

Working for Women's Pioneer Housing between the wars

Office History



Women's Pioneer Housing did not have an office until June 1921, and then only a shared one. Like start-up enterprises today, the business was operated from people's homes until a formal place of work was feasible. Minutes from meetings of the Committee of Management were written by hand by Etheldred in a red quarto notebook currently being conserved by the London Metropolitan Archives.

Where did they work?

The first committee meetings of the early pioneers were held in their homes – the first one at 6 Bramham Gardens SW (host not known), the second at Florence Lily Carre's (6 Elm Park Gardens). By November, Dorothy and Charls Peel's home at 7 Alexander Square had become a favoured venue for Committee of Management (COM) meetings. They had the use of office facilities at 29 Pelham Place, occupied in the autumn 1921 by Helen Arbuthnot, but these did not last long as shortly afterwards she retired to the south of France.

•The Women's Institute, 92 Victoria Street 1923-1932

The Women's Institute offices, now part of a modern shopping mall, were the home to many women's organisations in the first decades of the 20th century. To register as a Public Utility Society an address had to be found for a registered office, and on October 19th 1920 The Women's Institute became the registered office of Women's Pioneer Housing at £5 (£300 today) a year. These premises were also used for meetings in 1921 but the tenancy expired and - as Etheldred was living in a hostel at the time and had no place to keep the Society's books and papers - it was decided to take a share of office there for 2 days a week from 4.30-8 o'clock. This cost £15 (£900) per year including the £5 (£300) charge for postal address and name on the door.

It wasn't until October 1923, when 6 properties had been bought and two more were in the pipeline that more substantial offices were considered. A larger office at 92 Victoria St became available

and WPH took over the remainder of the previous tenant's lease at a rent of £19 (£1157) a quarter 'the rooms to be taken as they are in return for floor covering electric lights and blinds being left.' In November a Mr Robertson undertook the redecoration of the office for £6.5s.0d (£380). This office was larger than Etheldred and her assistant needed; they allowed Miss Phyllis Lovell to put a table in the office where she would work on the Housing Demonstration to be held in July 1924 at Queen's Hall which she organised on behalf the Women's Housing Council. There was a smaller office too, which WPH took over and sublet to the Women's Housing Council at an inclusive rent of £1 (£61) per week.

In June 1925 the lease expired and Beatrice Waldron, a tenant representative on the COM undertook to see the splendidly named Sir Arthur Whinney of Whinney Smith & Whinney about a new office lease. It was agreed to pay £75 (£4570) for the first 7 years with the option of renewing for a further 7 at the same rent which included administration and window cleaning expenses, but not office cleaning which was an additional 3 shillings and sixpence per room (£10.66).



92 Victoria Street today

•83 Buckingham Palace Road 1932 – 1939

In April 1932 it was decided to move WPH offices to the first floor of 83 Buckingham Palace Rd. The rent would be £95 (£6,681) a year and a premium of £300 (£21,100) was paid up front. This office must have been bigger and a licence to sublet was organised before they moved in. It was to be heated by electricity – £3 (£211) was paid for 37 feet of tubing belonging to Mrs Archdale and another 24 ft of new tubing from Electro Heaters Co who charged £4.10.0 (£316) for the tubing and £1.10.0 (£105) for fixing.

There was a committee room in the new office for which Edith Elliot, a COM member with private means, presented a clock. There was also a furnished flat on the first floor and when this was to be re-let in 1933, Etheldred had the keys and agreed to show the flat to applicants on behalf of the agents. After the office move the bank branch was changed from Bloomsbury to Belgravia which was nearer the office.

In 1939, with war looming, the then Secretary Miss Martin wrote to the owners of the building (Messrs Lyons and the Duchess Property Co) to enquire whether Air Raid precautions were being taken in the basement and whether there would be accommodation for the office staff.

What office equipment was available to WPH?

Before office accommodation was available, and when Etheldred was carrying out all the day-to-day work, a secretarial bureau carried out typewriting; printing was undertaken by the Women's Printing Society. For the office in Victoria Street it was agreed that the Secretary be authorised to spend up to £15 (£1055) on office furniture and up to £12 (£844) for a typewriter.

In fact in December 1923 Peter Jones were paid £10.2.2d (£710) for office furniture, and the first typewriter cost £9 (£632) from Stanley & Co. Electronic communication was laid on in the form of a telephone which cost £2.5.3d (£159). Staff costs included insurance for workers compensation and third party liability.

