

HISTORY OF THE  
LONDON  
COUNTY COUNCIL  
1889 — 1939

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LONDON COUNTY COUNCIL

1889 - 1939

DEDICATED TO THE  
PEOPLE OF LONDON

## INTRODUCTION

THIS book has been written at the instance of the London County Council to commemorate its jubilee, but it is in no sense an official history. The authors alone are responsible for what it contains. In the main it is devoted to the narration of facts, but we have not hesitated to make comments, though naturally with less freedom than if the book had been a wholly private venture. Every great public body, apart from its record of activities, has an indefinable "character", which is felt by the man in the street but often misinterpreted by him. The Council is no exception from this rule and it has been one of our aims to dislodge the mask of inscrutability which still screens from so many a true understanding of the Council and its work. Allowance is seldom made for the real difficulties which beset its path and for the peculiar setting in which its labours are carried on; and the early influences which shaped its career and so long left their impress on some aspects of its public policy are generally forgotten, if they have been at all known. Even to-day the Council is for many rather an aloof body, inducing much less of the feeling of familiar intimacy than is present in most of the large provincial towns, although the impression of aloofness is less widely given now than formerly, owing to the close contact which has developed between the Council and individuals and families, especially through the school and medical services.

We have tried to give a faithful picture of the work of the Council and its development, and of the forces which have determined its course at various periods, and, without hiding faults, to do justice to its great achievements.

The history of the Council has many points of special interest, quite apart from its position as the governing body of the capital city and as one of the most

instructive examples of development in local government during the last half-century. It was the first county council in which business was conducted on party lines. In its early years it was largely ruled by an ardent group of reformers who raised many questions of far-reaching importance. London is in this country the only large city (for it is a city in fact, though a county in form) with two tiers of local authorities, and its history is particularly instructive as an experiment in the government of a huge urban agglomeration. Again, the Council's growth repays study from the point of view of business management alone, for it is one of the largest business concerns in the country, outstanding not only because of the great volume of its work but also because of the many different kinds of services which it performs. To these are added the further complication of management by an elected representative body. We have devoted particular attention to matters of this kind.

The general plan of the volume is first, in compliance with a request made to us, to give a sketch of the local government of London in the nineteenth century up to 1889; this is done in the two opening chapters. This sketch is followed by an account of the influences which led to the establishment of county councils, more particularly of that for London. Then we explain how the Council itself works — how its policy is settled with the aid of a party system, and how the Council, its committees and its departments are organised and perform their many duties. In this we have tried to shew how business is actually carried on, which often would not be gathered from the mere form of procedure. To complete the picture, a description is given of what may be called the general or domestic services which apply to the whole of the Council's work — finance, staff and supplies. The part of the book which then follows sets forth a fairly full account of the several executive services — education, public health, housing and many others — and of the regulative services, such as building regulation and town planning. Finally, we try to give a picture of, so

to speak, the Council's "foreign policy" — its relations with its neighbours, both inside and outside London, and its dealings with Parliament and the government departments and with the ordinary Londoner. Our concluding chapter is devoted largely to some general problems of local government which emerge from the consideration of the Council's history. In treating of these matters we have done our best to avoid repetition, but some has been inevitable in order to preserve continuity of narrative.

There will be some who are sure to miss from this book the names and work of many men and women, officials as well as members, whose devoted service to the Council has enriched the public life of London and bettered the lot of so many of their fellow-citizens. Reluctantly we have had to forego, owing to the limits of space and time, saying as much about them as the merits of their labours would justify, restricting ourselves to the incidental mention of a few of the many who have notably contributed to the good government of London.

We have had room for only a brief account of the local government of the metropolis up to 1889. It is surprising that, among the many books written on London, there has not been an adequate comprehensive record of its municipal affairs during these years. Much detailed information about the early decades is to be found in the monumental works of Sidney and Beatrice Webb and there is information in fair quantity about individual parishes and some aspects of government,<sup>1</sup> in addition to plenty of miscellaneous material scattered about in many publications. Here is a promising field for anyone seeking a good historical subject of interest, and, one might say, of entertainment.

