borough of Lewisham Local History and Archives Centre

Info Byte Sheet No. 25

History of Downham

Until the 1920s, there were no houses in Downham, only in 1890s there was a rifle range near Rangefield Road and farmland much of it belonging to Holloway and Shroffolds Farms. After World War I the inner-city boroughs of Deptford and Bermondsey and the London County Council [LCC] recognised the need for additional housing to relieve overcrowding and offer a higher standard of accommodation than that provided by private landlords. It needed to be close enough to places of work to allow easy daily travel. During the war there had been little house building and there was a desire to reward returning veterans and their families with a higher standard of living. (Also there was a fear of social unrest if such a provision was made.)



Farmland, Downham, Lewisham, c.1880

The immediate catalyst for the LCC to start the development was legislation of 1923 that provided a subsidy to local authorities building houses. In 1920-23 the LCC bought the nearly 600 acres of farmland between Catford and Bromley by compulsory purchase, in order to build a new housing estate there. Holland and Hannan and Cubitts, one of the biggest building firms in the country were engaged as the contractor. Because there was plenty of land available, most of the dwellings were two-storey houses with gardens rather than flats and provided 7000 new homes for a population of 29,000. A narrow gauge railway from nearby Grove Park provided transport for the huge amount of materials needed. In keeping with LCC policy the estate was mainly built from brick, with a small-scale experiments using other building materials. Cost forced the LCC to build to a lower standard of finish to that initially planned. Despite this, the facilities in Downham were better than those left behind by the vast majority of residents. A significant part of the initiative for the scheme had come from the boroughs of Deptford and Bermondsey and they secured a commitment that 10% of residents should come from those boroughs. Mostly though, the LCC was keen for reliable tenants that could meet the fairly hefty initial rents of 12 shillings (60p) per week. Many were skilled or semi-skilled manual workers or those in clerical occupations. Transport towards London was available on



Downham Estate Under Construction, Downham, Lewisham, c.1925

trains from Grove Park or trams from Southend.

It was named Downham after the Chairman of the LCC, Lord Downham - the name was very appropriate because Downham means 'the village on the hill'. And is the third largest of the eight cottage type estates the LCC built on the outskirts of London in the 1920s. Most of the estate is in the London Borough of Lewisham, with a small part being in the London Borough of Lewisham. Not everyone stayed, there was dissatisfaction with the slow arrival of shops and social facilities; some returned to inner

London for the convenience of work and others because they disliked the dislocation from a familiar environment. The disadvantage of being so far from central London was that many breadwinners had a very long journey to work. A tram lane was included in the main road, and there was an all-night tram service.

The names of many of the roads, and of Malory School, are taken from the legends of King Arthur but it is not known why these were chosen.

Downham Library opened in June 1937, the Swimming baths was opened by the Mayor of Lewisham on the



Durham Hill, Downham, Lewisham, 1978

Websites:

Ideal Homes <http://www.ideal-homes.org.uk/lewisham/main/downham.htm>

Downham History <http://www.downhamonline.org.uk/downham/past.htm>

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Splendid Cinema, Bromley Road, Downham, Lewisham, c.1930



Downham Public Library, 1959

18th June 1937 and the architect was Mr Wykes. The Library was damaged during World War 2, with the damage being repaired in 1958. In 1958 the library was reopened by Herbert Morrison MP.

The Swimming baths closed in the 1980s and demolished in 2000s. The new library, opened 12 March 2006 and included a leisure and health centre.