When the Women's Housing Council vacated the small office they had sublet, a second-hand table and cupboard were bought for £3-3-0d (£220) and a chair for 10 shillings (£35) and it was agreed that a typewriter table could be purchased. However the minutes of COM meetings were still handwritten until July 1929.

In June 1925 security was considered in terms of a need for an office safe, which was bought and a burglary insurance policy for £200 (£12,250) taken out. This was necessary – there were two instances of bags being stolen, though these were from the Buckingham Palace Road offices in 1932 and 1933.

By the end of the 1920s the offices were getting more mechanised, maybe because of the influence of Winifred Martin (see later). In November 1928 an addressing machine was acquired which would have taken a lot of the drudgery out of addressing warrants for the dividends on shares and loan stock that had to be hand or typewritten and sent out every six months, and there were nearly 1000 to be sent in 1932. This machine didn't last very long as in Nov 1930 it was agreed that an Addressograph machine was to be purchased. Was the rate of technical advance in this machinery fast as in 1939 the Secretary was authorised to consider a modern addressograph machine?

In 1929 a numbering machine was added, and a second typewriter was bought for 10 guineas (£692) and the old one repaired for £2.8.0d (£158). A maintenance contract for these machines was taken out for 3 shillings and sixpence a month (£11.52). A new typewriter wasn't added until 1935.

Who worked there?

Etheldred Browning carried out all the day-to-day work of Women's Pioneer until 1923 and the only other full-time employees from 1923 to 1937 were an Office Assistant and an accountant from 1928 onwards. Etheldred herself suggested she become Manager and Secretary in June 1925 and be recognised as Founder from the 10th Anniversary in 1930.

The question of an office assistant was considered in 1923. The COM decided to place on record that though ready money was very scarce and the appointment of an assistant might lead to financial difficulties an appointment should be made. Etheldred was instructed to invite written applications and a short list of 'selected ladies' were asked to come before the COM. Several applicants were interviewed and Helen Sylvester was appointed at a salary of £3 (£198) per week to commence from Nov 5th. Her appointment 'was to be regarded as purely temporary and Miss Sylvester to be so informed', but she was in fact employed until her death in 1933.

Helen Sylvester (employed 1923-1933) was in her mid-fifties when she was recruited. Born in 1868 in Newcastle-under-Lyme, Staffordshire, by 1901 she had moved to London, possibly following the death of her father in 1900. She worked as a Church of England Deaconess, and in 1911 she was District Secretary for a charitable organisation. At the time of her appointment Helen was living in women's housing in Craven Hill, Paddington but in 1929 moved into WPH accommodation at 13 Ladbroke Gardens.

The minutes of the COM continued to be hand-written, but the handwriting in the red notebook changes. Helen Sylvester was not present at the meetings until 1924, but perhaps she copied out Etheldred's notes. Although she attended meetings from mid-1924 the minutes were not actually typed until July 1929.

When Helen fell ill in 1933 the Committee expressed very great appreciation of her services and the manner in which she carried on during Etheldred's recent absence when she must already have been feeling ill. She died in May 1933 having 'given ungrudging loyal service for 10 years and would be much missed by everyone and very specially by Miss B and the staff to whom she had been not only a colleague but a valued friend.'

Dorothy Sowter (Employed 1931-1938) replaced Helen Sylvester as Office Assistant in 1931 at the age of 50 at a salary of £156 (£10,274) a year. Dorothy was selected from three candidates who were interviewed by Helen Archdale and Dorothy Evans. Dorothy was Etheldred's cousin who had worked as a secretary since 1924 although she had private means as did her sister Olive. The two sisters moved into WPH accommodation sharing a flat first at 2 Porchester Square between 1926 and 1930, then at 15 Ladbroke Gardens between 1931 and 1938.

Dorothy decided to retire at the age of 56 at the same time as Etheldred, on 30th September 1938, and was granted a gratuity of £10 (££716).

Winifred Martin (Employed 1928-1945) was appointed as an accountant at the age of 32 by a sub-committee of Violet Durand, Helen Archdale, Aline Smallwood with Miriam Homersham as

adviser. Winifred was a certified accountant and selected for the job at a salary of £208 (£13,700) a year starting from June 4th 1928. We haven't been able to find out much about her previous career. She was born in Dartford, Kent on 1st March 1896. Her father was a boiler plater and Winifred was living at the family home in Dartford in 1911 working as a domestic servant. No details of her education have as yet come to light but by 1928 she describes herself in as a certified accountant and in 1938 as a qualified Company Secretary.