The time within which this book had to be written was very short, bearing in mind the large number of records to be consulted and other investigations to be made, and to compress fifty years of so full and varied a

<sup>1</sup> Such as *The Sanitary Evolution of London*, 1907, by Henry Jephson, a former member of the Council.

life as that of the Council into the compass of a single volume has proved no easy task. The work has had to be done under great pressure and could not have been finished in the time allotted, but for generous assistance from the staff of the Council, to whom we owe a deep debt of gratitude. From the clerk of the Council and the heads of all departments and their staffs we have had help cordially given under heavy stress of other work. Material for our researches has been abundantly produced, often after special endeavours to present it to us in the most useful form for our purpose. On two members of the clerk of the Council's staff we have had to make exceptional demands — Mr. P. E. Braun, the Council's principal officer in charge of the library and records, and Mr. D. J. Rowley, whose services the Council was good enough to place at our disposal. The assistance that they have given us in their several ways it is quite beyond the capacity of this slender acknowledgement to describe; we can only express to them our warmest thanks for their unfailing help.

Former members and officers of the Council have also given us abundant assistance, particularly Lord Dickinson, who held the office of Deputy-Chairman (and later Chairman) of the Council in some of its earlier years and who placed at our disposal the whole of his records accumulated during his membership; and Mr. John Burns who has also placed his papers at our disposal and fortified our narrative with material from his well-stored memory. Sir William Collins, too ("one of the best of chairmen", as he has been described to us) and Sir George Humphreys, who served the Council as manager of the works department and later as chief engineer, have put us in their debt by supplementing our knowledge of the Council in bygone days. We should like also to mention specially the kindness shewn to us by Mrs. Sidney Webb, who not only allowed us the stimulating privilege of reading in manuscript some chapters of her as yet unpublished biography *Our Partnership*, but consented to our quoting the two passages from it which enliven our chapter on parties and policies.

There are so many publications bearing on the Council and its work that it is impossible to pay adequate tribute to all who have ploughed the ground before us ; but we ought to say how valuable we have found *The London County Council from Within* (published in 1932) by Sir Harry Haward, whose half-century of public service began with the Metropolitan Board of Works in 1882 and included twenty-seven years as comptroller of the Council.

Of the many persons outside the Council from whom we have received information our gratitude is due especially to Mr. Parker Morris, the honorary clerk to the Metropolitan Boroughs' Standing Joint Committee and Mr. R. B. Webb, his chief assistant in the work of that committee ; and, for information about the political parties, to Major Brown of the London Municipal Society and Mr. Daines of the London Labour Party headquarters.

Lastly, we desire to thank the proprietors of publications and others who have helped us to trace cartoons relating to the Council and kindly allowed us to reproduce them, and to others who have permitted the reproduction of some of the pictures in this book. In particular we are grateful to the proprietors of *Punch*, from whose pages of contemporary comment we have freely drawn.



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# CONTENTS

	PAGE
INTRODUCTION . . . . .	xvii

## PART I

### LONDON GOVERNMENT BEFORE 1889

#### CHAPTER 1

LONDON BEFORE 1856 . . . . .	3
The face of London — social conditions — the local government medley — Sir Benjamin Hall — the Metropolis Management Act, 1855.	

#### CHAPTER 2

LONDON UNDER THE METROPOLIS MANAGEMENT ACT: 1856–1889 . . . . .	27
The Metropolitan Board of Works — drainage, embankments, improvements, housing — open spaces, fire brigade, flood prevention, control of streets and buildings — finance — the decline and end of the Board — the Vestries and District Boards — constitution, functions and achievements.	

#### CHAPTER 3

THE COMING OF THE LONDON COUNTY COUNCIL . . . . .	62
The reform movement and Mill's theories — the London Municipal Reform League — Harcourt's bill, 1884 — the Local Government Bill, 1888 (Ritchie) — the first elections — initial influences on the Council.	

## PART II

### THE COUNCIL

#### CHAPTER 4

PARTIES AND POLICIES . . . . .	83
Introduction of the party system — Organisation of the parties — Party policies and contests — the Progressives, 1889–1907 — the Municipal Reformers, 1907–34 — Labour, 1934–39.	

#### CHAPTER 5

ORGANISATION AND PROCEDURE . . . . .	118
The Council — council meetings — methods of business — “the Dais” — The Committees — terms of reference — procedure — The Departments — the clerk of the Council.	

## CHAPTER 6

FINANCE : POWERS AND PROCEDURE . . . . .	PAGE 157
--	-------------

The Finance Committee — estimates and budget — capital expenditure — borrowing powers — methods of borrowing — redemption of debt — sinking funds — capital works out of revenue — borrowing by other London authorities — revenue — audit.

## CHAPTER 7

FINANCE : EXPENDITURE AND REVENUE . . . . .	181
---	-----

Revenue expenditure and income — rateable value — rates — grants — metropolitan boroughs — capital expenditure.

## CHAPTER 8

STAFF . . . . .	202
-----------------	-----

Number of staff — recruitment — promotion — training — management of staff — conditions of service — superannuation.

## CHAPTER 9

SUPPLIES ; AND THE WORKS DEPARTMENT . . . . .	223
---	-----

The Supplies Department — manufacture and purchase of goods — examination of goods — distribution — The Works Department.

## PART III

## THE COUNCIL'S SERVICES

## (i) EXECUTIVE SERVICES

## CHAPTER 10

LONDON EDUCATION BEFORE 1904 . . . . .	241
--	-----

The London School Board — higher education — the “whisky money” — the Technical Education Board — the council becomes education authority for London.

## CHAPTER 11

THE COUNCIL AS LONDON EDUCATION AUTHORITY . . . . .	258
---	-----

Elementary and Secondary Education — the means of progress — teaching power — equality of treatment for schools — linking elementary with other education — educational “plant” — care of handicapped and delinquent children — triennial programmes — Continued Education — polytechnics — day trade schools — day continuation schools and evening schools — The Cost of Education — Development summarised.

# CONTENTS

ix

## CHAPTER 12

PUBLIC HEALTH : POWERS AND MEDICAL SERVICES . . .	PAGE 288
---	-------------

London Public Health Authorities and their Powers — Preventive Services — common lodging houses — cleansing — midwives — lying-in homes and nursing homes — infant life protection — maternity and child welfare — food protection — milk — the School Medical Service — Tuberculosis — Venereal Disease — Welfare of the Blind.

## CHAPTER 13

PUBLIC HEALTH : HOSPITALS AND ANCILLARY SERVICES . .	320
--	-----

General Hospitals — poor-law hospitals — the transfer to the Council — medical education — the domiciliary medical service — Special Hospitals — the work of the Metropolitan Asylums Board — special hospitals under the Council — Ambulances.

## CHAPTER 14

MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES . . . . .	344
----------------------------------	-----

Mental treatment before 1889 — development of powers for mental treatment — improvement of mental hospitals — administration and diet — treatment, occupation and after-care — training the mentally defective — the incidence of mental disease — voluntary treatment — research.

## CHAPTER 15

HOUSING . . . . .	363
-------------------	-----

General Survey — 1889 to 1919 — unhealthy areas and slum clearance — additional housing — 1919 and after — additional housing — slum clearance and overcrowding — Estates and their Management — large housing estates — management — rents — transport — summary tables.

## CHAPTER 16

PUBLIC ASSISTANCE . . . . .	403
-----------------------------	-----

The poor law in London — transfer to the Council — administration of relief — indoor relief — relief of the able-bodied — training and employment — the casual poor — expenditure — poor relief since 1850.

## CHAPTER 17

MAIN DRAINAGE AND FLOOD PREVENTION . . . . .	428
--	-----

Main Drainage — system of sewers — pumping stations — treatment of sewage — Flood Prevention.