There was a consensus in the COM, expressed by William Norman the Chairman and Lady Shelley Rolls the President, that the office was run on fairly chaotic lines prior to Winifred Martin's appointment. She systematised processes and from 1929 onwards budgets are presented, an analysis of receipts, a monthly statement of income and expenditure together with the estimated income and expenditure and a repairs expenditure chart were presented at each COM meeting. From 1932 a budget and percentage returns on properties were calculated.

Caretakers had not previously been paid, but had free accommodation in return for their work in the properties. In November 1937 after a long dispute with the Inland Revenue, Women's Pioneer Housing was compelled to accept that Caretakers were employees and were required to have National Health Insurance.

In September 1937 a **Junior Typist** was engaged at 25 shillings (£86) a week. She may have been a Miss Acford but information is scarce.

Etheldred's retirement in 1937/8 – despite the fact that Winifred Martin had been employed for nearly nine years before Etheldred's retirement was suggested, Etheldred argued that she should not retire immediately but stay on to train a successor. This argument didn't change anyone's mind, since Winifred was appointed to succeed her at a salary of £400 (£27,127) a year (Etheldred had been paid £500), to take effect from 1st October 1938. Winifred won praise for the way she carried out her work from very soon after her appointment.

It is possible to speculate that Etheldred had something against Winifred – her salary was kept down at the same level as that of the Assistant Secretary and she was often given non-repeating bonuses rather than the increases that were awarded to other office staff. There is also an intriguing question about Winifred's marriage to Frank Watts, which took place in September 1933. There is no reference to the marriage in any of the Women's Pioneer records researched so far, and her name as Manager and Secretary on the Annual Reports is always Miss W G Martin. She insists in her entry in the 1939 war register at her home address as being Mrs Watts, but that she is a Chartered Secretary

registered as Miss Martin. Whether WPH were happy to use her maiden name in her professional role, or whether she kept the marriage secret as many women did at that time, we do not know.

New appointments after 1938

In June 1938 three candidates for the post of book-keeper post were interviewed and **Miss Violet Ellen Perkins** was appointed at a salary of £200 (£13,563) a year to start on October 3rd and in May 1939 it was agreed that a new Junior Assistant should be employed.

Terms and conditions

Before the 1963 legislation on employment contracts, terms and conditions tended to be made up on the hoof, and Women's Pioneer Housing was no exception. We do know of some decisions that were taken:

Days off and holidays – In December 1923 it was decided the office should be closed from Sat 22nd to Sat 29th inclusive for Christmas but that Etheldred and Helen Sylvester should attend to deal with correspondence. When the office was closed during Bank Holiday week in 1924, Eva Harte, a tenant representative, kindly agreed to come in daily to open letters. In July 1924, a year after she had started work, it was decided that Helen Sylvester should have 4 weeks holiday.

The Rules of Public Utility Societies ensured that Fidelity guarantees be taken out with respect to staff, though these were to the advantage of the organisation not the member of staff.

Sickness – any sick pay was at the discretion of the employer so the COM made resolutions about the level of sick pay and for those whose absence was recorded in the minutes always allowed full pay.

Recruitment was usually made by the COM or a sub-committee and interviews carried out after shortlisting. In 1930 the appointment of the book keeper was subject to references, and we also know, for the first time, that the appointment was subject to one month's notice on either side.

From 1932 the **salaries** of the Manager and Secretary and of the staff were to be reviewed after the AGM each year. In that year the Chair reported that Etheldred did not propose to apply for an increase and this attitude was appreciated. (Whether the staff appreciated the decision as well is not recorded).

What did they do?

Etheldred took responsibility for selecting tenants, receiving applications and offers of investments if a flat was secured,

though she occasionally asked the COM for advice. Winifred Martin informed the COM of all new tenancy agreements after she took over.

Since all cheques over £5 (£300) had to be signed by two COM members (which also included the Secretary) the minutes give us an idea of the amount of accounting activity and they also cover many of the issues of repairs to property. Violet Perkins, the book-keeper was authorised after 9 months' employment to sign cheques and documents in the Secretary's absence, something that Etheldred had not allowed Winifred Martin until five years after her appointment. However other routine work such as the collection of rents is not mentioned, so presumably the office staff processed these.

There was a huge clerical task to be undertaken in late 1932 when two page individually typed letters had to go to all 250 or so stockholders telling them that their existing holdings would be repaid and inviting them to reinvest or apply for the repayment of their capital. By January 1933 81% had agreed to convert and 18% had asked for repayment, implying extra office work in recording, preparing and sending out hand-written stock certificates.

The modern addressograph machine must also have been working hard!