## CONTENTS

CHAPTER 18		PAGE
STREET IMPROVEMENTS AND BRIDGES . . . . .		441
General survey of past record — Street Improvements — Kingsway and Aldwych — routes through and round London and radial roads — relief of congestion in central area and docks — Bridges — the cross river traffic problem — Waterloo Bridge and Charing Cross bridge proposals — ferry and tunnels.		
CHAPTER 19		
PUBLIC BUILDINGS . . . . .		469
The architect's department — the County Hall and library — educational buildings — housing — fire brigade and other buildings — preservation and marking of buildings.		
CHAPTER 20		
THE FIRE BRIGADE . . . . .		486
Fire alarms — appliances — fire organisation — the firemen — water supply — special services — the cost of protection from fire.		
CHAPTER 21		
PARKS AND OPEN SPACES . . . . .		501
Open spaces in London — the Council's open spaces — the green belt scheme — the London squares.		
(ii) REGULATIVE SERVICES		
CHAPTER 22		
CONTROL OF LAND DEVELOPMENT AND BUILDING . . . . .		519
The London Building Acts and Byelaws — construction of buildings — planning and amenities — administration of the Building Acts — Town Planning — early measures in London — resolutions before 1934 — the general scheme — mode of preparing schemes — provisional principles — control of interim development — administration — Regional Planning — first and second regional committees — Specialised Work — structure of places of entertainment — means of escape in case of fire — buildings in relation to traffic — naming streets and numbering houses.		
CHAPTER 23		
PUBLIC CONTROL AND ADMINISTRATION OF JUSTICE . . . . .		551
Explosives, petroleum and celluloid — tests of weights and measures, gas and electricity — smoke abatement — shop hours, employment agencies and theatrical performers — massage establishments — charities — diseases of animals — collection of revenue — Licensing of entertainments — Administration of justice — coroners.		

# CONTENTS

xi

## PART IV

### THE COUNCIL'S EXTERNAL RELATIONS

#### CHAPTER 24

	PAGE
THE COUNCIL AND PARLIAMENT . . . . .	581
Party contrasts — bills in Parliament — money bills — pioneer legislation — relations with government departments.	

#### CHAPTER 25

THE COUNCIL AND OTHER LOCAL AUTHORITIES . . . . .	591
The City of London — the metropolitan borough councils — the Metropolitan Boroughs' Standing Joint Committee — Greater London — local government associations.	

#### CHAPTER 26

THE COUNCIL AND THE PUBLIC UTILITY UNDERTAKINGS . . . . .	608
Transport — cheap travel — Thames steamboats — tramways — Water — Electricity — Gas — Markets — Telephones — River Conservancy — The Docks.	

#### CHAPTER 27

THE COUNCIL AND THE PUBLIC . . . . .	645
Publications — reports and statistics — handbooks — publicity.	

CONCLUSION . . . . .	658
----------------------	-----

### APPENDICES

I. CHAIRMEN OF THE LONDON COUNTY COUNCIL, PARTY LEADERS AND CHIEF OFFICERS . . . . .	667
II. POPULATION . . . . .	673
III. LONDON COUNTY ELECTORATE . . . . .	675
IV. PARTY REPRESENTATION ON THE LONDON COUNTY COUNCIL	677
V. ANALYSIS OF THE GROSS EXPENDITURE OF LONDON LOCAL AUTHORITIES (EXCLUDING EXPENDITURE OUT OF LOANS), 1935-36 . . . . .	678
INDEX . . . . .	681

## LIST OF PLATES

The First Meeting of the London County Council ( <i>from a painting by H. Jamyn Brooks</i> ) . . . . .	<i>Frontispiece</i>
Local Government Bill, 1884 :	
FACING PAGE	
The Cloud Ahead Grows Blacker . . . . .	68
A Midsummer Pantomime . . . . .	68
The Old and New Council Chambers — Spring Gardens and Westminster Bridge . . . . .	120
The County Hall . . . . .	130
Chaucer School, Southwark : Boys of 1890 ; Boys of 1930 . . . . .	260
Girls' Physical Training : 1908 ; 1936 . . . . .	264
Oratory School, Chelsea, Infants' Class : 1905 ; 1926 . . . . .	274
Paddington Technical Institute : Engineering Workshop . . . . .	280
Barrett Street Trade School : Manicure and face massage . . . . .	280
Personal Hygiene Inspection, 1911 . . . . .	300
Medical Inspection, 1937 . . . . .	300
Open-Air Schools : A group of children on entry ; and five months later . . . . .	306
Lewisham Hospital : New wing . . . . .	322
St. Olave's Hospital : New sun balcony . . . . .	322
Lambeth Hospital : Old type of ward ; reconstructed ward . . . . .	326
North-Eastern Hospital : New ward . . . . .	338
Heatherwood Hospital : New block . . . . .	338
Mental Treatment : Instruments of restraint, 1830 ; Villa day-room, 1938 . . . . .	348
Boundary Street Area : Before clearance — a court ; general view of completed scheme . . . . .	370
Cottage Estates : Pre-war — Totterdown Fields ; Post-war — St. Helier . . . . .	376
Block Dwellings : Pre-war — Union Buildings Estate ; Post-war — China Walk Estate . . . . .	384
Plan of Becontree . . . . .	392

	FACING PAGE
St. Marylebone Institution : Women's day-room ; Nursery .	416
Woolwich Institution, North Yard : Before and after improvement . . . . .	424
Abbey Mills Pumping Station . . . . .	434
The Fleet Sewer . . . . .	438
Lambeth Bridge : Old and new . . . . .	458
The New Chelsea Bridge, 1935 ; Waterloo Bridge (as projected). .	464
The Old County Hall, Spring Gardens . . . . .	472
Pedlar's Acre, 1906 — the site of the present County Hall .	472
Wornington Road School, North Kensington :	
Under the School Board, 1874 ; Under the Council, 1938 .	478
Poplar School of Engineering and Navigation ; Principal doorway . . . . .	482
The New Fire Brigade Headquarters . . . . .	482
Fire Brigade : Horse-drawn steamer, 1910 ; Dual-purpose appliance, 1938 . . . . .	494
Hackney Marshes : Football . . . . .	506
Victoria Park : Lido and Boating Lake . . . . .	510
Holiday Entertainment in the Parks, 1938 . . . . .	514
A Midnight Raid : Testing the street scales . . . . .	556
A Daylight Raid ! Testing the shop scales . . . . .	556
One of the Thames Steamboats ; " A Suggestion to the L.C.C." .	614

## ILLUSTRATIONS IN THE TEXT

	PAGE
Reaction . . . . .	45
In Memoriam : Metropolitan Board of Works . . . . .	52
Landed ! . . . . .	75
The Marquis and the Municipal Monster . . . . .	97
Scene in the L. C. Circus . . . . .	98
Putting the Cat back in the Bag . . . . .	99
The Progressive Snowball . . . . .	101
A Nominal Change . . . . .	102
The Second-of-March Hare . . . . .	103



# ILLUSTRATIONS

	XV
	PAGE
Beaten on Points . . . . .	106
Up-hill Work . . . . .	134
The Seal of the Council . . . . .	156
The Municipal Road to Ruin . . . . .	165
Our Village Sign . . . . .	189
The Two Demand Notes . . . . .	195
Expenditure and Receipts of the Council . . . . .	198-199
Cooking the Accounts . . . . .	235
The Three Religions ! . . . .	268
Incidence of Mental Disorder . . . . .	357
The Great London Sweep . . . . .	387
The Kingsway and Aldwych Improvement, 1905 . . . . .	453
The London Atlas . . . . .	464
A Popular Pleasure-Ground : Cyclists in Battersea Park . . . . .	515
Wanted — an Open-Air Minister . . . . .	531
County of London Town Planning . . . . .	533
Ready-made Coat (-of-Arms) for the London County Council . . . . .	578
Putting it Pleasantly . . . . .	594
The Cruel Child . . . . .	597
The Wasted Waterway . . . . .	612
The Lord High Obstructionist . . . . .	618
“ Hercules (County) Concilians ” . . . . .	622
East London Water Supply . . . . .	625

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Map : Growth of Greater London since 1800 . . . . . *at end of volume*